

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

Lent

axis

While **Act One** of the [liturgical calendar](#) (Advent/Christmas/Epiphany) focuses on the *incarnation* of Jesus, **Act Two** hones in on His *death* and *resurrection*, beginning with a season we call Lent.

— What is Lent?

From the Anglo-Saxon word “[Lencten](#),” Lent means “long” or “to lengthen,” referring to the increasing hours of sunlight as springtime creeps ever nearer and winter retreats back from whence she came. But spiritually speaking, it means so much more.

Lent is the preparatory and anticipatory season that comes before Easter—a season of physical restraint that inwardly prepares us for the glory of Easter morning. It’s a season to gaze upon the cross of Jesus, a season of repentance that calls us to return to God in our hearts, minds, and actions. It invites us to make space in our hearts and time in our schedules for God. Lent is the opportunity to align our bodies and souls more deliberately with God. It is living for forty days how we should be living 365 days a year. “[In this season](#) God wants to liberate us from the bondage of our slavery to self centredness, greed, busyness, and rampant consumerism.” But it’s not just a season of dark penitence; it’s also full of joy, hope, and healing because we know that, as we take an honest look at the state of our hearts, ***we are never too far gone from God’s redeeming grace.***

In 2018, Lent begins on February 14, Ash Wednesday (and, interestingly enough, Valentine’s Day...), and ends March 31, the day before Easter Sunday. It lasts 40 days not including Sundays. More on that later.

— Why should my family consider observing Lent?

The short answer? To prepare your hearts to celebrate the Resurrection.

In Christian circles today, Lent is well known. Some dismiss it as a “Catholic” practice, while others choose not to participate because it can feel similar to a New Year’s resolution in which one gives up something “bad” and see how well one can succeed at that for 40 days (which is longer than a New Year’s resolution lasts...amirite?!).

But Lent is not as well known in culture because it hasn’t gotten the attention that Advent and Christmas have. There’s no “magic,” no “holiday spirit” tied to Lent as with the others. And the same is actually true for Easter (though it’s starting to change): Department stores don’t play Easter music, we don’t decorate our homes with Easter lights, and our employers don’t have Easter parties for the whole staff. It doesn’t “feel” a lot different than the rest of year. Yes, we have the Easter bunny, Easter eggs, and other symbols of spring, but overall there are fewer prescribed methods of celebrating. Some of this is good because it gives Christians a blank canvas, rather than muddying our way through the ups and downs of what culture has already established. But it also requires more intentionality.

Lent can be a beneficial spiritual practice for anyone, young and old alike, and there is significance beyond merely swearing off candy or Facebook. Having physical, tangible reminders that point us to deeper spiritual realities and to the grand story we’re part of is important for our spiritual journeys. Liturgies and traditions that involve our minds, hearts, and senses are powerful to shape our imaginations and combat our apathy and forgetfulness.

The same way we need Advent to prepare our hearts for Christmas, all the more do we need

Lent to prepare our hearts for Easter, the most significant event in human history. Often our preparations for Easter mainly involve buying new clothes and filling our Easter baskets (which is fine, it just doesn't go far enough.) And even our Lenten fasts don't always hold deep spiritual significance.

You cannot truly celebrate the end of anything without first starting at the beginning. Before we get to Easter, we need Lent. You cannot truly celebrate the end of anything without first starting at the beginning. Because the way to new life comes...through death.

— If we already have new life in Christ, why should we have a whole season thinking about death?

We present-day Americans often avoid talking about death and live as though our only hope lies in the now. Some of us claim there's hope for eternity, but how much of our daily lives are actually spent living in fear of death and motivated by avoiding it at all costs? Advanced medical care, airbags, a never-ending supply of food and clean water, home security systems ... all of these are good things. But the danger comes when they give us an illusion of control, when we put our trust in them.

Just because we aren't daily threatened by starvation, death in childbirth, genocide, or religious persecution doesn't mean we aren't ourselves staring death in the face. The reality is we all are. We resist weakness and helplessness, and it often isn't until we face a life-threatening diagnosis, a tragedy, or approach old age that we are really faced with the reality of death. With the way our culture treats death, *it's no wonder that we see old age as a slow, sad fade rather than a triumphant approach to the finish line.*

In a sense, it's not surprising that we want to avoid death. We weren't created for death; we are destined for eternal life. But the path to that life travels squarely through the cross. We are called to follow Jesus in the way He forged, denying ourselves and taking up our own crosses. The glorious news is that while we are plunged under the water in a symbolic drowning, dying to ourselves in baptism, we are raised up into the life Christ has so generously given to us, a life that is better than anything we could imagine—abundant life that begins right now. We fully partake in the victory He has secured for those who believe. He who knew no sin became sin so that we might be children of God. **We weren't created for death, but neither are we to fear it.**

Lent teaches us that “we are dust and to dust we will return” (check out an Ash Wednesday service for more on that). To refuse to acknowledge this or to simply ignore it has serious implications for life now. When we put our hope in our present circumstances or in something or someone other than Jesus Himself, our hope is misplaced and false. And false hope is no hope at all. The first question of “[A New City Catechism](#)” (a valuable tool in teaching the doctrines of the Christian faith—check it out) asks, “What is our only hope *in life and death*?” The answer? “That we are not our own but belong to God.” **This is our only hope.** We cannot save ourselves. And as this truth sinks deeper into our hearts, it can bring great comfort.

What do our lives reflect to our teens and those around us? Do they declare that there is hope beyond the end of life on this earth, or are we unknowingly clutching and clinging to the ground beneath our feet, trying to hold life together ourselves and fearing what is to come. What are our kids “catching” from the way we live our lives, beyond what we say to them?

Death on its own is bad news, but the good news is that we belong to a God who has fully conquered sin and death and accomplished our salvation. And we need not be afraid to look

straight to the heart of what we needed saving from. Just because we no longer live under condemnation doesn't mean we should live unaware of the magnitude of what had to be overcome for us to be in this position. And repentance is a discipline of Lent that forms that awareness in us.

— Why do we need to repent if God has already forgiven our sins?

Our penitence is important to God. Believers don't lose God's forgiveness when we sin, yet Jesus Himself taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." We repent out of obedience, knowing that God has a purpose for us in that practice. He knows we are prone to wander; He knows we so easily forget. Repentance and confession should be a regular spiritual discipline for Christians, and Lent allows us to dedicate a whole season to lean into it more deeply.

Repentance doesn't invite shame and condemnation; it invites freedom. There's a difference between knowing in our heads that we have been forgiven by God and actually experiencing it. When we can look our sin square in the face, when we're not afraid to admit how dark and sinful our hearts can be and can simultaneously know that we no longer bear any of its weight, that we are forgiven, pardoned, cleansed, no longer guilty . . . this is good news, and what a joyous opportunity we have to encounter it more deeply! Lent isn't for despairing, but for entering into greater joy.

Some of us are more like the younger brother in the "[Parable of the Lost Son](#)" (maybe this is where some of your teens are!), needing to be reminded to take our actions seriously and to remember that our sinful actions grieve God and hurt us and others. But before we pass judgment on our rebellious children, let's remember that others of us are like the older brother, hiding behind our religiosity and good works. We feel like we're doing all right on our own, but the truth is that we're all broken, all the way down.

So, whoever we are, we are called to repent of our sin—our indifference toward God and our desire to be in charge of our own lives—and we do this not just in our minds but in our actions. God's saving work isn't just one point in time; it continues in us through sanctification. His mercy does not say "you are forgiven" and then leave us comfortably where we are. No, in His mercy He leaves no area of our lives untouched, and He wants for us greater and greater freedom from the oppression of sin and the evil one.

Repentance isn't just a nice feeling we have—it's the road into new way of living, into the kingdom of God. And the disciplines of Lent invite us to enter in to this new way of life.

— What spiritual disciplines are associated with Lent?

Church tradition prescribes to us the Lenten disciplines of **fasting**, **almsgiving**, and **prayer**, the precedent for which we find in Matthew 6. As you read, remember that these disciplines don't earn us greater favor from God, but rather reflect *God's* redemption of the relationships that were broken in the Fall. The good news is that the process doesn't begin with us. And there's great hope in realizing that we don't have to wait until some future day to begin experiencing

reconciliation—God’s kingdom begins now. And as with any discipline, it’s okay that we don’t always “feel like” doing them. We can trust the Holy Spirit’s work, teaching us to love the right things and empowering us to do them despite our weakness. And these habits and practices we partake in, even when difficult, in turn form our hearts to love what is good.

Fasting

Fasting is probably the first thing you think of when someone mentions Lent. Unfortunately there’s a version of Lenten fasting that is a competition-like, social-media-driven show that flies in the face of what it’s intended to be.

Rather, fasting is a tangible expression of our inner conversion. We are reconciled to God through Christ, but we are also, in a sense, reconciled to a more truly human version of ourselves. We are no longer slaves to our sinful nature. Jesus’ power in our lives gives us power over the desires of the flesh.

[Matthew 6:16-18](#) says, “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

It’s traditional to fast on Fridays during Lent. More often than not, fasting involves giving up food, and it could look like only eating one meal on Fridays, going without food completely that day, not eating meat, or something else. It’s up to you to decide. Lee Nelson [says that](#) “one can fast from anything that assaults the appetites. The purpose of fasting is to bring about **hunger** in order to put those appetites in their proper place. So food is not the only possibility.” As we experience that hunger, we can allow it to create in us a hunger for good, a hunger for deeper relationship for God, a “[hunger](#) and thirst for righteousness.”

Another version of fasting could more accurately be called “abstinence.” This is what we typically think of when we talk about giving up Facebook, cake, movies, or Starbucks for the entirety of Lent. It can be food related or not.

One big thing to remember is that we don’t have to fast from something that’s *bad*, just something that will make an *impact*—something that we’ll feel. We don’t need to use it as another chance at our New Year’s resolution or to go on a diet and lose weight or to finally follow our doctor’s advice to stop eating sugar. We might indeed reap physical or emotional benefits from our fast, but that isn’t the focus, and **it’s better to choose something that you don’t plan to give up forever.**

However you decide to go about it, the important thing to remember is that we fast from something **for the sake of something greater**. Fasting isn’t meant to exist on its own. We fast from something to replace it with something else, specifically with the practices of giving and prayer. But be creative. You could fast from Facebook and have more intentional, eye-to-eye conversations with your kids. You could fast from Starbucks and give that money to someone in need. You could fast from listening to music in the car (obviously not bad) to embrace the silence and make space for prayer. You could fast from your nightly Netflix show and make time to read books that feed your soul. *We fast to make space in our lives for God to enter in.* And no one would deny that we and our teens could use that space.

Another important thing to remember is that we always feast on Sundays. (Sundays are not even included in the 40 days of Lent, meaning the season itself lasts longer than 40 days.) Greg Goebel encourages us to “remember...that [the fast is not the focus of Lent](#). The future feast is the focus, and fasting is a way to prepare for that feast. . . . Lent is actually the ‘[exception](#)’ to our Feasting. Fasting is a temporary part of our life, while we await the Bridegroom’s return.

Fasting will pass away, but feasting will remain forever.” On Sundays we feast, because *every* Sunday is a celebration of the Resurrection. Even in Lent, we taste Easter. We don’t fast in despair; we fast because we know the ending, that we are waiting for something good to come.

The pendulums of our Lenten fastings will probably swing between Pharisaical, legalistic perfection, and apathetic, half-hearted attempts that only last a few days. But wherever you fall on this spectrum, don’t stress, don’t give up, and remember God’s grace, which isn’t dependent on our success or failure. We also may want to hunker down and look inward in fasting, but rather we should try to see it as a pouring out. Our fasting turns our gaze off of our own selves so that it may be turned toward others, which is exactly what the next discipline helps us do.

Almsgiving

[Almsgiving](#) is a tangible expression of the truth that we can be reconciled with our neighbor, even and especially those who have nothing to offer us in return or those we don’t particularly like. We can give generously and sacrificially, not out of guilt but, again, for the sake of something greater, knowing that we’ve been given much. In giving, we experience greater freedom from the shackles of materialism and consumerism. And great needs can be met in “the least of these” through the generosity of those who have been given much. This kind of giving is exponential because everyone benefits. Giving can obviously be of our money, but also of our time, our words, our care, our food, a space at our tables, and more.

[Matthew 6:2-4](#) says: “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” We need to care about the states of our hearts and our motivations for giving, and we also need to care deeply about the recipients of our gifts.

A critical eye has recently been given to the American church’s methods of missions and charity through books like [When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself](#) and [Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help, and How to Reverse It](#). Steven Saint [writes this of his experience](#) with people groups in Africa, Asia, and South America who live simply and materially contentedly:

I have learned that it is unreasonable to evaluate their “lack” based on our distorted and exaggerated perception of need. When we try to meet phantom needs of people who live at a lower material standard than we have learned to consider “minimal,” we not only fall into a trap that keeps us from seeing their real needs, but we also tempt them into a snare that can raise their perception of need beyond what their economy can support.

So we must be intentional as we give.

And to give, we first need to see clearly how much we’ve been given—the beauty of this world, the life God has given us, the Gospel, etc.—so as not to become tight-fisted givers. Amy Lee [writes](#), “Beauty and generosity, hospitality and celebration—these often have the power to loosen our clasp on our contributions and reorient us in the best way: For before we are givers, we are recipients first, of grace upon grace.” (We highly recommend reading the rest of her powerful piece.)

Prayer

Prayer, the third discipline of Lent, is a tangible outworking of our reconciliation with God. We can “approach God’s throne of grace with confidence” (Heb 4:16). We no longer have to rely on animal sacrifices and high priests; we ourselves can come before God and converse with Him in intimate relationship. This isn’t a small thing.

Again [Matthew 6:5-8](#) says, “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

Many of us are most familiar with a free-form type of praying that comes from the heart as the Spirit leads. But there are other forms of prayer that offer just that: more form. Jesus Himself provided a structure for praying when He gave us the Lord’s Prayer. And we needn’t shy away from that type of prayer. Tish Harrison Warren asks:

But what if prayer is more than simply self-expression? What if prayer is a kind of craft or exercise that shapes us? What if God uses prayer to “act back on us,” to form us? What if set liturgical prayers are an ancient tool that reframe our perspectives and desires so that we might learn to pray in ways that are beyond us?

(We highly recommend reading her piece “[By the Book](#)” for more on that.)

If you want to pray using the method that Christians have used for centuries, check out [this online tool](#) for more. [The Book of Common Prayer](#) is also useful in this regard.

Some Cautions

Jesus condemned fasting in order to be noticed, charity in order to look good, and praying so that people would admire you. (Our kids will see through this more than anyone.) We don’t want external motions that never reach our hearts. But we’re missing out if we give up on the power of habit, tradition, and ritual completely. It’s true that works don’t earn our salvation, but they’re an outpouring of what we already have, and they remind us of who we are.

Also, if we fast, give, and pray during Lent, ***we have to take care not to be so rigid that we’re actually inconsiderate or self-righteous toward others.*** We’re called to be people of hospitality, a hospitality that goes beyond inviting people over for dinner by seeking the best for others however we can.

Fasting, giving, and prayer are extremely private, in the sense that we do not do them in order to gain attention and praise from other people. But they are also very public, in the sense that the ripple effect of these practices in our own lives will hopefully also do good in the lives of others.

Why does Lent seem so depressing?

Over a third of the Psalms contain laments pleading with God to heal the brokenness in the world. We don’t have to look far to see that *all is not as it should be*. It’s not. It’s begun. It’s coming. But we’re in that time between redemption and restoration. And we ourselves are not who we were meant to be. We can see this as bad news, but it’s actually very good news. *Because this is not all there is*. And because we are not in charge of becoming the people we’re meant to be. But God promises that He is making all things new, including us.

It’s okay to not understand it all. It’s okay to cry out to God with our doubts and questions. It’s appropriate to lament and cry out for justice. We aren’t to make peace with the brokenness of this world. To not acknowledge sin and darkness, whether in ourselves or in the world, isn’t merciful; it’s actually making peace with oppression because sin is the most oppressive force we know. We’re allowed to see the world as it is, but we need to also have a vision for where it’s

going.

Former gymnast Rachael Denhollander, known for her testimony in the Larry Nassar case, [has this to say](#):

One of the areas where Christians don't do well is in acknowledging the devastation of the wound. We can tend to gloss over the devastation of any kind of suffering but especially sexual assault, with Christian platitudes like "God works all things together for good" or "God is sovereign." Those are very good and glorious biblical truths, but when they are misapplied in a way to dampen the horror of evil, they ultimately dampen the goodness of God. Goodness and darkness exist as opposites. If we pretend that the darkness isn't dark, it dampens the beauty of the light.

We're afraid to be real about our sin because it hurts too much. Afraid to be vulnerable. Afraid to live in the light. But we need not gloss over the devastation, we need not sugarcoat life to our kids, we need not [shield them from the darkness](#).

What we can do is "humble ourselves" and "pray" and "seek His face" and "turn from our wicked ways." We can call out to God and He will "forgive our sin and heal the land" ([2 Chron 7:14](#)). The purpose of Lent isn't despair, but hope and healing.

— I'm not sure we should participate in Lent—it's not in the Bible!

Lent isn't specifically prescribed in the Bible, and this is a case people may make against it. But there are a lot of things not found in the Bible that we do every year, every month, or even every day. If we really lived that way, it would be ridiculous.

There are certainly many, many things that we are not required to do. But God has given us freedom and creativity to choose to do a lot of good things.

We don't need to fear embracing the extra-biblical traditions of the church, like Lent. What we do need is a greater awareness of the church spanning both space (i.e. we are connected to believers in every part of the world) and, in this case, time (i.e. Christianity throughout the last 2,000 years.) It's not just me and my Bible; it's the communal, relational Body of Christ, and thankfully we have years upon years of God working in the lives of humans to look to. It's also important to remember that even before the New Testament was canonized, the early church dedicated and participated in a formalized time of intentional self-reflection and self-denial. Practicing the spiritual discipline to "[deny yourself](#), pick up your cross, and follow me."

— There's no way my teens are going to go for this.

Are you sure? How do you know? They certainly don't need you to make them do Lent, but you could definitely invite them to be part of it. Talk through the ideas in this Guide, so they know why you're doing it, not just what you're doing. Ask them lots of questions, and invite them to contribute their own ideas. And if they hate what you're saying? Ask them why, but be okay with it.

In an article called "[How to Reach the Most Exhausted Generation in History](#)," the author argues that what teens really want and need is less, not more. They need slower, not faster. Who knows what might happen with your teens and Lent? Ask them if there is something

they'd like to take a break from for the sake of something greater.

Practical ideas for Lent:

- Biola University's [Lent Project](#). Don't underestimate the power of beauty in our lives. Biola does a fabulous job of bringing together art, music, poetry, and scripture to teach us (more than just intellectually) in this season
- Ash Wednesday. Find a local Ash Wednesday service, even if your church doesn't have one. You will be reminded that "You are dust, and to dust you will return." Then, be brave enough to walk around all day long with ashes on your forehead, and look for others who've done the same.
- Meditate on [Psalm 51](#). Print it out where you can see it. Read it together often. Perhaps memorize it. It encapsulates Lent very nicely.
- Music for Lent:
 - To Sing: "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," "What Wondrous Love Is This," "Abide With Me," "My Hope Is Built On Nothing Less," "Holy, Holy, Holy," "Man of Sorrows (What a Name)," "Were You There?," "Nothing But the Blood"
 - Playlists: [Lent with Sacred Ordinary Days](#), [Brother](#) by The Brilliance, [Traditional Lent](#)

As you and your family move deeper into Lent, and as one spiritual season gives way to a new one, urge one another on to follow Christ unceasingly. Obedience is never an accident. Your teen will never accidentally fall into faithfulness, it requires intentionality and action. Join with the saints in this season of spiritual change by repenting of sin, renewing your faith, and practicing the ancient traditions of the church as you prayerfully prepare to celebrate the mystery of our salvation.

Finally, we hope you will take some time to reflect on this beautiful poem.

"Fast from judging others; feast on the Christ within them.

Fast from emphasis on difference; feast on the unity of life.

Fast from apparent darkness; feast on the reality of light.

Fast from thoughts of illness; feast on the healing power of God.

Fast from words that pollute; feast on phrases that purify.

Fast from discontent; feast on gratitude.

Fast from anger; feast on patience.

Fast from pessimism; feast on optimism.

Fast from complaining; feast on appreciation.

Fast from worry; feast on trust in God's Care.

Fast from unrelenting pressure; feast on unceasing prayer.

Fast from facts that depress; feast on verities that uplift.

Fast from lethargy; feast on enthusiasm.

Fast from thoughts that weaken; feast on promises that inspire.

Fast from shadows of sorrow; feast on the sunlight of serenity.

Fast from problems that overwhelm; feast on prayer that undergirds.

*Fast from bitterness; feast on forgiveness.
Fast from self-concern; feast on compassion for others.
Fast from personal anxiety; feast on eternal truth.
Fast from discouragements; feast on hope.”*

-**William Arthur Ward** (American author, teacher and pastor, 1921-1994)

— For more about the Christian calendar...

Check out:

“A Parent’s Guide to Advent”

“A Parent’s Guide to the 12 Days of Christmas”

“A Parent’s Guide to Easter/Pentecost” (coming soon!)

“A Parent’s Guide to Ordinary Time” (coming soon!)

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