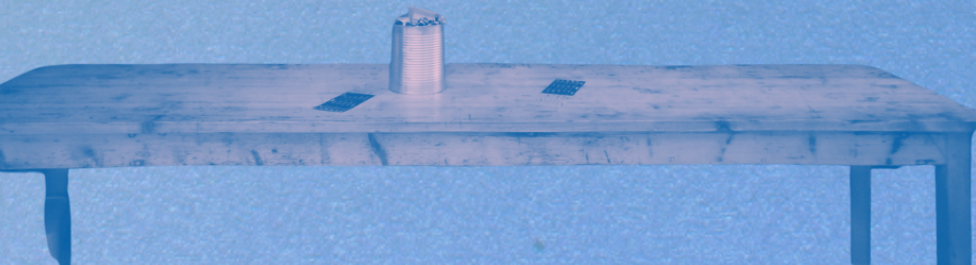


MARCH 5 - APRIL 17, 2025

# NCTS

PREPARING FOR WONDER

A 40 DAY JOURNEY  
THROUGH LENT



# PREPARING FOR WONDER

## A 40 DAY JOURNEY THROUGH LENT

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### INTRODUCTION to Acts and Isaiah and Lent

Something curious was happening in Israel.

It was common knowledge in the ancient world that the Jewish people were monotheists. ‘Yahweh is one, Yahweh alone’ was the watchword for generations of Jews living in the Holy Land and abroad. They adamantly—and at times violently—insisted that others ought to reject other, lesser gods and give their loyalty to the God of Israel.

Then, in the years following the death of Jesus of Nazareth, these committed monotheists were doing something strange: they were worshipping Jesus *and* Yahweh. In fact, they believed Jesus was Yahweh in the flesh—and that He had somehow escaped, or even conquered, death.

That Jesus of Nazareth was a miracle worker, few could doubt—but God? The thought of any deity taking on flesh was scandalous to Greeks and Romans alike, and to many Jewish people was beyond foolish.

And so, long before council or creed, the early church built its theology through *worship*.

In the decades that followed, yet another curious thing happened: droves of non-Jews—Gentiles—were joining Jews in their worship of the God of Israel, and His Son, Jesus of Nazareth.

While it wasn’t unusual to encounter what was commonly called a ‘God-fearer,’ a Gentile who observed some Jewish customs in order to draw near to the God of Israel—the rate at which Gentiles were claiming Jesus as Lord was, in a word, shocking.

So it was that the early church was faced by not one but two theological dilemmas: how do we, as committed monotheists, justify worshipping Yahweh and His Son, Jesus (not to mention this Third Person, the Spirit and Breath of God)? And, where do these Gentile God-fearers who have confessed Jesus as Lord fit in God’s covenant family, which to this point was primarily reserved for the children of Abraham?

The Book of Isaiah turned out to be rich with the raw material the early church needed to grapple with these questions.

When a eunuch from the court of Candace in Ethiopia, a God-fearing Gentile, meets Philip, it’s Isaiah he’s reading and Isaiah that helps Philip find language to usher him into the Kingdom. And as Cornelius’ house comes to faith, it’s then that the words of Isaiah ring out most strongly, reminding the children of Abraham that their calling had always been to *the nations*. As the early church gathered in their homes and at Solomon’s Collonade, it was Isaiah that guided their worship to see that the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 was Jesus of Nazareth.

These ancient words, ever true, spurred the church through great adversity to spread across the known world—and beyond. It didn’t take long before the Good News of Jesus spread from the backwater provinces of the Roman Empire to its heart: Rome itself.

By roughly 300 AD, Christians made up about 10% of the Roman population. These numbers increased in the fourth century, reaching an estimated 56.5% by 350 AD. This wildfire spread took place under the scrutinizing, even persecuting, eye of the Romans who felt these Christians posed a threat to their social order.

As Christians came to faith in droves, leaders of the early church realized that not every conversion was genuine—some converts were plants, spies sent to report back to Caesar on Christians’ activities.

# PREPARING FOR WONDER

## A 40 DAY JOURNEY THROUGH LENT

Jesus told us to be gentle as doves and wise as serpents; with this in mind the early church developed a 40-day period of intentional discipleship, marked by fasting, prayer, and generosity to the poor, that culminated in baptism at midnight on Easter morning. This rigorous process not only sorted out the committed from the uncommitted, but the sincere from the spies.

This forty day period came to be known as Lent.

In this guide, we'll join with the ancient church and Christians across the globe to prepare our hearts and minds for the wonder of Easter. With Acts in one hand and Isaiah in the other, we'll journey with the people of God to the celebration of Jesus' resurrection.

### SCRIPTURE READINGS THIS WEEK

Day	Date	Isaiah	Acts
1	Wednesday, March 5, 2025	1	1:1-26
2	Thursday, March 6, 2025	2-3	2:1-36
3	Friday, March 7, 2025	4-5	2:37-3:10
4	Saturday, March 8, 2025	6-7	3:11-4:12



# PREPARING FOR WONDER

## A 40 DAY JOURNEY THROUGH LENT

### FIRST FULL WEEK OF LENT

Day	Date	Isaiah	Acts
	Sunday, March 9, 2025	FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT	
5	Monday, March 10, 2025	8	4:13-37
6	Tuesday, March 11, 2025	9	5:1-32
7	Wednesday, March 12, 2025	10-11	Acts 5:33 – 6:15
8	Thursday, March 13, 2025	12-13	Acts 7:1 – 40
9	Friday, March 14, 2025	14-15	Acts 7:41 – 8:3
10	Saturday, March 15, 2025	16-17	Acts 8:4 – 40

### DEVOTIONAL - Chris Norman

The origins of Lent go back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century Christians observing a period of fasting and preparation for Easter. The 40 days of fasting is symbolically tied to Jesus' 40 days of fasting in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-2). Easter Sunday is the day of the year the church celebrates victory over sin with the resurrection of Jesus. The 40 days prior to Easter is an opportunity to prepare for this celebration by engaging in deeper levels of prayer, repentance, Scripture, and fasting.

Over the centuries the church at times has made the 40 days of Lent feel more obligatory or meritorious. Lent, however, is a voluntary observance, and not a biblical mandate (Rom. 14:5). While it has historical roots, it is only helpful and fruitful if the outward and inward practices of fasting and prayer are connected to a heart pursuing God. There is no benefit to the practice by simply going through the motions (Matt 6:16). This voluntary, and not mandatory, aspect of Lent over the more recent centuries of church history has given freedom for many more Protestant denominations to practice Lent along with Catholic and Lutheran churches.

For me personally, I have really appreciated the opportunity to reflect on Ash Wednesday, the start of Lent, and to practice a more intentional time of fasting, praying, and Scripture leading up to the celebration of Easter. It has also meant a lot to me that I am doing this with so many of my brothers and sisters all throughout the global church. Fasting can be giving up food or hobbies or specific things that require sacrifice. It can be once a week, the same period of time everyday, or any frequency we feel led to practice. Fasting coupled with prayerful dependence and pursuit of God can be spiritually impactful (Matt 16:18).

Lent is time of reflection, prayer, and preparation. It is God's kindness and love that leads us to repent and seek him more (Rom. 2:4). It is not a duty or required of Christians, but it can be spiritually fruitful for those who want to engage in the practice of preparing our hearts for the greatest celebration in human history – the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Matt. 28:5-7).

# PREPARING FOR WONDER

## A 40 DAY JOURNEY THROUGH LENT

### SECOND WEEK OF LENT

Day	Date	Isaiah	Acts
	Sunday, March 16, 2025	SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT	
11	Monday, March 17, 2025	18-19	Acts 9:1 – 31
12	Tuesday, March 18, 2025	20-21	Acts 9:32 – 10:22
13	Wednesday, March 19, 2025	22-23	Acts 10:23 – 48
14	Thursday, March 20, 2025	24-25	Acts 11:1 – 30
15	Friday, March 21, 2025	26-27	Acts 12:1 – 25
16	Saturday, March 22, 2025	28	Acts 13:1 – 28

### DEVOTIONAL - STEPHANIE TENNANT

From my earliest memories, I loved Easter and could not wait for Sunday morning to come when we'd celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. I'm old enough that I'd get a new dress, the frilly ankle socks, dress shoes, and sometimes a hat, and while I loved all that and looked forward to my Easter basket, what stands out most clearly in my mind is something that can't really be described or pictured, because it was something that I just felt to my core: a mixture of anticipation, excitement, hope, and joy that can't be manufactured!

While I was all in on Easter Sunday, I was raised in a Bible church where, other than the death of Jesus on the cross, we didn't give much thought to what preceded Easter or think about ways that we could prepare ourselves more intentionally for that celebration. My first experience with Ash Wednesday and seeing people celebrate it was when I was a sophomore in college and was attending a Bulls' game in Chicago. I remember being concerned about all the people with marks on their foreheads, but to be honest, I didn't give it much thought beyond that night.

A few years later, I was living in Chicago again, and I was reading an article in a Navigator's Discipleship Journal that became a pivotal moment of spiritual formation. The article was written by a young woman who was a dedicated runner, and in this article she shared how the Father brought to her attention how reliant she had become on running as a coping mechanism—this certainly grabbed me as I never thought of running as anything but positive. She went on to write that she decided to give up running for the forty days of Lent.

This was also really surprising to me as I had only heard of people giving up chocolate or sugar or meat on Fridays. If I'm honest, giving up those things felt like phoning it in or a form of religion, but this giving up of something that most would consider good and healthy, now that captured my heart and mind in a way the fasting for Lent never had before.

The author, as I remember it, shared what she learned and how she grew through a season where she prayed instead of running, how stillness changed her ability to hear from God, and how physically pausing drew her closer to the Father in a way that running used to in other seasons.

This article definitely got my attention and caused me to enter a season of figuring out what God was saying to me about it. I began to attend Ash Wednesday services, which highlighted the importance of repentance, fasting, and prayer, and I embraced the practice of fasting for the forty days of Lent. In the beginning, I would miss the start of Lent sometimes because I didn't attend churches that followed the Church Calendar, but I would still do it, even if I started late! I'd evaluate my life and seek the Father on what area of my life needed recalibration: coffee, shopping, social media, TV, desserts, staying up late, etc.

Some years, particularly the difficult ones where we were grieving and struggling with miscarriage and infertility, I would add something in: a new prayer practice, journaling, etc. it was important to me not to become legalistic

## PREPARING FOR WONDER

### A 40 DAY JOURNEY THROUGH LENT

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about it, so I wanted to embrace what the Father had for me in that season rather than just conforming to a religious standard!

I've learned a lot practicing Lent over the past fifteen years. One of the first things that I was very surprised to find out was that I could exercise consistent self control, something that always seemed like an area of failure and shame for me began to grow! Second, I learned to accepted the reality of my humanity. No matter how hard I try to be attentive, areas of excess creep up, and Lent is an annual opportunity to ask the Father where recalibration is needed on a more major scale in my heart and mind.

Now Lent is a season that I look forward to—a time to cultivate space and simplicity, a time for prayer, journaling, studying, and hearing from the Father in new and often unexpected ways. The absence of whatever I'm fasting from reminds me that I'm dust and that I'm completely reliant on a loving Father whose kindness leads me to repentance, so that I might experience more joy and more peace and bring Him more glory!

# PREPARING FOR WONDER

## A 40 DAY JOURNEY THROUGH LENT

### THIRD WEEK OF LENT

Day	Date	Isaiah	Acts
	Sunday, March 23, 2025		
17	Monday, March 24, 2025	29	Acts 13:29 – 52
18	Tuesday, March 25, 2025	30-31	Acts 14:1 – 29
19	Wednesday, March 26, 2025	32-33	Acts 15:1 – 29
20	Thursday, March 27, 2025	34-35	Acts 15:30 – 16:21
21	Friday, March 28, 2025	36	Acts 16:22 – 40
22	Saturday, March 29, 2025	37	Acts 17:1 – 21

#### DEVOTIONAL – KYLE TENNANT

Where I grew up, Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches loomed large on the religious landscape. For most of my life I associated Lent with fish fries and halupki and only mildly judged my classmates who told me how they'd given up chocolate for Lent while eating a Reese's peanut butter cup.

A decade or so later, I found myself pastoring in a church tradition that didn't just acknowledge Lent but actively sought to practice it. I can remember with clarity the first time I put a cross of ash on a person's forehead and said over them, "Repent and believe the Gospel."

Like many of the good things in our lives, I sort of tumbled into Lent—or, you might say, Lent tumbled into me, like a meet-cute in a 2000's romantic comedy. And like a 2000's romcom, my relationship with Lent grew through fits and starts until now you could say we're in a committed, if yearly, relationship.

Over the years, my practices of fasting for Lent have varied—I usually fast from something that has become too distracting, that is taking up too much space in my life. It's usually a combination of social media and a food or drink item. One year I gave up coffee which made for a sleepy forty days. Another, I gave up television. Instead of catching up on episodes of *This is Us*, I read nerdy fantasy novels and some books on Christian living.

I recall saying to Steph, "I feel so full of spiritual power."

"In New Testament times," Arthur Wallis says, "fasting was a channel of power."

Perhaps during this season of preparing for the wonder of Easter, our fasting will put us in touch with the spiritual power we see strewn across the pages of the Book of Acts.

Perhaps we'll find that our hunger and thirst can be satisfied by Him and Him alone.

# PREPARING FOR WONDER

## A 40 DAY JOURNEY THROUGH LENT

### FOURTH WEEK OF LENT

Day	Date	Isaiah	Acts
	Sunday, March 30, 2025		
23	Monday, March 31, 2025	38-39	Acts 17:22 – 18:22
24	Tuesday, April 1, 2025	40	Acts 18:23 – 19:20
25	Wednesday, April 2, 2025	41-42	Acts 19:21 – 41
26	Thursday, April 3, 2025	43	Acts 20:1 – 27
27	Friday, April 4, 2025	44	Acts 20:28 – 21:14
28	Saturday, April 5, 2025	45	Acts 21:15 – 40

### DEVOTIONAL – SUZE FAIR

Over twenty years ago, a good friend and I were talking about the holidays and how they often caught us by surprise. Easter was our topic of conversation that day and when she told me she actually felt ready, I asked her why. Her response was one word, “Lent”. I honestly had no idea what she was talking about. I thought Lent was just a “high church” thing.

I was wrong. As my friend explained more about it, I felt my heart being drawn to what it might mean to practice and observe for myself. Twenty-two years later, I’m still drawn to these forty days and how they prepare my heart for Easter.

Traditionally, Lent is about fasting and sacrifice and honestly, that is the part that always seemed overwhelming to me. What would I “give up” for forty days? Would I be able to sustain the going without – or would it just be a set-up for failure?

Here’s what I’ve learned over the years of practicing – observing Lent reminds me of LIFE and LOVE. The life of Jesus that was laid down on my behalf and the amount of love required to do so.

Over the years, I’ve fasted from many things – food, habits, and even some hang-ups. In the end though, it has mattered very little what I’m giving up – it’s always been about what the “lack” (often perceived and not real) reminds me of: *I am regularly tempted to use other things to fill the spaces in my heart, mind, and soul that only God should occupy.*

Observing Lent for me has functioned as a re-set of sorts – helping me practice what it means to be on journey with the Lord – all of the days of the year. All throughout these forty days, my heart is getting ready to remember and celebrate Resurrection.

In Psalm 84, the Psalmist writes about the journey this way:

What joy for those whose strength comes from the Lord, who have set their minds on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. When they walk through the Valley of Weeping, it will become a place of refreshing springs. The autumn rains will clothe it with blessings. They will continue to grow stronger, and each of them will appear before God in Jerusalem. Psalm 84:5-7, NLT

That’s my prayer this year as I observe Lent, that no matter where I’m walking (even if it is the Valley of Weeping), I will remember that there’s not a place I am or will be that Jesus hasn’t already been – and what starts with grief will end in celebration.



# PREPARING FOR WONDER

## A 40 DAY JOURNEY THROUGH LENT

### FIFTH WEEK OF LENT

Day	Date	Isaiah	Acts
	Sunday, April 6, 2025		
29	Monday, April 7, 2025	46-47	Acts 22:1 – 21
30	Tuesday, April 8, 2025	48-49	Acts 22:22 – 23:11
31	Wednesday, April 9, 2025	50	Acts 23:12 – 35
32	Thursday, April 10, 2025	51-52	Acts 24:1 – 27
33	Friday, April 11, 2025	53-54	Acts 25:1 – 12
34	Saturday, April 12, 2025	55-56	Acts 25: 13 - 22

### DEVOTIONAL – KELLY FAIR

I grew up in a household that did not participate in Lent. My parents were Jesus-loving, worship leading people but in our church and its denomination, Lent wasn't widely practiced. My sister and I waved branches on Palm Sunday, occasionally attended a Maundy Thursday service (Thursday before Easter weekend marking Jesus' last supper and arrest), and enthusiastically sang "Up From The Grave He Arose" on Easter Sunday.

But we didn't participate in the experience of Lent. In essence, we bypassed Lent in order to get to Easter and the resurrection of Jesus.

I guess that's a human tendency. We want to skip over the darker parts of the story of Jesus (his suffering, humiliation, rejection by his community and of course his horrific death on the cross) in order to get to the triumphant conclusion where Jesus walks out of the tomb.

But there's no resurrection without crucifixion and death.

This is where Lent comes into play for me. It is 40-day slow-down and reflection process that not only prepares me for that epic weekend in the life of Jesus, but causes me to examine my heart (motives, attitudes, etc.) and the way I live (priorities, decisions, actions), leading me into a more authentic expression of who God created me to be.

Jesus experienced something similar at the beginning of his ministry when he went into the wilderness for 40 days to pray, worship and engage with his heavenly father. In the process, Satan challenged and tempted him to take an "easier" path. In those 40 days, Jesus:

1. **Fasted** - He gave up a physical essential (food) upon which he depended.
2. **Prayed** - He replaced it with a spiritual essential (intimacy with his Father) that he actually needed.
3. **Focused** - He fed on the Truth of God's Word (Scripture) as a defining essential.

For me, Lent is a 40 day process of following Jesus' example of fasting (giving up a physical essential), praying (replacing it with a spiritual essential) and focusing (scripture) on what He's saying to me about me, my life, my character, etc.

While I've not given up all food for 40 days, I have given up something that's important to me at the time - coffee, bread, chocolate, television, social media, etc.- and replaced it with rhythms of prayer and being in God's word during the time when I would normally be doing those things.

What always happens is that I quickly become aware of how uncomfortable, inconvenienced or even agitated I am as I am focused on what I'm missing out on. I'm tempted to rationalize a cheat here or a cheat there ("One Hershey's Kiss and it's back to my fast.")

# PREPARING FOR WONDER

## A 40 DAY JOURNEY THROUGH LENT

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Sticking with it for the entire 40 days does three important things:

1. **Wakes Me Up** -I see how much I depend on that thing to provide comfort and happiness.
2. **Offers Me A Different Path** - I lean more on rhythms of prayer and scripture in ways I typically don't do at other times of the year.
3. **Delivers The Things That Matter**- It's not coincidental that at the end of the 40 days of Lent, I often experience greater measures of peace rather than anxiety or greater joy that lifts my spirit even when everything isn't going my way. I find myself more grateful for what I have been given rather than focused on what I don't have.

As of this writing, I'm still sorting through on how I'll engage with the 40 days of Lent. I'm seeking God's input on what I'm going to give up, what I'm going to lean into and how I'm going to pursue Him.

Here's what I know: I'm going to do it; that's not in doubt. And I'm going to struggle in the process; It'll be costly and uncomfortable. And I believe the Father loves me and has good gifts for me as I am obedient to Him.

# PREPARING FOR WONDER

## A 40 DAY JOURNEY THROUGH LENT

### PALM SUNDAY – HOLY WEEK

Day	Date	Isaiah	Acts
	Sunday, April 13, 2025		
35	Monday, April 14, 2025	57-58	Acts 25:23 – 27
36	Tuesday, April 15, 2025	59	Acts 26:1 - 18
37	Wednesday, April 16, 2025	60-61	Acts 26:19 - 32
38	Maundy Thursday, April 17, 2025	62-63	Acts 27:1 – 44
39	Good Friday, April 18, 2025	64-65	Acts 28:1 – 15
40	Holy Saturday, April 19, 2025	66	Acts 28:16 – 31
	Easter Sunday, April 20, 2025		

### PALM SUNDAY TEXT

#### *The Triumphal Entry (John 12:12-19)*

The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. 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!”

Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written,

“Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion;  
see, your king is coming,  
seated on a donkey’s colt.”

At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him.

Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. So the Pharisees said to one another, “See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!”