

What is Lent?

According to the Christian calendar, today is Ash Wednesday and marks the beginning of the season of Lent. For many Christians, especially Protestant Evangelicals, Lent is viewed as either an empty ritual characterized by trivial acts of self-denial, like giving up chocolate, sweets or carbonated beverages, or worse, it is a gross distortion of the Christian faith perpetuating the notion that we actually contribute something to our salvation through self-denial. Sadly, its practice often gets dismissed before we ever come to understand its purpose in the Christian calendar. Yet, when the ancient and Biblical roots of this tradition are explored and understood a healthy observance can emerge for all Christians, one which deepens our grasp of the full atonement Jesus Christ offered for our sins.

While the exact details surrounding the origins of this practice are unknown (it was established tradition by the fourth or fifth century), its focus has always been about Christians preparing for the Easter celebration marking the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Of course, the significance of the resurrection is not merely that Jesus Christ rose to new life, but that through him we also have new life—having become new creations in the power of the Spirit (2 Cor. 5:17). The resurrection is the evidence that Jesus Christ vanquished the enemies of sin, death and the devil.

Historically, Christians, recognizing the significance of the resurrection, thought it wise to give devoted attention to its preparation and provide time to consider all of the ways we have betrayed or forgotten the new life that is ours in Christ. In this way, Lent is a season devoted to deepening our repentance. Lent is intended to turn us away from the things and people that can never satisfy and redirect our hearts to the Lord Jesus and to the joy and life that only He can provide for us.

Specifically, the word, Lent, is taken from Old English and refers to the springtime. It lasts for 40 days, beginning on Ash Wednesday, excluding Sundays (which remains days marking the resurrection of Jesus Christ), and concludes on the Saturday of Holy Week. The forty day period commemorates Jesus' time of fasting in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11; Mk. 1:12-13; Lk. 4:1-13) prior to the beginning of his public ministry. However, unlike Jesus' battle against the Devil in the wilderness and subsequently all the way to the cross, which was on our behalf and substitutionary, we fight our battles against sin armed in the strength of the victory he gained. In other words, our battle is fought armed with his grace and truth.

Therefore, Lent should not be considered as a time when we make things right with the Lord through self-denial. Rather, it is a time for me to reflect on how the Lord Jesus made things right for me on my behalf and is calling me to fully enjoy the blessings of the life he has given. As Tim Keller wisely remarked:

There are, in the end, only two ways to read the Bible: is it basically about me or basically about Jesus? In other words, is it basically about what I must do, or basically about what he has done? Until I see that Jesus fought the real giants (sin, law, death) for me, I will never be able to fight giants in life. Unless I see that Jesus made the big sacrifices for me, I will never be able to make the normal sacrifices of life. Unless I can see him forgiving me on the cross, I won't be able to forgive others. Unless I see him as forgiving me for falling asleep on him (Matt.27:45) I won't be able to stay awake for him.

Lent, then, is not about a mechanical or ritualistic abstention from certain privileges or preferences in order to secure salvation by ourselves. Its purpose is to remind us that Jesus alone satisfies. He alone is our bread and drink. As David wrote, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you" (Ps. 73:25).

It is in this light that Lent invites each of us to make a deep inquiry into our hearts, and to discern for who and what we are living our lives? Is it for the Lord and his glory? Or, are we giving ourselves to fleeting and worldly pursuits? Where are we laying up our treasure? Are we ready to admit what this says about our hearts (Mt. 6:21)? Have we chosen the quick and easy way? Or, are we ready to follow in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:21)?

While it may be surprising to Protestant Evangelicals, Lent provides a wonderful vantage point through which our confidence in Christ alone can deepen. Through this forty-day season, we continue to learn that it is not so much about what we are going to give up as it is about listening to the way God is already leading us to loosen our grip on those things and people that have gotten in the way of our pursuit of Him and the Kingdom.