

# These Forty Days

A Lenten Devotional

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*Lord! Who throughout these forty days,  
For us didst fast and pray,  
Teach us with Thee to mourn our sins,  
And close by Thee to stay.*

*As Thou with Satan didst contend,  
And didst the victory win,  
Oh, give us strength in Thee to fight,  
In Thee to conquer sin.*

*As Thou didst hunger bear and thirst,  
So teach us, gracious Lord,  
To die to self, and chiefly live  
By Thy most holy Word.*

*And through these days of penitence,  
And through Thy Passiontide,  
Yea, evermore, in life and death,  
Jesu! with us abide.*

*Abide with us, that so, this life  
Of suffering overpast,  
An Easter of unending joy  
We may attain at last!*

—Claudia F. Hernaman,  
“Lord, Who throughout These Forty Days” (1873)<sup>1</sup>

In memoriam

Judith Faith Bell Hooven (1956-99)

*Judie worshipped God “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24, KJV).*

## \* Introduction to the Journey

*These Forty Days* is offered as a devotional companion for the season of Lent in the Christian year. The title refers not only to the forty days of the season from Ash Wednesday to Easter (not counting Sundays) but also to the wonderful nineteenth-century hymn of Claudia F. Hernaman, “Lord, Who throughout These Forty Days.” The hymn has in view the desert temptation of our Lord as told in the Gospels. The story of the devil tempting Jesus is set within a period of fasting and prayer that is preparation for Jesus’ public ministry and passion. It is notable throughout the Scriptures that times of desert preparation precede significant ministry. Besides Jesus’ experience, we see it, for example, in the lives of Joseph, Moses, Elijah, Jonah, John the Baptist, and the apostle Paul. Christian people throughout the centuries have recognized the importance of special times for fasting and prayer. This is why the church very early on began to observe the season preceding Easter as an appropriate time for special spiritual focus. This was nothing new of course because Israel also observed special times for fasting and prayer, usually climaxing in feasts celebrating God’s redemptive work among them (Passover, Pentecost, Ninth of Ab, Tabernacles, and Purim). Surely early Jewish Christians linked their long Passover tradition to the passion and death of Jesus, following the cues of the Teacher himself. This is simply to say that the rhythms of fasting and feasting, desert and oasis, discipline and joy, are not only well known to God’s people but also seem to be essential components of spiritual growth.

One reason for this is that as the people of God we are a “storied” people. That is to say, the way that God has chosen to reveal himself to us is not so much through propositional truths and philosophies but

largely in the telling of the story of our redemption. From creation to covenant to slavery to exodus to sacrificial worship to prophecy and judgment to silence to incarnation of God's self in Jesus of Nazareth to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit to the complete redemption of all things—what a story! This is why the Bible is so important to us because the Scriptures gather up these stories under the inspiration of the Spirit to continue shaping our identity as the people of God. Observing the seasons of the Christian year is simply part of remembering this story in a way that inspires, corrects, teaches, guides, and shapes us more and more into the likeness of Christ.

Those of us in the “believers’ church” tradition have not connected as deeply to the rhythms of the Christian year (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost) as our brothers and sisters from more liturgical traditions. Sometimes people in our tradition worry that by observing Lent we are in danger of promoting dead ritual or form for its own sake. However, we, too, have understood something about the need for times of special spiritual focus. Revivals, camp meetings, assemblies, and prayer meetings have all been part of recognizing the importance of setting aside certain times for a deeper focus on what it means to follow the way of Jesus. And this is what the season of Lent is really about.

The word “lent” comes from a Latin word meaning “to lengthen” in the sense that the days are getting longer (in the northern hemisphere). Lent is popularly known as the time when Christians make a sacrifice of something in their lives. More importantly, Lent calls us away from easy religion. It presses upon our hearts the radical claims of the gospel. It confronts us with the obedience, suffering, and death of Jesus Christ, and it forces us to hear again his disturbing words, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34).

So *These Forty Days* is offered as a simple guide for the reading of Scripture, reflection, prayer, and response. The primary emphasis is on the teaching of Jesus in what we have come to call the Sermon on the Mount, as presented to us in Matthew's gospel. The hope is that beginning the day with *intention* and *attention* will shape the remainder of the day toward a heightened sensitivity for how the Holy Spirit would like to teach us and guide us moment by moment. This is meant to be a friendly practice and not task driven. Embracing the discipline of this

time is a good thing. Since Christian life is communal, we may even find it helpful to share this time with others—either at home or with one or two friends. However we want to approach it—alone or in the company of others—perhaps the most beneficial way to begin is by praying right now that God would make us hungry and thirsty to spend these first moments of the day with our minds tuned to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who invite us into their life-giving fellowship.

May the Lord draw us closer during these days. May we come to Easter Day with a sense of prepared anticipation as we have never had before. And may the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us all.

# \* The Beginning of Lent

## (Ash Wednesday to Day 4)

Ash Wednesday is a significant way to begin the season of Lent, since it links us back to where this story is headed: the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and then his arrest, trial, suffering, and death. Traditionally the ashes of this day are obtained by burning the dried palm fronds that were used in the celebration of Palm Sunday the previous year. Typically the services of Ash Wednesday mark the beginning of the season of Lent through Scripture reading, songs of the season, and prayer. Many Christians begin a time of special fasting on Ash Wednesday that lasts throughout Lent (except Sundays). This can take many different forms, from giving up some particular food or habit to taking on a new spiritual discipline. Either way, the purpose is to move us to a deeper life of prayer.

In some places Ash Wednesday services include the opportunity to receive the imposition of ashes on the forehead during a service. This is a long tradition in the church that serves a couple of key purposes. One purpose is to remind us of the truth that life is short and we are utterly dependent upon God. The words spoken over us are, “For you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” This comes from Genesis 3:19, where God spoke the consequences of sin over Adam and Eve. The ashes also serve as a sign to the world that we are among those who identify with Christ. In this way we bear witness throughout the day wherever we go that we are “crucified with Christ. It is no longer [we] who live, but Christ who lives in [us]” (Gal. 2:20).



## Ash Wednesday

### BIBLE TEXT

Galatians 2:20

### CONSIDER

This season of Lent raises for us the idea of *paschal* spirituality. This is an odd word and may be unfamiliar to us, but it has significance as we seek to begin this journey well. It comes from the Hebrew word *pesach*, which carries in part the meaning “from death to life.” It has in mind the journey of Jesus, who became “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8) and whom God raised from the dead. The death and resurrection of Jesus is the center of our faith. We live as disciples (followers) of Jesus with the mind-set of the apostle Paul when he said, “I die every day” (1 Cor. 15:31). The way of Jesus is marked by a daily death to sin, selfishness, and dishonesty—all that is contrary to Christ.

This is paschal spirituality, the way of Jesus. Author Brennan Manning discusses in his book *The Signature of Jesus* seven characteristics of this paschal spirituality that could guide us well during this Lenten season. The first characteristic is that paschal spirituality is *Christ centered*. This may seem obvious, but we must confess how often we are consumed with ourselves. The question that Jesus asked of Peter following the resurrection should pierce our hearts every day, “Do you love me more than these?” (John 21:15).

The second characteristic is that paschal spirituality is always *communal*. Our Christian faith is always personal but never private. During this Lenten journey we must ask ourselves, “What is my net influence on the community of faith?”

The third characteristic of paschal spirituality is that it *believes in redemption*. Christians should be optimistic people. We have not given up on the world, because we know that God is at work in the world by the Holy Spirit to redeem the world and everything in it.

The fourth characteristic of paschal spirituality is that we consider ourselves to be *crucified with Christ*. We respond to God’s forgiveness with a life fully surrendered to God. As Christians we no longer work to

protect our personal rights, but now we fulfill our responsibilities, our service to Christ.

The fifth characteristic of paschal spirituality is that it is *joyful and optimistic*. Our life in Christ is anchored in hope and always looks forward. We ought to attract people to our faith quite literally by the fun there is in being a Christian.

The sixth characteristic is that paschal spirituality *promotes unity without uniformity*. Mature Christian faith appreciates the rich variety of personalities who make up the church.

Finally, the seventh characteristic is that paschal spirituality *regards persons as free*. Therefore, we stop trying to control and manipulate each other. This may be the hardest lesson of all, for sometimes we try to secure our own faith by forcing others to look just like us.

## READING

Death and resurrection are not one-time events that occur only at the end of our journey. They are the pattern of our lives day after day.<sup>1</sup> “Each time we let go of the past to embrace the future we relive the paschal journey of Jesus in our flesh. Each time we allow our fears or selfishness to die, we break through to new life. Each time we open ourselves to the Spirit so that he can break down the walls of suspicion and bitterness, we come home to ourselves, the community, and the Lord.”<sup>2</sup>

—Brennan Manning and John Heagle

## PRAYER

Father, as we begin this Lenten journey, we pray your watchful care over us as we seek to overcome evil by the power and grace of the Spirit. Through our sacrifices of self, make us more like Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

## DISCIPLINE (RESPONSE)

Think prayerfully through each of the seven characteristics of the paschal journey. To what degree are these marks of the way of Jesus evident in your life?

## BLESSING

Go now into this holy day in the power of the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the Savior who gave himself for us. And may the peace of Christ be with you.