

# Memories of Lent

## An Ash Wednesday Sermon

### Romans 3:23-25

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This sermon was preached in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary chapel on Ash Wednesday, 2000. It is printed here as a meditation for pastors as they begin their preparation for Lent.

#### Text

*There is no difference for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood.*

#### Introduction

What are your childhood memories of Lent? That might seem like a strange question. We might think about our childhood memories of Christmas—the Christmas Eve services, our family’s time for opening presents, the special foods our family enjoyed. We might even think of Easter memories—getting up early for sunrise services, joyful hymns, bright colored eggs and lots of candy, special flowers and special clothes. But memories of Lent? I do have many images of Lent lingering in my mind—the church seemed darker and more mournful on a cold winter night. In a strange way it seemed appropriate to tramp through the snow and cold from a prep school dorm to reach the church to meditate on Christ’s suffering. In my home church there were a series of carvings around the cross above the altar—a bag of money, a crowing rooster, a crown of thorns, and other images that kept the pictures of the Passion vivid in my mind around the year and through the years. And those thought-provoking, solemn hymns—“Jesus I will ponder now,” “O dearest Jesus,” “Come to Calvary’s holy mountain.” **Memories of Lent**—whatever your memories, are I am sure there are two we share. In a vivid way **Lent teaches us to remember our sins. Lent teaches us to remember our Savior.**

#### I. Lent teaches us to remember our sins.

*All have sinned.* What a sad tale is told in those few words. What a sea of tears—from the tears of mother Eve for her dead son Abel to the tears of a mother grieving for her little six-year-old girl gunned down in school by a schoolmate. What an ocean of blood—the blood of every martyr crying out from the ground—from Abel to the latest victim in Indonesia or Nigeria; the terrible toll of corpses from every war; the victims of every senseless drive-by shooting and botched holdup. What a flood of filth and ugliness—from the disgusting rites of the Canaanites to the filth flooding into our homes on the internet and cable TV. What endless murmurs of conscience whispering to those who have wounded a loyal friend, who have disappointed loving parents or a dear spouse, or worst of all, who have betrayed a faithful God. What shame and disgrace, what a stain—a stain no soap can wash away. What agony to bear.

“And the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all.” No wonder his sweat dropped like blood and he cried, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

I wish that was the whole story, but the text does not say “all of *them* have sinned.” It says *all* have sinned. I can’t escape the painful truth of that little word “all”—it includes me and it includes you, all of you. Imagine that every sin you committed is a pebble dropping on your head. It doesn’t even have to be a very big one. Imagine a little stone dropping on your head every time you said an unkind word, every time you had an evil thought, every time you fought with your brother or sister, every time you disobeyed your parents, every time you were inattentive or half-hearted in worship, every time you shaded the truth to your advantage, every time you were greedy for more or were discontented with the blessings the Lord had showered on you, every time the sermon you were preaching was more important to you than the Savior that you were preaching about. Multiply that steady rain by the days and by the months and by the years of a lifetime. What a mountain, what a crushing burden of guilt. Multiple that by all the billions who ever have lived, who are now living, and who ever will live in this world. Stone by stone, what an Everest of sin we have heaped up—what a crushing load of guilt.

“And the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all.” No wonder he cried, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

What verdict had God’s law pronounced upon us? *All fall short of the glory of God.*

Goodness is glorious. Godly living shines like a beautiful light that brings glory to God and to those who follow his way. But there is nothing beautiful or glorious about sin. It makes those who live in it ugly and warped. Sinners fall short of the glory for which God created them.

Those who do glorious things can bask in praise and approval. Heroes and winners receive fame and acclaim. But sinners and villains receive no praise and no approval from God. All he has to say to them is, “Depart from me. I never knew you.”

Those who do glorious things receive glorious rewards. But there is no glory for sinners—no joy in the light of God’s presence, no shining like the sun in the kingdom of light, only disgrace and shame in outer darkness.

*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* What a depressing story. But as you know that’s only chapter one of the story of Lent. The final chapter says: *All are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*

## **II. Lent teaches us to remember our Savior**

*All are justified.* All are declared forgiven. Lent doesn’t tell us what to do. It tells us what has been done. It does not hand out a list of instructions for us to follow. It hands us a cancelled bill. Our sins have been forgiven.

*All are justified freely by his grace.* We did not pay anything for this forgiveness. It was a gift. According to our English teachers Paul is not following very good style here. He is redundant. Freely means by grace, and by grace means freely. But sometimes truth is more important than style, and some things are too important to be said just once. So I am going to say it again. You were justified freely by grace.

There was nothing fake or phony about the verdict that you received because it came *through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.* Your debt was not ignored by a God who does not care all that much about sin. It was not covered up by a dishonest bookkeeper. It was paid in full. When Jesus cried, “It is finished,” it *was* finished.

Yes, Lent can be described by abstract theological words like justification, grace, and redemption. But Lent is really the story of a person. It is the story of our Savior, God and man, who at a real time and a real place in history was mocked and beaten and killed so that you could have life and glory. Redemption came *by Christ Jesus*.

And that's the whole story of Lent—"All have sinned, but all are justified freely by his grace." I can't deny the truth of that little word "all"—it includes me and it includes you, all of you. God made my Savior *a sacrifice of atonement*, a sacrifice that made peace between sinful me and a holy God. This peace is mine *through faith in his blood*.

That's what I will remember from this Lenten season—my sin and my Savior.

And if you remember that, the hours of Lent will be precious hours for your people. They will come to church tired after a long, hard day of work. Maybe with the kids complaining that they have to miss the hottest new TV show. Sometimes they will come with their hearts burdened with cares that only they know. They'll struggle to watch with Jesus for one hour in those moments when the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak, and they won't always win. But they will come—not because they want to be entertained by the latest cool Lenten dramas, not to gain psychological insight into black-hearted villains like Judas and Caiaphas or well-meaning cowards like Peter, not to learn some exciting new ideas they never heard before, but they will come because they want you to remind them of their sin and their Savior. They want you to take them back to Gethsemane so they can hear Jesus' prayer and remember Jesus' willing submission to his Father's will. They want you to take them to the judgment hall so they can remember Jesus' patient endurance of heartless cruelty. Most of all, they want you to take them to Calvary—to the foot of the cross—so they can remember the wondrous love that enabled Jesus to endure the pain until he could cry, "It is finished."

If the memories of Lent are precious to your people, they will be even more precious to you, the preacher of the cross. The hours of Lent are hours that will draw you closer to your Savior as you stand again at the foot of the cross. They are hours that will draw you closer to your flock as you shepherd them to the foot of the cross and as their love for you grows because of the message of peace you bring. As your memories of one Lent flow into the next, I hope your memories will be so precious that you will enter each Lenten season with eagerness and excitement, not groaning at the thought of the work that lies ahead but eager for those precious hours at the foot of the cross. I understand why busy pastors have pulpit exchanges and rotations in their Lenten preaching series, and I don't criticize this, but I hope you will find the hours that you spend with your people at the foot of the cross so precious, so blessed, that you will be too covetous, too greedy, too possessive to want to give up even one of them to anyone else. Cling to those hours, cherish those hours, make the most of those hours, remember those hours.

The things you need to remember from each Lent are not so many—they can be boiled down to two—your sin and your Savior. The things I need to say in my Lenten preaching are not so many—in fact they can be boiled down to one—"All are justified freely by grace." I have finished my job as a Lenten preacher when I have said, "You are all justified freely by grace." This is enough. ... No, wait a minute! That's not enough—I have to say it one more time—You all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus! That is enough.

Amen.

One way to follow up on this plan is to use the seven-part *Passion of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*. This is posted in docx format for easy cutting and pasting to bulletins or screens. It can also be used for home reading during Lent.

[Link to the seven-part passion history.](#)

Another good meditation during Lent is to think about the power of Lenten hymns on the basis of the article *The Power of Hymns*. Then use the Lenten hymns in your hymnal for daily meditations.

[Link to The Power of Hymns](#)

This sermon is reprinted from the book *In Season and Out of Season*, a collection of seasonal sermons by John Brug. The book can be purchased from Lulu.