



JOURNEY THROUGH THE SEASON OF *lent*

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WHAT IS LENT?

The two biggest events on the Christian calendar are Christmas and Easter. It is troubling that we put so little emphasis on Easter. While we are busy months in advance planning for Christmas, Easter seems to creep up on us, and with very little planning and focus, it seems to slide right past. But Easter should be a BIG deal! Easter is the day we celebrate that Jesus rose from the dead! In most Protestant religions, a season of Lent is not really practiced in any meaningful way. In most churches, you may find a Palm Sunday, a Good Friday, and an Easter celebration, but there is very little focus on the reflection or preparation for the magnitude of what we are celebrating on Easter.

The season of Lent is typically celebrated during the 40 days prior to Easter to reflect Jesus going into the desert for 40 days and 40 nights. Jesus went into the desert to fast and pray about His upcoming ministry. Although it was a time of deprivation, it was also a time of dedicated prayer and communion with the Heavenly Father. This was also the devil's opportunity to test Jesus and attempt to dissuade Him from following His calling.

"Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, He was hungry." Matthew 4:1-2, NIV

Using this as a model for worship, Lent is known as a time of prayer, repentance, and recommitment leading up to the celebration of Christ's resurrection at Easter. Lent is a time of spiritual preparation for the most important religious holiday for believers. It is common to hear that someone has given up chocolate or social media for Lent. The idea is to abstain from pleasurable activities and instead use the time and energy usually spent in those activities to focus on taking stock of one's own spiritual condition.

Why do we use the word "Lent"? It originates from the Old English "*lencten*," meaning lengthen, like the lengthening days of spring. In 2019, Lent begins with Ash Wednesday on March 6, and following the 40 days tradition, Lent ends on Saturday, April 20.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

As we prepare to celebrate Easter, we want to encourage you to spend this time with your families and perhaps use the next few weeks to focus less on your physical appetites and more on your spiritual needs. Whether you engage in the practice of fasting or the practice of giving up some pleasurable activity or not, this is an ideal opportunity to train yourself and your family to point toward Christ and the ultimate sacrifice He made. Ideally, such meditation would lead us to appreciate anew the cost of grace and the victory over death.

We have created ten family devotionals to use during this time to help you guide your family. While a daily Bible study is probably not feasible, we hope you will use these devotionals at dinner, before your family movie or game night, or even as a basic conversation starter while driving to soccer practice. If this is your first year to focus on Lent, it might feel forced or awkward. We encourage you to press forward. Each year, much like your celebration of Christmas, you will develop your own traditions and practices unique to the rhythms of your unique family.

We pray when Easter arrives you will find your family more firmly rooted in your faith and ready to welcome the risen Savior.

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DEVOTIONAL 1

The Practice of Sacrifice

by Dave Carl, Pastor of Family Ministry

In the past, Christians were known for their ability to die well. Seems like an odd thing to put on your résumé. Dying has been the common problem for all of mankind from the very beginning. How are we to think about dying? How do we avoid it? This causes all kinds of anxiety because for those without Christ, death is the enemy, the final loss from which no one recovers. We believers, on the other hand, know how to think about dying. To die is to be with Christ (Philippians 1:21–23) which is better for us by far but sad for sure in that we will leave behind loved ones. For us, death is not the enemy.

Throughout history, there have been faithful believers who fearlessly cared for the infected and infectious while the Romans sped out of town to safety. Risking death was a matter of both joy and duty. There have been believers who were calm and hopeful in the face of certain death because of their faith in Jesus. The hope of being in the presence of their Savior gave them strength and joy while they faced death. How did they pull this off? Who has this kind of peace and confidence? How does one get to be like that? The answer is these people had already died many little deaths. Not only were Christians known for surrendering to their mortal death, they were admired for all the small surrenders they experienced for the sake of others in the name of their Savior. To show the love of their Savior, they suffered for strangers. It gets easier and less frightening. If you give up your life, you gain it. It's a very Christian thing.

"If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for My sake, you will save it."
Matthew 16:25, NLT

Peace is ours as believers. Fear has no claim on us because of what Jesus did when he died well for us. Let's be open to die just a little death and fast from something this Lent season. It's a small death to be sure, but this is how we move toward Christlikeness. Worship with your mind by reading the story of Jesus in His last weeks of life and then worship with your body by giving up something your body wants. Jesus will be there as our reward after mortal death, and He will be with us in our small deaths as well. This is part of the unique joy of Lent.

PRAYER

Father, as we journey through this season of Lent, point us to make those sacrifices that draw us closer to You. Amen.

DEVOTIONAL 2

Self Examination

by Debi Kruder, Ministry Leader of AWANA

*“Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.”
Psalm 139:23–24, NLT*

God’s Word in Psalm 139 tells us that He searches us and knows our innermost being, our thoughts from afar, and our words before they are spoken. Yes, our God is an intimate God, and He knows us. But how well do we know and search ourselves? Daily we find ourselves examining others, developing perceptions of them, noticing their offenses with ease, often subconsciously. Paul David Tripp in *New Morning Mercies* writes it this way: *“It’s natural to be very aware of the sin of others, yet blind to our own. If we are ever going to be people of mercy, we need bountiful mercy ourselves, because what stands in the way of our being a community of mercy is us.”*

David bravely asks the Lord to examine him, to even test him. This type of examination can be muddy. Dusting off the cluttered heart can reveal sin, shame, and even abuse. Yes, it’s a brave request indeed! Yet, David asks, listens, and follows in obedience to the one who knows him best, his God. This Lenten season, let us be intentional about examining ourselves so that we can confess our sins and experience His mercy.

Pray bravely as David did in Psalms 51 and 19.

PRAYER

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

DEVOTIONAL 3

Fasting and Prayer

by Barbara Deatherage, Ministry Leader of Elementary Ministry

Fasting? What is THAT?

We know we've heard of fasting. Maybe we even know what it is, but the question of "Why?" lingers.

"Moses was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he did not eat food or drink water. He wrote the Ten Commandments, the words of the covenant, on the tablets." Exodus 34:28, CSB

There's a lot to see in those two sentences, but let's try to whittle it down to the bare bones.

- Fasting is giving up something. For Moses, it was all food and water for forty days and nights—probably not a good idea for growing children! However, kids can give up things—sweets, video games, favorite TV shows—for a specific time...if they have a good reason.
- So why fast? Fasting is an excellent reminder to pray. When the stomach growls, we remember to pray instead of eating. When we feel the urge to reach the next level of our favorite video game, we remember to pray instead.
- Okay, but is a reminder to pray enough reason to fast? Look back at Exodus 34:28. Moses fasted and spent time with God, which led to the Ten Commandments. Where did the Ten Commandments come from? God! After Moses fasted and prayed, God spoke to him. Who doesn't want to hear from God? That's reason enough to fast and pray, but...
- We're not done. The result of fasting and praying and hearing from God? Moses physically recorded the Ten Commandments, and in the next verses, he took them to the people to teach them how to live the life God required. Fasting, praying, and hearing from God led to action that carried out God's will.

This year, during Lent, introduce the idea to your family. Let your kids explore the idea of fasting and prayer and choose their own fast. Help them to follow through without making it a legalistic requirement, and then wait to see what God will do!

PRAYER

Lord, please bless our family as we offer up a Lenten fast to You. May we revel in more time in prayer with You. May our hearts be opened to Your words to us, and may we joyfully follow wherever You lead us. Amen.

DEVOTIONAL 4

Knowing Christ

by Ren Nelson, Associate Pastor of Preteen Ministry

*"I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of His resurrection and participation in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead."
Philippians 3:10–11, NIV*

A life of knowing Christ is so much more than attending church on Sunday mornings, joining a Bible study, and finding an opportunity to serve. Don't get me wrong, these are great things that God has given us for our joy and wants us to experience. However, we can get into trouble when our work and commitments for Christ take priority over knowing Christ Himself. Our involvement in the church should never be seen as more important than God's involvement in our lives and our hearts. Our time studying God's Word is all for nothing if the information on the pages doesn't lead to transformation in our hearts.

God knows you because He is God, and He loves you, not because of what you have done or are doing for Him, but because of what Christ did for you. I want to know this God. The God who became man to pay for our sins. The God who lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died. Then He rose from the dead to prove to us His deity, and that whoever puts their trust in Him will have life, now and forever. I want to know this God, and I want you to know Him too.

PRAYER

LORD, You are awesome! You are so big and we are so small. Guide us into a deeper understanding of who You are. Show us the joy and forgiveness that is found in You. I want to know You, God. I want Your thoughts to transform my thoughts. Make Your wants my own. Display Your power in my life. Amen.

DEVOTIONAL 5

Return to Christ

by Jennifer Withers, Pastoral Leader of Preteen Ministry

*“Even now,’ declares the Lord, ‘return to Me with all your heart,
with fasting and weeping and mourning.’
Rend your heart and not your garments.
Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and compassionate,
slow to anger and abounding in love, and He relents from sending calamity.
Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing—
grain offerings and drink offerings for the Lord your God.” Joel 2:12–14, NIV*

Prior to Joel’s plea to the Israelites to return to the Lord, God had sent a plague of locusts that wiped out their crops. God sent this plague as a punishment in order to wake up the Israelites of Old Testament Judah so that they would return to Him. The Israelites, God’s own people, had turned away from God and had begun to worship other gods. God called for a repentance of their hearts. In Acts 2:16–21, Peter refers to Joel 2 while preaching to new believers in New Testament Judea. Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the new believers, that *“everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”*

Find rest in that, dear friends. In order to be saved, God calls us to repent and call upon the name of the Lord. God calls us to repent with our hearts. We are not so different from the Israelites. I don’t know about you, but sometimes I too put my own idols before God. I have never worshipped another god, but it’s so easy to slip into worshipping ourselves, money, popularity, or other people. If you find yourself in the midst of putting an idol before God, I urge you to repent with your heart. God promises blessing through grace and love to those who return to Him.

This passage is a wonderful example of God’s sovereignty. He is aware of and active in what happens on earth. He loves and cares for His people, His creation. Through Jesus Christ, God calls us to a deep and loving relationship with Him.

PRAYER

Dear God, we love You so much. You are our Lord who deserves our worship and love. Please forgive us of our sins. Forgive us when we put others and ourselves before You. Guide us this week and help us to remember who You are. Thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross for our sins. We are humbled by Your grace and love. Amen.

DEVOTIONAL 6

Caution: It's Not for Show

by Kristin Langford, Ministry Leader of Early Childhood

"Whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance so that they will be noticed by men when they are fasting. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you."
Matthew 6:16–19, NASB

When I was a young girl, we lived in Louisiana. Many of my friends participated in Lent, during which they had to give up something important to them, like chocolate. I remember thinking that it was odd because they would complain about their lack of indulgence and find "cheat days" when they could have some. Then on Easter Sunday, they would go crazy devouring what they had denied themselves. I was confident that this was not the purpose given to them for Lent, but I was sure thankful that my church did not make me do that.

When Lent was reintroduced to me as an adult, I thought about my childhood friends and was not interested in participating. However, a few years ago I was challenged to adjust my mindset on this season of restraint. The Bible commands us to fast. In Matthew it says, "whenever you fast," not "if you fast." But, when we fast, God wants our focus to be on Him, not looking for sympathy or kudos by making a spectacle of our fast. If we don't have the correct focus, then others see how supposedly religious we are and the sacrifice we will make "for God," but our personal relationship with God is unchanged.

God wants us to have an authentic and transformative relationship with Him. He wants us to depend fully on Him. Without God, these sacrifices are trivial and unimportant. The goal is to draw closer to Him—to learn to love what He loves. We do not need other people's praise and adoration to lean into the Lord. Giving up something to gain more of Jesus can be between you and God. It does not nullify your fast if people around you notice and question, but we should not be going around boasting about what we are doing, or constantly reminding others about the sacrifice we are making. In John Piper's article, "Fasting for the Father's Reward," he urges us to remember, "This is what Jesus is calling us to—a radically God-oriented fasting."

So, I encourage you to participate for the sake of your own soul, and in response to Jesus, and for the advancement of the kingdom of God's great saving purpose to glorify His name.

PRAYER

Lord, draw me near to You in the season of Lent, and help me find a love for You that is deeper and more intimate than before. Amen.

DEVOTIONAL 7

Christ Was Sent to Save Us

by Michelle Felt, Ministry Leader of Kingdom Kids

"Lord, help!" they cried in their trouble, and He saved them from their distress. He sent out His word and healed them, snatching them from the door of death. Let them praise the Lord for His great love and for the wonderful things He has done for them." Psalms 107:19–21, NLT

I don't know about you, but the older I get the more I have come to realize how much grace God has extended to me. He sent His Son to save me because He loved me that much! When I am still and really ponder what that means and how it has transformed my life, I am overwhelmed. God has a plan for my life, even with the poor choices I've made and wrong turns I've taken. I have called out to God in my distress more times than I can count, in problems with my children or relationships that have failed, but through it all the Lord has heard me, saved me, and healed me. I love the definition of grace as explained this way by Angel Hatfield: *"Grace is the gift of a big exhale—from holding one's breath and waiting for what most certainly should come, to receiving a 'get free pass' that one would absolutely not expect."*

Two forms of action stand out to me in this verse. First, His Word provides healing and salvation. Second, we should be praising the Lord for the wonderful things He has done for us. With this combination, our focus is in its proper place ... on Him.

PRAYER

Lord, I pray that this Lent season we will take time to sacrifice for You and inhale deeply of Your love. Amen.

DEVOTIONAL 8

Our Dwelling Place

by Kelley Wilkinson, Director of Stonebriar Preschool Pals

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God.’”
Revelation 21:3, NIV

While I was growing up, my dad’s job moved us around a lot—a whole lot! There was never a great time of the year to move, but we usually did so at semester break or the beginning of summer. We would pack up, move to a new state, and try to settle in. There were some good things about moving, though. It was exciting to look for a new house and decorate my new room. My parents were great at trying to make the move as easy as possible. They would let us decorate our rooms with new bedding for a new house, giving us a new start in a new town.

The hard part of moving was saying goodbye to all our friends. It was very hard to leave our best friends and the activities we joined. We usually knew for at least a month or so before we were moving, so we had time to say goodbye to everyone. That helped quite a bit with closure. Our moves were way before texting and FaceTime. We only had the post office, and letters from friends would always dwindle over time.

This verse is so exciting because God tells us about the move He will make with us! He has a plan to come live with us in the most amazing new house ever: a new Heaven He has created for all His people. Can you imagine the most perfect place, most perfect house, most perfect neighbor—God Himself? That is a move I am excited about!

PRAYER

Thank You, Lord, for the plans You have of making our world new and perfect again when You come live with us in the new home You have created. Thank you for always keeping Your promises to us. Help me to live on this earth in a way that honors You. Praise Your name, Jesus, for what You will bring us in Your perfect timing. Amen.

DEVOTIONAL 9

Hosanna! Save Us!

by Nathan Kocurek, Associate Pastor of Student Ministries

It's kind of funny later to look back and laugh at a time when you thought you needed to be rescued, but as it turned out you really were never in any real danger at all. Like when you're splashing around in water in a total panic and then realize all you had to do was stand up. Obviously, it was not funny at the time, except maybe to your dad who watched you fall out of the boat, and instead of jumping into the water to save you he just laughed and said, "Boy, who told you to go swimming?" And then you had to walk around the campsite without shoes all weekend while they dried because they were the only ones you brought camping. That's never happened to you?

How about this: Some of us love scary movies or thrill rides because we like tricking ourselves into feeling like we're in a scary situation, but it's fun because we're really not. Our need for a Savior to rescue us from our sins is not like that. The danger is real, and it's not like all we had to do was stand up. Once, when Jesus looked at the crowds of people, He exclaimed, "They are helpless and harassed, like sheep without a shepherd." Like sheep without a shepherd, we are all helpless.

On our own, we are helpless against a cruel and ruthless spiritual enemy, the devil who seeks whomever he may devour. We are helpless against the effects of a fallen world and all its deceptions and illusions. And we are helpless against our own sin nature that spews a ceaseless flow of ungodly attitudes and desires. Our sin nature has not only devastated our lives but has earned for us an eternal destiny apart from God's love and only an everlasting experience of His righteous anger in Hell.

Thank God we have a Savior! We need to be rescued! And on a literal day on the calendar, the actual historical moment arrived when He showed up in Jerusalem riding on a peaceful donkey in fulfillment of Scripture, announcing to everyone that the long-awaited Messiah had finally come (Mark 11:1-11). Salvation had come at last. Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!

PRAYER

Thank You, Father, for sending Your Son to rescue us from our sins and Your wrathful justice. We cannot rescue ourselves. Help us not to overlook our salvation or the greatness of what our Savior did for us. Thank You for Your grace. It overwhelms us and sustains us and motivates us to seek your Son. We are Yours wholeheartedly, and we love You. Amen.

DEVOTIONAL 10

Why Do We Celebrate Easter?

by Dave Carl, Pastor of Family Ministry

We are at the end of Lent now and ready to say with millions of believers before us, "**He is risen, He is risen indeed.**"

"He asked her, 'Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?' Thinking he was the gardener, she said, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.'

Jesus said to her, 'Mary.'

She turned toward Him and cried out in Aramaic, 'Rabboni!' (which means 'Teacher').

Jesus said, 'Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."'" John 20:14–29, NIV

We have experienced sadness as we followed Jesus in this journey. We have felt compassion for Jesus and anger over the injustices, but now we are near the end. Sit in the discomfort, and thank Jesus for doing all this for us. Sit in the darkness, and feel all the feelings of loss and evil seeming to triumph, but know we are a people who can do even this with hope. We have hope because we know how the story ends. We are ready to celebrate even though it is still dark on Good Friday.

This is the story of Lent.

Jesus suffered much, and we have hope. When we suffer, we know how the big story ends, so we can have hope even if we are still in the darkness of our situation. Jesus has won, smashed down the gates of Hell, and set the captives free. This is one of the reasons He came. We who believe are a saved people because He suffered. We are a people who know how to die well, but we can also be a people who know how to live really well. Not for ourselves, but by dying small deaths we are free to celebrate His victory. Because we can live boldly, even recklessly, for the sake of our Savior, great things are possible. This is the abundant life Jesus wants us to have, soooo why would you settle for a small, self-centered life where you are constantly fearful it will all come apart one day? Live large for Jesus by singing and shouting, "**He is risen. HE is risen indeed!**"

PRAYER

Lord, we are so thankful for your sacrifice and overcoming the grave, so we can live boldly for a Savior who makes all things possible. Amen.

Easter Sunday marks the end of our journey through Lent and the start of an amazing life rejuvenated in Christ's love for us. Our hope is that this is the start of a new tradition for your family for years to come.

Here's one more activity:

Take one of those chocolate Easter eggs that are hollow inside and wrapped in colorful foil. Slowly take it out of the box and begin to unwrap it. Ask the member of the family what might be inside it. What would be an exciting thing to find inside the egg? As the anticipation starts to build, break it open. Show the inside to your family.

[Pause . . .]

An empty egg can be very disappointing. But the empty tomb is the most exciting empty space in the history of the world. When we think about the empty tomb and the resurrection, do you see it as a happy ending to the story, or the starting line of a life lived well for Christ?