



DARKNESS TO LIGHT

PREPARING YOUR FAMILY FOR EASTER

Easter 2021



WHY PREPARE FOR EASTER?



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 the empty tomb and Jesus' victory over death!

In many churches, you may find a special Palm Sunday celebration with fanning palm leaves, a Good Friday service, and a triumphant Easter celebration, but there is often very little focus on the reflection or preparation for the magnitude of what we are celebrating on Easter. This is why we are encouraging you to take time with your family to read God's Word and prepare your hearts for Easter together.

WHAT IS LENT?

Lent is a time of spiritual preparation for the most important religious holiday for believers. In liturgical Christian traditions, the season of Lent is typically observed 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. 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 is it called “lent”? It originates from the Old English “lencten,” meaning lengthen. A good example use of the word would be the lengthening days of spring. In 2021, the Lent calendar begins with Ash Wednesday, February 17, and following the 40 days tradition (excluding Sundays), it will end with the night of darkness, Saturday, April 3. We are looking forward to celebrating the Risen King, Jesus Christ on Resurrection Sunday, April 4.

This family devotional guide is inspired by the heart of Lent, and we pray it helps you and your family prayerfully anticipate the miracle of Easter.

HOW TO USE THIS FAMILY RESOURCE

We have created seven family devotionals to help you prepare for Easter. Since daily family Bible studies often aren't feasible, we hope you will use these devotionals at any point leading up to Easter in any way that works for you—at family dinners, before 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 Easter this way, 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.

CANDLES, PART OF YOUR TRADITION

Many of us are visual learners, and candles are a great way to mark the passage of time toward an approaching celebration. If you would like, you can use these devotionals along with any grouping of six candles to add a visual component to your family time.

On the first day, all six candles should be burning as you begin reading the first devotional. Instructions within the reading tell you when to snuff out one candle. On the second day, five candles would be lighted as you begin reading, and you snuff out one of them when instructed, and so on.

On Good Friday, the last candle is extinguished. Then on Easter, there are instructions within the reading to light all of the candles.



“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” John 1:5 (NIV)

THE SYMBOLISM OF CANDLES

For a while, it seemed as if the darkness was overcoming the world. Your candles symbolize the Light of the World, the Light that was God's glory and that illuminated God for us. As we move through the season preceding Easter, the candles are snuffed out one by one, until all are dark on Good Friday, when Jesus died, and the earth was covered with shadow. It seemed then as if darkness had won. The Light of the World had been extinguished. It was finished.

But NO! Easter brings resurrection! Life! Return from death! The Light has won, and all the candles are lit again as we praise Him—the Light of the World, the Bright Morning Star, the Glory of God. ⁽¹⁾



Light all six of your candles.

DEVOTIONAL 1: THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

Molly Jennerich, Ministry Leader in Student Ministries

Read: John 12:12–17, Matthew 21:1–11

When I read this Scripture passage, I asked myself, “If I were alive at the time, where would I be among the great crowd?” I picture myself with those pushing to the front trying to get a glimpse of Jesus like I would if I were trying to see the lead runners at the New York City marathon. I would be waving palm branches and shouting, “Hosanna!” at the top of my lungs.

**“They took palm branches and went out to meet Him, shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel!’”
John 12:13 (NIV)**

I would be thrilled to see my Savior humbly riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. My heart would be full of excitement and hope. But truthfully, I’d also probably be confused, unsure about what this all meant, and what would happen in the coming week, just like His disciples. Jesus rode into Jerusalem to great fanfare, but He was killed only days later. How did so much change in one week?

We have the incredible advantage of living on this side of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection. We know that Jesus did not come to defeat Roman oppressors, but to defeat death, sin, and Satan. For me, the triumphal entry points to Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, but also to His second coming. I can’t wait until Jesus comes back! I pray for it earnestly.

When He comes again, our eternity will depend on whether we have put our faith in Him.

“If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” Romans 10:9 (NIV)

Because He died on the cross and was resurrected, and because I have confessed Him as my Savior, I have nothing to fear in this life or the next. Can you say the same? As Easter approaches, the King of kings and Lord of lords wants to be your Savior and rule your life. Will you invite Him in?

FAMILY PRAYER: Father, as we journey through this season of Lent and prepare our hearts and minds for the celebration of Easter, we pray that You will make a triumphal entry into each of our hearts. Amen.

Blow out one candle and do not relight it until Easter Sunday.

Light five of your candles.

DEVOTIONAL 2: JESUS PREDICTS HIS DEATH

Barbara Deatherage, Ministry Leader for Elementary Ministry

Read: John 12:20–36

Why didn't they hear and understand?

"Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He [Jesus] said this to show by what kind of death He was going to die." John 12:31–33 (ESV)

If you and I had been in the crowd when Jesus said these words, we may not have understood what He was saying. Most people did not, including His disciples—even though they had heard it before:

"From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." Matthew 16:21 (ESV)

Jesus had clearly predicted His death, but when it happened, the disciples were shocked, frightened, and confused. Why? Let's consider three reasons which still keep us from hearing and understanding today.

1. They were too busy thinking about their own expectations of the Messiah. Their heads were full of what they thought a Messiah was to do and what they would get when He set up His kingdom. They still did not understand that Jesus' kingdom was not earthly and was not about what they wanted.

2. They were in denial. In Matthew 16, after Jesus predicted His death, Peter objected, "No! This is not going to happen to you!" In their minds, Jesus' way—dying on a cross—could not be the right way. They could not see it or understand it.

3. They were not living in the moment in the presence of God. Jesus had taught them the value of coming away and being still and listening to God, but instead of running to God, they saw themselves as deserted and hopeless.

We do these things, too—adults and children alike. We expect God to give us good things—the things we think are important. We expect the Christian life to be fairly easy, not the hard way. And we don't want to be still and quiet and wait for God to speak. The result is that we don't understand Him and His ways. Lent is a time to listen, to hear, to examine ourselves, and to welcome truth. God, our loving Father, waits to reveal Himself to us. He waits to speak to us, and He wants us to understand. Take time today—even if only for a minute—to let your family sit still with God without asking for anything but just being with Him, enjoying Him, and letting Him speak.

FAMILY PRAYER: Father, as we wait in this moment, we pray that You will lead us to You. Help us listen for You to speak to our hearts as You reveal Yourself to us. Amen.

Blow out one candle and do not relight it until Easter Sunday.



Light four of your candles.

DEVOTIONAL 3: JESUS WASHES HIS DISCIPLES' FEET

Debi Kruder, Ministry Leader for AWANA

Read: John 13:1–17, Luke 22:7–30

“He had loved His disciples during His ministry on earth, and now He loved them to the very end. It was time for supper, and the devil had already prompted Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had given Him authority over everything and that He had come from God and would return to God.”
John 13:1–3 (NLT)

Yet Jesus, knowing that He had all authority, knowing He was the most important guest at the table, gets up to serve. Imagine for a moment the scene . . .

The disciples and Jesus are in a guest room in Jerusalem. They are reclining around a table in anticipation of the Passover meal. Jesus has taken the cup of wine, given thanks to God for it, and shared it with the disciples. Likewise, Jesus took the bread, gave thanks to God, and shared it among them. Then Jesus says, “This cup is the new covenant between God and His people—an agreement confirmed with My blood, which is poured out as a sacrifice for you.”

I suggest what happened next happens often around our own dinner tables. We sit down at the table (or in full confession, in the family room) with a prayer of thanks, begin our meals, conversation begins, arguments instill, and the attention turns to ourselves instead of to the thankfulness for the One who provided it. Yes, the disciples are busy arguing among themselves about who is greatest after just receiving the gift of sacrifice.

I love our Jesus. He doesn't speak in just words but gives us beautiful illustrations, too. He sees the disciples are once again “not getting it,” confused, focusing on themselves, and so He gets up.

“So He got up from the table, took off His robe, wrapped a towel around His waist, and poured water into a basin. Then He began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel He had around Him.” John 13:4–5 (NLT)

The example was set, the message was clear. The One into whose hands the Father had given all lays down His life in humble service in the washing of their feet. Jesus now shows His disciples the full extent of His love, loving them to the very end, and requests they model the same.

FAMILY PRAYER: Jesus, may we model daily the extent of Your love. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear the needs of our neighbors. May we humble ourselves in service, putting the needs of others before our own, following Your beautiful example of love. Thank You, Lord Jesus, for the ultimate revelation of Your love in the sacrifice of Your life. Amen.

Blow out one candle and do not relight it until Easter Sunday.

Light three of your candles.

DEVOTIONAL 4: JESUS COMFORTS HIS DISCIPLES

Kristin Langford, Ministry Leader for Early Childhood Ministry

Read: John 14:1–4

“Don’t let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in Me. There is more than enough room in My Father’s home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with Me where I am. And you know the way to where I am going.”
John 14:1–4 (NLT)

Can you imagine what the disciples were feeling when Jesus was telling them that He was not going to be with them much longer? These men had given up everything to follow Jesus, and I am sure they were very confused and discouraged. They were probably worried about what was going to happen to them.

In one of His last moments with all the disciples, Jesus took the time to encourage them. He reminded the disciples that He was trustworthy. He reminded them that He had a plan for them. He reminded them that ultimately, they would get to spend eternity with Him. Even though He could have, He did not take the time to explain every detail of the days ahead. He gave them what they needed to get through.

During this past year, there has been a lot of worry and wondering about what lies ahead. I have often joked that if God would just give us the plan, we could deal with whatever it is. But that is not the way God works. Probably because if He gave us His plan, we would still find things to worry about or question or doubt. God wants us to trust that He is working in us, to help us grow and be more Christ-like. His plan is ultimately for His glory and for our good even when that is very hard to see.

I also find it so comforting that Jesus, knowing the awful pain and trials He was about to face, took the time to reassure the disciples. He loved them. He reminded them of the truth; He pointed them back to God and loved them where they were. Personally, when I am facing something big in my life, I can get very self-absorbed and worry only about me. Jesus modeled for us what it looks like to love God and love others by caring for and comforting those around Him. When I take the time to encourage and serve people, the mountains that seem unmovable in my life become much smaller and more manageable.

FAMILY PRAYER: Dear God, thank You for being a God who is trustworthy. Thank You for being a God who cares for us. Help us not to carry our worry around but to instead lay it at Your feet and put our trust in You. Amen.

Blow out one candle and do not relight it until Easter Sunday.



Light two of your candles.

DEVOTIONAL 5: JESUS PRAYS

Nathan Kocurek, Associate Pastor of Student Ministries

Read: John 17

What a Friend We Have in Jesus ⁽²⁾

**What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear,
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.**


Have you experienced stress over the past year? Do you ever feel pressure weighing down on you? Do you ever feel pulled in too many directions at once? Ever feel like the walls are closing in?

Jesus gets it. He felt pressure. How do we know? He's God, right? Why should Jesus feel any pressure? He's all-powerful.

Take a closer look at Jesus praying on the night that He was betrayed. John's Gospel tells us in chapter 17 what Jesus prayed about. The prayer of Jesus gives us a glimpse of what was going through His mind as He and the disciples were wrapping up their last meal together. With the weight of the world on His shoulders, what concerns did Jesus have? We can see what a heavy load Jesus carried when He turns to the Father . . .

- He asks that His death may glorify Him and His Father, the only true God (John 17:1–5).
Jesus was concerned about the excruciating trial He was facing.
- He asks that His disciples may be unified and eternally protected (John 17:6–12).
Jesus was concerned about the ones He loved, their relationships and their protection.
- He asks that His disciples may be sanctified by God's Word (John 17:13–19).
Jesus was concerned about their walk with God and their growth.
- He asks that future believers may be united as one in their love and purpose (John 17:20–23).
Jesus was concerned about the entire church family and its health and influence.
- He asks that all believers go to be with Him and see His glory (John 17:24–26).
Jesus was concerned about being together again.

When the crushing pain of His situation was closing in on Him, Jesus placed His hope in the Father's love. Against all odds, He knew His Father was faithful. Like a mother who endures the pain of childbirth for the joy of seeing her beloved son or daughter, Jesus endured the pain of the cross for the joy of seeing many brothers and sisters brought to new life. Take a deep breath. What pressure are you feeling today? Will you take a moment and pray? Consider the access to the Father we now have because of the sacrifice of Christ. "What peace we often forfeit . . ."



FAMILY PRAYER: Father, it is through the death of Jesus on the cross that we will one day see You face to face. We thank You for the blessings of Your peace and the future we anticipate to be with You. Amen.

Blow out one candle and do not relight it until Easter Sunday.



Light the last remaining candle.

DEVOTIONAL 6: THE DEATH OF JESUS

Ren Nelson, Associate Pastor of Middle School Ministry

Read: John 19:15–37, Luke 23:44–49

The best way to escape the heat of summer is a pool.


Growing up, my family did not have a pool of our own, but the city we lived in had the best aquatics complex ever. This place was the best! They had a shallow pool for the little ones, a sports pool for water volleyball and basketball, and they had a deep pool. All of these, however, were nothing compared to the diving pool!

One summer I signed up for a diving competition. Come to find out, I would be the youngest contestant in that competition and the only person who had never jumped off the high dive. One by one, each diver had their turn until finally my name was called. As I began to climb up the ladder, I soon realized that this was much higher than it looked from the ground. I am not certain, but I think that my ears may have popped halfway up the climb. Upon reaching the top, I realized that I had made a mistake. Crippled with fear, and unsure of how long I would be able to breathe at this unfamiliar altitude, I closed my eyes and ran off the board headfirst. With no real understanding of how to dive from this height, my frail elementary school body flayed through the air like a rag doll.

Upon entering the water, the force of impact ripped my arms back violently, popping both my shoulders out of socket. While the pain was horrible, the fear and panic were overwhelming. Without the use of my arms, I tried my best to kick my way to the surface before I ran out of air. I kicked and kicked as hard as I could, but I was too deep and could not make it on my own. Then, at just the right time, the lifeguard dove in and rescued me. I was pulled out of the depths with no time to spare and brought safely out of the water and onto the pool deck. To this day, I am thankful for the lifeguard who dove in and rescued me.

***“The moment Jesus died on the cross, He rescued us.
He rescued us from the depths of our sin.”***


The moment Jesus died on the cross, He rescued us. He rescued us from the depths of our sin. At the perfect moment, when we could not save ourselves, God jumped in to save us. He stepped into His own creation to rescue us from the pain and brokenness caused by our mistakes. You see,



this is how great our God is! He knew we were in trouble, and He came to save us from certain death. In those final moments before Jesus died on the cross, He experienced the pain intended as punishment for all of mankind. He chose to endure the punishment to pay for all our sin (past, present, and future) and make a way for us to be forgiven and made right with God forever.

“He experienced the pain intended as punishment for all of mankind.”

The “way” to forgiveness and new life is available to anyone who places their faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. I am thankful for the swift actions of the lifeguard all those years ago, but I am overwhelmed by what my Savior and Lord did for me on the cross. He lived the life I should have lived and died the death I deserved to die. It is because of this death that I now have life. To this day, I owe my life to the God who dove in and rescued me.



FAMILY PRAYER: Dear God, I am truly thankful for the cross. You rescued me when I needed You most. God, excite me for this new life I have been given, and encourage me when I feel low. God, You are my rescuer! Thank You. Amen.

Blow out the last candle and do not relight it until Easter Sunday.



Light all six of your candles.

DEVOTIONAL 7: JESUS' EMPTY TOMB

Dave Carl, Pastor of Children's and Family Ministries

Read: John 20

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

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. We have sat in the discomfort and thanked Jesus for doing all this for us. We have sat in the darkness and felt 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.

This is the story of Lent! This is why we celebrate Easter!

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!"**

FAMILY 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.

HE IS RISEN. HE IS RISEN INDEED!



DARKNESS TO LIGHT

PREPARING YOUR FAMILY FOR EASTER

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Notes:

1. The ideas for Lenten candles were inspired by Desiring God. For more Easter devotionals and resources, go to <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/lenten-lights>
2. *What a Friend We Have in Jesus* | Public Domain, lyrics by Joseph Scriven, music by Charles Crozat Converse (1834–1918) | CCLI# 1579266

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