

# A Guide to Lent: What It Is, Where It Came From, and Who Should Observe It

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*History, Practices, and Perspectives*

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## Introduction

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Lent is one of the oldest and most widely observed seasons in Christianity, yet many Christians — including most Latter-day Saints and many Protestants — know little about it. This guide covers what Lent is, where it came from, what the Bible says (and doesn't say) about it, how different Christian traditions observe it, and whether Latter-day Saints and Protestants have reason to participate.

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## 1. What Is Lent?

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Lent (from the Old English *lencten*, meaning "spring"; Latin: *Quadragesima*, meaning "fortieth") is a season of prayer, fasting, and repentance in preparation for Easter. Over one billion Christians worldwide observe it annually, including Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, and some Reformed traditions.

The season has three traditional pillars:

- **Prayer** — intensified personal and communal devotion
- **Fasting** — limiting food intake as a spiritual discipline
- **Almsgiving** — charitable giving, especially redirecting money saved through fasting to the poor

The basic idea is straightforward: set aside a sustained period to confront your own sinfulness, draw closer to God through self-denial, and prepare your heart to experience the Resurrection at Easter with real depth rather than casual familiarity.

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## 2. How Long Is It?

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### **The short answer: 40 days of fasting across 46 calendar days.**

From Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday (the day before Easter), there are 46 calendar days. Sundays are not counted as fasting days because every Sunday is considered a "little Easter" — a weekly commemoration of the Resurrection. Christians were historically forbidden from fasting on Sundays. So:

46 total days minus 6 Sundays = 40 fasting days.

This arrangement was formalized around 601 AD by Pope Gregory I, who moved the start of Lent from the sixth Sunday before Easter to the preceding Wednesday (Ash Wednesday), producing exactly 40 fasting days.

### **2026 Dates**

- **Ash Wednesday (start):** February 18
- **Palm Sunday:** March 29
- **Holy Thursday (liturgical end of Lent):** April 2
- **Good Friday:** April 3
- **Easter Sunday:** April 5

Technically, since 1970 in the Roman Catholic Church, the liturgical season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on the evening of Holy Thursday before the Mass of the Lord's Supper. The Sacred Triduum (Holy Thursday evening, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday) is treated as a separate liturgical unit.

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## 3. Where Did Lent Come From?

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### **The earliest evidence (2nd century)**

Pre-Easter fasting is among the oldest Christian practices outside the New Testament itself. The church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260-340 AD) preserves a letter from Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130-202 AD) to Pope Victor I regarding the Paschal (Easter) controversy. Irenaeus writes:

*"Some think they ought to fast for one day, others for two days, and others even for several, while others reckon forty hours both of day and night to their fast."*

Irenaeus noted that this variation "did not originate in our own day, but very much earlier, in the time of our forefathers." Since Irenaeus was effectively a third-generation disciple after the apostles — he was taught by Polycarp, who was taught by the apostle John — this places pre-Easter fasting extremely early in Christian

history, even if the 40-day duration came later.

## Early purposes (2nd-3rd centuries)

The earliest pre-Easter fasts served two purposes:

1. **Baptismal preparation.** Converts preparing for baptism underwent a final intensive period of fasting, prayer, and instruction before being baptized at the Easter Vigil.
2. **Reconciliation of penitents.** Serious sinners who had been excluded from Communion underwent public penance before being restored at Easter.

Both purposes point to the same theme: getting right with God before the most important celebration of the Christian year.

## The Council of Nicaea (325 AD)

The First Council of Nicaea, convened in May 325 AD by Emperor Constantine I with at least 200-318 bishops present, is the earliest ecumenical council to reference the 40-day Lenten period. While the Council's primary business was resolving the Arian heresy and standardizing the date of Easter, Canon 5 references the *tessarakonta* (Greek for "forty days") as an established season of preparation before Easter.

The practice likely predated the Council. Nicaea didn't invent Lent — it recognized what churches were already doing.

## Post-Nicaea development (4th-7th centuries)

- After 313 AD (the Edict of Milan legalizing Christianity), Lenten observance became more widely adopted.
- Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296-373 AD) sent annual festal letters instructing his flock on the dates and discipline of the Lenten fast.
- Pope Gregory I (c. 540-604 AD) moved the start of Lent to Ash Wednesday, establishing the 46-day period that yields exactly 40 fasting days.

## Medieval period

During the Middle Ages, Lenten fasting became extraordinarily rigorous. Only one meal per day was permitted, and that could not include meat, eggs, dairy, or animal fats. Fish was generally allowed. These rules have relaxed considerably over the centuries.

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## 4. What Does the Bible Say?

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Lent is not directly commanded in Scripture. There is no verse saying "observe a 40-day fast before Easter." However, there are strong biblical precedents for the practices and the number 40.

## The primary text: Jesus's 40 days in the wilderness

*"Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred." (Matthew 4:1-2)*

This is the central scriptural foundation for the 40-day fast. Lent is modeled on Christ's own experience of fasting, prayer, and resisting temptation in the desert before beginning His public ministry.

## Old Testament 40-day precedents

The number 40 appears repeatedly in scripture as a period of testing, preparation, and transformation:

- **Moses on Mount Sinai** (Exodus 24:18; 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9, 18): Moses spent 40 days and 40 nights on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, fasting from bread and water.
- **Elijah's journey to Horeb** (1 Kings 19:8): After being fed by an angel, Elijah traveled 40 days and 40 nights to the mountain of God.
- **The Great Flood** (Genesis 7:4, 12): It rained for 40 days and 40 nights.
- **Israel in the wilderness** (Numbers 14:33-34; Deuteronomy 8:2): The Israelites wandered for 40 years.
- **Nineveh's repentance** (Jonah 3:4): God gave Nineveh 40 days to repent.

## Ash Wednesday scriptures

- "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." (Genesis 3:19) — the basis for the words spoken when ashes are applied.
- "Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:6)
- "I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes." (Daniel 9:3)

## The three pillars of Lent in the Sermon on the Mount

*"Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them... But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth... And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are... But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret... Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance." (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18)*

Jesus does not say "if you give alms," "if you pray," or "if you fast." He says "when." He assumes His followers will practice all three. The Lenten tradition simply structures these three practices into a

concentrated season.

## **Joel 2:12-13**

*"Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness."*

This verse captures the spirit of Lent: genuine repentance, not outward performance.

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## **5. Traditional Practices**

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### **Ash Wednesday**

The season opens with Ash Wednesday, when the faithful receive ashes on their foreheads in the shape of a cross. The ashes are made from the palm branches of the previous year's Palm Sunday. The minister says either: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19) or "Repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mark 1:15).

### **Fasting**

Catholic fasting rules stipulate that those aged 18-59 may eat one full meal per day, with two smaller meals that together do not equal a full meal. Obligatory fasting days are Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Historically, fasting was far more rigorous — in the early and medieval church, only one meal per day was permitted, with no meat, eggs, or dairy for the entire 40 days.

### **Abstinence from meat**

Catholics aged 14 and older abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and all Fridays during Lent. Fish is permitted. This is why fast-food chains promote fish sandwiches during Lent.

### **"Giving something up"**

The popular practice of giving up a luxury (chocolate, social media, alcohol, etc.) for the 40 days is a modern expression of the ancient discipline of self-denial. The idea is that the sacrifice creates space for God and reminds the believer of dependence on Christ rather than on material comforts. Without the spiritual dimension, it is just a diet.

### **Prayer**

Common Lenten prayer practices include the Stations of the Cross (tracing Jesus's path from condemnation to burial, typically on Friday evenings), daily scripture reading, and additional worship services.

## Almsgiving

Money saved through fasting is redirected to the poor. Charitable giving and acts of service are emphasized throughout the season.

## Palm Sunday and Holy Week

- **Palm Sunday:** The Sunday before Easter, marking Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-11). Begins Holy Week.
  - **Holy/Maundy Thursday:** Commemorates the Last Supper and Jesus washing the disciples' feet (John 13:1-17). The liturgical season of Lent ends at the evening Mass.
  - **Good Friday:** Commemorates the crucifixion. A day of fasting and abstinence. Many churches hold services from noon to 3 PM.
  - **Holy Saturday:** A day of quiet waiting. The Easter Vigil on Saturday night is the first celebration of the Resurrection.
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## 6. How Different Traditions Observe Lent

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### Roman Catholic

Lent is obligatory. Fasting and abstinence rules are binding under canon law. The three pillars are formally structured. Confession is strongly encouraged. Liturgical practices include Stations of the Cross, special Lenten Masses, and the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults for converts preparing for baptism at Easter.

### Eastern Orthodox ("Great Lent")

Eastern Orthodox Lent differs significantly from Western practice:

- It begins on **Clean Monday**, not Ash Wednesday. The Eastern Orthodox do not observe Ash Wednesday.
- Sundays are included in the 40-day count. Holy Week is treated as a separate period, so Orthodox Christians fast for approximately 48 days total.
- Fasting is far stricter. All animal products are forbidden — meat, fish (except on certain feast days), eggs, dairy, and even olive oil and wine on most weekdays. The diet is essentially vegan.
- The first week and Holy Week are observed with particular strictness. Some fast completely on Clean Monday.

- Because most Orthodox jurisdictions use the Julian calendar for calculating Easter, Orthodox Pascha usually falls after Western Easter, sometimes by as much as five weeks.

The theological emphasis in the East is less about penitential mourning and more about *theosis* — the restoration of the soul to communion with God. Orthodox tradition calls Lent a "bright sadness," sorrowful over sin but joyful in anticipation of transformation.

A distinctive Orthodox practice is **Forgiveness Sunday**, the last day before Great Lent. At Forgiveness Vespers, every member of the congregation bows before every other member and asks for mutual forgiveness before entering the fast. It is one of the more striking practices in all of Christianity.

## **Anglican/Episcopalian**

Observe Lent with liturgical services, Ash Wednesday, and encouragement of fasting. The Book of Common Prayer includes Lenten collects and readings. Observance is encouraged but not obligatory.

## **Lutheran**

Martin Luther rejected the idea that fasting earns merit before God but endorsed it as a tool for bodily discipline. He wrote: "It is right to fast frequently in order to subdue and control the body." Modern Lutherans observe Lent with midweek services, Ash Wednesday, and personal devotions but do not impose mandatory fasting rules.

## **Methodist**

John Wesley was a strong advocate of fasting. United Methodists observe Lent with Ash Wednesday services and encourage personal disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

## **Presbyterian/Reformed**

Historically, the Reformed tradition was skeptical of Lent. John Calvin critiqued it as "replete with superstition." However, many modern Presbyterian and Reformed congregations have reintroduced Lenten observance.

## **Baptist, Pentecostal, Non-denominational Evangelical**

Most do not observe the liturgical calendar. They emphasize that repentance and discipline should be ongoing, not confined to a season. Some evangelicals critique Lent as implying that human effort contributes to salvation. Ulrich Zwingli specifically preached against Lenten fasting as unbiblical.

That said, there is a growing trend of individual evangelicals adopting Lenten practices as helpful spiritual disciplines rather than requirements.

## 7. Should Protestants Observe Lent?

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### The case for

**Jesus assumed fasting.** In Matthew 6:16-18, Jesus says "when ye fast," not "if ye fast." He assumed His followers would fast. Lent provides a structured way to do what Jesus expected.

**The early church did it.** Pre-Easter fasting predates the Catholic Church as an institution. Irenaeus's letter (c. 190 AD) shows that Christians in the second century — within living memory of the apostles' students — were already fasting before Easter. This isn't a medieval invention. It is among the oldest Christian practices outside the New Testament.

**Scripture supports the 40-day pattern.** Moses fasted 40 days. Elijah traveled 40 days. Jesus fasted 40 days. The number 40 as a period of preparation and transformation runs throughout the entire Bible.

**Protestants already do similar things.** Many Protestant churches encourage prayer challenges, scripture reading plans, and periodic fasting. Lent is essentially a structured version of what many Protestants already believe in.

**It counteracts the shallowness of Easter.** For many Christians, Easter Sunday arrives with little preparation. Lent provides 40 days of building anticipation, so that the Resurrection is experienced as the culmination of a journey rather than a standalone holiday.

### The case against

**It's not commanded in Scripture.** The Bible never says to observe a 40-day pre-Easter fast. For strict sola scriptura Protestants, this matters. Adding required observances that scripture doesn't mandate was a central concern of the Reformation.

**Risk of legalism.** When fasting becomes obligatory and rule-bound, it can become exactly the kind of outward performance Jesus warned against in Matthew 6. The Pharisees fasted twice a week (Luke 18:12) and Jesus did not commend them for it.

**Repentance should be continuous.** The Protestant concern is that confining repentance to a season implies it doesn't matter the rest of the year.

### A middle ground

Most Protestants who observe Lent do so voluntarily, treating it as a helpful spiritual discipline rather than a binding obligation. They would say: the Bible commands fasting, prayer, and charity. Lent is one way to practice all three with intentionality. It is not the only way, but it is a tested and ancient one.

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## 8. The Latter-day Saint Perspective

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## The official position

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not officially observe Lent. The church does not follow the liturgical calendar of other Christian traditions. The unofficial *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* states: "Latter-day Saints conduct Easter Sunday services but do not follow the religious observances of Ash Wednesday, Lent, or Holy Week."

## LDS fasting: a different approach to the same principle

Instead of a seasonal fast, the LDS Church has a monthly fasting practice:

- **Fast Sunday** (typically the first Sunday of each month): Members go without food and water for two consecutive meals, approximately 24 hours.
- Members donate the money they would have spent on those meals as a **fast offering**, used to assist the poor and needy.
- Fast Sunday includes a **Fast and Testimony Meeting**, where members share personal spiritual witness.

Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin taught in General Conference (2001): "The law of the fast has three great purposes: first, it provides assistance to the needy; second, it contributes to our physical well-being; and third, it increases humility and spirituality."

The LDS approach and the Lenten approach share the same three pillars — prayer, fasting, and almsgiving — but structure them differently. LDS members fast monthly throughout the year rather than concentrating it into one season.

## How LDS fasting compares to Lent

	Lent (Catholic)	LDS Fast Sunday
Frequency	Once per year, 40 days	Monthly, 12 times per year
Duration	40 days of modified fasting	24 hours, complete abstinence
Strictness	One full meal + two small meals on fast days; no meat on Fridays	No food or water
Charitable component	Almsgiving (one of three pillars)	Fast offerings donated to the needy
Liturgical context	Leads to Easter	Tied to monthly testimony meeting

## The growing trend

There has been a shift in recent years. Beginning around 2020, LDS Church leaders began referencing Palm Sunday and Holy Week in General Conference addresses and on social media.

Elder Gary E. Stevenson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles observed "a growing effort among Latter-day Saints toward a more Christ-centered Easter," including "greater and more thoughtful recognition of Palm Sunday and Good Friday as practiced by some of our Christian cousins." He encouraged members to treat Easter as a season of worship and preparation.

Eric D. Huntsman, a BYU professor of ancient scripture, co-authored *Greater Love Hath No Man: A Latter-day Saint Guide to Celebrating the Easter Season*, encouraging members to deepen their engagement with the final days of Christ's life through study and family traditions during Holy Week.

## Should Latter-day Saints observe Lent?

There is no doctrinal reason why a Latter-day Saint could not personally adopt Lent-like practices. The church does not prohibit it. And the principles behind Lent — extended fasting, intensified prayer, charitable giving, and sustained focus on Christ's sacrifice — align with core LDS teachings.

A Latter-day Saint observing Lent might:

- Give up something for 40 days as a personal sacrifice and reminder of dependence on Christ
- Increase scripture study focused on the final week of Christ's life
- Fast more frequently than the monthly Fast Sunday
- Increase charitable giving during the season
- Follow Holy Week day by day, from Palm Sunday through the Resurrection

None of this conflicts with LDS doctrine. The question is whether a member finds it spiritually useful.

The honest reality is that most LDS members give Easter far less attention than Christmas. The Restoration centers on a living Christ, and Lent — whatever its institutional origins — is a time-tested way to prepare yourself to encounter the Resurrection with genuine spiritual depth rather than passing it by with a quick Sunday meeting and an egg hunt.

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## 9. Common Misconceptions

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**"Lent is exactly 40 days."** There are 46 calendar days from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday. The six Sundays are excluded from the fast count, yielding 40 fasting days.

**"You can't eat any meat during Lent."** Catholics abstain from meat only on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and Fridays during Lent — not every day.

**"Fasting and abstinence are the same thing."** Fasting limits the amount of food. Abstinence avoids specific foods (particularly meat). They are distinct disciplines with different rules.

**"Lent ends on Easter Sunday."** The liturgical season of Lent ends on Holy Thursday evening. The Sacred Triduum (Holy Thursday evening through Easter) is a separate period.

**"Lent is only a Catholic thing."** Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Eastern Orthodox Christians all observe Lent.

**"Giving up chocolate is the point."** The point is spiritual growth through self-denial. Without the spiritual dimension — prayer, repentance, charity — giving up chocolate is just a diet.

**"Sundays during Lent are cheat days."** Sundays are not fasting days because they celebrate the Resurrection. But the Lenten season continues. They are rest days within the journey, not breaks from it.

**"Lent was invented by the medieval Catholic Church."** Pre-Easter fasting can be traced to the second century. The 40-day duration was referenced at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. Lent predates the medieval period by centuries.

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## 10. The Theological Purpose

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### Identification with Christ

At its core, Lent invites believers to walk with Jesus through His 40 days in the wilderness. By fasting, praying, and enduring self-denial, Christians enter more deeply into the experience of Christ — His suffering, His reliance on the Father, and His victory over temptation.

### Repentance and self-examination

The ashes of Ash Wednesday declare human mortality and sinfulness. The 40 days provide structured time to identify patterns of sin, confess them, and turn back toward God. As Joel 2:12-13 says: "Return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your heart and not your garments."

### Preparation for baptism and renewal

Historically, Lent was the final preparation for converts receiving baptism at the Easter Vigil. Even today, the season invites all Christians to renew their baptismal commitments and ask whether they are living up to the covenants they have made.

### Spiritual discipline

Fasting, prayer, and almsgiving are not punishments but training. Paul used athletic metaphors for the spiritual life: "I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection" (1 Corinthians 9:27). Lent is a season of intentional conditioning — building habits of prayer, generosity, and self-control that persist beyond the 40 days.

### Solidarity with the suffering

Voluntary hunger creates empathy for those who have no choice. The money saved through fasting is directed toward their relief. Lent connects personal spiritual growth to concrete action for others.

## Death and resurrection

Lent enacts the pattern of dying and rising. Believers "die" to comforts and sins during the 40 days so that they can experience Easter — the Resurrection — with greater depth. As Paul wrote: "We are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).

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## Historical Timeline

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Date	Event
c. 30-33 AD	Jesus fasts 40 days in the wilderness
c. 190 AD	Irenaeus writes to Pope Victor about varying pre-Easter fast lengths
2nd-3rd centuries	Pre-Easter fasts of 1-2 days or 40 hours practiced
313 AD	Edict of Milan legalizes Christianity; Lenten practice spreads
325 AD	Council of Nicaea references the 40-day Lenten period (Canon 5)
4th century	Athanasius sends annual festal letters detailing Lenten discipline
c. 601 AD	Pope Gregory I establishes Ash Wednesday as the start of Lent
1517-1540s	Reformers critique Lenten abuses while retaining some fasting
1970	Post-Vatican II reforms clarify Lent ends on Holy Thursday evening
2020s	LDS leaders begin encouraging greater attention to Holy Week

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*All biblical quotations are from the King James Version.*

