



9 Lenten Terms You Should Know

As I noted in my article "[What is Lent?](#)," I grew up in a church that nominally observed the season of Lent. We certainly celebrated Palm Sunday and Easter, but Ash Wednesday and adamant fasting? Not so much. Even when we did begin observing other Lenten practices, like Ash Wednesday, I still did not always understand the significance. So, if you too have a vague understanding of what Lent is all about, I hope these Lenten terms will help you fill in the gaps.

Lent

Lent is a season of the Christian liturgical calendar intended for spiritual reflection and preparation. It lasts approximately 6 weeks, beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending the Thursday before Easter. The term Lent comes from an old English word meaning, Spring. However, in Latin, Lent means fortieth because Lent is observed for forty days. During the Lenten season, Sundays are not counted in the forty day observance: each Sunday is its own celebration of Christ's resurrection, a mini-Easter. The forty days of Lent correspond to the 40 days Jesus fasted in the wilderness, being tempted by Satan ([Matt 4:1-2](#)), in preparation for his public ministry. In some traditions, Lent has also been seen as a season to prepare new believers for baptism. Lent is meant to be a time to focus on the meaning of the cross and prepare spiritually for the coming celebration of Easter.

Fasting

Fasting is the most well-known, and most commonly misunderstood, practice associated with Lent. Almost everyone has heard about "giving something up" for Lent. But it's more than just that. The idea behind Lenten fasting is to deny satisfaction of a physical need or desire in order to devote that time to prayer, reflection, and service. This fasting is meant to parallel the 40 days Jesus fasted in the wilderness in preparation for his public ministry. Fasting most often involves abstaining from food of a particular type, such as meat or sweets, or at a particular time. For example, many people are familiar with the practice of not eating meat on Fridays during Lent. Yet, fasting can also include staying off social media, not watching television, or not playing video games. A couple may agree to abstain from sexual intimacy as a fast, and use that time together to seek intimacy with God through prayer. Most people choose not to fast on the intervening Sundays throughout Lent, as these are days of celebrating Christ. Fasting during Lent helps Christians reflect on their need for the cross and prepare their hearts for the celebration of the resurrection.

Penance

Penance is the outward expression of internal repentance--the turning away from sin. It begins with the confession of *unconfessed* sin, and is made complete when a person takes voluntary action to seek forgiveness and make restitution or amends for wrongs that he or she has committed against God or another person. During Lent, penance can play a vital role in bringing healing to the one sinned against, and to the one who has sinned. It is a way to experience afresh the forgiveness that comes through the cross, where Christ took the punishment for our sin upon himself. It is not our penance that pays the cost of our sin or brings salvation, but the sacrifice of Christ alone. Penance, however, can help heal a broken relationship.

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday is the first day of the season of Lent in the Western Christian tradition. The name comes from the symbolic practice of placing black ash on a believer's forehead--most often in the shape of the cross. In the Bible, ash represents grief, death, judgment, and repentance. This tradition encourages Christians to begin the season of Lent by focusing on their need for the cross.

Holy Week

Holy Week, also called Passion Week, is the week before Easter. It includes Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Dark (or Holy) Saturday, and traces the steps of Jesus during the last week of his earthly life.

Palm Sunday

Palm Sunday is celebrated one week before Easter. Many churches begin their Palm Sunday services with a procession of believers into the church waving palm branches. This commemorates the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem the week before his resurrection, the first Easter ([Matthew 21:1-11](#),

[Luke 19:28-41](#), [Mark 11:1-11](#), [John 12:12-18](#)). Large crowds welcomed Jesus by waving palm branches and cheering the arrival of the man whom they thought would be their political king. Today, Christians celebrate Palm Sunday with the assurance the Jesus Christ reigns in heaven and over all creation forever.

Maundy Thursday

Maundy Thursday commemorates the last supper Jesus shared with his disciples. The name "Maundy" comes from the Latin word *mandatum*, meaning "command," for the two commandments Jesus gave to his disciples during their last night together before the crucifixion. First, Jesus tells them, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." ([John 13:34-35](#)). The second command Jesus gives as he takes the bread, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me" ([Luke 22:19-20](#)). Jesus used those same "remember" words when he passed the cup. Maundy Thursday is often celebrated with communion. And, Maundy Thursday is the official end of the Lenten season.

Good Friday

Good Friday is not actually part of the Lenten season. Good Friday marks the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It is a time of solemn reflection, prayer, and remembrance. Many Christians fast on Good Friday and focus on repentance. Some churches will have Good Friday services and these services typically focus on Jesus' death for the forgiveness of sins. This is why Christians refer to the day as "Good" in spite of the suffering the day commemorates.

Dark (or Holy) Saturday

Dark Saturday is the day before Easter. It is the last day of Holy Week, but not officially part of Lent. It marks the day after Jesus' death when his body lay in the tomb. In Western Christianity, churches do not commonly hold services for Dark Saturday, but in Eastern Christianity, Dark Saturday is often observed with a symbolic funeral service for Jesus.

For more on Lent

[Lent: A season for sacrifice, repentance, and prayer](#)

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