



Preparing for The Great Lent

Season of the Cross

INTRODUCTION

The Biblical Holy Days are established and documented in Lev. 23. These Holy Days, plus new moons and Jubilee years, are part of a religious calendar system within the Liturgy of the Tabernacle, The Temple, and the synagogues. These became the basis for the observance of Holy Days and the religious Church calendar that developed after the separation of Rabbinic Judaism and Orthodox Christianity as organized religions. The loss of the connection with Judaism required the Church Fathers to interpret the emphasis and focus of the Holy Days from a memorial of the Exodus and shadow of things to come to an exclusive perspective based on Jesus' life and ministry as a fulfillment of these things. As a result of this and calendar changes, the Holy Days of Christianity are not as clearly connected to the Biblical dates as they might be otherwise. But the idea of a preparation period to major Holy Days was understood by the Christian Church and they connected this to **Zechariah 8: 14-20** where the fasts of mourning of God's Judgment will be turned into feasts of Joy and gladness. As a result, both Judaism and Christianity have periods of fasting and self denial in preparation to Major Holy Days.

YOM KIPPUR IN JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY

The most holy day in Judaism is the Day of Atonement. This vastly important day is preceded by 10 days of awe that are used to call Jews back to God, to repentance, and to reconciliation. The Day of Atonement is the day of the great fast as expressed by Isaiah chapter 58.

The Church, using the Gospels and passages in the Book of Hebrews, found the fulfillment of Yom Kippur in the death of Jesus on the Cross which is followed by the most Holy Day of Christianity – Resurrection Sunday. With the loss of the Temple, it was easy and logical to transfer the theology and meaning of Yom Kippur to Holy Week. This makes the sacrifice of Good Friday the New Testament fulfillment of the Day of Atonement. The Resurrection becomes the proof that Jesus' death was effective, and the ascension demonstrates the entering into heaven by His own blood as the High Priest of the New Covenant. The Spirit's descent at Pentecost completes the connection and justified the church's focus on the passion of Christ as the primary point of the religious calendar.

Instead of ten days of awe or repentance as in Yom Kippur, the Church began to use the 40 days of Jesus temptation as fulfillment of the 40 years of Israel's temptation in the wilderness. Israel failed but Jesus was successful in his testing and could bring the real atonement to the whole world. So 40 days instead of ten became the pattern. This gave the structure of 40 days of Lent to Holy Week and then 50 days to Pentecost.

Over time, the Eastern and Western Church separated they way that these days are counted. In the West, Sundays are not included and the period ends on Maundy Thursday during Holy Week. This requires the Lent period to begin on a Wednesday which is called Ash Wednesday. In the Eastern Church, Sundays are included and the period begins on Clean Monday and ends on Friday before Palm Sunday. The Eastern Church also continues the tradition that Resurrection Sunday must always follow Passover. The Western Church has changed the date to avoid direct connection with Passover. THE DISCIPLECENTER uses the Eastern perspective for these calculations so that we are more in line with Messianic Judaism and the Early Church. This means that some years we will follow Ash Wednesday and others we follow Clean Monday as the start of the Lenten period.

OBSERVANCE

The Observance of Lent goes back at least to the second century and may go back to the destruction of the Temple in the first century. It is the earliest tradition known among the Christians with a liturgical structure. It involves Fasting, Abstinence, Humility and Repentance.

FASTING involves the complete cessation of food and water. This is both an affliction of the Soul (as in Yom Kippur) and a denial of the flesh appetites. It includes a focus of prayer and spiritual appetites such as hunger for the Word. The primary fasting is found in Holy week though some believers fast certain days during Lent. Fasting is clearly a discipleship norm as Jesus spoke of it to His disciples. **Matt. 6: 16-24, Mark 2: 18-22, Isaiah 58: 1-12.**

ABSTINANCE is the elimination of some food, comfort or behavior which may interfere with ones spiritual life. This has many forms such as meatless Fridays, giving up alcohol for Lent, or even Leaven as in the Days of Unleavened bread. The key issue here is not about giving up a sin. That should happen when we become aware of it. This is about giving up the things that interfere with or serve as a present detriment to a fuller commitment to Christ. And it should include a seeking to restore relationships and seeking one another's forgiveness as in Yom Kippur.

HUMILITY requires both that we understand the danger and harm that our pride and arrogance create, but also that we humble ourselves before God. We live by His grace and permission. He remembers that we are dust. We need to know this as well. **James Chapters 3-5** tells us to control our tongue and to humble ourselves before God because God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. The spiritual discipline of fasting and abstinence is geared to humility through self denial, rather than spiritual performance to be seen of men.

REPENTANCE – is sometimes called the first word of the Gospel. We are to repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repentance is not feigned sorrow. In fact, it is not emotional at all. We spend too much time feeling guilty and sorry with no behavioral change. True repentance is to acknowledge our wrong and take steps to avoid its continuance. All our sorrow and guilty feelings are useless if they do not lead to behavioral change.

OUR TASK

The Lenten Season is approaching. We will soon begin our observance of Lent. We have not developed a full DiscipleCenter liturgy for this. We will grow into it as we have done each Holy Day observance before it. It was important for us to experience Yom Kippur and its days of awe and fasting before we kept this observance. Both Holy Days are important and the best understanding is seeing Yom Kippur as the basis of Lent and the Crucifixion as the atoning sacrifice of Jesus for our sins. And it will be of no real benefit for us to observe outwardly and in liturgy what we ignore in fact and truth and behavior. It is best to grow into observance of these things.

We will have a brief Ash Wednesday or Clean Monday observance as indicated on our congregational Holy Day Listing. You may participate and receive the ashes or you may refrain from this ritual. But we will be entering into lent in our hearts as a congregation.

Pick at least one thing to do regarding Lent this year. Read a book on it or use a devotional system or visit a web site that addresses Lent. Many Sources are available.

Plan to fast at least once during the 40 day period. The most probable day would be Good Friday.

Plan at least one item of abstinence for the 40 day period. For example, give up meat on Wednesdays or Fridays. (you may eat fish). Or give up TV one night a week. Or address something else that holds you.

Keep Lent in your prayers. During these forty days of lent, work on an attitude of humility before God.

Keep Lent in your relationships. Seek reconciliation with one another and be prepared to observe Holy Week and Passover at peace with God and man.

Reflect on the Cross and its meaning. He endured the cross for us. This preparation time is the season to focus on that meaning. Consider wearing a cross. As you put it on each day, remember that this is the price paid for your sins. As you remove it each evening, be thankful for that old rugged cross.