

# The Intent of Lent

Lent is defined as, “an annual season of fasting and penitence beginning on Ash Wednesday and lasting 40 weekdays to Easter”. Many today in the professing church observe this time of penitence and fasting as a demonstration of sorrow for their sin. One of the most common observances is the practice of “giving up something for Lent”. Is Lent a proper observance for believers in the Age of Grace? Should we be observing this time of penitence and fasting to demonstrate our sorrow for sin?

We must say from the outset that there is absolutely no scriptural basis for the timing of Lent. That is, no where in scripture do we see God setting the 40 weekdays between Ash Wednesday and Easter as a time of penitence and fasting. In fact there is no scriptural basis for Ash Wednesday, or even for Easter for that matter. We do however see a time of penitence and fasting commanded.

## **Penitence and Sacrifice**

The penitence and fasting of scripture is found in the law that God gave to Israel through Moses. It is a part of the sacrificial calendar that Israel observed year to year. Specifically, it was a part of the activities surrounding the yearly Day of Atonement. On the Day of Atonement the high priest in Israel offered up sacrifices for his own sins and for the sins of the nation.

And Aaron shall bring the bullock of the sin offering, which is for himself, and shall make an atonement for himself, and for his house, and shall kill the bullock of the sin offering which is for himself: . . . And he shall take of the blood of the bullock, and sprinkle it with his finger upon the mercy seat eastward; and before the mercy seat shall he sprinkle of the blood with his finger seven times. Then shall he kill the goat of the sin offering, that is for the people, and bring his blood within the vail, and do with that blood as he did with the blood of the bullock, and sprinkle it upon the mercy seat, and before the mercy seat: And he shall make an atonement for the holy place, because of the uncleanness of the children of Israel, and because of their transgressions in all their sins: and so shall he do for the tabernacle of the congregation, that remaineth among them in the midst of their uncleanness. Leviticus 16:11,14-16

While the high priest was carrying out his responsibilities on the Day of Atonement, the people of Israel were also to be carrying out certain responsibilities. These responsibilities are enumerated in the twenty-third chapter of Leviticus.

And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Also on the tenth day of this seventh month there shall be a day of atonement: it shall be an holy convocation unto you; and ye shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD. And ye shall do no work in that same day: for it is a day of atonement, to make an atonement for you before the LORD your God. For whatsoever soul it be that shall not be afflicted in that same day, he shall be cut off from among his people. And whatsoever soul it be that doeth any work in that same day, the same soul will I destroy from among his people. Ye shall do no manner of work: it shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations in all your dwellings. It shall be unto you a sabbath of rest, and ye shall afflict your soul: in the ninth day of the month at even, from even unto even, shall ye celebrate your sabbath. Leviticus 23:26-32

Notice that while the high priest was offering a sacrifice for the sins of the nation, the people of the nation were to be doing three specific things. They were to be offering their own sacrifices; they were to be observing a sabbath by doing no servile work; and they were to be afflicting their souls. In other words, the people of Israel were to be undergoing a time of penitence and sacrifice, the very same activities that are today associated with the observance of Lent. Lent is a time when people are to demonstrate great sorrow for their sins (afflict their souls). This sorrow is usually demonstrated by “giving up something” (usually some carnal pleasure like movies, a favorite food, etc.) to show penitence. In addition the practice of giving up something is also means of sacrificing and atoning for sin. Rather than the animal sacrifice that the law prescribed the participant in the Lenten ritual is sacrificing some worldly pleasure. It is clear that in it’s essence and meaning, Lent is really just a return to the Law of Moses. The penitence and sacrifice of Lent are principles that are in accord with the practices of that law. The question then that we should ask ourselves is whether or not a believer in the Age of Grace should be observing practices that are based in the Law of Moses. Should we be

continuing the penitence and sacrifice of the law?

### **A Perfect Sacrifice**

The answer to this question comes in understanding the purpose of the penitence and fasting of the law. The writer of Hebrews gives us a very clear description of why the law demanded such practices.

For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? Because that the worshippers once purged should have had not more conscience of sins. But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins. Hebrews 10:1-4

Notice that the penitence and sacrifice of the law were not given for the purpose of taking away sin. Rather, they were given to be a “remembrance” of sin. The constant, year in, year out, penitence and sacrifice of the law caused Israel to always be remembering their sin. Every year they spent a day just focusing on their sin and being sorry (afflicting their souls) for it. This yearly remembrance was necessary because the sacrifices they were bringing each year were imperfect. The blood of bulls and goats could not and can not take away sins. Because the sins were never taken away, they were remembered again every year.

However, the writer of Hebrews does offer hope for the nation Israel. He states that if a perfect sacrifice can be found then there would be no need for the imperfect sacrifices to continue. Not only that, but the repeated remembrance of, and sorrow for, sin could also be eliminated because those that partake of the benefits of the perfect sacrifice would have “no more conscience of sins”. Oh! If only we could find the perfect sacrifice!

Not to worry – the writer of Hebrews goes on to reveal the identity of the perfect sacrifice.

And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: but this man [Jesus Christ], after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified. . . . Now where remission of these is, there is no more offering for sin. Hebrews 10:11-14,18

In the epistle of Romans Paul reveals that the same perfect sacrifice that takes away Israel’s sins is also sufficient to take away the Gentiles sins.

Whom [Christ] God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus. Romans 3:25,26

In this passage Paul tells us that the death of Christ is a propitiation (satisfaction) for our sins and that all those that come to that propitiatory sacrifice are justified (made righteous).

Because we have been made partakers in the perfect sacrifice of Christ we have been made perfect in Him. There is no need for us to participate in any penitence and sacrifice for sins. Our sins are completely, totally, and eternally forgiven and taken away in Christ on the basis of His perfect sacrifice at Calvary.

### **Standing in Liberty**

Those who continue practices such as Lent, that encourage penitence and sacrifice are not realizing or enjoying the liberty that they have been given in Christ. They are allowing themselves to be put under the bondage of the law. Paul warns us not to be caught up in such practices.

Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. Galatians 5:1

In the churches of Galatia, circumcision was the practice that was being presented as the key to pleasing God. However, Paul points out that submitting to circumcision is just the first step in placing yourself in bondage to the whole law.

For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. Galatians 5:3

In fact, those that were demanding circumcision were also demanding adherence to all of the law of Moses.

But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, [Gentile believers] and to command them to keep the law of Moses. Acts 15:5

We must realize that legalism does not stop at circumcision, or even the works of the Mosaic Law. Every time we make some effort through an observance like Lent to appease God we are, in effect, saying that the sacrifice of Christ is not enough. We are saying that God still demands some act of penitence and sacrifice on our part in order to satisfy His justice. Again in writing to the churches of Galatia Paul warns against any such notion.

I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain. Galatians 2:21

Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace. Galatians 5:2-4

The absolute perfection and acceptance by the Father of the sacrifice of Christ makes any other sacrifice unnecessary and patently offensive to God. Consider this for a moment. Do you really believe that giving up pizza for Lent can add anything to the perfect sacrifice of Christ? Do you really believe that depriving yourself of your favorite meat is going to make the sacrifice of Christ more effective in taking away your sin? I trust not!

I realize that comparing the blood of Jesus Christ with pizza may seem to be, at best, silly, and at worst sacrilegious, yet that is exactly what we do when we believe that our puny penitence and sacrifice can somehow gain us acceptance and approval before God. We should not allow the liberty that

was purchased with the precious blood of our Savior to be replaced with the bondage of Lent.

### **How Do I Deal With Sin?**

If penitence and sacrifice are not the proper way to deal with sin in our lives then how do we deal with that sin? How can we deal with the sin in our lives without placing ourselves under the bondage of Lent or some other law-based system?

First, we must understand how sin enters into our lives. The Apostle John gives us a clear explanation of the avenues that sin takes as it attempts to influence our actions. These principles of how sin operates are true in all ages.

For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. I John 2:16

There are three ways that Satan seeks to influence man through the course of the world. They are the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. This is the way that Satan tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden; this is the way that Satan tempted Christ in the wilderness; and this is the way that Satan tempts you and me today. It is in these specific areas that we must gain the upper hand if we are to gain victory over sin in our lives.

Paul tells us that the way to deal with this three pronged attack of sin in our lives is with the replacement principle. That is, rather than simply focusing all of our attention on eliminating the sin we should be focusing on replacing the sin with something else. The something else that we replace the sin with is the new man, the life of Christ in us. This is Paul's admonition as he writes to the churches of Ephesus and Colossi.

That ye put of concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. Ephesians 4:22-24

Lie not to one another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with this deeds; And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him: Colossians 3:9,10

We must replace the sin of the old man (Adam) with the righteousness of the new man (Christ). How can do this? How can we access this life of Christ in us? How can we allow that life to replace the life of the old man, the old nature, which still dwells within us? The life of Christ is not a mysterious, magical, mystical thing. God has given us a visible, tangible, identifiable contact with the life of Christ. That objective standard is the written Word of God. The Bible is like no other book that has ever been written, in that it is alive. The life of Christ is resident in its words.

It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing; the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life. John 6:63

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner

of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Hebrews 4:12

Notice that in Ephesians 4:23 (quoted above) Paul points to the mind as the location where the replacement principle must take place. In Colossians 3:10 (also quoted above) he points out that it is knowledge that energizes the new man. As God's Word fills and renews our mind we are replacing the old man with the new man. As we are filled with the knowledge of God's Word, we are filled with the life of Christ. Fortunately (and certainly not coincidentally) God has given us, through the writings of Paul, a resource to deal specifically with each of the areas of temptation through which Satan attacks. For each of the ways that sin can attack God has given us a passage of scripture to renew our minds and gain victory over the sin.

**The lust of the flesh –**

And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. Galatians 5:24

**The lust of the eyes –**

While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal II Corinthians 4:18

**The pride of life –**

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus; Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Philippians 2:5-8

As we can see above, in each case where Satan attacks, God's Word provides the answer. When the attack is through the lust of the flesh the Word reminds us that our flesh has been crucified with Christ and therefore has no more hold on us. When the attack is through the lust of the eyes the scriptures remind us that we should be looking at things not seen because they are things of eternal value. If the attack comes through the avenue of pride, we are admonished to have the attitude that Christ had when He humbled himself and became obedient unto death. As we renew our minds with the truth of these verses we will gain the victory over sin, not by focusing on the sin but by focusing on the solution.

### **The Thrill of Victory or the Agony of Defeat**

It is not necessary to go back to the bondage of the law to deal with sin in our lives. We must realize that in this Age of Grace it is the grace of God that teaches us how to have victory over sin. Trying to defeat the power of sin with law based observances like Lent will lead only to defeat and discouragement. Allowing the grace of God and the Word of Truth to renew your mind will lead you to victory over sin and a walk that truly manifests the life of Christ.

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