

# Giving Up and Going Forward

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Date: 02 March 2025

Preacher: Richard Brown

- [ 0 : 0 0 ]     So I want us to start with thinking about Lent. Okay, so when I do a session of presentation to healthcare assistants about privacy and dignity, what I do is I stop people shouting out and one person dominating with all the answers and everything. I go around the room one by one. But this is too large a group to do that, you'll be relieved to hear. So what I want you to do is just to stick your hand up so I know where the noise is coming from because that will help me hear better. So firstly, how long is Lent?
- 40 days. 40 days and six Sundays. Any other suggestions? Okay, it might also, and I can't remember which denomination does this, could be 44 days.
- But essentially, mostly it's 40 days, but the six Sundays between Ash Wednesday and Easter Day are not counted as part of Lent. Liz and I, bizarrely, many years ago found ourselves in a convent overnight doing some teaching for a friend of Liz's.
- And it was during Lent. And on the Saturday, all the meals were silent. On the Sunday, we were allowed to talk at the meals. Okay. When does Lent start?
- Wednesday. Any particular way? Day after Panko Day. Day after Panko Day. Ash Wednesday. Any other suggestions of when Lent starts?
- [ 1 : 5 2 ]     Okay, again, depending on which denomination you're in, it might start on Monday week. Okay. When does it finish? 40 days later.
- 40 days later. 40 plus 6 days later. Easter Sunday. That is consistent. Okay. What are you supposed to do during Lent?
- Not much. Oh, dear. That's a very lazy approach to it. Nothing indulgent. Reflect and pray. Someone else at the back was saying something I didn't quite catch. Fasting. Yep. Anyone else? Any other suggestions? Okay. Yes, you're supposed to do...
- Sorry. Prepare for the resurrection. Yes. All those things are legitimate things to do during Lent. There are various things that different denominations expect you to do.
- [ 3 : 0 0 ]     Such as not eat meat. Or maybe not eat meat on Fridays. So people started eating fish on Fridays. But actually, the idea was not to eat fish on Fridays instead of meat.
- It was people getting round the fact that they weren't allowed to eat meat. And fish was not considered to be meat. That legalistic approach to things.
- Okay. What are you supposed not to do? Overindulge, yes. Should you only not overindulge in Lent?
- It's a rhetorical question. Anything else you're not supposed to do? Okay. In years past, back in the pre-medieval ages, you were not supposed to get married.
- Because marriage was a joyful celebration occasion. So you should not be doing that during Lent. A time of quiet reflection and thinking towards death and resurrection.
- [ 4 : 0 5 ]     Okay. How is the date of Ash Wednesday determined? Yes, absolutely. You're absolutely right, Matt.
- It is a slightly trick question. It is determined by the fact of how long before Easter it is. Okay. So the next question then is, how is the date of Easter determined?

Sorry? With the moon. It's to do with the moon. Yes. Sorry? Right. Up to the 8th century AD, there was no uniform method for determining the date of Easter.

But the method favoured by the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 gradually became the accepted method. The adoption of the Gregorian calendar requires some modifications to this scheme, but it is still basically the same.

Unfortunately, the simple definition is not strictly speaking correct. The spring or vernal equinox used is not the true equinox, but an artificial one, always assumed to be on the 21st of March.

[ 5 : 17 ] The full moon used is not the full moon, but an artificial construct based on what's called the mettonic cycle. The reasons for this method is independent of longitude on the earth and is thus independent of time zone.

It also allows the date of Easter to be calculated in advance, regardless of the actual motion of the earth around the sun. Now, who can tell me when the original Easter day, what it tied in with?

Passover. Passover. So, how do we determine the date of Passover? Okay, it's the 15th day of Nisan, the month of Nisan in the Jewish calendar.

But the Jewish calendar is a lunar calendar, and every 19 years they have to put in a leap month. So, that means that when they originally tried to tie in Easter with Passover, after a while they were out of sync.

And then some denomination says we should tie it in with the Passover, and other people said no, we should try and avoid clashing with Passover. And other people said it should tie in with Passover, and other people said no, it should be a Friday and a Sunday.

[ 6 : 40 ] Okay, what is the purpose of the ashes of Ash Wednesday? Okay, so burned the palm crosses is how they now get the ashes.

Anyone know what the purpose of the ashes is? As they signify repentance. Okay. We now, or those who do it, now burn the palm cross to create the ashes.

In earlier times, they had ashes put on their foreheads and put sackcloth on, as in biblical ways, so that people could publicly see who the sinners were.

Thankfully, we have moved on from that. Okay. Right. I think that's probably enough on Lent and the ashes. Right.

Okay. Let's move on. Slightly easier. When did Jesus fast for 40 days and 40 nights? After his baptism.

[ 7 : 54 ] Yeah. Not the 40 days before his resurrection, before his death and resurrection. Okay. Who else in the Bible fasted for 40 days and nights?

Hands up, please, so I can see where I think... It was Moses. Anyone else? Okay.

Here's a clue. Transfiguration. Elijah. Elijah. Yes. Moses and Elijah. Elijah.

Yes. Moses and Elijah. So, what can we say so far about Lent? Okay. So, Lent is generally considered to be a reflection of Jesus' time in the wilderness.

But, there is no agreed timeline for when Lent should actually be. There are no agreed specific practices, because depending on what denomination you are in, they will tell you specific things you should or shouldn't be doing.

[ 8 : 58 ] Beyond prayer, fasting in some way, and giving to the poor, very much a similar thing to Ramadan, who I would imagine copied it from Christianity in the Middle Ages.

However, as I said, different denominations, especially Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox, do give specific rules to follow, but I won't go to any of them. No one is expected, like Jesus or Elijah or Moses, to fast completely for 40 days and nights.

That is not one of the rules for any of the denominations. No one is expected to put themselves in social isolation for 40 days and nights, like Moses and Jesus did.

Elijah doesn't say he was in social isolation. It says he was on a journey. So, he may have bumped into other people on his journey. Moses, with his 40 days of fasting, ended up doing it three times.

Once was associated with worshipping God on the mountain and receiving the law, the Ten Commandments. Elijah was sent to anoint two kings.

[ 10 : 45 ] And Elisha to succeed him as the next prophet. So, that's the 40 days of fasting.

Only three people. So, not necessarily something that everyone else should be trying to do. And for very specific purposes. So, of course, where should we turn to look for teaching on fasting, but to the person who did the best teaching ever?

Jesus. What did Jesus say about fasting? The short answer is not a lot, actually. He said, when you do it, don't look gloomy.

Because people were fasting and looking gloomy so that people knew they were fasting. He said, that's your reward. Other people saying, oh, well done.

You're not going to get anything from God for that. Don't fast when the bridegroom is around. And that was more of a thing between his disciples and John the Baptist's disciples.

[ 11 : 47 ] Not something necessarily we're talking about in modern marriages today. And the other thing he said, and again, there is no explanation as to how this works out or how it's done.

He said, some evil spirits are only driven out by prayer and fasting. But when he said that, he had been asked to drive out the evil spirits, and he did.

He didn't stop and fast beforehand. So, we still don't know how the fasting element works itself out in that respect. So, maybe the Old Testament tells us more about fasting.

And how often we should do it. And the answer is, yes, it tells us something. It tells us that the Israelites were told to fast for one day only. And that was the Day of Atonement.

So, having deconstructed Lent a bit, it isn't especially biblical in many ways. But that's not to say that we shouldn't look at the period of Lent, as it's been handed down to us as a Christian, festival's not quite the right word, Christian discipline and practice from the church, rather than the Bible per se.

[ 13 : 05 ] But we can still learn from it and find things that are positive and helpful for us. So, let me go back to my original question.

Have you ever given anything up for Lent or ever done something actively positive for Lent? Anybody willing to share anything they have written down on their piece of paper?

Please? He said desperately. Yes? Excellent.

He gave up sugar in his tea and has continued thereafter. TV. Gave up TV for Lent. Gave up.

Okay, so I gave up eating meat and another came eating lunch. Michelle at the back first. Lovely.

[ 14 : 09 ] So, a specific Bible study. Lovely. Lovely. Good time to read it. Excellent.

Not the same psalm. No, a specific psalm. We read a psalm every day for 40 days of Lent. Good. Was anyone else making signs? No, it's my imagination.

Seeing things in my eyes. Lovely. Thank you very much for sharing notes. Some very positive, well, all very positive things. Some that lasted and were ongoing. Some more spiritual, which hopefully also, not necessarily so obviously, may also have had a long-lasting effect.

I'm going to pose the question slightly differently. And the question, of course, should not be, have you ever given anything up or started something for Lent? But have you ever given anything up for God?

Have you ever started doing something positively for God? The theme for today is giving it up or paying it out. And, of course, this should not be confined to the period of Lent, as the passage that we read from John indicates.

[ 15 : 24 ] It should be a lifelong thing. If we go back to the Old Testament again, we remind ourselves of Isaiah 58, verses 6 to 11. And I'm going to go back to verse 3, actually.

Why have we fasted, they say, and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves and you have not noticed? Yet, on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers.

Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.

Is this the kind of fast I have chosen? Only a day for people to humble themselves? Or we could say only for seven weeks, six weeks, for people to humble themselves?

Is it only for banging one's head like a reed and for lying in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast? A day, a period, acceptable to the Lord? Is this not the kind of fasting I have chosen?

[ 16 : 32 ] To loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke? To set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry?

And to provide the poor wanderer with shelter? When you see the naked, to clothe them. And not to turn away from your own flesh and blood. Then your light will break forth like the dawn.

And your healing will quickly appear. Then your righteousness will go before you. And the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call and the Lord will answer.

You will cry for help. And I will say, here I am. If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness and your night will become like the noonday.

The Lord will guide you always. He will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

[ 17 : 45 ] So perhaps we can see Lent as a period then, not of temporary self-denial or temporary extra generosity, but rather a period of drawing closer to God, to learn from him what major or permanent changes he wants us to make in our lives in order to be freer to serve his purposes.

And not just for a season that we determine ends, but for one that he determines ends. Similarly, if we embark on a period of abstinence of whatever it might be, food, alcohol, luxuries, we should do these not for their own sake, but for a purpose.

Moses, before being presented with the law. Elijah, before anointing kings and a prophet. Jesus, before starting his public ministry.

Perhaps the purpose is we should choose to fast forward, not just in Lent, or the way we may choose Lent to do that now. But maybe starting a new project, a new job, entering a new role, maybe in marriage or in parenthood.

Or before making big or important decisions, such as when Jesus fasted overnight on the mountains before appointing his disciples. Or like Moses, a period of fasting for repentance or intercession.

[ 19 : 20 ] So whatever you do in Lent, whether it's giving up or starting, make sure you don't do it for its own sake.

Make sure that your fasting is not for fasting's sake, but for God's sake. Thank you.