

In Three Days —
The Traditions of Lent and Easter

by
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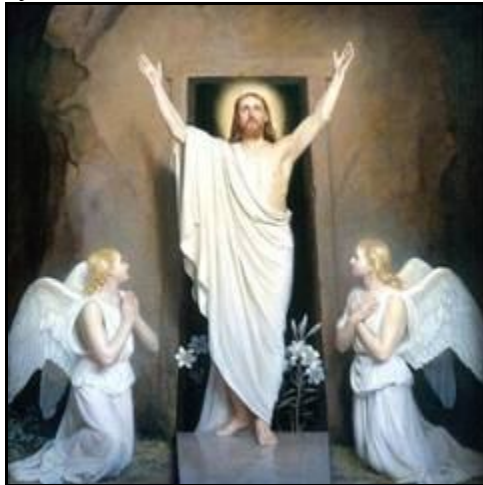
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THE TRADITIONS & HISTORY OF LENT and EASTER

In the Church's calendar and traditions, the penitential season known as Lent and the glorious season known as Pascha, or Easter, are interrelated. There are also a number of other special days included such as Ash Wednesday, and Holy Week, which includes Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday.



But Easter, like Christmas, is more than just a day; it is a season. The Easter season begins on Easter Sunday and ends fifty days later on Pentecost. Some churches follow the liturgical calendar with its Feasts and Festivals, liturgical colors and so on. Others do not. The roots of many of these traditions can be traced back to the early Church. We have lots of fun facts to share and, whatever faith tradition you adhere to, you'll find this book both educational and enriching.

QUINQUAGESIMA SUNDAY

In times past, the Sunday prior to Ash Wednesday was often called Quinquagesima Sunday from the Latin for fiftieth. In other words, there are fifty days from this coming Sunday to Easter. Your first thought may have been, "Wait a minute, Lent only lasts forty days. If you are starting with Sunday and add in the Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday you'll get 43, not 50."

This overlooks two things. First, Sundays are not counted as part of Lent. So we need to add in the six Lenten Sundays. Also, Lent ends at midnight on Holy Saturday. Easter Sunday must also be included. The math goes like this: starting with 40, we add 3 (Sun, Mon & Tues) + 6 (Sundays) + 1 (Easter) and get (Ta Da!) 50.

THE NUMBER FORTY IN THE BIBLE

As mentioned earlier, Lent lasts forty days. The early Church Fathers did not pull this figure out a hat. The number forty appears throughout the Bible. And, more often than not, it is associated with a period of waiting, probation or preparation. The following list is no any way inclusive. It does, however, demonstrate the re-occurrence and importance of the number forty throughout the Bible.

In the Old Testament:

It rained for forty days and nights. Likewise, Noah waited 40 days after the waters receded before sending out a raven. (Genesis 8:3-8)

Isaac was 40 years old when he married Rebecca. (Genesis 25:20)

Esau was 40 years old when he married his two wives. (Genesis 26:34)

The Israelites ate Manna 40 years in the Desert. (Exodus 16:35-6)

Moses spent 40 days and nights on Mount Sinai. (Exodus 24:18) He came down, saw the Golden Calf and broke the tables. Then in Exodus 24:28 he returns and fasts 40 days.

The scouts spied in the Promised Land 40 days before returning. . (Numbers 13:25)

Then the Israelites were required to spend 40 years “wandering” in the Desert. (Numbers 14:33)

Joshua was 40 years old when he spied with the scouts. (Joshua 14:7)

Goliath taunted Israel 40 days before his defeat by David. (1 Samuel 17:16)

King David reigned for 40 years. (2 Samuel 5:4)

King Solomon reigned for 40 years. (1 Kings 11:42)

Elijah fasted 40 days in the wilderness. (1 Kings 19:8)

Jonah preached to Nineveh for 40 days before they repented. (Jonah 3:4)

Ezekiel lay on his right side for 40 days. (Ezekiel 4:4)

In the New Testament we find:

The Purification of Mary is 40 days after birth of Jesus (Leviticus 12:1-4, Luke 2: 22-4)

Jesus spent 40 days fasting in the desert after His baptism (Matthew 4:1-2)

Jesus also spent 40 days on earth following His Resurrection (Acts 1:3)

And, Jesus, by tradition, spent 40 hours in the tomb.

The forty days of Lent, as we can see, has deep significance.

THE DANGERS OF A LITTLE BIT OF KNOWLEDGE

This is as good a time as any to deal with the overall concept of Easter. As we found in our study on All Things Christmas, there are many half-truths and misconceptions surrounding the traditions and practices of the Church. People perpetuate these falsehoods either out of ignorance or because it discredits the Church and, by discrediting the Church, they gain credibility.

In the case of Christmas, it was the false fact that Christmas was placed on December 25th because the date corresponded with pagan solstice feasts. Easter, too, we are told is a pagan holiday. As Easter approaches, you’ll hear this refrain repeated over and over. For the sake of charity, we’ll assume the people saying this are simply misinformed.

REFUTTING THE MYTH OF PAGANISM

First of all, while we cannot be certain when Jesus of Nazareth was born, we know with certainty when he died. As we said earlier, Easter is known as The Pascha everywhere except in the English speaking world. Pascha is Greek for Passover...the day on which Jesus was crucified. But didn't pagans have Spring festivals? Of course they did. Many small towns have a Fall Harvest Festival...an Apple Fest, a Pumpkin Show, etc. Are these festivals a ritualistic way of paying homage to the Earth Goddess, or simply enjoying an opportunity for family fun and food from traveling fair booths?

So where did the connection of Easter and paganism come from? It began with the observations of an 8th Century Christian writer. Again, like the Christmas speculation, a passing comment took on a life of its own. In this case, the Venerable Bede said that the word Easter was derived from the name of the pagan goddess *Eostre*, whose name was in turn derived from the Norse word for Spring, *Eastre*. So Easter comes from Spring, which seems appropriate. Note, he was talking about the *word* Easter, not the beliefs and practices associated with Easter.

But what about those practices, those boiled eggs in a basket of grass, etc? Let's take a closer look. Circadian rhythms are biological processes which are dependent upon day length. Modern egg producers stimulate the hen's laying cycle by extending the perceived day length with artificial light. People living in the First Century didn't have this luxury; they had to depend upon the natural cycle of solstices and equinoxes. Consequently, as the days grew longer with the coming of Spring, their hens were stimulated to begin laying. Also, during the 40-day period of fasting preceding Easter, the Early Christians did without meats, fats and eggs.

What could be more opportune? Just as we move into Spring and the celebration of the Resurrection, the hens begin to produce eggs again. Eggs, of course, are ideal representations of a resurrection of sorts when they hatch and of the new life the Christians found in Christ. Interestingly, the Early Christians dyed their boiled eggs red—for the saving blood of Jesus Christ. They presented them to their children on Easter morning as a reminder of the Paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. Easter morning, of course, was also the first day eggs could be eaten again. This year when you boil and color eggs with your children or grandchildren, tell them the story of the Early Christians. Remind them that, like those children the early centuries, they are participating in a holy tradition.

Be sure to also remind them that children of the Early Church *never* had chocolate.

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SHROVETIDE, MARDI GRAS AND CARNAVALE



A Renaissance Look at Carnalvale Venezia

The Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday are known as Shrovetide, from the old English

word *shrive*, meaning to confess. People traditionally went to Confession in the days before Lent as a sort of spiritual house cleaning in preparation for the upcoming penitential season.

A SEASON OF PREPARATION

In addition to spiritual preparations, Lent also required some actual house cleaning as well. Fats, eggs, milk, cheese and butter were not eaten during Lent, so the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday was the last day to use up those provisions. Making pancakes or waffles used up four at once. In Merry Old England, we find the rather reserved English letting their hair down by eating pancakes and sausages. This popular custom continues. Today nearly all Anglican churches have a traditional gathering to celebrate a Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper.

The English also have pancake races in which women wearing a dress, apron, and bonnet, must flip a pancake as they run. This practice supposedly dates back to a 15th Century homemaker who heard the bell summoning her to church and, not wanting to be late, rushed out of the house her skillet still in hand.

Instead of the regular Aunt Jemima type pancakes, you might like to try the baked pancake known as a Dutch Baby. They're quick and easy. Cut in fourths, each serving has just 175 calories...less than a bagel with cream cheese.

Here's the recipe:

Ingredients: 1 cup flour, 2 Tbsp sugar, 1 cup milk, 3 eggs, pinch of salt and a pinch of nutmeg.

Process: Put an iron skillet in a 425 degree oven and let it heat. (An easy way is to put the skillet in the cold oven, By the time the oven's warm, the skillet is too.) Meanwhile, combine the egg and milk and whip until the eggs are dispersed. Add the other ingredients and whisk or beat until smooth. When your skillet is hot, carefully remove from the oven and quickly run a stick of butter around the bottom and sides. Pour in your batter and return to oven for 15 minutes. The edges should be crisp and brown when it comes out. Remove from pan, dust with powdered sugar and top with fruit if desired.



A Dutch Baby Hot out of the Oven

EAT, DRINK, AND BE MERRY

Since Lent entailed a period of prolonged fasting, Shrove Tuesday represented the last day for feasting. And, since Lent was a somber, penitential time, it was also the last day for parties. Over time Shrove Tuesday became a time for people to eat, drink, and make merry. Nearly all European cities have Carnevale celebrations with parades, costumes and various localized traditions. The same is true of Central and South America.

In France the day came to be called Fat Tuesday, or *Mardi Gras*. In Poland, the food of the day is *Paczki*, pronounced *punch-key*, large, filled and fried doughnuts. They have become so traditional that many Poles refer to Shrove Tuesday *Paczki Day*.

Fasching is the somewhat sedate German version of Carnival. As in other places, it's an opportunity for people to act silly before settling into the seriousness of Lent. As part of *Fasching*, the Thursday before Ash Wednesday is known as *Weiberfastnacht*, or Women's carnival night. This is the day women are allowed to cut off the tie of any man within reach and kiss any man they like. *Faschingsdienstag*, or Carnival Tuesday, is the last day of *Fasching* and when most of the festivities happen. Some of the street parades date as far back as the 14th Century. Fats and eggs make their appearance here in the form of donuts.

CARNAVAL – PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

The word Carnival or Carnavale, is derived from the Latin word *carnelevare*, which refers to the taking away of flesh. The Lenten fast of years past typically eliminated all meat and animal products from the diet. Over time what began as a quasi-religious celebration has become a secular holiday. Given time and the human proclivity to overdo, this has resulted in the bacchanalian festivities we have today.

Two of the most well-known are the Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans and the Carnival in Rio. Being in the Southern Hemisphere, Rio's Carnival takes place at the peak of summer and attracts thousands of people from around the world. Carnival, as it is spelled in Portuguese, is a 4-day celebration. It starts on Saturday, and ends on Shrove Tuesday. Despite the notoriety it generates, the Brazilian festival is of somewhat recent origin. Carnival balls were imported to Rio from Italy in the late nineteenth century, and reached their peak in the 1950's. The Samba Parade began in the 30's and found a permanent home in 1984 at the Sambodrome. Rio's Carnival is known for its fantastic floats, many of which feature nearly naked women.

Though most people think of Mardi Gras taking place on Shrove Tuesday, the Celebrations in New Orleans begin two weeks before. Driven primarily by the tourist trade, there is at least one major parade each day leading up to the finale on Tuesday. The parades in New Orleans are organized by Carnival krewes. Krewe float riders toss throws to the crowds; the most common throws are strings of colorful plastic beads, doubloons (aluminum or wooden coins impressed with a krewe logo), decorated plastic throw cups, and small toys. While generally considered a raucous event, the New Orleans Mardi Gras celebrations never approach those in Rio.

FROM CHRISTIAN PREPARATION TO PAGAN FEASTS

It seems we have run the gamut from sedate gatherings designed to emphasize the traditions and solemnity of the penitential nature of the Lenten Season to bawdy festivals that are primarily pagan in nature. In thermodynamics the concept of entropy measures the tendency of a process, such as a chemical reaction, to proceed in a direction which reduces its state of order to that of disorder.

Does this same rule apply to human activities as well? Can it be said that when human beings are left to their own devices they inevitably descend from goodness to sinfulness? Jesus spoke of the narrow gate and the wide gate and the seed that fell on infertile ground. St. Paul exhorted early Christians to strive for the higher things of life. The way in which the Early Church celebrated Shrove Tuesday versus the way it is celebrated in some places now tends to support the notion that high moral character is only achieved by overcoming the entropy of our lower nature.

ASH WEDNESDAY



The Cross of Ashes on the Forehead

Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, is the day when many people have ashes placed on their forehead in the shape of a cross while the officiant says the words from Genesis 3:19 “Remember man, you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

THE SANCTIFICATION OF THE ORDINARY

One of the beliefs that Christians adopted from Judaism is the idea that everyday things can be sanctified when their use is dedicated to God. The most obvious example would be the bread and wine of the Eucharist. But water is sanctified through Baptism and oil through the sacrament of Anointing. Like other pious devotions, the imposition of ashes is what might be called a sacramental. That is, a practice which affirms a person's beliefs and, in so doing, deepens their faith. Early Christians believed these practices to be a source of grace and many continue those traditions today.

***DIES CINERUM* – THE DAY OF ASHES**

The earliest references of Ash Wednesday date to the Fourth Century and refer to it as *dies cinerum*, day of ashes. On this day all the faithful according to ancient custom approached the altar where the priest dipped his thumb into blessed ashes and made the sign of the cross on their forehead. The ashes used in this ceremony are made by burning the remains of the palms blessed on the Palm Sunday of the previous year.

The custom of distributing ashes to all the faithful arose from a devotional imitation of the practice observed in the case of public penitents. In Biblical times men who repented of their sins covered themselves with ashes and clothed their bodies with sackcloth. By participation in this ceremony a believer was symbolically making a public confession of their sinfulness and asking for forgiveness. The person is also forcefully reminded of their own mortality and, with it, impending judgment.

SIN AND PUBLIC REPENTANCE

In the Early Church, Ash Wednesday was the day on which those who had sinned, and wished to be readmitted to the Church, would begin their public penance. It must have been a powerful reminder for those leaving the Church to see the penitent wearing the same ashes they wore on their foreheads.

In its earliest form Lent was the final preparatory stage before Baptism, which took place on Holy Saturday night...after sundown and therefore on Easter Sunday under the Jewish system of calculating days. Ashes as a symbol of repentance appear throughout the Old Testament. Jesus mentions ashes in Matthew 11:21 and Luke 10:13, "Woe to you, Chorazin! woe to you, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes." The use and meaning here was to provide an outward or ritual expression for the repentance of sin just as is done today on Ash Wednesday.

EARLY CHURCH FATHERS ON THE PRACTICE OF ASHES

This thought carried over into the Early Church. The theologian, Tertullian, described the use of sackcloth and ashes in the penance of an adulterer. And later Church Fathers Eusebius, Cyprian, and Jerome also associated ashes with public repentance. The last of the early fathers, Isidore of Seville (560-636), described the practice of his day with these words, "It is good, therefore, that a penitent deplore his sin in sackcloth and ashes, for in sackcloth is harshness and the prick of sin; and the ashes, moreover, display the dust of death."

Many Protestant churches have a ritual imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday. Interestingly, the Eastern, or Orthodox, Church still uses the Julian calendar to calculate the date for Easter. This necessitates a change in their penitential season, *The Great Lent*, as well. Consequently, they celebrate Ash Monday rather than Ash Wednesday.

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LENTEN FASTING



Temptation of Christ, James Tissot 1895

We'll begin by addressing a popular misconception. A number of Christians believe that when Jesus fasted in the desert for forty days and nights he didn't eat or drink anything. One woman said, "I could never do that, but after all, he is God." The point she's missing is Jesus was also

man, and as a man he needed food and water just as we do. I've heard radio preachers say things like, "He went into the desert where there was no food or water."

Come on folks, let's use our heads here. Reread the quote from Matthew at the top of this post. Jesus went into the wilderness. Funny how people imagine that Jesus couldn't find food, but they readily accept the idea that John the Baptist survived in the wilderness on "locusts and wild honey." (By the way, the practice of eating locusts continues to this day in many African countries.) In the wilderness there also things such as pine nuts, wild berries, etc. Matthew adds, "...and afterward he was hungry." Of course he was; he'd been fasting. Fasting, not starving.

WHY A PERSON FASTS

Despite being made in the image of God, we remain physical creatures. Our response to sacred moments must involve not just our mind, but our body as well. This is why the Church calendar contains both feasts and fasts. St. Augustine deals with the idea of fasting in this way, "We must fast because it is sometimes necessary to check the delight of the flesh in respect to licit pleasures in order to keep it from yielding to illicit joys."

A number of Early Church Fathers recommend fasting as a way to build discipline. Our modern world rejects the idea. We live in a society that glorifies consumption. Party hardy...eat, drink and be merry. So let's look at some other ways to view fasting. Think of it as a way to physically express our hunger for God in our life. As John Calvin said, "...with a full stomach our mind is not so lifted up to God."

A person can use a period of fasting to become one with those who suffer from food deprivation. When you feel a hunger pang, imagine what it must be like to see your children starving and have no way of providing the food they need. Food always tastes better when we're hungry. If you want to be hungry, fast. And then when you do eat, eat with a deep appreciation for the food God has provided you. Make the practice of eating a prayer of thanksgiving.



Jesus in the Wilderness

MODERN FASTING

As we learned in our Shrove Tuesday chapter, in times past Lent was a time of real, self-imposed hardship. Christians did without all animal products...fats, meats, milk, cheese and eggs. There are many instances in history where people ate nothing during the day and ended the fast with a single evening meal. In the Early Church the believers maintained a vigil fast from Good Friday afternoon—the time of Jesus' death—until Easter morning. If you count it out, you'll see it comes to 40 hours, the time Christ is traditionally assumed to have been in the grave.

The modern Lenten fast usually entails abstaining from meat on Ash Wednesday and Fridays, eating only one full meal a day, making the other two combined less than a full meal,

and not eating between meals. So, rather than fasting, most people today abstain. This probably fits our modern lifestyle better than a full-day fast. That is, they do without certain foods during specific periods. This is where the idea of “What are you giving up for Lent?” comes from. In addition to the regimen above, or in some cases instead of, people decide to give up one item or food group that they particularly enjoy. Most commonly it is sweets.

NOT AN OPTIONAL PRACTICE

One thing that must be understood about fasting is, except for the elderly or infirm, fasting is a requirement of the Christian life, not an optional practice. Both the Old Testament and the New make it clear that believers are expected to fast. How you do it, when you do it, and why you do it are all up to you. But the bottom line is you are expected to fast. Jesus said, “The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast. (Matt. 9:15) Recall also that Acts tells us that, “...*while they were praying and fasting the Holy Spirit came upon them.*”

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About the Author:

Writing has always been a major part of E. G Lewis’ life. A former newspaper editor and publisher, his articles have appeared in many national and regional magazines. He also wrote and directed corporate training films. Mr. Lewis writes both Commercial and Biblical Fiction. He began work on the Seeds of Christianity™ Series in 2008. The first book, *WITNESS*, was published in December, 2009. The second in the series, *DISCIPLE*, came out in June, 2010. The third book, *APOSTLE*, was released in April 2011. He also has three Christian nonfiction eBooks

Mr. Lewis has a graduate degree in Economics from Ohio State University and worked in management and corporate planning before becoming a fulltime novelist. He and his wife Gail, also a writer, live on the Southern Oregon Coast.