

DETAILS



Lent

The Season of Repentance and Renewal

November 8, 2022 | \$20, 128 pages, casebound | 978-1-5140-0048-9

One of the six books offered within the Fullness of Time series. Each book within the series edited by theologian Esau McCaulley offers Christians of all traditions a renewed appreciation for key events throughout the Christian calendar.

The First Book Within the Fullness of Time Series

As more and more churches mark several different seasons throughout the church year in their preaching and teaching, the Fullness of Time series provides resources that help readers live fully into both the theology and spiritual practices of each significant date on the Christian calendar. Six books in total offer reflections on how the church is forming all of us into the likeness of Christ throughout each season.

- Releasing Winter 2023: *Lent* written by Esau McCaulley, priest, scholar, and author of *Reading While Black*
- Releasing Spring 2023: *Pentecost* written by Emilio Alvarez, founding pastor and rector of The Gathering Place
- Releasing Fall 2023: *Advent* written by Tish Harrison Warren, Anglican priest and award-winning author
- Releasing Fall 2023: *Christmas* written by Emily Hunter McGowin, associate lecturer of theology at Wheaton College
- Releasing Fall 2023: *Epiphany* written by Fleming Rutledge, Episcopal priest and author of many books
- Releasing Winter 2024: *Eastertide* written by Wesley Hill, associate professor of biblical studies at Trinity School for Ministry

Series editor Esau McCaulley says of this work, "These books are written from the perspective of those who have lived through the seasons many times, and we'll use personal stories and experiences to explain different aspects of the season that are meaningful to us. In what follows, do not look for the comments of historians pointing out minutia. Instead, look for fellow believers and evangelists using the tool of the church year to preach the gospel and to point Christians toward discipleship and spiritual formation. We pray that these books will be useful to individuals, families, and churches seeking a deeper walk with Jesus."

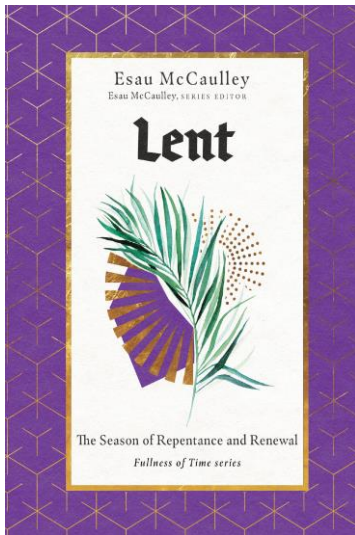


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EXCERPT



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Lent is inescapably about repenting. We often experience the Lenten fast as either a mindless ritual or self-improvement program. In this short volume, priest and scholar Esau McCaulley introduces the season of Lent, showing us how its prayers and rituals point us not just to our own sinfulness but also beyond it to our merciful Savior.

Turning Toward God with Intention

Lent is a season of repentance and preparation. In many churches, it is a time when those who will be baptized prepare for their new life with God. It's a time when those who have been estranged from the church can be reconciled to the body of believers. It's also a time for all of us to think about the ways we have drifted from the faith. The common theme uniting these three functions of Lent is that they all involve a turning toward God with intention and reflection on the past.

We hope that as Christians mature and grow they will become more and more like Christ. But the church in its wisdom assumes that we will fail, even after our baptism. The church presumes that life is long and that zeal fades, not just for some of us but for all of us. So it has included within its life a season in which all of us can recapture our love for God and his kingdom and cast off those things that so easily entangle us.

Today Lent is known as the forty days of fasting in preparation for Easter. In the West, Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and concludes on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter. Exactly how we ended up with this exact period of time is something of a mystery. In the first few centuries of the church's life, there was a one- or two-day fast in preparation for Easter. Some scholars think that this fast was eventually extended to what we now call Holy Week. We went from a few days to a week-long preparation. One week grew to three weeks, and finally forty days. During these forty days baptismal candidates were prepared to be received into the church on Easter.¹

As best as we can tell, however, the fasts related to Holy Week developed apart from what is now called Lent. It seems there was a period of fasting that preceded baptism even when the baptism was not connected with Easter.² Those fasts varied in length, but there is some evidence that the forty-day pre-baptismal fast was popular in Alexandria.

Whatever its precise development, it's clear that the early Christians thought that baptism was serious and required preparation. I think this is wise. Becoming a Christian is no small matter. To transition from believing that you live in a world where death is the end to one in which an Almighty God calls dead things to life is much more significant than choosing what to have for breakfast. We should have space to reflect on the full significance of the change.

After the council of Nicaea set a particular date for the celebration of Easter, many throughout the church began to see the feast of the Resurrection as the best time to bring people into the church. It was also a fitting time to bring back into the church those who had strayed away. The link between Lent and Easter, then, was a collision of different factors. The season of fasting linked to baptism and the reconciliation of those estranged from the church were connected to the fasting in preparation for Easter, including Holy Week.

So Lent came to be about three things: the preparation of new converts for baptism, the reconciliation of those estranged from the church, and a general call for the whole church to repent and renew its commitment to Jesus.



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Esau McCaulley is assistant professor of New Testament at Wheaton College and a contributing opinion writer for the *New York Times*. He is the author of *Reading While Black* and *Sharing in the Son's Inheritance*, as well as the children's book *Josie Johnson's Hair and the Holy Spirit*.

In those early centuries, the practice varied. In the East the Lenten fast lasted seven weeks, but Saturdays and Sundays weren't counted in the total, so there were actually only thirty-six fast days. In the West, the fast was only six weeks, but they ended up with thirty-six days, too, because only Sundays were not counted.³ Western Christians eventually added the four days from Ash Wednesday to the first Sunday of Lent to give us the number forty. Today in most Western churches the days of Lent are calculated by counting forty days from Ash Wednesday through the end of Holy Week, excluding Sundays.

Fasting practices also varied. In some contexts particular foods were removed from the diet during Lent; in other places the number of meals was reduced. This may seem like the kind of creeping legalism that would send Protestants running for the hills. But hold on.

All this variation is actually rather freeing. There was never a single way of doing Lent given to us from on high that we must follow in order to be right with God. The history of the development of Lent is like our spiritual lives. The church stumbled around trying different things and doing its best to discern together the best ways to use this period of time to bring us closer to God. We should not see the season of Lent as a series of rules but as a gift of the collected wisdom of the church universal. It is one of many tools of discipleship pointing us toward a closer walk with Jesus. This does not mean that we should treat Lent as a spiritual buffer to choose this or that. It means that we should take the wisdom that the church offers us as wisdom but not legalism. There may be some benefits to adopting practices that may not initially make sense to us because Christians before us have struggled, discerned, and prayed their way into the practices that are now our heritage.

I was not baptized at the end of Lent. I was raised in the Black Baptist church, where we got baptized when we heard the gospel and believed. But Lent does hold a particular place in my heart. The season of Lent was my first encounter with liturgical spirituality. It added a new element to my spiritual life.

My first Lent was a pilgrimage. I never left the city I resided in during that time, but I did go on a journey. At a time when I felt adrift spiritually, Lent help me be aware of the nearness of God. These outward practices took me on an inward journey further into the awareness of God.

That is the purpose of all of this. In this series of books on the liturgical seasons, we aren't trying to lay further burdens on the backs of Christians or to pretend that we've figured out the only way to please God. Instead, these are notes on an encounter that is available to all.

What follows then is an attempt to point out the things that I've seen along the way. It is not just an explanation of Lent but an invitation to experience it, a chance to meet our risen Lord who always runs just ahead of us, beckoning us forward.

—Adapted from “We Must Repent: An Introduction to Lent”



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