

## WHAT IS LENT?

Lent is a forty-day liturgical season that initiates the most sacred part of the Christian year. Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and concludes on the Great Vigil of Easter. Sundays are not included in the forty-day count because every Sunday is a joyful celebration of our Lord's resurrection. During Lent, Christians meditate on the great paschal mystery -- the salvation God won for us sinners by the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

## WHAT DOES THE WORD "LENT" MEAN?

The word Lent is apparently derived from the Old English *lencten*, which means "lengthen." It refers to the lengthening of the daylight hours that occurs in the northern hemisphere as spring approaches. It is in this period of transition from late winter to early spring that the season of Lent falls.

## WHY DOES LENT LAST FORTY DAYS?

The duration of the season of Lent is based on the ancient church custom of requiring catechumens to undergo a forty-day period of doctrinal instruction and fasting before being baptized on the evening before Easter. This probationary period was called the *quarantine* (from the Latin word for forty). The number forty occurs frequently in both testaments of the Bible. It signifies the time that is required for discipline, testing, and separation prior to achieving a goal or new beginning. For example, we read in the Old Testament that it rained forty days and nights during the Great Flood ([Genesis 7:12](#)), Moses communed with God on Mount Sinai for forty days before receiving the Ten Commandments ([Exodus 24:18](#)), the people of Israel were forced to wander in the wilderness for forty years ([Numbers 14:33-34](#)), Elijah journeyed for forty days before he reached Mount Horeb and had a vision of God ([1 Kings 19:8-9](#)), and the inhabitants of Nineveh fasted and repented for forty days in response to the preaching of Jonah ([Jonah 3:4-5](#)). The outstanding instances of the number forty in the New Testament are the account of Christ's ordeal in the desert fasting, praying, and being tempted by the devil ([Matthew 4:1-11](#); [Mark 1:12-13](#); and [Luke 4:1-13](#)) and His various appearances to the apostles and others between His resurrection and ascension during which He strengthened their faith and prepared them for the coming of the Holy Spirit ([Acts 1:3](#)).

## HOW DOES WORSHIP CHANGE DURING LENT?

Since Lent is a season of penitence, reflection, and prayer, worship during this time is solemn and restrained. The somber colors of purple and black replace the brighter white and green of the Epiphany season. Flowers are generally removed from the sanctuary. Songs of praise like the *Gloria in Excelsis* ("Glory in the highest") and expressions of joy like *Alleluia* ("Praise the Lord") are removed from the liturgy until Easter. Many churches hold special mid-week worship services (Wednesday evenings at Saint Mark) and offer devotional activities that help their members concentrate on the traditional Lenten disciplines of fasting, almsgiving (gifts of mercy, or "charity" as it is usually called), and prayer. The practice of these disciplines goes back to the early days of the church and are meant to help Christians recall and be thankful for our Lord's atoning death on the cross.

## WHAT IS ASH WEDNESDAY?

Ash Wednesday (from the Latin *Dies Cinerum*, meaning "Day of Ashes") is the first day of Lent. On this day, Christians focus intensely on their utter and complete sinfulness and the necessity of Christ's suffering and death to earn their salvation. Ashes are referred to many times in the Old Testament as a sign of sorrow, mourning, repentance, and mortality ([2 Samuel 13:19](#); [Esther 4:1-3](#); [Job 42:6](#); and [Jeremiah 6:26](#)). Many churches use ashes during Ash Wednesday worship as part of a rite called the [Imposition of Ashes](#). According to this custom, ashes (traditionally made by burning palm fronds used on Palm Sunday of the previous year) are mixed with a small amount of olive oil and applied to the forehead of each worshipper. The smudge mark made by the dirty ashes is a powerful reminder that we are going to die because death is the penalty for our depraved natures and sins of thought, word, and deed. The fact

that the ashes are placed on our foreheads in the sign of the cross directs us to Jesus Christ as the only way to forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life in heaven.

### **WHAT IS HOLY WEEK?**

The last week of Lent is known as Holy Week. During this holiest time of the liturgical year, the church commemorates the final week of our Lord's life. The high points of this week are Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil.

### **WHAT IS THE LITURGICAL COLOR FOR LENT?**

Purple, the color of royalty and repentance is the traditional color for the season of Lent. Black, the somber color of mourning and sorrow for sin, is reserved for Good Friday and Ash Wednesday. For the period from Palm Sunday through Maundy Thursday, some churches use scarlet, an intense variant of purple and red that symbolizes the life-giving blood of Christ.

### **WHAT IS THE SEASON OF LENT REALLY ABOUT?**

For many Christians, the season of Lent typically includes some kind of fasting. These fasts usually take the form of abstaining from all food throughout a given 24-hour period or certain kinds of food for the duration of the forty-day season. In place of a food fast, some Christians commit to give up a pleasurable activity or dedicate themselves to charitable giving. Focus on prayer and devotions are also especially emphasized during Lent. But even though our Lord recommends and comments on the Lenten disciplines of fasting, almsgiving, and prayer in His Sermon on the Mount ([Matthew 6:1-18](#)), these practices can easily become legalistic rituals that are centered inwardly on the self rather than outwardly on Christ. If during Lent Christians choose to give up something or rededicate themselves to helping those in need as a way to proclaim the salvation Christ has won for all by His suffering and death, then such activities are sacrifices that glorify God. However, it is essential to remember that nothing we do through self-denial or good works can ever earn the Lord's forgiveness or repay Him for what He accomplished for us. Lent is not about our giving up something to please God. Lent is about what Jesus Christ gave up to pay the penalty for the sins of the world -- His holy and innocent life. As many churches sing during this Lenten season:

*The sinless Son of God must die in sadness; The sinful child of man may live in gladness; Man forfeited his life and is acquitted; God is committed!*

The hymn extract is the fifth stanza of *O Dearest Jesus, What Law Hast Thou Broken?* by Johann Heermann and Johann Crüger, Hymn 439, [Lutheran Service Book](#), [Concordia Publishing House](#), 2006.

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