

# NO PAIN, NO GAIN (The Meaning of Lent)

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*Matt. 4:1 Then was Jesus led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*

The Gospel reading as recorded in St. Matthew has been the primary reading for the First Sunday in Lent dating back to the earliest history of the Universal Church. In this passage our Lord is intentionally driven into the wilderness to undergo hardship. Why would the Holy Spirit *intentionally* lead Christ into the desert to be tempted? What is the meaning of this and why is it the primary Gospel reading at the beginning of Lent, “*The Forty Days*”? Lent is supposed to be a special time in the Church year for *preparation through sacrifice and hardship*. I was reminded of this fact vividly, quite early in my life.

I played CYO football in the early seventies in Philadelphia. There was no registration or presentation of birth certificates or other pertinent documents as was done meticulously in Pop Warner “secular” football; students simply showed up and played. This was, after all, the CYO, and we were on the *honor* system of registration. Well, there was apparently not much honor in the system. I thought that my eyes were deceiving me when I saw members of the opposing team actually *driving* to the game in their own cars. “Eighth graders don’t drive cars”, I remarked to a teammate. The opposing team was full of ringers, 16-18 year olds, with facial hair and drivers licenses. We knew we were in trouble, not only for this game but for many to follow. Being 11 years old in a pre-pubescent body and receiving a weekly thrashing from very large, very developed young men who drove their own cars to a grade school football game did not prove to be a nurturing experience. Once a week, with my body pounding from the beating I had just taken, I would ask my self, “What is the use of all this suffering? Why don’t I just give up and not come back?” To say the least I became disillusioned, cynical and a bit punch drunk. I came very close to quitting my beloved sport of football. But I held on and suffered through two long years.

Fortunately, my CYO football career only lasted until my eighth grade. A friend convinced me to try the Pop Warner leagues, the weight leagues. By this time, I was a high school freshman playing with mostly sophomores and a few juniors. The ages and weight of the players were checked regularly to ensure fairness. I tried out very late in the practice season, so there was not much hope of winning a spot on the team, never mind a starting position. I was, however, allowed to play in the last exhibition game before the season proper started. A peculiar thing happened, while playing defense. I sacked the quarter back, *often!* I tore through the line, blocked punts, recovered fumbles and made quite the spectacle of myself. What was happening? I was never this good at football. In truth, even I was surprised at my own newly acquired abilities!

My performance in that one game earned me a starting position with that team. That team went undefeated upon that season. We went all the way to the championship without one point being scored against us. We were good...*very good*. We challenged local high school JV and varsity football teams to play us and they apologetically declined in fear.

What had happened to me? How had I gone from being a lackluster player to championship material in the course of a year? **The truth was, I had just stumbled onto the meaning of Lent!** I was used to the hardship, punishment and suffering dished out to me by CYO ringers. *I became conditioned by hardship and suffering to face any task set before me.* When my body began to mature, and I played with boys somewhat more my size I found I was better than my contemporaries. The 2 years of pain and

suffering suddenly became worth it. The suffering and sorrowful bashing I received in CYO football prepared me for the big leagues. I was more than equal to the task. My days in CYO had caused me to play outside of myself, to confront my own weakness and crush it. *I was conditioned by the hardship to gain the victory!*

Christ is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tested. He has a large task set before him and the Holy Spirit *intentionally* takes Christ to be tested and tried early on in His ministry. This is Christ's Lent. It is about hardening oneself for future trial and triumph. That first Lent, as are all that follow, was about confronting sin and crushing it. Christ fasted 40 days and 40 nights, then He confronted Satan to triumph over sin and death.

In Holy Scripture God often confronts and crushes sin during these periods of "40 days". In the story of Noah and the flood, God confronts and crushes the sin of the world in forty days of a deluge (Gen. 7:17, 8:6). Moses fasted for forty days and nights waiting for God to deliver the law to the children of Israel in the desert (Exo. 24:18, 34:28). Goliath, as a type of Satan, taunted and confronted God's people and was defeated after 40 days. David as a type of Christ, confronted him at the end of forty days and **crushed** his head with a stone (1 Sam. 17:16; also notice the allusion to Gen. 3:15). Elijah fasted for forty days in the desert (1 Kings 19:8). Ezekiel laid on his side and bore the sin of Judah for 40 days (Ezekiel 4:6). In Jonah's preaching, Ninevah was given 40 days to repent before God would confront and crush their sin (Jonah 3:4). These are only a few passages in Holy Scripture that abound in the trial and triumph of "The Forty Days".

The breadth of the Old Covenant prepares us to undergo hardship with God's people and to triumph over sin after a forty day trial. Christ, in His forty days, was being prepared not only to meet His Goliath (Satan) in the desert, but he was being prepared for the rest of His ministry and the ultimate hardship of the Cross on Calvary where he suffered for the sins of the whole world.

I observed Lent every year by "giving up" some innocuous item such as meat on Friday or chewing gum. Through this, I discovered, in a small way the fuller meaning of Lent. Just as with the hardship I received in the "desert" of CYO football, so I was prepared for the greater test of the big leagues. The Holy Spirit *intentionally* drove Christ into the desert to refine Him in his humanity and to make him rugged and ready for His confrontation with Satan, not only in this encounter but ultimately at the cross. The fasting and hunger may have made him weaker in a physical sense, but it also made Him stronger in His reliance on the Father. Like a baseball player in the warm-up circle who swings a heavy lead bar or two large bats to make his real bat that he uses up at the plate feel lighter, the punishment of the hot days and cold nights did not weaken our Lord but better equipped Him to be ready for what ever trial came His way. Christ is prepared for the greatest trial of all time by embracing his God directed trial and living with it and through it, not trying to go around it. The Passion of our Lord began, in the desert, not during that fateful Passover. The Church has always acknowledged this. Litanies of the Church read:

*Good LORD, deliver us.*

By the mystery of thy holy Incarnation; by thy holy Nativity and Circumcision; by thy Baptism, **Fasting and Temptation**,

*Good LORD deliver us.*

The Passion of our Lord began with a familiar temptation, that of food.

*Matt 4: 3 And when the tempter came to him, he said, If you are the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread.*

Just as Adam was tested by food and failed, so Jesus the New Adam, was tested and fulfilled all prophecy through His triumph (cf. Gen. 27 & Gen. 1 for further studies in trial by food). Our Lord is further tried in the desert through a threat to his personal security and power.

*Matt 4: 6 And said to him, If you are the Son of God, cast yourself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning you: and in their hands they shall uphold, you, lest at any time you dash your foot against a stone.*

*Matt 4: 8 Again, the devil took him up upon an exceeding high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them;*

Christ was tempted in the very essentials and staples of life, simple things that we are all tempted with every day. Christ's key to victory after His Forty Days is also our key to victory. Our Lord used the hardship, punishment and suffering that the desert dished out to prepare Himself for an even greater battle. *He was conditioned by the hardship to gain the victory!* . He had confronted sin and crushed it. Traditionally during Lent we can enter into the desert **with** our Lord and intentionally under go an ascetic hardship as a way of training ourselves for what lays ahead.

This is the primary Gospel reading for the First Sunday in Lent because the Church Calendar and the cycle of the Liturgical year is meant to *draw us into the life of Christ*. It draws us into the Incarnation of our Lord and allows us to enter into the desert *with* Him. We can fast and pray with Him. In the Pentecost season (Ordinary Time), we can walk the roads of Judea with our Lord and witness His miracles and sit at His feet. *When we fast with Christ during Lent we enter into His life to better identify with Him*. We prepare to undergo the agony in the Garden with Him and keep watch *with Him* , **if** we are able.

*Matt 26:38 Then he said to them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even to death: wait here, and **watch with me**.*

*39 And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and **prayed**, saying, O my Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but your will be done.*

*40 And he came to the disciples, and found them asleep, and said to Peter, What, could you not **watch with me** one hour*

As we go through the life of Christ, we are finally taken to the apex of hardship and suffering. We travel the Via Dolorosa with Christ and ascend Golgotha and die with him. As we enter into the Liturgical year, we then are Resurrected with Him on Easter and Ascend with Him into heaven. (St. Paul reminds us that being ascended with Christ in Heaven is the place of all believers with Christ now. cf. Eph. 1:3). Traditionally, in the early Church, baptisms were performed on Easter as a sign of Resurrecting with Christ.

*Rom. 6:4 Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that as Christ was **raised from the dead** by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.*

*Col 2:12 Buried with him in baptism, in which also you are **risen** with him through the faith of the operation of God, who has raised him from the dead.*

The Church would prepare those for the rugged road of living the Christian life in the same way Christ started His ministry: by fasting for forty days. Catechumens, those entering the Christian faith, were put through the life of Christ. They fasted for forty days, kept watch with Him during Holy Week, and died and were risen to new life in their Baptisms on Easter. (St. Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan, baptized St. Augustine, His most celebrated catechumen, on an Easter day over 1600 years ago, after such a forty day fast.)

During Lent we are afforded the opportunity to be prepared by hardship, so we can confront and crush sin in our life. Fasting can be likened to the athlete who trains his body to bring it into submission.

*1 Cor. 9:24 Do not you know that they who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? So run, that you may obtain.*

*25 And every man that strives for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible.*

*26 I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so I fight, not as one that beats the air:*

*27 But I buffet my body, and bring it into subjection: lest by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.*

Have you ever met a mature Christian who was strong in their faith and had not undergone hardship? Have you ever met any person who excels in their field in the world of business or art who had not worked or practiced 1000s of hours to achieve their goals. America is the land of instant everything, even instant spirituality. The true spirituality of Holy Scripture comes from hardship and trial. If our Lord had to go through trials and hardship, how can we “modern” western Christians think we can attain a holy life without fasting, praying ceaselessly, and entering into the desert with Christ our Lord. The truth is, spirituality that is attained easily is lost quite easily.

Make this Lent a time to confront and crush sin in your life. Thomas á Kempis, the author of the *Imitation of Christ* says, “The best way to push out old sinful habits is to adopt new holy habits. This is never done easily.”

God will take you through the desert to make you ready for whatever he will call you to do. The way of sanctification is not easy and we need prepare ourselves for a tough road ahead. What are you going to give up for Lent? Perhaps meat on Fridays or some other discipline. These small sacrifices will only profit if they lead to true godly discipline. If we can give up small things for Forty days, then perhaps we will be better trained to give up bigger, more important things for life. How about giving up pettiness, lust and rebellion, indifference and lukewarm fervor for God. A little fasting will go a long way in disciplining our bodies to say no to bigger sins.