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Great Lent: Why Does It Hold Forty Days?



Many wonder why Great Lent holds forty days. To be very accurate, Great Lent does not last forty days but thirty-six days. However, people generally think it holds forty days.

This year: 2020

This year—2020—is a good year in which to explain this: because Great Lent begins on March 2nd, when it is “Clean Monday,” the first day of fasting,. The 12th of April is Palm Sunday and, on the 19th of April, we celebrate Easter (Pascha).

What period is Great Lent?

First of all, it is fascinating to note that Holy Week is not part of Great Lent—because Lent is not distinguished by what we eat but for what we mourn, for what we struggle toward.

The Great Lent is, by excellence, a period of mourning in which we should more intensely live our separation from God, a time by excellence dedicated to God.

Great Lent: Forty days?

So, even though we refrain from non-fasting food until Easter, the mourning period only lasts until the Friday before the Saturday of Lazarus and, until there, are exactly forty days.

With Lazarus Saturday, the atmosphere changes and the certainty of the resurrection of the Lord, beyond the immensity of the pain of the cross, rises in our hearts. This change is evident in the services and, because of this, people generally count Great Lent as a period of forty days, even if the period in which we eat only fasting food extends through to Easter.

Old Testament vs New Testament

However, some of the holy Fathers say that the 36-day period was chosen for Great Lent as a tithe of the Old Testament law, transfigured in the New Testament.

If, in the Old Testament, the law was “bodily” (material) and, therefore, each one had to give the tenth part of what is most valuable of his material wealth to God, yet in the law of the New Testament, being a spiritual law, we must give God the tenth part of our most precious wealth, seen from the spiritual point of view, that is the mind, the heart, in the tenth part of our time. The year, having 365 days, the Fathers decided that Great Lent would hold 35-36 days.

Being easier to calculate in whole weeks, the Fathers said six weeks of seven days equaled forty-two days—from which they removed Saturday of Lazarus and Palm Sunday; and so, from here, it is said that Great Lent holds 40 days—from which, the Fathers removed also the five Sundays that remained, making each of these Sundays a feast day: leading us to have thirty-five days. To this, some consider Great Friday to be a day of mourning by excellence: thus, we may conclude to having thirty-six days, the spiritual tithe of the New Testament of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the photo, a parent fills a bottle with vinegar. Vatopedi Monastery, Mount Athos.

— Source: asceticexperience.com