

Everything you need to know about Lent

What is it, who is it for, what is its history and how best to observe it



Lent is that time of year when Catholics smear ash on their foreheads and give up eating chocolate or checking Facebook or watching television, right? That may be the basic view from the outside, but for those who observe it, the season of Lent is a period of penitence that prepares the heart for the celebration of Easter — Christ’s resurrection.

And it’s not the exclusive domain of Catholics. This season of self-examination and self-denial has found favor with Mainline Protestant and evangelical churches, too.

What is Lent?

The word Lent comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, meaning “spring.” It is a contemplative six-week period of fasting that begins on Ash Wednesday and concludes on Holy Thursday with the start of the Triduum (the three-day period including Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday), though the fast continues through Holy Saturday. The period covers 46 days, though in the Western tradition, the six Sundays of Lent are not included as fasting days. These days of Christian Sabbath are instead feast days, bringing the total days of observance to 40.

The regulations of the fast have changed with time. These days, Catholics are obligated to fast (eating only one meal per day) and abstain (meaning no meat) on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, as well as abstaining from meat each Friday of the season. Choosing to give up candy or Facebook is just that — a choice. The Catholic Church does not regulate these added penitential practices.

If you're Catholic (or just Christian-curious) and need a guide, the United States Council of Catholic Bishops created a Lenten calendar, which highlights the essence of season: give up, take up, lift up. Give up material possessions, take up charitable habits, and lift up those in need.

The origins of Lent

Lent traces its roots back to the ancient Christian church of the first century. Originally, it was a two-day fast beginning on Good Friday and intended for those preparing for baptism. The 40-day fast has its clearest roots in a discussion at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD.

Initially, the observance of the fast was quite strict, with dairy products and eggs also being removed from the table. (Many Christians, especially those in Catholic and Orthodox traditions, continue to adhere to such stricter fasts.) But with the passing of centuries, more emphasis was placed on almsgiving and prayer, resulting in loosened definitions of fasting and abstinence.

Lent can also be thanked (or blamed, depending on one's perspective) for that raucous celebration now characterized by colorful beads and drunkenness (especially in New Orleans) known as Mardi Gras (literally "Fat Tuesday" in French). It was originally the "last hurrah" during which all the fat in the house was eaten up before the beginning of the fast on Ash Wednesday.

Why 40 days?

In the Bible, 40 is an important number for preparation and testing used to draw the believer closer to God. Some examples:

Exodus 34: Moses sat atop Mount Sinai with God for 40 days, without food or water, writing on tablets the covenant known as the Ten Commandments.

Exodus 16: The Israelites suffered 40 years, eating only manna, until they reached the Promised Land.

Mark 4: Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, fasting and being tempted by the devil.

Who is Lent for?

Though people generally assume Lent is just observed by Roman Catholics, it is also a standard practice in many Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican, and even evangelical churches.

Still, many Protestants reject the observance of Lent in part because it is nowhere mentioned in the Bible. Many view it as a legalistic practice that emphasizes “salvation by works,” which is thought to be a Catholic doctrine.

When Protestants split from the Catholic Church after the Reformation, many left behind the practices of Lent. Ulrich Zwingli, a Swiss reformer, led one of the initial protests against Lenten traditions in 1522, arguing that its rules were centered on obeying Rome rather than the gospel.

Martin Luther, the influential Protestant reformer, helped rethink Lenten practices and spoke out against the theology that “good works” could cancel out sin. As per one of his Lenten sermons:

But the worst of all is that we have adopted and practiced fasting as a good work: not to bring our flesh into subjection; but, as a meritorious work before God, to atone for our sins and obtain grace. And it is this that has made our fasting a stench and so blasphemous and shameful, so that no drinking and eating, no gluttony and drunkenness, could have been as bad and foul. It would have been better had people been drunk day and night than to fast thus.

John Calvin, another influential reformer, also criticized Lent as a “superstitious observance” in his Institutes of the Christian Religion. He wrote that Christ’s 40-day fast wasn’t intended to be a model: “It was therefore merely false zeal, replete with superstition, which set up a fast under the title and pretext of imitating Christ.”

An evangelical case for Lent

Charles Colson, Watergate “hatchet man” turned evangelical leader, was one of many evangelical

leaders to embrace Lent anew in the contemporary era. While many have practiced it, according to Colson, “as a season for giving up chocolate or other extras in order to show God how much we love him,” Colson stressed that Lent is a time of “gospel-centered piety.”

Lenten fasting isn’t about earning God’s favor, he said, “but rather emphasizes simplicity for the sake of others.”

Likewise, Protestant theologian Steven R. Harmon was raised Baptist and assumed that Catholics saw Lent as a requirement for salvation. But while attending seminary, he discovered the Christian calendar. He argues that since Baptists already observe a calendar that contains unbiblical observances, including the two feasts of Christmas and Easter that are of patristic origin, observing Lent should be no problem.

Indeed, Harmon believes that Baptists should observe Lent, as it can “help them take up the cross and follow Christ in the midst of a suffering world.”

Why Ash Wednesday?

“Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return.”

That phrase, derived from Genesis 3:19, is what priests often recite as they mark believers’ foreheads with the cross of ash. (Priests may also recite: “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel.”) Traditionally, burned palms from the previous year’s Palm Sunday service are used to make the ashes. (The New Testament records that a crowd waved palm branches, crying “Hosanna!” as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey.)

In biblical times, ashes were used to express penitence for sins committed. Job repents “in dust and ashes,” Jeremiah tells the Israelites to “roll in ashes; mourn with bitter wailing,” and Daniel turns to God in prayer, fasting and “in sackcloth and ashes.”

The ashes are not intended to be a “holy mark,” but are instead a public acknowledgment of one’s sin and mortality. The shape of the cross reminds believers of their hope in Jesus, who conquered death.

How can you observe Lent?

Fasting, praying, almsgiving: those are the pillars of traditional Lenten observance. Here are a few ways you can observe Lent, whether you've been doing it for years now or this is your first attempt.

If you're not into the idea of fasting for six weeks, you can consider adding a spiritual discipline to your life. The folks at Bible Gateway suggest the following: choose a theme to center daily prayers on for each day of Lent, donate time to a homeless shelter, or start a Bible reading plan — there's even one to help you complete the Gospels in 40 days.

If you're set on giving something up, make it something that you'll notice — something you may be turning into an idol. Mark Roberts writes about his experience with fasting, and how it can raise awareness of how much we rely on things instead of relying on God.

For all Christians who observe it, Lent is intended to deepen one's appreciation of Jesus' suffering and sacrifice. It's a period of penitence in preparation for the celebration of Easter. In the words of Pope Francis: "Lent is a fitting time for self-denial; we would do well to ask ourselves what we can give up in order to help and enrich others by our own poverty. Let us not forget that real poverty hurts: no self-denial is real without this dimension of penance."

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