

A Journey Worth Considering

by Brandon Eggar

When it comes to taking trips there are many who would rather forgo all the planning, and simply enjoy the destination itself. I'm not one of these. I want to focus on the planning. I want to make the arrangements. I want to scope out the sites in advance. I'm the type of person who thoroughly enjoys the planning as well as the actual travel from point A to point B. For me, the journey – the planning and the travel – makes the destination even more desirable and worthwhile.

I mention this because there's a journey coming up that I want to encourage you to consider. It's an ancient journey. It's a journey that comes around once a year. It's a journey with a well-worn path, and it's a journey with a grand destination. But it's also a much misunderstood journey, and because this is the case, it easily becomes an abused journey or one that's neglected altogether. The journey to which I'm referring is Lent (a word taken from the Old English word for springtime, or time of refreshing).

For most of my life, I was unaware of this journey. I grew up in a family that didn't observe Lent. As a matter of fact, I can't even recall the first time I actually heard the term Lent, but I do remember my reaction. My first thought regarding Lent was that it was foreign to true Biblical Christianity and, at worst, a distortion of it. For me, Lent was nothing more than an empty ritual focused on trivialities such as giving up chocolate or Dr Pepper for a limited time before Easter only to return to it in an even more ravenous manner after Easter. However, I now realize that my reaction to Lent was based more on its practice rather than its essence. In other words, I observed its abuse and therefore rejected it instead of first asking what it is and why certain parts of the Church practice it... and have been practicing for quite some time. It wasn't until I inquired concerning the meaning of Lent that my view of this ancient practice was transformed and developed from an uninformed dislike to that of a healthy admiration. And if this is the case for one who grew up in a tradition that didn't observe Lent, it can also be the case for the one who did yet didn't know why. For both the same question remains, "What is Lent?"

What is Lent?

The specific details surrounding the origin of Lent remain unknown to us (as a tradition it seems to have been firmly established by the fourth or fifth century), yet its ultimate reference point does not. Lent was always related to – and pointed forward to – Easter, the day Jesus, our King, defeated death and secured life for us. Easter is the day we celebrate life – life in its fullness – and are reminded of the truth that if we belong to Jesus, we too have died to sin and been raised to new life in him (Rom. 6.3-4).

Easter, then, is the celebration of the reality of our new identity – the day we confess loudly and joyfully that if anyone belongs to Jesus they are a new creature (2 Cor. 5.17). So understood, Lent then is our preparation for this celebration, a preparation that takes the form of repentance. Put another way, Easter is the great day we feast upon the truth of Jesus' victory of life for us while Lent is a time of considering and repenting of all the ways we've betrayed or forgotten this new life Jesus has given to us. Keeping with the metaphor, Lent is a journey of rediscovery and recovery of who we are as followers of Jesus with its grand destination being the celebration of Easter. It is an intentional journey of turning away from those idolatries that have captured our hearts and turning back to the One who came to captivate our hearts with his life and joy.

Let me add at this point that Lent is not the only time we are to focus on repentance. Repentance is not a one-time activity for the Christian. Rather, it is an ongoing, daily activity. But just as we should always thank God for the birth of Jesus, we still observe a periodic reminder of this great event, Christmas, so as to focus on and celebrate it more fully. So it is with the observance of Lent as well as Easter.

Lent, then, is about the heart – about asking ourselves what is our greatest treasure. For as Jesus told us, “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6.18). The Lenten Journey is a time when we are to become more intentional, with the Lord’s help, about inquiring as to where our hearts are, i.e. are they seeking after the treasure of God’s kingdom (Matt. 6.33)?

When is Lent?

The Lenten Journey begins on Ash Wednesday and extends through the Saturday before Easter, or Holy Saturday. It is comprised of forty days, excluding Sundays. According to Church tradition, Sunday is never a day for fasting but rather always a day for feasting or celebration. What this means is that there is no such thing as a Sunday of Lent, but only a Sunday in Lent. The climax or highlight of the Lenten Journey takes place on Holy Week, the week leading up to Easter. Holy Week is the time we observe Maundy Thursday (the day the first Communion was instituted) and Good Friday (the day we remember the Lord Jesus’ death for us on the cross).

How might we practice Lent?

There is an unlimited number of ways we could answer this question, yet because we are limited by the space of this article, let me provide you with a sampling of helpful suggestions.

A Heart Exam

The first suggestion comes in the form of seeing Lent as a concentrated “heart exam.” Just as one goes to the doctor for an annual physical exam, Lent could be seen as an annual heart exam that consists of asking yourself hard “heart” questions concerning your life, such as:

- *Am I living for God and his glory or for my own?*
- *Am I living thankfully?*
- *What are my besetting sins and what am I doing to fight them?*
- *Am I living with a gospel focus?*
- *Am I faithful in the participation of worship and with the community of Jesus?*
- *Do I seek the Lord in prayer?*

Many more questions could be added to this list, but you get the point. One thing you must remember is that these questions are not meant to lead us to despair concerning how bad we are or how miserably we’ve failed. Rather they are meant to lead us to Jesus and the forgiveness and life that he has secured for us through his death and resurrection.

Exercising Self-Denial

Central to the gospel is the call to self-denial (Mark. 8.34). It’s front and central yet so easily forgotten. Lent, in its purest form, is meant to be a recovery of this call – a recovery that’s intended to remind us and grow us in the truth of what it means to say no to ourselves and yes to Jesus.

Because of sin we are prone to indulge ourselves with things we reckon will bring us life and happiness. Each of us has an inclination deep within us to “live by bread alone” (Matt. 4.4), to believe that the things of this world – even the good things of this world – can satisfy our deepest longings. But Jesus came to liberate us from this false belief, to liberate us from our addiction to creation. He came so that we might be free to once again be dependent on God who is life, who alone can satisfy our deepest longings, and who in his grace gives food and clothing and comfort and yes, even entertainment, to be received and enjoyed gratefully. The reason for the gospel’s call is to put this truth back into perspective. It is teaching us to say no not simply to things, but to our misuse of things.

So what does this look like practically on the Lenten Journey? It means choosing some things in our lives that we know we’ve become reliant and dependent upon and then giving them up, or cutting back, in order to refocus our lives on him who alone can satisfy. One example among many would be the practice of saying no to our addiction to TV – to our armchair vegetation – that puts us in a state of passively accepting anything and everything that is coming from it. Lent is a good time to start saying no or cutting back on TV, or even social media, in order to focus more time on reading the Bible or other good books, or praying, or spending valuable time with family or friends. Again, there is nothing wrong with TV, yet when we become dependent upon it, and in the end are lessened by it, then there needs to be a change.

A Renewed Commitment to Worship

Another suggestion, and one that is quite basic yet foundational, is this – attend the corporate worship of our God on the Lord’s Day. It’s easy in our individualistic culture to lose sight of the utter importance of worshiping God together, praying together, listening to God’s word together, taking communion together, of committing ourselves – our time, talents, and treasures – afresh to our Lord together. FWPC is your community, your family; therefore take time this Lenten Season to commit yourself anew to this family who loves and cares for you and longs to see you grow in the freedom of the gospel.

Should we practice Lent?

If one were to ask me, “Are Christians required to practice Lent?” my answer would certainly be “No.” There is no Biblical mandate requiring us to practice Lent. But that is far different from the question, “Should we practice Lent?” To that question, my answer would be, “You don’t have to, but it might do you some good.” There is no magic in Lent. It does not guarantee results, but it is a practice that many for many, many years have found edifying in their own Christian pilgrimage. It is a wise tradition that has been handed down for our growth in grace. It can and has been misused. It has been ignored. Yet regardless of this, it remains a journey worth considering. Might you and yours consider taking it this year.