



Fact of Faith

WHY IS LENT FORTY DAYS?

The Lenten season is a time of preparation for the liturgical celebration of the suffering, Death, and Resurrection of Christ. Many Catholics spend that time on the three practices of Lent: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. It is also a time to participate in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

The season of Lent lasts from Ash Wednesday until the evening of Holy Thursday. If Sundays are excluded from the count, the season lasts forty days. The forty-day length of Lent is rooted in the biblical usage of the number forty. Forty is typically indicative of a time of testing, trial, penance, purification, and renewal. In the New Testament, forty days is the length of Jesus' time of trial in the desert in preparation for his public ministry, proclaiming the Gospel.

Mark 1:12-15

The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts,

and the angels ministered to him. After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand.

The forty-day period of Jesus' trial in the desert echoes a number of events in the Old Testament:

- The face of the earth was cleansed and purified during the promised period of days and nights that rain poured down during the great flood—"I will bring rain down on the earth for forty days and forty nights, and so I will wipe out from the surface of the earth every moving creature that I have made" (Gen 7:4).
- The face of the earth was renewed during a forty-day period after the mountain tops appeared and the waters of the great flood receded—"The tops of the mountains appeared. At the end of forty days Noah opened the hatch of the ark that he had made" (Gen 8:5-6).
- Moses spent forty years as a shepherd in the desert before God called him to lead the Israelites out of slavery—"Moses fled when he heard this and settled as an alien in the land of Midian . . . Forty years later, an angel appeared to him in the desert near Mount Sinai in the flame of a burning bush" (Acts 7: 29-30).
- Moses fasted for forty days and nights on Mount Sinai before receiving the tablets of the covenant—

"So Moses stayed there with the LORD for forty days and forty nights, without eating any food or drinking any water, and he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments" (Ex 34:28).

- The Israelites spent forty years wandering in the desert, as a time of testing, trial and purification of the people, before reaching the Promised Land—"Now the Israelites had wandered forty years in the desert, until all the warriors among the people that came forth from Egypt died off because they had not obeyed the command of the LORD" (Jos 5:6; see Num 32:13).

- The prophet Elijah spent forty days in the desert before encountering God on Mount Horeb—"Elijah got up, ate and drank; then strengthened by that food, he walked forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, Horeb" (1 Kgs 19:8).

- The Ninevites were given forty days before God was going to destroy the city, allowing time for repentance and conversion—"Jonah began his journey through the city, and had gone but a single day's walk announcing, 'Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed,' when the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth" (Jon 3:4-5).