

40 DAYS OF DECREASE

WELCOME

Welcome! This tool's purpose is to prompt honest personal reflection and engaging discussion as you journey on your own or with a group through *40 Days of Decrease*.

If your use of *40 Days of Decrease* is paralleling Lent 2021 and following the liturgical calendar, begin *Day One* on Ash Wednesday (February 17) and do six of the forty days each week, skipping Sundays for Sabbath. If you plan to begin exactly 40 days before Easter, you can start on Monday, February 22. But don't feel bound to specific dates - God knows your heart and you can begin anytime.

Inside this free download you'll find a chart for all 40 days of fasts and the companion Scripture readings. After the charts is a sampler of the first six days from the book, *40 Days of Decrease*. Due to copyright, we cannot give away the entire book but we invite you to purchase it from your favorite local retailer, Christian bookseller, or online at Store.FaithGateway.com.

At the end of the sampler are additional bonus questions designed to help groups with discussion and process their *40 Days of Decrease* journey with intentionality. Additional resources are available to churches, including six sermon outlines, at www.40fasts.com or on Alicia Britt Chole's site: www.aliciachole.com. Alicia is also hosting a Facebook Group for anyone on this journey - look for *2021 Lent- 40 Days of Decrease* in the public groups.

We are so grateful you have downloaded this resource. Many will find great freedom and healing as *40 Days of Decrease* mentors us in re-centering and deepening our spiritual lives.

May we all honor sacred decrease for the love of God.

40 DAYS OF DECREASE

At a Glance Summary

Day	Reading Theme	Heart Fast	Featured Quote	Journaling Scripture
1	Our ache to live awed by Christ's Resurrection	Lent as Project	Peterson, Coe	Jn 12:1-11
2	Lent as a much-needed mentor	Regrets	Abba Theodore of Scetis	Jn 12:12-19
3	John the Baptist on sacred decrease	Collecting Praise	John of the Cross	Jn 12:20-28
4	John the Baptist on uncertainty	Artificial Light	Dillard	Jn 12:29-36
5	Questions as a friend of faith	Tidy Faith	Lewis	Jn 12:37-43
6	Jesus' response to John the Baptist's death	Speeding Past Sorrow	Spurgeon	Jn 12:44-50
7	Jesus' call to take up your cross and die	A Meal	Bonhoeffer	Jn 13:1-7
8	The problem with miracles	Fixing It	Coe	Jn 13:8-17
9	When we don't understand God's voice	Rationalism	Yancey	Jn 13:18-30
10	How the unknown reveals our defaults	Avoidance	May	Jn 13:31-36
11	Bartimaeus' moment	Religious Profiling	The Lenten Tridion	Jn 14:1-14
12	Zacchaeus and interconnectedness	Isolation	Martin Luther King, Jr.	Jn 14:15-22
13	Jesus' anointing for burial	Stinginess	Spanish poet	Jn 14:23-31
14	Jesus' response to the crowds' praise	Spectatorship	Andrew of Crete	Jn 15:1-17
15	Lessons from Jesus on vulnerability	Spiritual Self-Protection	May	Jn 15:18-16:4
16	When Jesus grieved	Halos	Yancey	Jn 16:5-16
17	When Jesus cleansed the courts	Apathy	Nouwen	Jn 16:17-33
18	When Jesus cursed a fig tree	Appearances	Traditional Orthodox hymn	Jn 17:1-5
19	When Jesus closed a question	Revisionism	Fryling	Jn 17:6-19
20	When Jesus rebuked the leadership	Spectatorship	Leavened Bread	Jn 17:20-26

A Different Kind of Hunger. A Different Kind of Fast.

40 DAYS OF DECREASE

<i>Day</i>	<i>Reading Theme</i>	<i>Heart Fast</i>	<i>Featured Quote</i>	<i>Journaling Scripture</i>
21	When Jesus felt troubled	Premature Resolution	Yancey	Jn 18:1-11
22	God's sound from heaven	Sound	Hunter	Jn 18:12-14
23	Possible purposes of the foot-washing	Armchair Jesus	Nouwen	Jn 18:15-18
24	John 14:31 and the Crux	Neutrality	Sweet	Jn 18:19-24
25	Jesus' overwhelming sorrow	Denial	Bonhoeffer	Jn 18:25-27
26	The disciples' sorrow	Comparison	Merton	Jn 18:28-32
27	A co-worker's betrayal	Discontentment	Laubach	Jn 18:33-40
28	Jesus' voluntarily restricted freedom	Formulas	MacDonald	Jn 19:1-6
29	The misrepresentation of Jesus	Intimidation	Merton	Jn 19:7-16
30	Jesus' friend's failure—Peter's denial	Self-Confidence	Keating	Jn 19:17-27
31	The violent mockery of Jesus	Mocking Jesus	Yancey	Jn 19:28-37
32	Jesus' final rejection	Addition	Spurgeon	Jn 19:38-42
<i>Day</i>	<i>Reading Theme</i>	<i>Heart Fast</i>	<i>Featured Quote</i>	<i>Journaling Scripture</i>
33	Jesus' crucifixion	Willful Sin	Yancey	Jn 20:1-9
34	The 7 groups surrounding Jesus, part 1	Criticism	Francis of Assisi	Jn 20:10-18
35	The 7 groups surrounding Jesus, part 2	God-As-Job	Gregory of Nazianzus	Jn 20:19-23
36	Joseph of Arimathea's gift	Withholding	Azevedo	Jn 20:24-31
37	Jesus' time in the tomb	Your Voice	Abba Doulas	Jn 21:1-9
38	The disciple's response to loss	Escapism	Swoboda	Jn 21:10-14
39	At the empty tomb	Guarding Tombs	Saint John Chrysostom	Jn 21:15-19
40	Seeing Jesus	Fasting	Chesterton	Jn 21:20-25

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Sampler

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Alicia Britt Chole



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PROLOGUE

THE GRAND REDUCTION

The sabbatical started more suddenly and violently than anticipated. A high fever, a few scans, multiple masses, possibly a lethal abscess . . . the specialists convened, conferred, counseled me to cancel all engagements, and began cutting.

The reduction had begun.

Waking from surgery, my first memory was seeing a dear friend place a hand over her mouth. Later she told me, “I’d never seen anyone that color, alive.” The masses, thankfully, were all benign. But my body did not respond well to the invasion. The area’s organs went into hibernation and for the first time in my life, I became familiar with breathtaking *pain*.

The experience redefined that word for me. It hurt to be awake. It hurt to see my children’s fear. It hurt to hear, “We don’t know why.” In time, it would even hurt to hope. Reductions, it seems, have blurry release dates. Days stacked upon one another in vain like whisper-thin blankets with no warmth to offer. Though technology blinked, beeped, and buzzed noisily around me, the organs slept on. This healing simply would not be hurried. The wound was evidently too great to risk haste.

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After eight days in the hospital, the doctors sent me home. “At this point, I give you a fifty-fifty chance that the organs will come back online,” the specialist offered. With those words, my entire recovery-time “to do” list vaporized in the desert heat of pain. All I could do was sit and be loved—a need that my family filled extravagantly. Little did I know that the pain was under assignment: it was making room in my life for another operation well beyond the reach of any surgeon’s scalpel.

I would not trade that desert of pain for the world.

Deserts unclutter the soul. The hot desert sun vaporizes all manner of luxuries. Then the cold, shelterless nights expose the essential guts of life. I needed to eat, to sleep, to be protected, and to not be alone. Lent had come half a year early. God asked me to fast mental and physical strength. He invited me into holy weakness.

I found Jesus there.

We often think of Jesus’ fast beginning when He stepped into the Judean wilderness. But the fast actually began three decades earlier when the Glory of heaven was wrapped in plain paper and given as a gift to mankind.

The Grand Reduction had begun.

Jesus fasted omnipresence and clothed Himself with flesh. He fasted being worshiped by angels and accepted the disregard of man. He fasted the Voice that birthed planets and submitted to the silence of thirty hidden years:

How must it have felt—knowing he had the power to heal—to have to walk past children suffering with leprosy? What would it have been like—knowing that his conception was miraculous—to be unable to defend his mother when others whispered about her past? And how agonizing would it be—when his Word could one day raise the dead to life again—to stand by while those he loved (perhaps even Joseph his father) died?¹

We are duly thankful, challenged, and inspired by Jesus' forty-day fast from food in the Judean wilderness. Perhaps we should likewise be grateful, awed, and humbled by His thirty-year fast from praise, power, and potential in Nazareth.

It takes a great deal of strength to choose weakness.

Jesus chose voluntarily. I did not possess the courage or wisdom to volunteer. So God, for the sake of my soul, took me there involuntarily. His drafts are merciful indeed.

When He calls us to fast strength—when He drafts us into decrease—God's purposes are clear:

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (Deuteronomy 8:2–3)

To humble us, to test us, to know what is in our hearts . . . such is the sifting power of helplessness. In our daily lives, we may prefer self-reliance. But perhaps utter dependence is the truer friend of our souls.

Two weeks past the surgery, I picked up my journal and wrote, "I used to think I could do just about anything. Now I know I can't." Through the fasting of strength, God was "causing me to hunger." Helplessness exposed the contents of my heart. God began to feed me.

As He nourished me, my eyes were opened to see an invisible danger that had been growing within me. Prior to surgery, God was not absent. The challenge was that self was so very present. Though I had purposed to live simply, clutter was collecting around my faith. I was becoming

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more vulnerable to sin, but sin of a slightly different strain than in earlier years.

We all guard against sins of commission and we are vigilant toward sins of omission. But achievements—even in small doses—can make us vulnerable to sins of *addition*: adding niceties and luxuries to our list of basic needs, adding imaginations onto the strong back of vision, adding self-satisfaction to the purity of peace.

Jesus emerged from His thirty-year fast armored to resist such sins of addition. He walked into the Judean desert and with each “It is written” affirmed the sacredness of decrease. He walked out of the Judean desert and with each step fulfilled His calling without compromise. Jesus lived a truly uncluttered life and died a focused, eternally fruitful death. How I long to follow His example.

Years later, the pain from that surgery has, thankfully, disappeared. The fruit of pain’s assignment in my soul has, thankfully, remained. My desert decrease was divine. May this season of preparation provide us the opportunity to pause and be grateful for reductions. Ultimately we are grateful for the Grand Reduction, when Jesus came from heaven to earth and from earth to the cross. But we can also be thankful for the lesser reductions, when God drafts us into deserts.

Throughout our collective *40 Days of Decrease*, let us rest assured that when Father God calls us to fast increase, decrease will purify our souls.

INTRODUCTION

What might be the fruit of fasting stinginess? What would happen if our churches fasted spectatorship? What might occur if our families fasted accumulation? What could change if our offices fasted revisionism? What might erupt if a new generation fasted escapism? Such fasts could trigger a spiritual revolution.

40 Days of Decrease guides readers through a study of Jesus' uncommon and uncomfortable call to abandon the world's illusions, embrace His kingdom's realities, and journey cross-ward and beyond. Designed to prepare our hearts for Easter, *40 Days of Decrease* can also be experienced by those who desire to honor Christ's resurrection year-round. A life-engaging guide for communities and individuals, each day of *40 Days of Decrease* features a devotional based upon Jesus' life, guidance for reflection, suggested (and occasionally surprising) daily fasts, an inspiring quote for prayerful meditation, an optional and somewhat academic sidebar chronicling the historical development, practices, and images of Lent, and a suggested Scripture reading with journaling space.

As you begin your experience, consider setting aside thirty minutes or an hour every morning to read, reflect, and prepare your heart for that

INTRODUCTION

day's fast. Though each fast could theme an entire week or month, in *40 Days of Decrease* I offer forty different fasts in the hope that collectively they will prepare us to be duly awed by Christ's resurrection by being duly available to daily crucifixion. With carefully selected quotes from Jesus-centric traditions and readings crafted to engage our modern minds with the most disenchanting days of the first disciples' lives, *40 Days of Decrease* seeks to reintroduce Lent as a wise mentor that encourages us to reframe unanswered questions, darker seasons, and spiritual disillusionment as the shedding of earthly illusions and the gaining of God's reality.

In Protestant and Catholic traditions, the counting of Lent's forty days excludes Sundays.¹ Likewise, *40 Days of Decrease* offers readings and exercises exclusive of Sundays for six days a week, beginning with Ash Wednesday.² As we experience this sacred season and the holiness of loss and less in Jesus' journey cross-ward, may our hearts open vulnerably to a greater commitment to love and be loved by the Savior. For, in the words of Orthodox Reverend Alexander Schmemmann, "The purpose of Lent is not to force on us a few formal obligations, but to 'soften' our heart so that it may open itself to the realities of the spirit, to experience the hidden 'thirst and hunger' for communion with God."³

Let such softening begin!

DAY ONE

We ache deep within to meaningfully honor Christ's resurrection. Yet, in practice, this focal point in the liturgical calendar is often a celebration of *public holiday* more than it is of *humanity's hope*. At day's end, we fall asleep well fed and perhaps even grateful, yet still somehow something short of *awed*. Inspired by the church's ancient tradition of Lent, we then add discipline to the celebration, voluntarily adopting a form of temporary discomfort to self with the intention of bringing to mind the discomfort of the cross (which is unspeakable). And still, our twenty-first-century discomfort remains mild and our first-century remembrance remains meager.

Though what is specifically "given up for Lent" shifts from generation to generation, the broad categories of entertainment, pleasure, and food have remained constant through the centuries. Caffeine, chocolate, designer coffee, carbs, and social media currently rank among the more popular offerings. In an age suffocating in self, any willful fast from what much of the planet would deem a luxury is to be commended. However,

"Christian spirituality is not a life project for becoming a better person."

—EUGENE
PETERSON¹

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since commendation cannot be confused with preparation, I must ask: can such polite fasts alone truly prepare us to be awed by Christ's resurrection?

In English, the Latin *Mortem tuam annuntiámus, Dómine, et tuam resurrectionem confitémur, donec vénias* is translated as, "Your death we proclaim, Lord, and your resurrection we confess, until you come."² This generation is, perhaps, more familiar with the popular adaption:

Christ has died.
Christ has risen.
Christ will come again.³

Indeed. So, are we awed?

God seems more interested in what we are becoming than in what we are giving up. As David sang,

You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise. (Psalm 51:16–17)

Faith, in general, is less about the sacrifice of stuff and more about the surrender of our souls. Lent, in kind, is less about well-mannered denials and more about thinning our lives in order to thicken our communion with God.

Decrease is holy only when its destination is love.

Reflection

Reflect upon your personal preparation for Easter to date. Recall any knowledge of the church's historical Lenten practices. If this is not your

first experience, in what ways have you thinned your life in order to thicken your communion with God in previous seasons?

Now consider a key question: why are you setting aside forty days to honor Jesus' death and resurrection this year?

Today's Fast: Lent As Project

Lent is often, and understandably, described with project language. The season has a starting date, an ending date, and clear, quantifiable goals “to accomplish” in between. After Easter, consequently, we evaluate Lent with project language. We “did okay” or “only made it two weeks” or “kept our commitment” or “totally failed.”

Whether engaging this experience prior to Easter, or at another time during the year, from day one, I invite you to consider Lent as less of a project and more of a sojourn. A sojourn is a “temporary stay at a place.”⁴ And a “stay” is about presence, not productivity. For the next forty days, fast measuring your “success” statistically—that is, resist calculating how often you keep your commitment to do without meat or sugar or your favorite shows. Instead, invest your energy in seeking to remain present to the sacred history of Jesus' walk to the cross. With each reading, dust off your childhood imagination and “stay” in each story. Observe Jesus' response to John's death. Imagine yourself as one of the disciples trying in vain to hush blind Bartimaeus. Throw your only cloak under the colt's hooves as Jesus enters Jerusalem. Taste the mounting tension as Jesus offends leaders with parables. Hear Jesus predict Peter's denial.

“Spiritual disciplines do not transform, they only become relational opportunities to open the heart to the Spirit who transforms.”

—JOHN H. COE⁵

Fast Lent as project and enter Lent as experience, as a sojourn with your Savior.

On Lent

“What is your commitment this year, Mommy?” my daughter inquired with discerning eyes. The previous year, we both made commitments to honor the poor. Keona did what she loved and baked to raise funds for children in need. I devoted the entire year to simplicity, choosing to abstain from spending money on adding anything physical to my personal life—from shampoo to shoes. “This year I am fasting sugar and desserts,” I replied. Then Keona offered one word that connected my then-ten-year-old with the wisest of ancient thinkers: “Why?”

Why, indeed.

My annual fasts, seasonal forty-day fasts, and weekly twelve- to twenty-four-hour fasts are more love offerings than disciplines, though it certainly requires discipline to maintain them. In short, I ache. I ache for my Bridegroom. I ache to live every waking moment conscious of His presence. I ache to live aware of His past and present suffering. I ache to live unattached to what man counts and measures. In many ways, all fasts are Lenten experiences, and as with the history of Lent, it is difficult for me to discern which came first: the discipline of fasting or the journey of Lent. Did they grow up together? Did one mature into the other? Are they two distinct experiences that fused over time? These are the questions that, in part, make the early origins of Lent difficult to discern.

For daily readings, I have chosen to offer small passages (beginning with Jesus’ anointing at Bethany) from the gospel of John. Savor these sentences like a perfect cup of coffee or chunk of chocolate. Place yourself in the story and let the words melt in your mind. Then journal your reflections about the day.⁶

Today's Reading: John 12:1–11

DAY TWO

Christian spirituality, the contemplative life, is not about us. It is about God. The great weakness of American spirituality is that it is all about us: fulfilling our potential, getting the blessings of God, expanding our influence, finding our gifts, getting a handle on principles by which we can get an edge over the competition. The more there is of us, the less there is of God.

—EUGENE PETERSON¹

Though uttered with reference to his (and my) culture, Eugene Peterson's insight has global relevance, for it reveals the church's spiritualization of an insatiable narcissism. Self cannot satisfy self, no matter how frequently it feasts. Lent is a much-needed mentor in an age obsessed with visible, measurable, manageable, and tweetable increase, for it invites us to walk with Jesus and His disciples through darker seasons that we would rather avoid: grief, conflict, misunderstanding,

betrayal, restriction, rejection, and pain. Then Easter leads us in celebration of salvation as the stunningly satisfying fruit of Jesus' sacred decrease. A thoughtful Lenten journey directly confronts our modern obsession with increase and introduces us to unexpected friends of spiritual formation.

At least since the Council of Nicea in AD 325, Lent has been a forty-day, communal focus upon the most disillusioning season of the first disciples' lives. Jesus, having confessed to be the Messiah, prophesies

"A thought comes to me that troubles me and gives me no rest. It is not strong enough to make me act; it only hinders my progress toward virtue. A vigilant man would shake it off and arise for prayer."

—ABBA THEODORE OF
SCETIS (C. 4TH CENTURY)²

His soon-coming death. Jesus, who commands winds and waves, allows Himself to be arrested. Jesus, who bests the brightest Pharisees and Sadducees, refuses to defend Himself when falsely accused. Jesus, who raised others from the dead, chooses not to save Himself.

In Jesus' journey cross-ward, the disciples' illusions of what Jesus could and should do with His power were shattered by the reality of what Jesus actually did with His power, and their personal illusions of commitment-unto-death were shattered by the reality of fear-inspired self-protection. Meditating upon Jesus' suffering and the disciples' disillusionment creates a framework within which we can spiritually process our own loss of illusions and gaining of realities. This is critical, because in the words of Dr. Dan B. Allender and Dr. Tremper Longman III, "reality is where we meet God."³ Therefore, as Jesuit Robert F. Taft eloquently said, through Lent let us:

Enter into the desert of our hearts where, removed from side issues, we can face what we are, and in compunction, *penthos*, over that reality, let us . . . [die] to self so that we may live for others, as we make vigil before the coming of the Lord.⁴

Reflection

French monk Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) spoke of “four degrees of love” in his little book, *On the Love of God*: love of self for self’s sake, love of God for self’s sake, love of God for God’s sake, and love of self for God’s sake.⁵ In light of Eugene Peterson’s quote that began today’s reading, ponder the difference between Clairvaux’s first and fourth degrees of love.

Today’s Fast: Regrets

Approaching a fresh endeavor can be both energizing and stressful. New is inspiring. New is enlightening. And new is, oddly enough, a reminder of what is now old. When fresh beginnings are stalked by the memories of stale endings, a sickly substance can steal our strength: regret. Regret empties anticipation, flattens dreams, and suffocates hope, because regret is a form of self-punishment. Whereas hindsight helps us learn from the past, regret beats us up with the past.

So for one entire day (or go for forty), I invite you to fast regret. Do not feed it. Do not give it space. Let it go: God’s mercies are “new every morning” (Lamentations 3:23). And meditate on Jesus’ glorious promise from Revelation 21:5: “I am making everything new!”

On Lent

Before us lies a two-thousand-year-old heirloom quilt. Some portions are missing. They have slipped into the dark chasm of lost history, leaving nothing but space and speculation. Other portions are obviously unoriginal. They bear the loving evidence of a repatching, a rezoning, an offering of newer fabric sewn by less ancient hands.

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Much work has been done by many scholars to reconstruct what is now absent, to track the origin of what remains, to trace the source of each worn, faith-sewn thread back to its beginnings. However, beginnings are mysterious things: part breath, part hope, part fumble, part grace. Roots are, historically, perhaps the most humble of God’s creations on earth. They require neither acknowledgment nor praise. Their reward is reaped when the living stand upon them and reach for the fruit the roots made possible. Such is the story of Lent. The weighty beauty of this heirloom rests not in its satisfyingly discernible beginning, but in the warmth of soul it still offers to communities and individuals today.

Today’s Reading: John 12:12–19

DAY THREE

He must become greater; I must become less.

—JOHN 3:30

Decrease is a spiritual necessity. John the Baptist was the first among Jesus' followers to grasp its countercultural power. "Less is more" is a popular simplicity mantra in our day. But John's understanding of "less is more" was spiritually profound. Gabriel had announced John's life-calling to Zechariah before John was even conceived:

John was the one who, "in the spirit and power of Elijah . . . [would] make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17). In many ways, John lived a Lenten lifestyle 365 days a year. His diet was narrow, his possessions were minimal, and his focus was eternal. But decrease for John was less about assets and more about attention. His longing was to draw his generation's attention and allegiance to the

"[The dark night of the soul] strengthens and purifies the love that is of God, and takes away and destroys the other."

—JOHN OF THE
CROSS (1542–1591)¹

Messiah. From John's perspective, the true value of people seeing him was that people would then be positioned to see through him and gaze at Jesus. By willingly decreasing, John increased others' view of the Savior.

Attention is not innately evil. It becomes evil when used as a self-serving end instead of a God-serving means. Those who steward attention as means and not end stand tall and serve strong, knowing that all gifts come from God and can therefore draw attention to God. Praise slides off such souls like water off a window² into a cup that is offered to God alone. Surrounded by swelling crowds, John directed his fans to Jesus.

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel." (John 1:29–31)

John decreased so others could see the Lamb. John decreased so others could follow the One who preceded and surpassed him (John 1:30). John decreased so that the Messiah would be revealed in John's lifetime. May our decrease likewise increase our generation's view of Jesus.

Reflection

In his day, a psalmist sang: "Not to us, LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness" (Psalm 115:1). Think of models in your lifetime of individuals who—like the psalmist in the Old Testament and John the Baptist in the New Testament—used the attention they received to increase others' view of God. Then reflect on ways that you are following (or in the future can follow) their example.

Today's Fast: Collecting Praise

Biographer Carole C. Carlson said of Corrie Ten Boom:

Her remarkable ministry became known to millions through both the book and movie version of *The Hiding Place*. She never looked at fame as being the culmination of personal triumph. To Corrie it was simply a result of God's plans. Her way of handling adulation was to take each compliment as a flower, and then gather them all in a bouquet and give them back to Jesus by saying, "Here Lord, they belong to You."³

Make an effort today to follow Corrie's example and fast collecting praise. The key to this fast is redirection, not deflection. Whereas deflection discounts and rejects praise, redirection stewards and then deposits praise at the feet of the One to whom it is due. Sincerely receive any affirmation today without apology and then tonight, offer Jesus a bouquet of praise. If at day's end you find your intended bouquet sparse, fill it in with gratitude for God's work in your life.

On Lent

The etymology of the word *Lent* enjoys an easy consensus among scholars. In earlier times, the English word *Lent* carried the meaning of "springtime." As *The Lenten Triodion* poetically states, "Lent signifies not winter but spring, not darkness but light, not death but renewed vitality."⁴ According to Fr. William P. Saunders, professor of catechetics and theology at Christendom's Notre Dame Graduate School in Alexandria, the Anglo-Saxon word *lectentid* "literally means not only 'springtide' but also was the word for 'March,' the month in which the majority of Lent falls."⁵ In Greek, *Lent* is *tessarakosti*, and in Latin,

40 DAYS OF DECREASE

quadagesima, both of which emphasize the number forty, a number rich in biblical significance.

In origin, however, Lent’s history is far less obvious. Fifty years ago, the history of Lent could have been penned with greater certainty . . . and with greater error. Scholars affirm that we simply know less than we used to about Lent. Catholic scholar Nicholas V. Russo explains that, “today the history of Lent’s origins is far less certain because many of the suppositions upon which the standard theory rested have been cast into doubt.”⁶

Today’s Reading: John 12:20–28

DAY FOUR

Whereas decreasing in attention is evident at the beginning of John's public ministry, decreasing in confidence is evident toward the end. The latter is infinitely more trying than the former. When mumbler came to John asking how he could have possibly overlooked requiring the new guy to sign a non-compete clause, John's Jordan River proclamation was a manifesto:

The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.
(John 3:29)

John refused to compete with Jesus. Instead of collecting attention, John directed attention back to the Bridegroom. We heard no hesitation in John's voice from the Jordan: Jesus was the One he had been waiting for. However, a year later John's voice from prison sounded less certain. Surrounded by paid guards instead of volunteer crowds, John sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matthew 11:3).

Only Jesus and John know what fully prompted John's question. But perhaps Jesus' response offers us a glimpse into the source of John's uncertainty. After reminding John (via the witness of John's disciples) of His ministry of healing and hope, Jesus said, "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me" (Matthew 11:6). Initially, this statement seems oddly out of place following a mention of Messiah-endorsing miracles. Yet

"God needs nothing, asks nothing, and demands nothing, like the stars. It is life with God which demands these things. . . . You do not have to sit outside in the dark. If, however, you want to look at the stars, you will find that the darkness is necessary. But the stars neither require nor demand it."

—ANNIE DILLARD¹

somehow Jesus' actions were not matching John's expectations. And that distance between what John thought Jesus would do and what Jesus actually did was straining John's certainty of who Jesus was. In this sense, Lent came early for John. He experienced from prison what the first disciples later would experience throughout Jesus' Passion, and what we still ponder two millennia later.

Jesus' ways are often unexpected. Jesus' words can seem oddly out of place. From within prisons of pain or persecution, injustice or accusation, limitations or unmet longings, we, too, can wonder if Jesus is truly who we thought He was. A key invitation of our spiritual journeys is to be emotionally honest about our uncertainties. Questions such as the one asked by John are signs of a living, growing, active faith, not evidence of a dying one. Jesus' calm response to John echoes to us today: "Recall what I have done in the past. Accept me as the Great I Am of your future."

Reflection

Has the distance between what you thought Jesus would do and what Jesus actually did ever caused tremors of uncertainty in your soul? How did you

respond to the uncertainty? Today, follow John's example: ask Jesus frank questions, and then wait for His response.

Today's Fast: Artificial Light

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, there is a moving moment on Cheese-fare Sunday² in which all lights in the church are extinguished. In the subsequent darkness, the community begins to "wander forty days through the desert of Lent."³ Picture John the Baptist in prison. Imagine what he might have seen, heard, and felt. Then unplug from the power grid and read Hebrews 11 aloud by candlelight.

On Lent

Several ancient pre-Nicene texts are consistently referenced by Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant scholars alike in the search for the origins of Lent. In Table 1, I have attempted to list and organize these texts by approximate dates and key phrases.

TABLE 1. PRE-NICENE TEXTS REFERENCED IN SCHOLARSHIP REGARDING THE ORIGIN OF LENT

In between the "one day," "two days," or "forty hours" seen in the *Apostolic Tradition*,⁶ Tertullian,⁷ and Irenaeus and the "forty days" of *Canon 1 of St. Peter*,⁸ *Canons of Hippolytus*,⁹ and Origen,¹⁰ Dionysius of Alexandria¹¹ and the *Didascalia Apostolorum* refer to a six-day "fast in the days of Pascha from the second day of the week."¹² At first glance, then, ancient pre-Nicene texts speak of a one- to two-day, or forty-hour, fast immediately preceding Resurrection Sunday; a six-day pre-paschal fast; and fasts of forty days.

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APPROXIMATE DATES	ANCIENT WORK OR AUTHOR	KEY CONCEPTS AND PHRASES
c. 120–c. 202	St. Irenaeus of Lyons (Gaul)	fast, variety, one day or two, forty hours
c. 150–c. 212	Tertullian (North Africa), <i>Concerning Baptism</i> 19; <i>On the Fasts</i> 2, 13–14 (<i>Patrologia Latina</i>) ii, 956, 971–974.	one day, forty hours
2nd C	Didache	fast, baptism, preparation for the sacrament ⁴
2nd C	Justin Martyr in First Apology, 61	fasting, baptismal candidates ⁵
c. 185–c. 254	Origen, <i>Homilies on Leviticus</i> 10.2:5–6	forty days, fasting
c. 215 (if authored by Hippolytus)	<i>Apostolic Tradition</i> 2, 30, 2–9; 21, 1–5	final examination and preparation in the days before Baptism (ch. 20), fasting (ch. 23), fasting at Easter (ch. 33)
50 years after Origen?	<i>Canons of Hippolytus</i>	fast, the forty, God fasted on our behalf
d. 264	Dionysius of Alexandria	fast of up to six days
c. 313	<i>Canon 1 of St. Peter of Alexandria</i>	other forty days, bewailing their faults
3rd C	<i>Didascalia Apostolorum</i>	fast, days of Pascha, from the second day of the week

DAY FIVE

Jesus' response assured John of more than Jesus' identity. Jesus' words affirmed John's identity as well. Returning to their mentor, John's disciples testified, "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor" (Matthew 11:5). In other words, Isaiah 61 was being fulfilled. The Spirit of the Lord was upon Jesus. Jesus was who John thought He was: the Messiah. Which meant, conversely, that John was who God said he was: the prophet sent to prepare the way for the Lord.¹ Such a calling is understandably easier to believe by the waters of the Jordan than from within the walls of a prison.

Perhaps that is, in part, what can make questioning so painful. For the faithful Christ-follower, self-concept is inextricably connected to God-concept. We are valuable because God is Creator. We are forgiven because God is Redeemer. If God is not who we thought He was, then who are we? Many of us dare not even ask the question. Do we fear that God will fail the test? Dr. Leonard Sweet teaches that in the Jewish culture,

It's an act of reverence to ask questions of the story. The Jews are confident that the story is strong enough to be tried and tested.... Around

the table, a Jewish child has “That’s a good question!” drummed into his or her soul, not, “You don’t ask that question” . . . Questions are as sacred as answers.²

We weaken—not strengthen—our faith when we silence sincere questions. Faith in Christ is not an airy substance that rests on unquestioning souls. Biblical faith is muscular, thickened more through trials than ease. The Author of our faith is more than able to address the identity crises His unexpected words and ways may trigger.

John heard within Jesus’ response the same striking answer that we hear today: Who is Jesus? Jesus is more than we thought, hoped, or imagined. His wildness is a source of wonder, not of worry. His righteousness is deeper than the oceans. His goodness is higher than the heavens.

“We are not necessarily doubting that God will do the best for us; we are wondering how painful the best will turn out to be.”

—C. S. Lewis (1898–1963)³

His faithfulness exceeds our comprehension. So what does that make us? Loved. Who are we? Christ’s beloved. We are loved when making bold proclamations near cool waters under sunny skies. We are loved when asking sincere questions in dark cells and darker times. We are loved.

Reflection

Jesus described John as “more than a prophet” and the greatest man “born of women” after—not before—John posed his please-confirm-your-identity interrogative (Matthew 11:9, 11). John’s question did not make Jesus nervous. Reflect on the questions patriarchs, prophets, and kings have asked God throughout the ages, such as Jeremiah’s respectful questioning of God’s justice below:

You are always righteous, LORD,
 when I bring a case before you.
 Yet I would speak with you about your justice:
 Why does the way of the wicked prosper?
 Why do all the faithless live at ease? (Jeremiah 12:1)

Today's Fast: Tidy Faith

If we view faith and doubt as antonyms, we will be tempted to interpret John's question as something other than spiritual uncertainty. Perhaps, we may reason, John was confident but wanted his disciples to hear about the miracles from the Source, or perhaps John sent his disciples with the hope that they would start following Jesus themselves, or . . .

Or perhaps John had doubts. Theologian Peter Abelard (1079–1142) stated, "By doubting we come to inquiry, by inquiry we come to truth."⁴ Today let your faith be messy. Fast tidying it up to make it more tame, and meditate upon Jesus' peaceful (and even affirming) response to John's uncertainty.

On Lent

Irenaeus was mentored by Polycarp who sat at the feet of the apostle John. His words, which come to us through Eusebius's chronicles of church history, have understandably been cited repeatedly on the subject of Lent's ancient origins:

The dispute is not only about the day, but also about the actual character of the fast. Some think that they ought to fast for one day, some for two, others for still more; some make their "day" last forty hours on end.⁵

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Upon reading the surrounding text in Eusebius’s *History of the Church*, it appears that from Eusebius’s perspective—writing over a hundred years after Irenaeus’s death—“the dispute” referred to a serious disagreement between churches in Asia and the church in Rome over when “the paschal fast”⁶ should end. An assembly of bishops ruled in favor of what Eusebius described as, “the practice which, *from apostolic tradition*, has prevailed to the present time, of terminating the fast on no other day than on that of the resurrection of our Saviour.”⁷

Today’s Reading: John 12:37–43

DAY SIX

Fifteen months¹ after John the Baptist was imprisoned, Herod Antipas—the son of Herod the Great who reigned at the time of Jesus’ birth—beheaded John to save face at a banquet.² John’s decrease was now complete. All eyes turned to Jesus. Matthew recorded that, “When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place” (Matthew 14:13). In the manna-for-multitudes and gravity-defying miracles that follow, it is easy for us to overlook and underestimate Jesus’ grief. But after Jesus healed and fed the thousands who awaited Him in the no-longer-solitary place and before Jesus and Peter walked on water in a storm,

Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone. (Matthew 14:22–23)

At this point in Jesus’ life, few remained alive of those who had witnessed His angel-celebrated birth and grasped at least in part the

“We have never reaped such a harvest from any seed as from that which fell from our hands while tears were falling from our eyes.”

—C. H. SPURGEON
(1834–1892)³

heavenly weight of His messianic anointing. Zechariah and Elizabeth, righteous Simeon and the prophetess Anna, the Magi, the shepherds, and probably even Joseph had died. The crowds were curious as well as clueless. The disciples were devoted as long as there was little danger. But John knew who Jesus was. John attested to Jesus’ divine Son-ship when he leaped in Elizabeth’s

womb at the sound of Mary’s greeting, when he baptized Jesus and heard God’s voice through the open heavens at the Jordan, and when he asked Jesus to confirm His identity from within the prison that would be John’s last home on earth.

Now, John was gone and Jesus needed solitude to pray. John’s death marks a turn toward the cross in Jesus’ ministry. From this point forward, Jesus more intensely taugth upon and demonstrated the revolutionary nature of His “upside down” kingdom.⁴ Consequently, the religious tension that eventually nailed him to the cross dramatically escalated. Alone on that mountain, as Jesus grieved John’s death, He anticipated His own.

“[God] draws the curtain about the bed of his chosen sufferer and, at the same time, he withdraws another curtain which before concealed his Glory!”

—C. H. SPURGEON
(1834–1892)⁵

Reflection

Bring to mind the names and faces of loved ones who have died. What deposits did they make in your life? How did you feel when you first learned of their deaths? Allow your experiences to infuse feeling into the written account of Jesus’ prayerful mourning on the mountainside.

Today's Fast: Speeding Past Sorrow

Jesus sets an example for us all to sit with our sorrow. He could have easily kept moving in an attempt to distance Himself from sadness. Instead, Jesus sent everyone away and carved out space to pray in solitude. Deaths are defining moments in our lives. It serves us poorly to hurry past them. Today, honor the losses in your life. Instead of speeding past sadness, slow down and be present to your emotions. With Jesus, sit with your sorrow and let loss do its eternal work in your soul.

On Lent

After the assembly's ruling, Bishop Polycrates wrote a letter defending the Asian church's continued observance of ending the fast at Passover, based upon the practices of many "great lights"⁶ who had served and died in Asia.⁷ In context, Irenaeus's oft-quoted words were written as a response to an escalation in this conflict. His letter was penned to rebuke and correct the actions of Victor I, Bishop of Rome, who dramatically excommunicated the churches of Asia in response to Polycrates's letter. To what extent Victor's reaction had to do with exerting the supremacy of the Church of Rome, movements away from traditional Jewish customs, or the actual practice of fasting, we are left to wonder. However, Irenaeus's words of correction are clarion: his concern was peace, not practice.

Jesus died. His disciples heard His last words. They saw Him take his final breath. They witnessed soldiers piercing His side and testified to the “sudden flow of blood and water” it produced (John 19:33–35). They observed where He was buried. They mourned three days. Then suddenly, the risen Jesus stood before them! Jesus appeared to well over five hundred people (1 Corinthians 15:5–8) over a period of forty days (Acts 1:3). The Gospels record His appearances to grieving women at the tomb,¹ two disciples on the Emmaus road,² fearful and doubting disciples behind locked doors (John 20:19, 26–29), the Eleven at mealtime,³ fish-less fishermen by the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1–14), and faithful followers gathered on a mountain for Jesus’ closing commission and ascension.⁴

Jesus was not hiding, but His disciples struggled to identify Him. A few recognized Him by His words,⁵ many by His wounds,⁶ two by the breaking of bread (Luke 24:30–31), and a small boatful by the smell of fish.⁷ We, too, struggle to recognize Jesus graveside, on long roads, behind locked doors, when hungry, and in empty seas. And so He appears, in His Word, in our pain, in communion, and through provision.

How must Jesus feel when His disciples recognize Him? When the fog of fear lifts and we behold His power? When the smog of self thins enough for us to realize that all He does, He does for love?

On Day One I stated, “Decrease is only holy when its destination is love.” Jesus’ decrease was holy. The author of Hebrews speaks of how Jesus endured the cross “for the joy set before Him” (Hebrews 12:2). That joy, my friend, was you and me and every soul on earth. In gratitude, we, too, like our Jesus, willingly take the path of decrease: not for decrease’s sake, nor even for our sake. Like John the Baptist before us, we decrease so that Jesus can increase in and through us. And then one day, one glorious day, when our decrease is complete, we will stand with a multitude in the presence of our risen Savior and shout:

Crown Him with many crowns, The Lamb upon His throne;
Hark! How the heav’nly anthem drowns all music but its own!

Awake, my soul and sing of Him Who died for thee,
 And hail Him as thy matchless King through all eternity.
 Crown Him the Lord of love! Behold His hands and side—
 Rich wounds, yet visible above, in beauty glorified.
 No angel in the sky can fully bear that sight,
 But downward bends His wond'ring eye at mysteries so bright.
 Crown Him the Lord of life! Who triumphed o'er the grave,
 Who rose victorious in the strife for those He came to save.
 His glories now we sing, Who died, and rose on high,
 Who died eternal life to bring, and lives that death may die.
 Crown Him the Lord of heav'n! One with the Father known,
 One with the Spirit through Him giv'n from yonder glorious
 throne,
 To Thee be endless praise, for Thou for us hast died;
 Be Thou, O Lord, through endless days adored and magnified.⁸

Reflection

Forty days ago you entered a journey of holy decrease. Our focus has been to “be duly awed by Christ’s resurrection by being duly available to daily crucifixion.” My personal prayer for you is that Christ’s sacrifice is now clearer and that His resurrection is now dearer. Whether you experienced *40 Days of Decrease* during Lent or in another season to heighten your honor of Jesus as Redeemer, take time today to look back over this book and any notes you have made. What concepts stood out to you? Were there any areas in which a discrepancy was revealed between God’s thoughts toward you and the thoughts you have toward yourself? In what ways

“The more I considered Christianity, the more I found that while it has established a rule and order, the chief aim of that order was to give room for good things to run wild.”

—G. K. CHESTERTON
(1874–1936)⁹

has the journey enriched your portrait of God? Then pause in gratitude to Jesus, your Mentor, for His holy decrease that was inspired by love.

Today's Fast: Fasting

Today, fast fasting and celebrate our risen Savior. Rejoice in His resurrection and anticipate His return. The past thirty-nine days of decrease have unsettled us, uncluttered us, and increased our capacity to see, serve, and celebrate Jesus. Add your voice today to the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us (Hebrews 12:1). With the angel at the tomb, proclaim, "He is not here; He has risen!" (Matthew 28:6). With the women greeted by a stone that had already been rolled away, be filled with joy and hurry to tell others (Matthew 28:8). With the two along the Emmaus road, hear Jesus' voice, and let your heart burn within you (Luke 24:32). With Thomas, exclaim, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). With the Eleven, assemble with others and ask God to open your mind to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). With the heavenly host shout, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is, and is to come" (Revelation 4:8). And with John pray, "Amen, Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:21).

Christ has died.

Christ has risen.

Christ will come again.¹⁰

May we live in awe!

On Lent

This final sidebar is to be written by you as you continue taking your place in the history of Jesus' church. By any standards, honoring Jesus' death and resurrection is an ancient tradition dating back to the days of the Apostles (though as a forty-day Lenten journey its form solidified a few centuries later). I invite you to intentionally mentor your generation (and the next) toward living in gratitude for Christ's sacrifice and in awe of His resurrection. Below, write a brief letter to Jesus thanking Him for journeying cross-ward through death to bring you into eternal life.

Today's Reading: John 21:20–25

NOTES

PROLOGUE

1. Alicia Britt Chole, *Anonymous: Jesus' Hidden Years and Yours* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 89–90.

INTRODUCTION

1. In Eastern Orthodox Churches, the forty days of Great Lent begin on a Monday and are inclusive of Sundays. The six weeks of Great Lent conclude on Palm Sunday when Holy Week begins. “Balancing the seven weeks of Lent and Holy Week, there follows after Easter a corresponding season of fifty days of thanksgiving, concluding with Pentecost.” *The Lenten Triodion*, Service Books of the Orthodox Church (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon, 1994, 1977), 13–14.
2. For examples in the Scriptures of the use of ashes as a symbol of mourning, see 2 Samuel 13:19, Esther 4:1, Job 2:8, and Daniel 9:3.
3. Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent*, rev. ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 31.

NOTES

DAY ONE

1. Eugene Peterson, "Transparent Lives," *The Christian Century* 23, November 29, 2003: 23.
2. From The Center for Liturgy at St. Louis University, accessed December 15, 2014, http://www.liturgy.slu.edu/romanmissal/christ_has_died.html.
3. This first of three acclamations making up the Memorial Acclamation in the first English version of the *Roman Missal* has been described as more of a Latin adaptation than a Latin translation. As of 2008, the first acclamation of what is now called the Mystery of Faith reads, "Dying you destroyed our death. Rising you restored our life. Lord Jesus, come in glory." See <http://content.ocp.org/shared/pdf/general/TL-NewRomanMissal-MysteryofFaith.pdf>, accessed June 3, 2015.
4. OED Online, s. v. "sojourn, n.," accessed December 22, 2014, <http://www.oed.com.georgefox.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/184006?rkey=8IRiLR&result=1>.
5. John H. Coe, "Resisting the Temptation of Moral Formation: Opening to Spiritual Formation in the Cross of the Spirit," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 1, no. 1 (March 1, 2008): 77.
6. If you would prefer more or different passages to read, simply search online for Lenten daily readings. Here is a link to a user-friendly collection of daily readings from Disciples of Christ minister, Ken Collins: <http://www.kencollins.com/texts/daily/1-lent.htm>.

DAY TWO

1. Peterson, "Transparent Lives," 23.
2. *Apophthegmata Patrum*, Alphabetical Collection, Poemen 15, as quoted in Everett Ferguson, *Inheriting Wisdom: Readings for Today from Ancient Christian Writers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 52.
3. Dan B. Allender and Tremper Longman III, *The Cry of the Soul: How Our Emotions Reveal Our Deepest Questions about God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1994), 24.
4. Robert F. Taft, "Lent: A Meditation," *Worship* 57, no. 2 (March 1, 1983): 132.
5. See chapters 8–10 of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Love of God*. The entire text can be read online at the Christian Classics Ethereal Library, http://www.ccel.org/ccel/bernard/loving_god.

DAY THREE

1. Warnie Lewis, ed., *Letters of C. S. Lewis* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966), 285.
2. Chole, *Anonymous*, 113.
3. Carole C. Carlson, *Corrie Ten Boom, Her Life, Her Faith: A Biography* (Old Tappan, NJ: F.H. Revell Co., 1983), as cited in chapter 9 of Thomas E. Hollingsworth, *The Effective Christian*, 2001, <http://www.theeffectivechristian.org/index.htm>.
4. Mother Maria and Diokleia Kallistos, *The Lenten Triodion* (South Canaan, PA: Saint Tikhon's Seminary Press), 23.
5. William P. Saunders, "The Origins of Lent," *Catholic Herald*, March 2, 2006.
6. Nicholas V. Russo, "The Early History of Lent," *Lent Library* (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2013), 19, <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/193181.pdf>.

DAY FOUR

1. Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), 43.
2. Also called the Sunday of Forgiveness, this is the last Sunday before the beginning of Great Lent in the Orthodox tradition.
3. Schmemmann, *Great Lent*, 29–30.
4. Russo, "The Early History of Lent," 19.
5. *Ibid.*
6. John Paul Abdelsayed, "A History of the Great Lent," *Coptic Church Review* 31, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 19.
7. Russo, "The Early History of Lent," 18; Abdelsayed, "A History of the Great Lent," 19.
8. Abdelsayed, "A History of the Great Lent," 22–23.
9. Nicholas V. Russo, "A Note on the Role of Secret Mark in the Search for the Origins of Lent," *Studia Liturgica* 37, no. 2 (January 1, 2007): 196; Abdelsayed, "A History of the Great Lent," 23.
10. Abdelsayed, "A History of the Great Lent," 22, quoting Origen: "They fast, therefore, who have lost the bridegroom; we having him with us cannot fast. Nor do we say that we relax the restraints of Christian abstinence; for we have

NOTES

the forty days consecrated to fasting, we have the fourth and sixth days of the week, on which we fast solemnly.”

11. Russo, “The Early History of Lent,” 18.
12. Schmemmann, *Great Lent*, 135.

DAY FIVE

1. See Isaiah 40:3 and Matthew 3:4.
2. Leonard I. Sweet, *The Well-Played Life: Why Pleasing God Doesn't Have to Be Such Hard Work* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2014), Kindle edition, 101–102.
3. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 370.
4. Abelard, *Sic et Non*, quoted in Burge, *Heloise and Abelard*, 54. As cited in Diana Butler Bass, *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), Kindle edition, loc. 1475.
5. Eusebius, *History of the Church*, vol. 5, chapter 24, no. 12., *New Advent*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/250105.htm>.
6. *Ibid.*, chapter 23, no. 2.
7. *Ibid.*, chapter 23, no. 1. Emphasis mine.

DAY SIX

1. Since dates of antiquity are understandably difficult to assert with certainty, Throughout *40 Days of Decrease*, I have chosen to reference time between events, as there seems to be more scholarly agreement with regard to the general ordering of events than the precise dating of events. Johnston, Ellisen, and Cheney suggest the dates of December AD 29 for John's imprisonment and March AD 31 for John's beheading, hence my estimate of fifteen months. See Johnston M. Cheney and Stanley A. Ellisen, *Jesus Christ the Greatest Life: A Unique Blending of the Four Gospels*, Logos Edition (Eugene, OR: Paradise Publishing Inc., 1999), 47, 65.
2. See Matthew 14:3–12 and Mark 6:14–29.
3. C. H. Spurgeon, *The Saint and His Saviour: The Progress of the Soul in the Knowledge of Jesus* (1857; repr., London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1889), 419.

4. Gayle Erwin, *The Jesus Style* (Cathedral City, CA: Yahshua Publishing, 2011), Kindle edition, loc. 113.
5. C.H. Spurgeon, "The Pitifulness of the Lord the Comfort of the Afflicted," Bible Hub Online Bible Study Suite, accessed June 3, 2015, http://biblehub.com/sermons/auth/spurgeon/the_pitifulness_of_the_lord_the_comfort_of_the_afflicted.htm.
6. *Ibid.*, chapter 24, no. 2.
7. As a side note, I found the excerpts from Bishop Polycrates's letter fascinating and wondered if they reflected second-century foreshadowing of The East-West Schism to come, and/or the transition away from Jewish customs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alicia Britt Chole has a doctor of ministry in leadership and spiritual formation from George Fox Evangelical Seminary and serves as the founding director of Leadership Investment Intensives (www.leadershipii.com), a nonprofit devoted to spiritually investing in the lives and legacies of leaders in the marketplace and the church. A captivating communicator, seasoned mentor, and gifted writer, Alicia speaks internationally and has authored several books including *Anonymous: Jesus' Hidden Years and Yours*, which is highly regarded by leaders around the world. In a culture obsessed with fame, Alicia brings ancient truth to life.

Alicia lives with her husband, their three amazing children (all Choles through the miracle of adoption), four somewhat-less-than-amazing dogs, one truly strange cat, and eight confused chickens off of a dirt road in a country home devoted to writing and reflection.

Among her favorite things are thunderstorms, pianos in empty rooms, organic hot tea, and anything with jalapenos. To connect with Alicia, visit www.aliciachole.com and [@aliciachole](https://twitter.com/aliciachole).

40 DAYS OF DECREASE

Life Group Discussion Guide Questions

General Discussion Prompts (select 1+ of these questions to begin your group discussions each week)

1. Was there a phrase or concept that stood out to you from this week's readings?
2. Which were your most and least favorite fasts of the week?
3. Everything we do affects everything we do. How is this *40 Day* journey affecting your life? Your perspective? Your relationships?
4. What are some of the factors that make seeing decrease positively a challenge in our day?
5. Read Isaiah 58: 3-14. From God's perspective, what makes a fast acceptable?
6. Describe your experience with Lent to date.
7. Share any experiences you have had with fasting. What were your primary motivations in choosing to fast?
8. As you experience your *40 Day* journey, in what ways do you hope that a less cluttered soul might affect those near you?
9. What is your favorite day so far? Why?
10. If you were to give this book to one other person, whom would you choose? Why?

40 DAYS OF DECREASE

Daily Reading Discussion/ Reflection Questions

Prologue – Day One, page xiii–5

1. What stood out to you from the Prologue reading, *The Grand Reduction*?
2. Alicia speaks of “sins of addition.” (p. xvi) How can achievements weigh us down spiritually?
3. Have you ever “given up” anything for Lent or for a forty day fast? If so, share your experience.
4. Whether you are reading *40 Days of Decrease* as a preparation for Resurrection Sunday or at another time of the year, what would it mean to you to fast *Lent as a project*?
5. *Bonus content*: visit <https://vimeo.com/149386646> to watch a 02:18 video from Alicia on fasting Lent as a project.

Day Two, pages 7-10

1. In what ways can Lent become a “much-needed mentor”?
2. Share any thoughts you had as you contrasted Bernard of Clairvaux’s first and fourth degrees of love.
3. In Days Two’s fast, Alicia calls *regret* a “sickly substance.” How can regret “steal our strength...flatten dreams, and suffocate hope”?

Day Three, pages 11-14

1. In what ways can attention be positive? Negative?
2. Why did John want to decrease?
3. Is it always dangerous to be famous?
4. How did John the Baptist manage his season in the spotlight?
5. *Bonus content*: visit <https://vimeo.com/149386650> to watch a 02:09 video from Alicia on fasting collecting praise.

Day Four, pages 15-19

1. John’s disciples said, “Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him.” (John 3:26) What is your guess regarding what may have motivated this question?
2. Have you ever helped someone who eventually “surpassed” you? What emotions did you experience? Did anyone else feel offended on your behalf?
3. Imagine John in prison. What questions might you have had in John’s place?
4. Share your experience with Day Four’s fast of *artificial light*.

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Day Five, page 20-24

1. Alicia states that our God-concept and our self-concept are connected. (p. 21) Do you agree or disagree? Why?
2. Dr. Sweet explains that in the Jewish culture, "it's an act of reverence to ask questions of the story. The Jews are confident that the story is strong enough to be tried and tested. . . . Around the table, a Jewish child has 'That's a good question!' drummed into his or her soul, not, 'You don't ask that question' . . . Questions are as sacred as answers." (p. 21-22) How comfortable are you asking questions about your faith?
3. What do you think John's response was when his disciples returned with Jesus' answer?
4. Day Four invites us to fast *tidy faith*. Is there a difference between doubt and unbelief?

Day Six, page 25-28

1. Have you ever lost someone who truly believed in you? What was it like?
2. When grieving, when do you prefer to be alone? To be with others?
3. Share any of the names and stories that came to mind as you were answering today's reflection question.
4. Today's fast is *speeding past sorrow*. Why do some prefer to hurry through sadness?

Day Seven, page 29-32

1. How does "fear, by nature, distort reality"? (p. 29)
2. Imagine surveying your neighbors with this question: "What comes to you mind when I say 'the cross'?" What responses do you guess they might offer?
3. What do you think "the cross" meant to Jesus' disciples before His death? After His resurrection?
4. Share your experience fasting *a meal* if you were able to participate in today's fast.

Day Eight, page 33-36

1. On page 34, Alicia states: "Tomorrow needs and storms cannot void the reality of today's miracles any more than today's miracles can void the potential of tomorrow's needs and storms." How can today's storms prompt us to forget yesterday's miracles?
2. Why are we tempted to offer platitudes in the face of other's pain?
3. In your own words, what does it mean to "fast *fixing it*"?

Day Nine, page 37-41

1. How would you answer the question Alicia poses on page 38: "Why does Jesus speak words that He knows we cannot understand?"
2. Countless studies have been done on how music affects the developing brain of a baby. Clearly then, we do not have to understand a thing's complexity in order to be affected by its sound. What do you believe happens in your mind whenever you read or hear God's Word?
3. List things you enjoy that may be beyond your current understanding. For example, a skillful saxophone solo or a star-filled sky.

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Day Ten, page 43-46

1. What does the request of John and James (and their mom) tell you about how the disciples viewed Jesus' kingdom? (p. 43)
2. How do you most often respond when faced with uncertainty?
3. Share your response to today's featured quote from Gerald G. May. (p. 44)
4. *Bonus content:* visit <https://vimeo.com/149386647> to watch a 01:55 video from Alicia on fasting avoidance.

Day Eleven, page 47-51

1. If you were given one week to live, how do you think you would spend it?
2. Think about making a movie of Bartimaeus' story. Which scene would you pick as your favorite? Why?
3. What possibilities did you list in today's reflection question concerning the reasons why the disciples' might have sought to silence and turn away children and Bartimaeus?
4. Concerning today's fast, what would it look like to discount the faith or potential of the beautiful? The poor? The highly educated? The mentally broken?

Day Twelve, page 53-57

1. Picture Zacchaeus and Bartimaeus in the same hometown before and after they met Jesus. Which one of these men, if either, do you personally identify with more?
2. Reread MLK, Jr's featured quote about interrelatedness. (p. 54) How authentically connected to others to you feel currently?
3. *Bonus content:* visit <https://vimeo.com/149386649> to watch a 02:11 video from Alicia on fasting isolation.

Day Thirteen, page 59-63

1. Imagine yourself in any of the anointing accounts (p. 60) as another dinner guest. What thoughts might you have experienced while observing a woman pouring perfume on Jesus?
2. Read aloud the featured quote by an anonymous Spanish poet. (p. 61) Share what line stands out to you and why.
3. Today's fast is *stinginess*. Brainstorms ways in which you might be able to be "irrationally lavish toward someone who cannot possibly return the favor" this week. (p. 62)

Day Fourteen, page 65-68

1. What do you think would motivate someone to throw their (possibly only) cloak on the ground to form part of a carpet that a donkey would walk over while carrying Jesus?
2. Why did the leaders' ask Jesus to stop the parade?
3. On a scale of one (reckless spontaneity) to ten (paralyzing over-think), how would you describe yourself? How does your answer affect your spiritual life?

40 DAYS OF DECREASE

Day Fifteen, page 69-73

1. Alicia states that, “Knowing that the Twelve would soon run for their lives and that the masses would soon reject Him, Jesus still stayed fully present for the party.” (p. 69) What would someone have to believe in order to joyfully stay present to favor that would not endure?
2. Under what circumstances can self-protection be healthy? Unhealthy?
3. How would you define *spiritual self-protection*? If you can, share how and/or when spiritual self-protection seems to manifest in your life.

Day Sixteen, page 75-78

1. Imagine Jesus grieving over Jerusalem. What is your guess regarding what his disciples were thinking or doing during this time?
2. Close your eyes and picture Jesus. Is He glowing? What color is His hair, eyes, skin? Are His feet dirty? Are His nails clean? Discuss how your image has or has not been affected by artistic and cultural depictions of Jesus.
3. Where do you sense that God is weeping in the world today? Pause to intercede over that need.
4. *Bonus content:* visit <https://vimeo.com/149386648> to watch a 02:01 video from Alicia on fasting *halos*.

Day Seventeen, page 79-83

1. What do you think motivated Jesus to clear the temple?
2. Share any responses to the questions Alicia asked regarding the physical nature of the temple clearing: “How would you have felt about Jesus in the temple that day if you were a Gentle? A moneychanger? A religious leader? His disciple?” (p. 80)
3. Regarding today’s fast, how would you describe the difference between *apathy* and *patient waiting*? Between *apathy* and *passivity*?

Day Eighteen, page 85-89

1. If you could ask Jesus one question about this passage (p. 85), what would it be?
2. Share your reflections on the following statement: “Jesus, evidently, find utter fruitlessness frustrating.” (p. 87)
3. In today’s fast, what do you think motivates us to “inflate or deflate, exaggerate or belittle” our real selves? (p. 88)

Day Nineteen, page 91-95

1. In your own words, explain why Jesus “closed the question” in this discussion with the chief priests and elders. (p. 92)
2. Jesus was speaking in this passage to the religious of his day. In the church today, what do we tend to value more than truth?
3. Today’s fast is *revisionism*. This could be a difficult fast because it addresses a form of self-deception. In the 1994 version of *Miracle on 34th Street*, a lawyer states in a courtroom, “Ask yourself which is better – a lie that brings a smile, or a truth that brings a tear.” What are some of ways in which we justify telling lies?

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Day Twenty, page 97-102

1. Jesus reserves His harshest words for hypocrites. What is your definition of hypocrisy?
2. Share any thoughts from the parable you selected in the reflection section.
3. Today's fast is *leavened bread* as a symbol of rejecting hypocrisy in our lives. Many today accuse the church of hypocrisy. Why?
4. How do you discern the difference in your life between willful hypocrisy and broken humanity?

Day Twenty-One, page 103-107

1. What factors may have contributed to Jesus's soul being troubled at this time in His ministry? (p. 104)
2. Do you agree or disagree with the following: "Obedience is not a moment: it is a process connected by countless moments." (p. 104)
3. Share a time when your heart was troubled due to "obedience-in-the-making." (p. 105)
4. Regarding Today's Fast of *premature resolution*, what is it about the middle of the process of obedience that is so trying?

Day Twenty-Two, page 109-112

1. Of all the things Father God could have said, what is your guess as to why He chose to say, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again" (John 12:28-30) over Jesus as He approached "this hour"?
2. Inaudibly, how does God most often "speak" to you?
3. If you were to hear God's audible voice at least once, what would you hope that He said? (e.g., your name, an answer to a question, specific direction, etc.)
4. Share your experience with fasting *sound* today.

Day Twenty-Three, page 113-118

1. If you have ever washing someone's feet or had someone wash yours, share the how, why, and outcome of the experience.
2. Is there an area in which you struggle to receive Jesus' forgiveness? If so, spend a minute picturing Jesus washing your feet saying, "I forgive you. Though what happened surprised you, remember that it did not surprise Me. My love is still here. Return."
3. For Today's Fast of *armchair Jesus*, picture a football game. Where do you see Jesus? The coach on the sidelines? The owner in the exclusive box? The announcer? A cheerleader? The quarterback? Try to answer as honestly as possible.

Day Twenty-Four, page 118-123

1. "Get up. Get going cross-ward." (p. 120) What does this mean to you personally?
2. Share your response to the reflection question: "How would you describe the difference between passion and love"?
3. In Today's Fast, Alicia defines fasting *neutrality* as taking a side in the seemingly small moments of life and choosing Jesus over self. In what areas do you tend to go passive? Ask for prayer if you would like support for the battle.

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Day Twenty-Five, page 125-128

1. A few days ago we studied Jesus' description of His soul as troubled. Today we hear Him saying, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." (Matthew 27:37-38) What would you be feeling if you described your soul in this way?
2. Jesus specifically asked Father God to, if possible, take the cup away and clearly God's response was for Jesus to continue cross-ward. What do you think Alicia meant by the statement: "Sharing Jesus' certainty honors Jesus' sacrifice"? (p. 126)
3. Alicia points out the misalignment between Jesus' emotions (overwhelmed with sorry to the point of asking for the cup to pass) and God's will (that Jesus would continue cross-ward). In other words, Jesus was not emotionally thrilled to continue the journey and yet was still without sin. Why then do we so often pray, "God, if this isn't your will, then change my emotions"?

Day Twenty-Six, page 129-133

1. If you were Peter, James, or John, how might you have felt when Jesus returned to find you sleeping?
2. Alicia relayed how she sometimes defaults to taking a nap when she is sorrowful. How do you respond to deep sorrow?
3. Today's fast is *comparison*. Have you ever looked at others' lives and assumed them more spiritual and/or more favored? What creates these assumptions? What dissolves them?

Day Twenty-Seven, page 135-139

1. Think of the movies you have seen and/or fiction books you have read in the past year. How often was some form of betrayal part of the plot?
2. What is it about betrayal that makes it a particularly painful wound?
3. From the featured quote, what do you think Frank Laubach meant by the phrase, "I can turn life's rough spots into Your vocabulary"? (p. 137)
4. What does Alicia mean in today's fast that, "one of the fiercest allies of not-enough-ness is our imaginations"? (p. 138)

Day Twenty-Eight, page 141-145

1. Reread the featured quote by George MacDonald. (p. 143) In what ways did Jesus resist, "every impulse to work more rapidly for a lower good"?
2. In your own words, what does Alicia mean by the "Discipline of Restraint"? How did Jesus model this strength at His arrest?
3. Are you currently experiencing any forms of restricted freedom?
4. Share any thoughts you had from today's fast of *formulas*.

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Day Twenty-Nine, page 147-151

1. Consider each of the eight recorded accusations against Jesus. Which were valid? Which were misrepresentations?
2. Alicia states that, "Jesus had no fear for Pilate to exploit." (p. 149) How might Pilate have exploited the fears of his prisoners?
3. Share your responses to the questions posed in today's fast: "What do you fear? Being misunderstood or misrepresented? Being unwanted or unneeded? Illness or injury?"
4. How can awareness of our fears be a weapon of spiritual warfare?

Day Thirty, page 153-157

1. What emotions do you think Peter might have felt after the rooster crowed?
2. Reread today's featured quote from Keating. (p. 155) How can our failure become a "triumph of grace"?
3. In your own words, what does Alicia mean by fasting *self-confidence*?
4. *Bonus content:* visit <https://vimeo.com/149386651> to watch a 01:57 video from Alicia on fasting self-diagnosis.

Day Thirty-One, page 159-163

1. Reread the list on pages 160-161 of all that Jesus experienced prior to the crucifixion. What might the abusers have believed to mentally justified their treatment of Jesus?
2. Share any thoughts you had during today's reflection exercise.
3. In today's fast, Alicia states, "Perhaps we mock Jesus more than we know." (p. 162) Pause prayerfully asking God to search your heart for anyway in which you are mocking Him.

Day Thirty-Two, page 165-170

1. Why do you think Pilate tried repeatedly to free Jesus?
2. Rejection is often at the root of our greatest pains. Jesus absorbed the world's utter rejection to make the way for our complete acceptance. How can His offering affect our pain in daily life?
3. How easy or hard, meaningful or mundane was today's fast for you?

Day Thirty-Three, page 171-176

1. Alicia states, "Perhaps we would live differently if we remembered more frequently (and more accurately) what the cross cost." (p. 171) Do you agree? Disagree? Why?
2. Share your responses to today's featured quote from Philip Yancey. (p. 172)
3. Reread Psalm 22. Underline the phrases that describe Jesus' experience one thousand years after they were prophesied.
4. Today's fast is *willful sin*. What motivates us to keep sin alive in our lives?

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Day Thirty-Four, page 177-181

1. Who would you surround yourself with if you had six hours to live?
2. In what ways were the taunts Jesus heard on the cross at the end of his earthly ministry similar to the temptations Jesus heard in the desert at the beginning of his earthly ministry?
3. Today's fast is *criticism*. How can we distinguish between being a critical thinker and being critical?

Day Thirty-Five, page 183-187

1. Consider the rebel's request of Jesus to remember him when Jesus came into His kingdom. (Luke 23:41-42) Why do you think Alicia considers this statement "among the most insightful statements of faith in Christ in the Gospels"? (p. 184)
2. Share any stories you know of believers who saw death as a finish line instead of defeat.
3. What came to mind as you read today's fast of *God-as-job*?

Day Thirty-Six, page 189-193

1. Joseph kept his commitment to Jesus a secret while He was alive and made a bold proclamation of faith in Christ at His death. What do you think occurred in Joseph's soul to prompt the change?
2. What does it mean to you to give Jesus your "resting place"? (p. 191)
3. In what ways do we withhold love from others? From God? From ourselves?

Day Thirty-Seven, page 195-201

1. What comes to mind when you think of the disciples after Jesus' burial and before the resurrection? Where do you picture them? What conversations or thoughts do you guess they might have had?
2. As we did a few days ago with Psalm 22, reread Isaiah 53 and underline the phrases that depict Jesus' cross-ward journey.
3. Describe your experience with today's fast of your *voice*. Was the silence loud for you? Did your mind wander every second or every few minutes?
4. Was the fast valuable? Why or why not?

Day Thirty-Eight, page 203-207

1. If you have ever buried dreams, share how the experience has affected, challenged, strengthened, etc. your faith.
2. Why do some try to rush through the grief process?
3. When disillusioned or experiencing spiritual pain, do you naturally seek company or solitude or both?
4. Reflect on today's fast of *escapism*. Long-term, how does using escapism as an anesthesia affect our personal development? Our relationships?

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Day Thirty-Nine, page 209-213

1. Picture the guards in front of the tomb, unknowingly hand-selected by God for this moment. Why did they think they were there?
2. Just as the angelic choir sang their God-song to an audience of shepherds, now an angel comes in blinding light to move a stone in front of guards. What do shepherds and guards have in common? Why do you think they responded so differently to the angelic visitation?
3. What does Alicia mean by her invitation to fast guarding tombs? (p. 211-212)

Day Forty, page 215-213

1. Though the reality is beyond our imaginations, what comes to mind when you think of one day seeing Jesus?
2. Reflect once again on John the Baptist's commit to decrease that we examined toward the beginning of *40 Days of Decrease*. In what ways have you experienced sacred decrease during this journey?
3. Share any responses you had to the questions Alicia posed in today's reflection section: "What concepts stood out to you? Were there any areas in which a discrepancy was revealed between God's thoughts toward you and the thoughts you have toward yourself? In what ways has the journey enriched your portrait of God?" (p. 217-218)
4. End your 40 days with others thanking Jesus for the holy decrease that set us free!