

## **How To Do Lent Well**

*from "After Mass" podcast*

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### **Lent's True Posture**

Lent does not begin with effort, it begins with posture. How someone enters the season determines almost everything about how it's experienced. The same practices can either form the soul or exhaust it, depending entirely on the framework through which they're interpreted. This is why the church has always insisted that the desert be understood before it's entered. In scripture, the desert is never presented as a corrective for failure. It appears at the moment of transition, before covenant, before mission, and before public action. God doesn't lead his people into the wilderness because something's gone wrong, but because something significant is about to be entrusted. The pattern is consistent. Liberation comes first, then the desert, then mission.

And that order matters especially as we begin lent. Punishment looks backward at guilt. Preparation looks forward to responsibility. The desert belongs to the second category. It's not the withdrawal of God's favor. It's the reordering of the heart so that favor can be received rightly. The desert is not deprivation for its own sake. It truly is clarification. When excess is stripped away, what governs the soul becomes visible. Attachments that were previously buffered by routine comfort or distraction lose their cover. What remains is not necessarily sin, but truth. This is why Lent often feels emotionally flat even when it's spiritually effective.

### **Desert's Formation Process**

Many people enter the season of Lent expecting clarity and motivation or a sense of spiritual momentum. What they frequently encounter instead is resistance, restlessness, and this kind of interior dryness. This experience is almost always interpreted as failure by us. Our faith interprets it very differently. Dryness doesn't mean absence. Resistance doesn't mean regression. And discomfort doesn't mean that God is displeased. These are instead indicators that formation has begun. When external supports are reduced, the true movements of the soul surface. The desert doesn't manufacture new struggles. It reveals existing ones. What becomes visible in Lent was already present. It was simply just being managed. And this is why the church never promises that Lent will feel affirming. She promises that it will be fruitful.

The desert removes familiar reference points. Food is limited. Noise is reduced. Predictability is interrupted. And these changes are not meant to harm our soul. They're meant to expose where stability has been drawn from sources that cannot ultimately sustain it. The desert trains the soul to desire God without substitutes. And this isn't because the substitutes we use are sinful, but because reliance on them weakens spiritual maturity. This is why the desert feels uncomfortable even when it's holy. Comfort dulls awareness, and the desert sharpens it.

As Lent begins, the most important thing to understand is this. The goal is not to feel strong. The goal is to remain when strength is not felt. The goal is not to manufacture meaning, but to allow meaning to be revealed through your endurance. Formation doesn't begin with illumination. It begins with purification. The interior life must be simplified before it can be deepened. The desert accomplishes this by removing alternatives. It reduces negotiation. It limits escape routes. It creates the conditions for obedience to become possible without constant argument. This is why the desert always comes before mission. A heart that has not been trained in restraint will be governed by impulse, affirmation, or comfort. A heart trained in

the desert learns how to remain oriented towards God when conditions are unfavorable, and that capacity cannot be learned in abundance. It is learned in lack. This is the posture required to enter Lent well. Don't expect momentum. Don't expect consolation. And don't expect immediate clarity. Expect formation. Expect resistance to surface and attachments to be challenged. Expect the temptation "to reinterpret the season once it becomes uncomfortable. And remain anyway, because the desert is not where God breaks the soul, but it's where he prepares it. The desert is where God trains the heart before he uses it. Once the desert is entered correctly, the primary temptation is not despair. It's mismanagement.

### **Desert's Core Demands**

Most people don't try to abandon Lent outright. Instead, they try to almost control it. So they attempt to stabilize the discomfort, interpret it away, or replace it with something more manageable. The desert is tolerated only as long as it remains intelligible and emotionally regulated. But the desert does not function that way. The desert requires consent without control, which is harder to even say out loud, much less practice. This is the most difficult demand of the season of Lent, not because control is overtly sinful, but because it feels responsible. The instinct to manage outcomes and interpret progress and monitor effectiveness is deeply ingrained. The desert interrupts that instinct by refusing to provide clear feedback.

In ordinary life, effort is usually rewarded with visible efforts. The desert breaks that equation. Faithfulness is no longer reinforced by affirmation, clarity, or emotional response, and the soul is asked to remain without evidence. This is not inefficiency. This is training. The desert teaches the soul how to obey without negotiation. Negotiation is one of the most subtle ways resistance expresses itself. The soul doesn't refuse the discipline. It reframes it. It looks for adjustments that preserve comfort while retaining the appearance of fidelity. The desert exposes this tendency by narrowing options. This is why Lent feels restrictive even when the practices are modest. Restriction is not the goal. Limitation is the method. The desert limits alternatives so that the soul can no longer bypass obedience through substitution.

When distractions are removed, when comforts are reduced, when explanations no longer satisfy, the soul must choose whether it will remain oriented toward God or retreat into management. Remaining requires patience, but not the modern notion of patience as emotional calm. It requires endurance rooted in truth, the willingness to continue without improvement in how things feel. The desert also requires silence. I hate silence, but not merely the absence of noise, but the suspension of constant self-commentary. Many people narrate their spiritual lives internally. We track progress, we interpret setbacks, and we evaluate effectiveness. The desert interrupts this narration. Without commentary, the soul becomes aware of how often it relies on interpretation rather than trust. Silence exposes this reliance and it removes the buffer of explanation and leaves only presence. This is why silence often feels unproductive. It's not unproductive. It's unmanageable to us.

The desert also requires acceptance of incompleteness. Lent does not resolve everything it exposes. The desert reveals disorder without immediately correcting it, and this can feel really unsettling to us. The instinct is to fix what's been uncovered. The desert forbids this impulse. It teaches the soul to carry unresolved awareness without forcing closure, and this is essential formation. A soul that can't tolerate incompleteness will always seek premature resolution, and that tendency produces shallow conversion. The desert deepens conversion by refusing to hurry it.

Staying in the desert, therefore, doesn't mean understanding it. It means submitting to its structure. Remaining faithful when prayer feels thin, maintaining discipline when desire resists, continuing practices without reinterpretation. This fidelity is active consent. The desert trains the soul to act without interior reinforcement, and that capacity is rare, but it's also necessary because a soul that can only obey when it's supported will not endure any pressure. A soul that has learned to remain faithful without support becomes stable. This is why the desert is not an emotional experience but instead a moral one. The desert asks a single question repeated daily in different forms. Will you remain oriented toward God when nothing else is propping you up? That question is not answered by reflection. It's answered by staying, which brings us to my next consideration. If staying in the desert requires consent without control, patience without feedback, and fidelity without explanation, what actually changes in the soul over time?

### **Desert's Structural Impact**

The desert doesn't change the soul quickly. It changes it structurally, and it's uncomfortable. But this is the mistake that most of us make when evaluating whether the desert is actually "working." We look for emotional indicators, consolation, peace, insight, or a sense of progress, right? The desert offers none of these things reliably because it's not operating at the level of experience, it's operating at the level of orientation.

What the desert produces first is interior simplification. So in ordinary life, the soul is complex, not because it's deep, but because it's divided. We have competing desires, we have layered motivations. The desert doesn't resolve these divisions immediately, but it limits them. And by removing options, it reduces interior noise. Over time, fewer things compete for dominance, and it's not because everything's been solved, but because they've been weakened. So desire loses some of its urgency, and impulse loses some of its authority. So the soul becomes less crowded. This simplification is rarely felt as relief, and it actually feels like exposure. Without distraction, the soul becomes aware of how much effort was previously spent managing itself. That management falls away in the desert, and what replaces it isn't calm, but clarity. But it's clarity without commentary.

The second thing the desert produces is non-reactivity. Not indifference and not numbness, but non-reactivity. So the soul stops responding immediately to every interior movement. Desire arises, but it no longer dictates your action. Resistance appears, but it no longer determines your direction. The gap between impulse and response widens. And that widening is crucial, because freedom does not emerge when desire disappears. It emerges when desire no longer rules you. The desert creates the conditions for this by requiring repeated acts of obedience without reinforcement. So over time, the will stops negotiating with every single impulse. It simply chooses. And this is why the desert feels monotonous. Monotony is not failure. It's stabilization. When nothing dramatic is happening, that's when you know habits are forming. And when habits form, reaction weakens. And when reaction weakens, freedom increases.

The third thing the desert produces is availability. Availability is the capacity to respond without preconditions. It's the opposite of conditional obedience. In ordinary life, obedience is often contingent. If it feels meaningful, if it feels effective, if it produces results, that's when we're obedient. The desert strips away these conditions. When the soul remains faithful without immediate clarity or immediate reward, it learns how to act from truth rather than outcome. This is spiritual maturity. Availability is what allows the soul to be used rather than consulted. This is why the desert always precedes mission. A soul that still requires reassurance cannot be sent

reliably. A soul that must feel aligned before it acts will hesitate under pressure. The desert trains the soul to move without waiting for alignment.

The fourth thing the desert produces is resistance to illusion. Illusion thrives on excess. Excess information and excess stimulation and excess interpretation. The desert reduces all of this, and what remains is bare obedience. Over time, the soul becomes less impressed by substitutes, less convinced by explanations, less dependent on interior narratives, and this is sobriety. Sobriety allows the soul to recognize what actually matters and ignore what doesn't matter. This is why the desert doesn't feel productive, because productivity is an illusion the desert dismantles. Desert doesn't produce measurable results. It produces capacity, capacity to remain, to stay faithful, to choose, and to respond without delay. These capacities can't be rushed. They can't be manufactured. They can only be formed through experience and consent over time.

This is also why leaving the desert too early is costly. When discomfort is removed prematurely, that formation remains incomplete. So the soul regains its former support without having gained the strength that deprivation was meant to produce. The desert's work is not harsh, but it is precise, and it cannot be bypassed. So what emerges from the desert is not intensity, but readiness. And readiness doesn't announce itself. It becomes visible only when the soul is tested. And this is the final truth the desert teaches. The desert is not where the soul is used. It's where the soul is made usable, which brings us to the final movement.

### **Exiting with Intention**

“If the desert produces readiness, rather than experience, how does one leave it without undoing what it formed? So the desert is not meant to be permanent, but it is meant to be decisive. What determines whether the desert actually prepares the soul is not how long it lasts, but how it is exited. Leaving the desert too quickly or leaving it incorrectly can undo that very formation that it was meant to produce. This is why the church doesn't treat Lent as a self-contained spiritual experience. It is a threshold. What is formed here is meant to be carried forward, not abandoned, once the season ends. The primary temptation at the end of the desert is not indulgence. It's amnesia. The soul forgets what was actually revealed when all of these supports were removed. It forgets what governed attention when our noise was reduced. It forgets how much less was actually needed to remain faithful to God. Former habits return, and it's not because we choose them deliberately again but because they're familiar. So this is why the desert has to be exited with intention.

What the desert gives is not answers. It's clarity. It reveals what was “unnecessary, what we were using as compensation, and what quietly weakened our freedom. That clarity is fragile. If it is not protected, it is quickly replaced by former patterns of management. The goal here is not to preserve the deprivation that we felt in the desert. It's to preserve orientation. The desert simplifies our interior life. Leaving it well means resisting the urge to immediately reintroduce complexity. Our practices may relax, but our posture should not. Silence may shorten, but attention should not scatter. Discipline may soften, but obedience should remain non-negotiable. This is how formation endures.

The measure of whether the desert has done its work is not how one feels upon leaving it, but how one responds afterwards. Does the soul return immediately to distraction? Does resistance regain its voice? Does obedience once again require negotiation? Or has something shifted? The desert is successful when the soul no longer needs constant reinforcement to remain

faithful, when desire still arises but no longer dictates, when silence is less threatening, and when obedience feels less dramatic and more ordinary. This is readiness. Readiness is not enthusiasm. It's availability, the ability to respond without requiring ideal conditions, the capacity to remain oriented toward God when circumstances are unremarkable or difficult. This is why the desert always precedes mission. A soul that has not passed through the desert will depend on affirmation, clarity, or comfort. A soul that has passed through it can act without them. That difference is not visible immediately, but it's revealed under pressure.

So as Lent begins, the invitation is therefore not to endure the desert, but to consent to it. Not to interpret it constantly, but to live it honestly. Not to rush towards the resolution, but to allow formation to complete its work. Do not measure this season by how it feels. Do not evaluate it by productivity. And do not attempt to manage its outcomes. Remain. Remain when prayer feels thin. Remain when discipline feels ordinary. Remain when resistance argues quietly. Because the desert is not where the soul proves itself. It's where the soul is made ready. And readiness is what allows God to entrust more than comfort ever could.

That is how Lent is entered well.