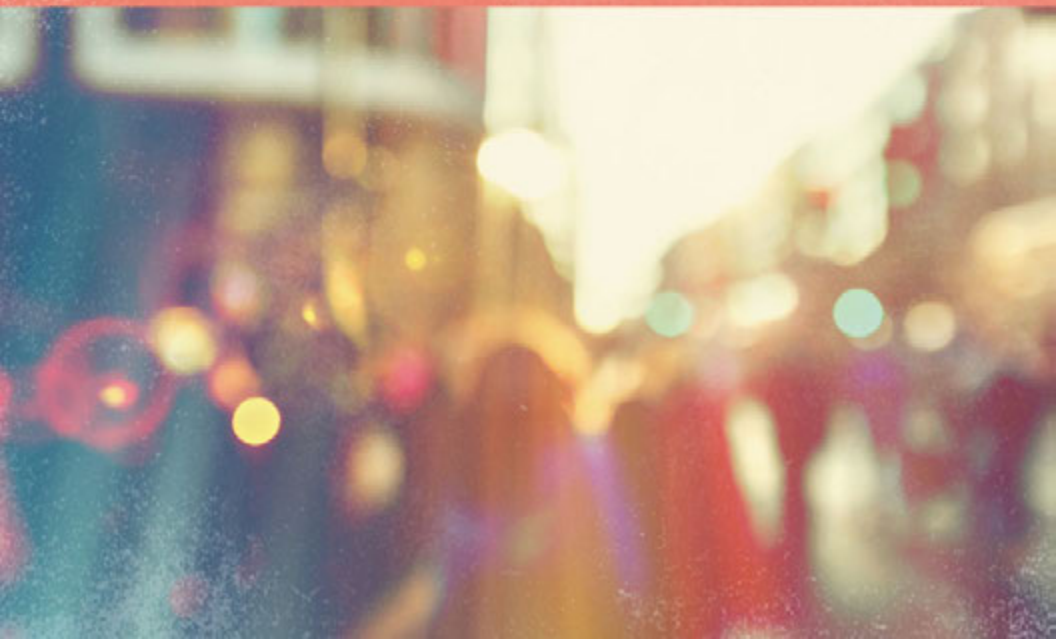


alicia britt chole

40 DAYS OF DECREASE

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



PRAISE FOR *40 DAYS OF DECREASE*

Alicia has a unique way of framing truth. Her heartfelt and thoughtful words penetrate the soul and make you feel and think in new ways.

—MARK BATTERSON

LEAD PASTOR, NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH, WASHINGTON, D.C.

I shared the platform with Alicia, heard her speak and realized how much she loved the Lord and His Word. I was taken by this dear woman.

—KAY ARTHUR

INTERNATIONAL BIBLE TEACHER, CO-FOUNDER OF PRECEPT MINISTRIES

Alicia has written a beautiful Lenten devotional, filled with gems that will draw your soul to God and His love. I highly recommend it!

—PETER SCAZZERO

PASTOR AND BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY SPIRITUALITY*

I have always loved Alicia's writing and I am falling deeper for her prose bathed in prophetic realism. She refuses to be sentimental and forces the reader to find a gritty Gospel where life, pain, and redemption live in the same space. The majority of writers claiming a spiritual center serve up prosaic prose, peppered with simple and cute couplets of sanitized faith, but Alicia delves into what Howard Thurman calls "the altar on the island of the soul." This is the kind of writing that cuts and heals. Bravo!

—DR. OTIS MOSS, III

SENIOR PASTOR, TRINITY UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST, CHICAGO, IL

I first encountered Alicia Britt Chole through her profound book, *Anonymous*, and I am delighted to see this new companion to nurturing our life together in the Spirit. *40 Days of Decrease* is a unique and original approach to the traditional preparation for the climax of Easter. The daily Reflection and Today's Fast components are gems, and the 40 distinct fasts she proposes offer a transformational praxis that redefines the meaning of hunger.

—DR. KEN BOA

PRESIDENT OF REFLECTIONS MINISTRIES, AUTHOR OF *CONFORMED TO HIS IMAGE*

Alicia Britt Chole's book is a wonderful journey into the purpose and heart of the Lenten season for those who may not be familiar with it. As someone who grew up in a non-liturgical church context, I never understood how to engage Lent as a sacred act of decreasing self and elevating Christ. Alicia's profound yet accessible revelation of decreasing ourselves so that Christ might increase in our lives will bless both seasoned participants in Lent and those who are just beginning to express this powerful spiritual discipline.

—KERRI WEEMS

AUTHOR OF *RHYTHMS OF GRACE: DISCOVERING GOD'S TEMPO FOR YOUR LIFE*

To me, Alicia is the complete package. Who I see day in and day out is the same person I see in public—a true follower of Jesus.

—DR. BARRY JAY CHOLE

CO-FOUNDER OF LEADERSHIP INVESTMENT INTENSIVES, ALICIA'S HUSBAND

Alicia has a tremendous passion to communicate the wholeness of God's purpose for broken people in broken communities, and shine a light on that path to wholeness and peace.

—SARA GROVES

AUTHOR, RECORDING ARTIST

Alicia is a dynamic sage and spiritual guide for the twenty-first-century seeker of God.

—DR. FRANK ANTHONY THOMAS

PROFESSOR OF HOMILETICS AT CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

In her beautifully transparent way, Alicia walks us through her journey toward utter dependence on Jesus and guides us in how to do the same. You will be blessed by her story and encouraged to look at fasting in a whole new way during this forty-day study. She will teach you how to rest in the promise that where He calls, He blesses and restores.

—JENNIFER ROTHSCHILD

AUTHOR OF *INVISIBLE: HOW YOU FEEL IS NOT WHO YOU ARE*, FOUNDER OF FRESH GROUNDED FAITH EVENTS AND WOMENSMINISTRY.NET

Alicia Britt Chole has an eloquence and thoughtfulness with words that are a rare gift. Her writings have deeply influenced me and I keep going back to them again and again. This devotional will provide Christ-followers everywhere a rich experience through the Lenten season. Her insights will help you linger over the sayings of Jesus and, more importantly, help you love Jesus more deeply.

—LANCE WITT

FOUNDER OF REPLENISH MINISTRIES

My dearest friend Alicia has done it again. And this time bringing our thoughts and attention to our interior life as we journey through Lent together. She writes with her whole heart laid bare . . . intuitive, prophetic, and profoundly inspiring, calling forth a revolution of soul health, stirring our passion to know Jesus more.

—DARLENE ZSCHECH

COMPOSER, WORSHIP LEADER, PASTOR, AND SPEAKER

Once again, God has sounded a clear chord of revelation through Alicia Chole. In her book, *40 Days of Decrease*, God uses her to lovingly guide the reader into recognizing His presence, purpose, and power in times of necessary loss. Against a backdrop of societal belief that identifies God in terms of individual gain and increase, Chole alerts and encourages us to recognize God's will and ways in the midst of experiencing personal reduction. In so doing, she leads us into a fast that further conforms us into the image of Christ. God has entrusted Alicia with a gift rare and precious in nature.

—DR. CLAUDE R. ALEXANDER, JR.

LEAD PASTOR OF THE PARK BAPTIST CHURCH, CHARLOTTE, NC

This book is a breath of fresh air. In a world where the loudest voices seem to all say that fulfillment is only found in addition, Alicia Britt Chole beckons us to reacquaint ourselves with the power of subtraction. *40 Days of Decrease* is a beautiful invitation to prepare for the celebration of Jesus' resurrection in a more meaningful way than ever before.

—DAVID LINDELL

LEAD CAMPUS PASTOR, JAMES RIVER CHURCH WEST

More than ever I am persuaded that the true purpose of Christian spiritual formation is not self-help or even spiritual growth, but loving God and serving God's world. Christ-followers are hungry for the kind of Lenten fast that sets us free to love and serve . . . and Alicia's creation is a powerful tool to lead us on that journey.

—DR. DAN BRUNNER

PROFESSOR OF CHRISTIAN HISTORY AND FORMATION,
GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY

Alicia is brutally honest; she's true; she is much closer to the Jesus path, the downward journey to the cross, than the surplus of tepid and painless "American-Christianity-lite." Hers are stern, robust and healing words, ideas, paragraphs, days. Alicia is not a pseudo-martyr, simply inviting us to wallow in (or idolize) her pain and sadness. Rather, through the delicate turn of the word, idea and phrase, she invites us to walk with Jesus Himself (not with her), to join her and others on the tough and true journey of transformational discipleship. This is the diet of true Christian Lent (You will learn more about Lent than ever before!), crucial for those who prefer to jump over the 40 days and land immediately into an exciting resurrection Sunday. I myself need this deep and disturbing book.

—DR. WILLIAM D. TAYLOR

SENIOR MENTOR, WORLD EVANGELICAL ASSOCIATION

Alicia does something quite remarkable with this book. Her gentle and poetic prose invites us to forgo life's clutter and heavy burdens, leading us to joy and freedom of a deeper life with God. So practical. So helpful.

—DR. NATHAN FOSTER

AUTHOR OF *THE MAKING OF AN ORDINARY SAINT*

I am continually stunned by Alicia's vivid conciseness, which cuts quickly to the unseen core of carnality. She settles down the reader into the joy of purposeful brokenness. This devotional is more than a "must-read;" it gripped my heart as a "must-experience."

—DR. DAVID J. NIQUETTE

LEAD PASTOR OF CHRIST CENTER COMMUNITY CHURCH, FORT COLLINS, CO

40 DAYS OF DECREASE

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

Alicia Britt Chole



W PUBLISHING GROUP

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To my eldest, Jonathan, whose life is a gift from God.

Jonathan, a long time ago you and I were sitting together one night near a bonfire and you asked me a weighty question that at its core was about decrease. “Mom,” you began, looking deeply into my eyes, “will you die one day?” “Yes, my love,” I replied. “One day Mommy will die.”

You breathed in my words and began to walk and walk, processing mysteries of faith with your golden mind and soul. Then you announced, “Mom, it’s okay. It’s okay if you die one day. Jesus can take you to heaven. BUT, I’m going to be the one who carries you there.” One day, my beloved son, my decrease on earth will be complete. On that day, rest assured that your love truly helped carry me to heaven.

I pray that I will be able to read this book to you for decades to come. But if you ever find yourself absent my voice, may these words guide you into Jesus’ arms. (I will be waiting for you there.)

Ebook Instructions

In this ebook edition, please use your device's note-taking function to record your thoughts wherever you see the bracketed instructions [Your Notes].

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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

PROLOGUE

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,

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
