

Lent: Study time for ‘The Test’!

LENT ... what a strange sounding word!!!

When I was in high school, I had no clear idea ... well, to be honest, I had **NO** idea what Lent was about. Like most of the protestant kids, I made jokes about it. “Hey, Max! How about giving me five bucks so I can say you **LENT** me some money!” And off we’d go with another round of insensitive laughter. Kids sure can be cruel. Thinking back on it, I realize that **I** certainly was!

It’s really too bad that so few protestants adhere to the ancient Lenten practices, especially those of fasting and abstinence. Even when I became Catholic 25 years ago, I **STILL** didn’t fully understand how Lent could change my life.

It took the Holy Spirit **TIME** to change me. More accurately, it took **ME** time to **ACCEPT** the changes which He had in store for me!

In the late Charles Schultz’s classic comic strip – “Peanuts” – Charlie Brown’s sandlot baseball team **NEVER** seems to catch a break – losing game after game in a seemingly **ENDLESS** season of miscues and failures.

Disappointed and dejected, Charlie Brown complains to Schroeder – the piano-playing philosopher of the strip – that “life just isn’t **FAIR**”!

“Don’t be discouraged, Charlie Brown,” Schroeder says. “These early defeats help to build character for **LATER ON** in life.”

“For **WHAT** later on in life?” asks Charlie Brown.

To which Schroeder replies: “For **MORE** defeats!”

Really – if you think about it – this is what Lent does for us. It prepares us for the slings and arrows that life will surely hurl our way.

Life is **FULL** of disappointments and defeats.

How many times must a toddler fall before he learns to stand and walk?
Seemingly **COUNTLESS** times!

How many skinned knees must be bandaged before a child can learn to skate
or ride a bike?

A **LOT!!!**

In business, **SEVEN** of every **TEN** new enterprises fail within ten years.

In team sports, the overall failure rate is – of course – one-to-one ... or 50 percent ... as one team **MUST** lose before another can win.

Individual competition can be rough, too. Some athletes **NEVER** win!

I remember quite clearly how **HARD** I worked – day after day – even in the off season – to prepare myself for high school and college track and field events.

It didn't seem to matter if I tried the sprints or the long-distance runs. Inevitably, I would be an "**ALSO-RAN**" ...

In case you're unfamiliar with the term, the local paper would report those who placed first, second and third with a description of their achievements. But then at the very end of the article would be that **DREADED** paragraph which would **INEVITABLY** end with a list of names – mine included – and the words "also ran" ...

BUT!!!

While I may not have won any events at those track meets, all the practice – all those miles I ran – or what is nowadays sometimes called **SWEAT EQUITY** – made me **STRONGER** – more able – to meet life's challenges.

When I joined the Navy, those couch potatoes I went to boot camp with didn't have a **CHANCE** of keeping up with me during those long runs and marches! For me, boot camp was a **BREEZE**.

And the **MENTAL** discipline I acquired as an “also-ran” on the track team kept me focused on the goal, even when injuries, failures and disappointments came my way ... as they most surely did ... and **WILL!!!**

No one learns to walk without falling.

No one learns to ride a bike or skate without a few skinned knees.

Businesses cannot succeed if they don't at least try.

Athletes will never win if they don't compete.

About now you may be asking yourself “What does all **THAT** have to do with **LENT**?”

Consider this:

If we **NEVER** experience the deprivation and hardship of the desert as Christ did, **HOW** can we prepare ourselves for the time when we will be tempted by the devil? And – most assuredly – we **WILL** be tempted!!!

So how **CAN** we prepare?

Enter that liturgical season we call **LENT** ...

The desert in Mark’s gospel is a place of emptiness, aridity, and isolation. It is a lonely place devoid of all comforts, conveniences, and consolations.

In the desert’s brutal barrenness, Jesus was forced to confront the full reality of life without amusements, amenities, diversion or distraction.

As we **IMITATE** Christ’s experience – in the smallest, most basic way – we, too, wrestle with the limits of our humanity and those “wild beasts” that rage within us.

Lent is the time when we consciously go into that desert – that is, when we deliberately and explicitly reexamine and call into question those basic attitudes, values and assumptions on which we base our lives and our behavior.

In the measure that we experience **CONVERSION** during this time, and reshape and reform our lives, we come more fully under the reign of God and into the fulfillment of His promises.

In the desert, Jesus becomes one with the Father and His will and He is strengthened for His mission.

For us, the Lenten experience **RECREATES, PURIFIES** and **RENEWS** us in ways that helps us to avoid serious **SIN** and **TEMPTATION** when it strikes us ... and – make no mistake – it **WILL** strike us.

God will not leave us alone in the wasteland. Jesus did not confront his temptations alone. Nor do **WE!!!**

Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit to guide and strengthen us. He **NEVER** leaves us to face temptation alone.

And even in those seemingly dark days of what we view as failure, He is preparing us for what is to come.

Really – if you think about it – life is **NOT** about **SUCCESS**. It's about **FAILURE** ... and how we adapt and overcome it. Our failures will most certainly conquer us if we don't persevere in the face of adversity.

THIS is what Lent does for us. It **PREPARES** us for the difficulties and hardships that life will undoubtedly hurl our way.

In Lent, we begin that preparation, that strengthening needed to triumph over temptation. When we **DENY** ourselves, we **READY** ourselves for the day when Satan will offer us what **LOOKS** like an easy win but is actually a false sweet loaded with barbs and hooks!

Will we give in to his **EMPTY** promises?

Or will we follow the example of our Lord Jesus Christ who **REBUKED** him?

What will **YOU** do? How will **YOU** prepare for the test?