

What is Lent?

*A brief explanation of the history, and current practice
of the 40 days before Easter*

For Lutherans the 40-day season of Lent is an important one. But what is Lent? Do the Scriptures mention it? Why do we observe it?

Though the Scriptures do not mention Lent, it has a longstanding tradition in the Church. It began very simply as a time of preparation for Easter. From the earliest times it was customary for Christians in most places to fast (not eat) before Easter. At first this was a 2-day fast (Friday and Saturday). As time passed, this fast was extended in some places to a week. Though we are not certain how it developed, by 350 A.D. it was customary in many places to observe a 40-day fast. (Light food like bread & water could be eaten). The earliest reference to a 40-day fast leading up to Easter is in a letter written by a Bishop named Athanasius in 330 A.D. Today Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday (Sundays are excluded to preserve the number 40). Basically, the Sundays in Lent are recognized as “mini-Easters” where one can feast rather than fast.

For Christians living in the Fourth Century, Lent had two major emphases:

1. It was seen as a time of repentance and denial of self.

All Christians were to examine their lives according to the Ten Commandments and other Christian ethics and repent where necessary. They were to remember what it cost their Savior to save them.

2. It was a time of instruction and preparation for the catechumens (students) who wanted to become members of the Christian Church.

During Lent they learned the Christian doctrine by studying the Creed. They were led step by step through prayer and special rites toward baptism. If they “passed” they were baptized and received the Lord's Supper in a joyous service either on Easter Eve (the Easter Vigil) or Easter itself.

At the time of the Reformation, some Christians wanted to eliminate Lent since Scripture didn't command it. Luther urged that it be kept, for he saw Lent as an opportunity for the strengthening of faith. However, he argued that no one should be forced to participate...it should always remain voluntary.

In modern times, Lent has become a time specifically for spiritual growth. Some people “give something up” for Lent in an attempt to deny the desires of the flesh and draw them closer to the desires of their spirit. Some people “take something on” (a spiritual practice like prayer, reading the Bible daily, etc.) in an attempt to grow closer to God.

Are you satisfied with your walk with Christ? Or do you long for more: to know Him better, to be more like Him, to experience His love more profoundly? Then we urge you to willingly submit yourself to the discipline of Lent. Give something up, or take something on – but the real point is spiritual renewal and growing closer to the God whose love is the center of our lives.

Adapted from a writing by Dr. Richard P. Bucher