

## “Lent 2006”

By: Doug Warren

### What is Lent?

The first of March is Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. Many have asked me, “What is Lent anyway?” As we struggle with understanding the seasons and teachings of the church I am often reminded of a story of a certain Catholic neighborhood where one of the neighbors was causing everyone else such consternation. Everyone in this particular community was a practicing Catholic who observed the practice of refraining from eating meat on Fridays, except of course this one man. Every Friday he fired up his grill and cooked mouthwatering steaks, sending that maddening aroma to all his neighbors.

They all agreed something had to be done. After much collective efforts his neighbors finally convinced the man to become a Catholic and he was baptized in the cathedral where the priest declared, “You were born a protestant, you were raised a protestant, but now I baptize you a Catholic.” The whole neighborhood rejoiced for finally they could manage their Fridays without that enticing smell. But much to their shock the next Friday they smelled the flavors of beef wafting through the air. Several neighbors rushed to the new convert’s house only to find him at the grill with a cup of water saying, “You were born a cow, you were raised a cow, but now I baptize you a fish.”

### A Brief History of Lent

So what is Lent? Is it just missing out on certain foods? Is it just another hoop to jump through in the name of religion? Let’s start with looking at its history. Lent is the season in the church calendar from Ash Wednesday to Easter, Ash Wednesday being the seventh Wednesday before Easter Sunday. It is a time of fasting (refraining from eating) and penitence (sorrow over sin) in anticipation of the celebration of the resurrection of Christ.

Lent began simply as a time of fasting from Friday at the ninth hour to Sunday morning, commemorating the time of Christ’s death. Though not universally applied in the early centuries, this forty-hour fast was widely recognized as identifying oneself with Christ. Some practiced this fast on a weekly basis (which is where the Roman Catholic practice of refraining from meat on Fridays arose), while others only fasted once a year.

By the fourth century, the annual feast of Easter had developed with the forty hours becoming forty days during which fasting was emphasized (though still not practiced universally by the church). The forty days not only commemorated the forty hours that Christ was in the tomb, but also recalled the forty-day fasts by Moses and Elijah, and the forty days that Jesus was in the wilderness.

### What is involved in Observing Lent?

Observing Lent is a way to prepare for the Easter celebration. It is a time to consider the depth of our sin and misery to which the good news of the Gospel is the answer. The good news will be all the more sweet as we recognize our need for a Savior. We also look forward in anticipation to the celebration of His resurrection. Because of this, we encourage people to fast during times of

this season – inasmuch as they are able. This is not to be done legalistically, but in recognition of our desperate need for Christ’s salvation.

## **A Word About Fasting**

Many have misunderstood the foundation of biblical fasting and as a result have slipped into all sorts of error. Fasting does not curry favor with God. Even in our most sincere attempts at piety, we are stained with our unrighteousness. We fast out of gratitude and love, not in an attempt for merit. By giving up something that is essential for our life, we are demonstrating our dependence upon God. He is our life. Without Him we cannot survive. He is more necessary than food and drink.

Many who fast today refrain from luxuries like chocolate or television and not from necessities like food and drink. While this may be an appropriate *starting* place, it is not what is intended by the biblical admonitions to fast and pray. Fasting is going without food as a way of reminding ourselves that we need God more than sustenance. While it may be that we need to realize our need for God is greater than for candy or entertainment, that misses the depth of our true dependency.

We also fast to identify with Christ in His suffering. We must see that Christ has not saved us for our comfort, but for His own glory. This is a much-neglected truth in the American Church today. We do not suffer for the sake of suffering, but we acknowledge that Christ has called us to a life of suffering together with Him, and we seek to enter into that gladly, knowing that to be *with Him* in pain or trial or torture is far greater than being rich and comfortable without Him.

## **Repentance and Faith**

Because our acts of repentance such as fasting are for God’s glory and not our own sense of righteousness, we must look to Him in them. Our repentance must be matched with faith in Jesus who alone in all the world has merited justice before His Father.

Daniel gives us a wonderful guide to repentance. Not only did Daniel properly understand the times within which he lived, he prayed according to the Scriptures. He repented of his own sins and for those of his people. God used Daniel to lead His people in faith and repentance, which is the center of holy living. Listen to Daniel’s cry:

*“Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. For your sake, O Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary. Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name.”*

May we, trusting the same promises as Daniel and looking to the same gracious God, pray with such fervency and faithfulness. We need to understand the times in which we live, pray according to the Scriptures, and trust God’s faithfulness to heal us and restore His people as a blessing to all nations.