

Lent: What Does the Bible Say?

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The Lenten season is observed by the Roman Catholic Church, as well as many other liturgical Christian denominational churches, such as Lutheran and Episcopal. A liturgical church is a church or denomination that orders its corporate worship schedule around the seasons of the year. Lent is a tradition of men, having begun in the fourth century A.D. It is not found in the Bible at all, either by way of precedence or observance. The Lenten season runs from Ash Wednesday (in 2019, March 6th) through Easter Sunday (in 2019, April 21st). Lent runs for a period of forty days, not including Sundays. So, it is actually a period of 46 days total.

What is Ash Wednesday and what do the ashes represent? Biblically, ashes are associated primarily with repentance. One text which makes this clear is found in the Gospel of Luke. *"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes"* (Luke 10:13, NKJV). Therefore, ashes were understood to be an outward sign of inward sorrow for sin, which is repentance toward God. The secondary meaning of ashes is in relation to the brevity of life and the need for spiritual resurrection life. This meaning encapsulates both humility and hope. *"For dust you are, And to dust you shall return"* (Genesis 3:19).

What biblical basis do those who affirm the necessity of Lenten observance appeal to? They look to Matthew 4:2, which reads, *"And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry."* In this passage, Jesus is being tempted by the devil in the wilderness for the purpose of proving He is the sinless Son of God, which He did prove. However, the timing is out of context. Matthew 4:3, says, *"Now when the tempter came to Him..."* This means that the fasting of our Lord preceded the temptation, not the Passover. Further, Matthew goes on to tell us that after the temptation was over, *"He departed to Galilee"* (Matthew 4:12). This proves that it was not the Passover season (which equates on our calendar to the Easter season), since it was Jesus' custom to go up to Jerusalem for that feast in accordance with the Law of Moses (Cf. Luke 2:41; John 12:1,12; Galatians 4:4). We conclude then that this passage cannot be used as precedence

to require Lenten observance, as that is foreign to its context. There is, however, one point of similarity, in that Jesus succeeded where Adam had failed with regard to resisting the temptation. Therefore, victory over death is certain and secure for the Christian (Cf. Romans 5:12-14; 1 Corinthians 15:20-22)

So, inquiring minds want to know...Should we be celebrating Lent as Christians today? The short answer is “Yes, we may, but on a voluntary basis only.”

The Roman Catholic Church Catechism (1997 edition, Image/Doubleday, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, section 2043) states in part, “The fourth precept, “You shall observe the days of fasting and abstinence established by the Church.”” This Catholic Church command is a clear and obvious violation of the Bible, which is God’s Word. The Bible, of course, supersedes all human and ecclesiastical tradition as the supreme authority for all Christians in all matters of faith, doctrine, and practice. Scripture says, *“Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth”* (1 Timothy 4:1-3). The Roman Church gives a precept (in other words, a command) regarding the very things for which Scripture prohibits any command. She is therefore in blatant violation of Scripture on these matters.

The problem is the commanding of observances of specified feasts, seasons, and fasts, not in the voluntary observance of them. In fact, every Christian has liberty to observe days, fasts, and seasons, so long as he or she does it with right heart motive, and with spiritual edification as the goal. As the Bible says, *“Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. Who are you to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord.; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord,*

for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks" (Romans 14:3-6).

So observe Lent if you wish. Or don't observe Lent if you wish. "*Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God*" (1 Corinthians 10:31). And make sure, if you observe Lent or any other season, Easter or any other day, that you are doing it before God in heaven, not an audience on earth, as Jesus also said. "*Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast; anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly*" (Matthew 6:16-18). Our final point of application is that based on this Scripture, it is wise not to make it known to men if you are voluntarily fasting or engaging in any other spiritual exercise.