

Contents

Acknowledgments	9
Introduction	13
Part 1: The Case for Lent	
1. Into the Wilderness	21
2. A (Mercifully Short) History of Lent	29
3. Repeating History—the Right Way	37
4. Receiving the Humility of Christ	49
5. Confessing Our Secrets	61
6. Learning to Love the Future	73
7. Answering Common Objections	83
Part 2: The Path of Lent	
8. The Mountain of Fasting	97
9. The Valley of Prayer	111
10. The Adventure of Almsgiving	121
11. The Cup of Confession	131
12. Tying It All Together	141
Part 3: Leading Others through Lent	
13. Leading Children through Lent	149
14. Leading Churches through Lent	159
15. Conclusion	169
Appendix: Special Services in Lent	171
Notes	185

CHAPTER I

Into the Wilderness

We are not ready for Easter. Not emotionally, not spiritually.

But we always seem to be ready for the trappings of Easter.

For most Christians, Easter Sunday is a polite and happy occasion. Families, including mine, dress up in pastels and bow ties for the after-church picture. Children paint eggs, hunt for eggs, and consume Peeps and chocolate bunnies. We eat brunch, including delicious ham, and then move on with our lives.

Meanwhile, church leaders see Easter Sunday as an opportunity unlike any other to reach out to the community. Easter is still one of the highest-attended services of the year. As a local church pastor, I appreciate that people are open in a unique way on Easter Sunday. And I feel the pressure every year to preach a homerun sermon and to connect personally with spiritually curious visitors. The reality of church growth competes with Jesus' resurrection for my headspace and personal energy.

Despite all the hoopla and mixed motives, I believe pastors and parishioners alike sincerely want to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. You can sense the sincerity in the smiles, the sermons, and the earnest declarations of "He is risen!"—as well as in the half-startled responses of "He is risen indeed!" My experience

before I practiced Lent was that this sincerity seemed to be somewhat forced. The attempts at celebration were often awkward. Easter Sunday is a victory feast, but in many churches it feels like a company picnic where everyone is expected to show up and be happy.

When Jesus Christ rose from the dead, history itself took a surprising, climactic turn. Even the people who had been preparing themselves for the reign of God could hardly believe it. To paraphrase Samwise Gamgee, Frodo's faithful companion in *The Lord of the Rings*, this meant that everything sad was coming untrue. Death itself had been turned on itself. Satan and his demons had run into the mousetrap of the cross, forfeiting their threats. And our Hero was making good on all His promises, sending His Spirit to renew the face of the earth, giving gifts as He ascended to His rightful throne.

It is the birthright of every Christian and gospel-proclaiming church to celebrate, feast, and exult in Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday. We are invited to participate in the stirring worship depicted in Revelation 4–5, giving honor and thanks with a loud voice to the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Every Sunday—and especially on Easter Sunday—we can overflow with hope every time we look upon Him whom we have pierced. He is not only seated on the throne, but is also healing our marriages, breaking our addictions, and uniting races and cultures into one family.

Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again! It is all true, gloriously so. Why, then, do we still feel awkward and halfhearted on Easter Sunday? In many cases, it's because our imaginations have been malnourished along the way to Resurrection Sunday. We have been secretly snacking on lesser stories—such as politics or our children's athletic success. In

theory the gospel is compelling, but in reality we would rather pay attention to whatever Netflix is offering. We are so full on the junk food of our culture that we cannot metabolize the feast on our Easter plates.

Augustine had a phrase for this: *incurvatus in se*, meaning “curved in on oneself.”¹ We were made to look upward and outward with our imaginations to behold the beauty of God in Christ. But like a Grand Canyon tourist who would rather look downward at his Instagram likes than outward at the breathtaking vistas in front of him, we have curved in on ourselves. We are called to worship, but we have chosen to fantasize. We have exchanged God’s exhilarating and expansive story for lesser stories shaped by our fears, pain, and unhealthy desires.

The truth is that well before Easter, Jesus can wash, prepare, and fill our imaginations for worship. And this is where the practice of Lent comes in. But before I go further, I must tell you about Zorro.

Jumping into the Story

When I was growing up, my parents set aside Fridays as a family night. After dinner, our family of six would huddle around the TV and watch classic reruns. I was taken with *Zorro*, the show about a swashbuckling hero who confronted the corrupt, oppressive tyrants of 1820s California. Zorro was everything Batman was, except with an enviable mustache and peerless fencing skills.

I loved watching the nobleman Don Diego de la Vega transform himself into Zorro with a cape, mask, and wide-brimmed hat—all black. Zorro would inevitably find himself in a battle of

wits and swords with evil men. After dominating them with his footwork and his horsewhip, he would leave a Z mark on their shirt with three swift movements of his sword. His enemies could only gape and curse in response.

I was so enthralled by Zorro that I wanted to jump inside the TV and become part of the story. But even more so, I wanted the story I was watching to jump outside the TV and transform my life. I wanted to become the type of person who could confront evil men and wield a sword like Zorro. So I started practicing with sticks from our backyard. Making the Z was tougher than it looked on TV! I remember asking my Dad to enroll me in fencing lessons. Zorro's story had captured my imagination to the extent that I wanted to live in it.

A compelling story has the effect of us wanting to participate, which is why my daughters want to become mermaids and my sons attend Hogwarts. And this, I believe, is why many Christians make, or aspire to make, a personal pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Walking the footsteps of Jesus allows them to tangibly inhabit His life and ministry. You can breathe the air of Bethlehem, be baptized in the Jordan River, and get your feet dusty on the road to Golgotha.

Perhaps you have heard the classic Holy Land testimony: "The Bible came alive for me!" I think such declarations communicate that salvation-history is not a spectator sport, but a vivid drama in which they participate.

Can you imagine taking a "Holy Land" pilgrimage every year in anticipation of Easter? This is the journey of Lent. Lent is an ancient pilgrimage that the Lord uses to recapture our imagination of and renew our participation in the greatest story ever told.

I doubt any Holy Land tour would take you to the wilderness for forty days. But perhaps they should. The desert is where God called his people to make them holy. We might assume that the wilderness is a place of exile and isolation, and it certainly can be that. But in the story of redemption, the wilderness has always been a sacred rendezvous spot for God and His beloved sons and daughters. In the wilderness, we detox from our false attachments and renew our sacred, primal bond with our loving Father.

Entering the Wilderness

When I am on a flight that is preparing for takeoff, I quietly defy the command to switch my electronic devices to airplane mode. Honestly, I chafe at this federal regulation. The plane will work just fine even if I send a few texts, right? I do not like airplane mode because it cuts me off from the stimulants and freedoms that I feel I need. It forces me to have an actual conversation with the person sitting next to me.

When God calls His people into the wilderness, He puts their whole existence on airplane mode. I resist this, and so might you. It means feeling out of control and out of the loop. Our go-to stimulants and stories are no longer on tap. We can no longer anesthetize our emotions. We can no longer avoid a conversation with our Father. It might feel like a restrictive punishment, but it's actually a heavenly gift. Lent is indeed a wilderness, and there are several reasons why we can and should enter it.

We enter the wilderness of Lent because the gospel is true. We do not go into the wilderness to find God. We enter the wilder-

ness because God has found us. He has delivered us, blessed us, and called us His own. The desolation and quiet gives us space to ponder the great salvation we have already witnessed. Even our struggles and failures in the wilderness teach us the truth of the gospel.

Consider the people of Israel. They journeyed into the wilderness after watching their oppressors drown in the Red Sea by the hand of God. Exodus details the song of praise that carried them out of Egypt: “The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation. . . . Pharaoh’s chariots and his host he cast into the sea” (Ex. 15:2, 4).

The wilderness was not where Israel earned their salvation. It is where they internalized what it meant to be saved. In a desolate place, salvation came that shattered the earth. Bread fell from heaven; water gushed from a rock. The multitudes were fed by faith and with thanksgiving. The Living Word was in their midst, working beautiful and wild miracles, changing slaves into sons. With each nourishing meal, the tyranny and pretense of Egypt lost its grip. It took Israel forty years to realize they were the Lord’s treasured possession, not Pharaoh’s unworthy slaves.

Consider Jesus, true Israel. He entered the wilderness with his Father’s baptismal endorsement ringing in His ears: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). Unlike Israel, and us, He had no false attachments of which to repent. His forty-day fast made space for Him to bask in His Father’s love and to draw upon the Spirit’s power. When the devil tempted Him with fantasies of dazzling self-love and godless power, Jesus was ready. He shut down the demonic chatter with the Word of God, which lived inside Him.

In the Lenten wilderness, our fantasies of glory, fear, or pleasure can give way to the reality of God's glory, love, and holiness. God acts in history, and we enter the wilderness to give our imaginations a chance to catch up.

We enter the wilderness of Lent to prepare for Easter. Why is Lent forty days?² Practically speaking, it takes at least that long to prepare our hearts for Easter. As Dallas Willard put it, "One drop of water every five minutes won't get you a shower."³ We need to be immersed in the reality of the kingdom of God for big doses at a time before we start seeing its impact on our lives. The same is true for Easter Sunday—and the "Eastertide" Sundays that follow. We need more than a Good Friday service two days in advance to get into the state of mind and heart to celebrate Jesus' victory over death and hell. We cannot prepare for Easter over the weekend. No, we need to walk a longer pilgrimage to get ready.

Most importantly, the forty days draw us into the gospel drama that Jesus lived. He went into the wilderness before us, and He goes there again with us. He knows that the struggle is real, that our frame is weak, and that we are dust. Because we are united to Him, His forty days become ours.

We enter the wilderness to get to the Promised Land. Lent is not our ultimate destination. The wilderness fast is temporary, thanks be to God! The bright light of the resurrection is ahead. Can you see it? In fact, the word *Lent* derives from the old Saxon word for "spring," and Christians of Eastern traditions love to refer to the "Bright Sadness" that marks every Christian who will endure the darkness leading up to Easter.

In the Lenten Spring, winter is giving way to summer—life and sunrise and a great feast are ahead. Each day's light is longer

than the last. Lent, then, is a profound picture of the Christian journey. It stands between our deliverance and our home. It is a time of faith and longing, hope and expectation.

No, we are not ready for Easter. Not yet. But with the world behind us and the cross before us, we go repenting and rejoicing one faltering step at a time. And everything sad is coming untrue.

CHAPTER 2

A (Mercifully Short) History of Lent

Where did Lent come from? How did it become recognized as the forty-day period of prayer, fasting, and generosity leading up to Easter? And when we say, “Lent began as a practice of the ancient church,” what does that even mean?

To answer these questions, I invite you to picture yourself in a thorny pastoral situation. Imagine the Lord saw fit to answer your prayers for the unchurched, and revival broke out in your region of the Roman Empire. Your church is deluged with new converts, and the nets of your ministry are breaking from the surplus of fish reeled in by the gospel. People with broken pasts and no background in Christianity come readily to be filled with God’s love in Christ. The poor and wealthy, young and old—people representing all the cultures of your region—are desperate to encounter Jesus and join His family.

It’s the beautiful mess for which you’ve fasted and prayed. Now it’s up to you to shepherd these sheep.

To complicate matters, imagine that Christianity is outlawed and branded as a public menace. State-controlled propaganda blames Christians for the Empire’s various trials, and every weapon of the state and cultural elite is aimed at eradicating the worship of Jesus Christ. You meet secretly late at night or

early in the morning, yet this leads the local officials to accuse you of conspiracy. Church leaders are often summoned and interrogated, sometimes tortured or even fed to beasts. Survivors sustain trauma, and so do you, since there is a price on your head. People crack under the pressure and renounce Christ for fear of losing family members, limbs, or their homes.

You have tough questions to answer, and the stakes for answering rightly could not be higher. For instance, who do you baptize and admit into your fellowship? A few of the “spiritual seekers” are likely state informants. How, then, do you discern one from the other? Others are hyped from their conversion but are ill-prepared for a life of cross-bearing. How do you bridge the gap?

Moreover, how do you maintain the integrity of the Christian faith while welcoming so many pagan converts? The church isn’t growing incrementally; it’s multiplying faster than you can keep track. And rival teachers are wooing the spiritually hungry with heretical teachings. You need a process of discipleship that is dynamic enough for the situation—and quick.

One more thing: Many who wavered under threat of torture want to be admitted back into fellowship. Others have brought scandal on themselves by committing murder or adultery, and they also want to be publicly forgiven. Though such people have not made unreasonable requests, they have broken faith with the family of God. Restoration should not happen without some kind of process.

How do you respond to these needs?

Binding Ourselves to Christ

The pastor-theologians of the church faced conditions like these in the first few centuries after Jesus' life and passion. And this is the environment out of which the practice of Lent emerged. Early church leaders called their people to devote themselves to a regular season of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving to form themselves as more mature Christians. This season later became known as Lent, but in the meantime it was simply a gentle harness that yoked the fledging church to Jesus Christ.

Fasting is a willing abstention from eating food, and some drinks, to make space in our souls to feast on Jesus. In short, fasting is “hunger for God, concretized.”¹ For many people, this is the most painful *and* powerful part of Lent. We will cover the varieties of Lenten fasting in chapter 8.

Prayer is participating in the life of God, talking with and listening to Him, whether in solitude or communal worship. Christians pray using the Scriptures, especially the Psalms. In Lent, our prayers take on a tone of repentance and contrition, which we will discuss in chapter 9.

Almsgiving is a direct participation in God's generosity as we give away our resources in love to our neighbor. We'll look more closely at this in chapter 10.

When the Christian church weaves fasting, prayer, and almsgiving together over a period of several weeks, individuals, families, and communities are impacted powerfully. These practices strengthened the ancient church in at least four areas.

Spiritual growth. Seasons of prayer and fasting allowed our spiritual forebears to participate in their union with Jesus, who Himself fasted as He sought refuge in His Father's love

(Matt. 4:2). Jesus assumed that His followers would fast after he returned to the Father: “The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast” (Matt. 9:15). Prayer and fasting were practical ways for the early church to receive Jesus’ strength in their weakness.

Discipleship. Pagan converts to Jesus needed to cultivate new habits to support their walk with Christ. Fasting, prayer, and generosity over a period of time promoted spiritual reformation. Along the way, they received pastoral support in the form of prayer, fellowship, confession, and Bible teaching. In addition to forming new converts, this process helped to weed out informants.

Generosity. The early church took on responsibility for those marginalized by the Roman Empire, including abandoned babies, widows, lepers, and victims of plague. The practice of generosity, or almsgiving, made this sustainable. And when the early Christians fasted from food, they had more resources to give away.

Discernment. After persecution began to wane, many people who renounced Christ and betrayed their friends and family sought reentry into the church. Periods of fasting and prayer were integral to determining how and when to welcome apostates back into fellowship. Requiring the lapsed to fast, pray, and give generously helped to weed out the insincere.²

In short, Lenten practices were a loving and pastoral response to the needs of a congregation. And they still are, provided that we practice them in the right spirit.

Enrolling in Christ's School

But how did formal, prolonged practices that remind us of Lent become the season of Lent leading up to Easter?

The historical development of Lent is uneven and messy.³ For three hundred years after Christ, different churches around the world took varying approaches to extended seasons of prayer, fasting, and generosity. Given the pace of growth and the heat of persecution, this is not surprising.

I am writing this chapter in the month of June, and my kids are still in school for another week. Chicago public schools usually begin class after Labor Day and end later in June, which offers both benefits and drawbacks. While my kids are finishing the school year, their cousins in Alaska, Texas, and Ohio are already enjoying summer break. But at the end of the day, my kids are learning the same subjects as their cousins. Yes, there are variations in the calendar, teaching styles, and local customs, but all the cousins are learning how to read, perform math equations, and dissect frogs.

As the early church wrestled with how to make disciples, they developed what we might consider “schools of Lent.” They varied somewhat in timing and style, but they all had the same essential curriculum of Christ-centered prayer, fasting, and generosity. These church leaders would later develop universal standards that would stand the test of time. Three “schools of Lent” were most prominent during the first three hundred years of the church’s life.

An intense baptism class. If you wanted to become a Christian under Roman persecution, you could enroll in a three-year process known as the “catechumenate,” a full-immersion experience

that taught the spiritually curious how to live, think, and worship as Christians before they were baptized and admitted into the complete fellowship of the church.⁴ This often involved putting aside concubines, quitting professions that involved idolatry or injustice, and making restitution with people against whom one had sinned against by stealing, cheating, or deceiving. Those who had denied Christ in word or deed and wanted to rejoin the church could also enter the catechumenate. During the three years, candidates studied the Bible, attended worship services regularly, and received moral and theological instruction from their pastor. Once they had shunned their pagan ways and embraced the ways of Jesus, they were allowed to register for baptism. At that point, things got even more intense. Candidates and their sponsors—a more mature Christian who walked with them through the catechumenate process—would enter a three-week period of fasting and prayer. The fasting requirements of the catechumenate in part formed the basis of the Lenten fast in later centuries: one daily meal of vegetables. During the three-week fast, each candidate was interviewed, prayed over, and expected to memorize key doctrines of the Christian faith before they were baptized. In short, the catechumenate helped early Christians break old, sinful habits, reorder their loves, and conform their daily lives to the ways of Christ.

The Easter Fast. A few short years after Jesus' passion, the earliest Christians began to fast and pray to remember Jesus' death and celebrate His resurrection. As early as the first century, baptismal candidates and their sponsors fasted the day before Easter.⁵ By the late second century, Christians fasted for forty hours, going without food and drink between the afternoon of Good Friday and the morning of Easter.⁶ By the third century,

Christians fasted throughout Holy Week, and by the fourth century the Easter fast was extended to forty days.⁷

The Epiphany Fast. Whereas early Christians in North Africa and Rome fasted before their baptisms, those in Syria, Armenia, and Egypt practiced a forty-day fast after their baptisms. They sought to model Christ, who received His baptism and then spent forty days fasting in the desert. Epiphany is the season of the church calendar beginning in mid-January and celebrates the revelation of Christ's glory in His incarnation. Eastern Christians were enamored with Christ's glory and wanted to partake in Him, so they were baptized during Epiphany and then fasted after receiving the sacrament.⁸

While specific practices of each “school of Lent” were slightly different, they all shared the same rich gospel curriculum of humble repentance, spiritual renewal, and holy preparation for the mission of the church in the world. The early Christians were learning how to put their besetting sins to death (“mortification”) and to experience new life in union with Christ (“vivification”).

In the fourth century, the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, and persecution of Christians eased considerably. This meant that Christian leaders could gather in safety, inform each other about the practices of their churches, and solidify their teachings. In 325, a diverse gathering of church leaders from around the world convened in Nicaea (in what is now modern Turkey) to decide on matters relating to theology and practice.

At this council, the church leaders decided that they all would practice Lent—they called it *Quadragesima*, meaning “fortieth” in Latin. They took the three overlapping fasts and turned them

into one universal season leading up to the Easter feast. Yes, baptismal candidates would still fast, taking one simple meal in the evening, but now the whole church—every person in every region—was invited to join them.⁹ Lent took the best parts of the catechumenate fast, the Easter Fast, and the Epiphany Fast and combined them into a universal, forty-day period that finds its culmination on Easter Sunday.

One of my friends who loves Jesus but is skeptical of Lent once asked me, “If Lent and Easter are so wonderful, why just celebrate them once a year?” This is a great question, and history shows that Christians in Rome insisted that every Friday is a “little Lent” and that every Sunday is a “little Easter.” As such, Sundays are for feasting and rejoicing in Christ, not fasting.¹⁰ So in 487, the church excluded Sundays from the forty days of Lent. That’s why Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, to account for all forty days.¹¹

Even though Lent became a standard season for the Christian church in the fourth century, it has always been flexible enough to adjust to the local culture and pastoral needs of the people. Fasting, prayer, and generosity are woven together differently for Christians in different parts of the world. Even in my own life, Lent is never quite the same each time I practice it.

But the pastoral vision for this season remains unchanged: Lent is a school that trains people to live as Christians. It is so effective at forming us into the likeness of Christ that we continue it to this day.