

Illuminating Lent

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Introducing Lent

Scripture

Matthew 6:5–14 Jesus gives his disciples the Lord’s Prayer to serve as a pattern of prayer for them to follow

Luke 11:1–4 A version of the Lord’s Prayer

Prayer

Our Father which art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever.

Amen.

Introduction

Every year, the forty days of Lent mark a long period in the Christian calendar. It is a time when the church traditionally has focused on what it means to be the people of God and what it means for individuals to be Christians. It is a time of self-examination in the Christian life. It is a time when we can reflect on what we do and what we don’t do; on what directions our lives are moving; and on what ways we are living out our vocations as disciples of Jesus Christ in the context of the lives God gives us.

In this Lenten study, we will shine a light on Lent. To help us do this, each lesson will focus on a “direction.” These will be linked to a line or two from the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4):

- Upward: What We Do for God—Glorify God
- Inward: What God Does in Us—Communion with God
- Downward: What God Gives to Us—Providential Provisions
- Forward: Where God Leads Us—Discipleship

- Onward: What God Will Do—Resurrection Hope

All these dimensions or directions are important in themselves, as we will see. None of them are sufficient alone for the Christian life. We need all of them. We need the fullness of our experience of God in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The different directions and what they bring us go together to provide the fullness of Christian life and experience that is crucial for us. So this is a holistic study: all aspects of the directions in our Christian lives bring the fullness of the discipleship Jesus Christ calls us toward as his people.

As we move through these dimensions, perhaps we will find that one or more of them is lacking or undervalued in our lives. Lent is the time to develop that dimension more fully. Perhaps we will find that we are overemphasizing one or more of these directions. Lent is the time to modify our Christian walk and turn toward other parts of our lives that need developing. The Lord's Prayer helps us recognize these directions and can serve as an ongoing reminder when we pray it of the directions in which God calls us to live.

Background to Lent

Lent comes from the Middle English word *lente*, meaning “springtime,” and from the Old English word meaning “to lengthen” in regard to daylight. It is thus associated with the lengthening of days in the spring of the year.

In the early church, *Lent* became the name for the period of forty weekdays before Easter, beginning with Ash Wednesday. It was the time when those who were catechumens were being instructed in preparation for church membership to be marked by baptism. Converts to the faith devoted themselves to a time of learning, praying, listening, and studying to understand the mysteries of the Christian faith. It was a time of preparation for the important event of Christian baptism, which would mark them publicly as Christians, disciples of Jesus Christ.

As the Christian church moved through history, this forty-day period before Easter became a special time for those who had been baptized, as well. It became a time of penitence, a time when they examined their lives to see what God was saying and what they should be doing.

The forty days of Lent reflect the biblical significance of the number forty. We remember that Moses spent forty days with God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:18) and Elijah trudged toward Mount

Horeb for forty days and forty nights (1 Kings 19:8). Notably, it rained for this period of time when Noah was in the ark (Genesis 7:4), and the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years, on their way to the land of promise (Numbers 14:33). The prophecy given to Jonah was that the city of Nineveh would be destroyed in forty days (Jonah 3:4). Forty days marked a movement toward something of great importance.

The most famous forty days in the New Testament was the time Jesus spent in the wilderness, fasting, while being tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1–11). The Lenten period reminds us of each year of Jesus’ wrestling with the temptations to turn away from being faithful to God. Jesus resisted the temptations and “angels came and waited on him” (Matthew 4:11). Then Jesus began his ministry.

Through the early centuries, the church commemorated the temptation narrative and imbued the Lenten period with special meaning. Fasting for various periods was required during Lent to remind believers of Jesus’ temptations leading to his suffering and death on the cross. The time was to be marked by penitence, self-examination, and spiritual practices to bring one closer to God. A traditional description of activities in Lent associates fasting as justice toward one’s self; prayer as justice toward God; and almsgiving as justice toward others. The point of all activities and practices was to focus one’s life and experience on loving and serving God.

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The Lord’s Prayer and Lent

The Lord’s Prayer is a model prayer. Jesus taught it to his disciples in response to their request, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). There are two Gospel accounts of the Lord’s Prayer. The longer version is in Matthew’s Gospel (Matthew 6:9–13). Luke’s version is

short and compact (Luke 11:1–4). Because the prayer is from Jesus and is given as his answer to his disciples’ question on how to pray, the Lord’s Prayer has had a prominent place in the church’s worship and in the prayer lives of Christians from early times.

The church has recognized the prayer as containing the elements all prayers should possess. Jesus told his disciples, “Pray then in this way” (Matthew 6:9), implying that the prayer provides an example of what prayer should include. Early church theologian Tertullian praised the prayer as “a short compend of the entire gospel.”¹ The prayer encapsulates the Christian life and the praise, petitions, and glory that disciples of Jesus Christ offer to God.

It appears from bishop Cyprian that the first time the Lord’s Prayer was recited publicly by Christians happened right after their baptism, probably when they joined the congregation for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper for the first time. In the time of Augustine in the fourth century, the Lord’s Prayer was taught to those preparing for baptism on the Saturday before the fifth Sunday in Lent. It was recited in the church a week later on the eve of Palm Sunday.²

Association of the Lord’s Prayer with the Lenten season and especially for those studying the Christian faith in preparation for baptism has ancient roots. Taking our cue here, we can make the Lord’s Prayer our companion for Lent. We can pray it every day. If the prayer is a summary of the gospel, or what we need to believe and do, then looking to the Lord’s Prayer for guidance during Lent is very appropriate.

The Lord’s Prayer orients us toward who God is and what God is doing. The prayer gives the foundation for faith and guides us into what our relationship with God in Jesus Christ can mean for us as his disciples. We are committed to Jesus Christ as our Lord and

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1. Karlfried Froehlich, “The Lord’s Prayer in Patristic Literature, *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, no. 2 (1992): 76. Cf. Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV, Lecture Fragments*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981), 44 for the citation from Tertullian (*De oration* I, 6) and Barth’s comment that Ernst Lohmeyer says that “Lord, teach us to pray” embraces the whole person and finally means: “Lord, teach us to believe.”

2. Froehlich, 75.

Savior. We live in thanks, praise, and prayer in all we say and do. An old saying among theologians is that “the law of prayer is the law of faith.” In the Lord’s Prayer, we see what our faith means as expressed in prayer; and as a prayer, where our faith leads us.

Giving Up and Taking On

Two directives help us. In Lent, we ask: 1) What can we *give up* for Lent? and 2) What can we *take on* for Lent?

“Giving up” something for Lent has been a traditional direction. In earlier days, some Christians would fast for a certain period—perhaps one day per week. Or, in the Roman Catholic tradition, Lent has marked a time for giving up meat. The goal was to remind faithful Christians that as Jesus Christ gave up his life for us, so his people give up something of value as a sign of commitment and dedication to Christ. It was important to realize that what was given up was something of value: Faithful followers would not simply give up ice cream for dessert!

“Taking on” something for Lent would be to ask: What is God calling me to do as something new or different or as a way of expressing my commitment to Jesus Christ in a new or fuller way? Jesus ministered to those around him. How can we discover fresh ways for our ministries to be carried out? What new directions could God be calling us toward for service? This is not simply a matter of choosing to be involved, simply for the sake of having a new item on our résumés. It is a prayerful effort to ask God to show us a new form or direction for our ministries as disciples of Jesus Christ.

“Giving up” and “taking on” are two paths to pursue during Lent. If we keep these in mind each year, we will find that sometimes we may be led to move along one road; at other times, along the other road. Perhaps during the six-week period both paths will open for us, leading us to give up some attitudes, actions, or practices while newly embracing creative routes to new forms of service—with our friends, in our churches, or in our communities. We never know what insights and promptings the Holy Spirit will provide! Our duty is to be ready for either and open to the winds of the Spirit who can guide us into “all truth” (John 16:13) of what God is calling us toward.

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My favorite description of Christian experience is captured by the two words *grace* and *gratitude*. We receive the grace of God in Jesus Christ; we express gratitude for this grace in the lives we live and what we do. We can remember this with every breath we take. We “inhale” the grace of God; we “exhale” in gratitude for God’s love in Christ.

In Lent, we can inhale by finding what God is asking us to take on in Lent: What can we take into ourselves that will be deepen and strengthen our devotion to God and service to others? We can exhale by finding what God is asking to give up in Lent: What can we let go of or lay aside so our commitment to God’s love in Jesus Christ will be made stronger? Breathe in and breathe out. Inhale and exhale. Grace and gratitude. Take on and give up.

Spiritual Practice

Learning, memorizing, and praying the catechism is a time-honored discipline of the Lenten season. Devote your prayer time to meditating on these questions and answers from *The Study Catechism*³.

Question 121. What is the purpose of prayer?

Prayer brings us into communion with God. The more our lives are rooted in prayer, the more we sense how wonderful God is in grace, purity, majesty, and love. Prayer means offering our lives completely to God, submitting ourselves to God’s will, and waiting faithfully for God’s grace. Through prayer, God frees us from anxiety, equips us for service, and deepens our faith.

Question 124. What prayer serves as our rule or pattern?

Our rule or pattern is found in the Lord’s Prayer, which Jesus taught to his disciples.

3. *The Study Catechism: Full Version* was accepted by the 210th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1998. For the entire catechism, go to pcusa.org/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/catechismfull.pdf.

Questions for Reflection

What Lenten practices have you known others to carry out through the years? Have you adopted any of them in your own life? Think of others or resources you can use to help you decide what practices to engage in this Lenten season.

Reflect on what you think about the Lord's Prayer and what it means to you. In what ways do you see the prayer as encapsulating the gospel of Jesus Christ? What are ways you can incorporate this prayer more fully into your daily life?

Read again the section on "Giving Up and Taking On." Use "Inhale and exhale. Grace and gratitude. Take on and give up" as an exercise. As you do, think about what the words mean and how they can be meaningful in your life.