

Introduction

What makes the desert beautiful . . . is that somewhere it
hides a well.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*

Students rushed in as the tardy bell rang, sliding into their desks and grabbing pen and paper to answer the journal prompt written on the whiteboard. I (Katie) checked attendance and let them work quietly as they answered the day’s question: “Why do you think Lent is forty days long?”

As they worked, I pulled up the lecture notes and presentation on my computer and waited patiently, watching as pens were set down one by one, students turning to visit with their friends when they finished.

“That’s it . . . Lent is RUINED!”

Scanning the room, I noticed right away who had shouted in frustration. In the back row, with a candy bar wrapper in his hand, sat Gus: a jovial kid who played football, served on student council, and filled the role of lovable class clown most days.

“Did you give up candy for Lent, Gus?” I asked, chuckling quietly.

“YEAH! And I TOTALLY FORGOT!” he said, in between chews. “Gabe just handed this to me and I ate it without thinking and now . . .” his words trailed off as he took another big bite of the forbidden candy bar, “and now, Lent is OVER! I didn’t even last a week.”

Have you ever made that same mistake? Lent starts on Ash Wednesday, and, just like a New Year’s resolution, you set a lofty goal for yourself to not eat candy or to avoid sodas or to pray a Rosary every day or to become a super-awesome-saintly-holy-best-Catholic-ever. . . . And inevitably, a few days into Lent, something happens: you instinctively grab a piece of candy from a dish, or you buy a soda at lunch, or you totally forget to pray the Rosary before you go to bed, and next thing you know, it’s the week before Easter and you haven’t done anything you wanted to do or not do the entire season of Lent and you think that Lent is just completely ruined.

If we think about Lent as a season of “doing this” or “not doing that,” then it’s very easy to fail. When we pigeonhole the entire season as a time to complete our Catholic to-do lists filled with stressful tasks, it’s easy to treat these forty days with a win-or-lose attitude. Either we successfully give up the one thing we like and we have a good Lent, *or* we fail miserably and give in to a temptation and the entire season becomes a colossal waste of time.

When we think of Lent only in these black-and-white terms and make it about the external things we do or don’t do, then it becomes a few weeks of hurrying up and getting to Easter so we can get back all that stuff we gave up and take a rest from all that extra holy stuff we tried to cram in and celebrate Easter, with marshmallow chicks and fine chocolates. With this little book we want to help you break that cycle of lame Lents and instead take you on a journey of sorts that we hope brings you closer to Jesus.

Rather than doing a half-hearted Lent this year, what if you approach it as a time that can center and reshape your entire year, maybe even your whole life? What if you enter into the spiritual desert of Lent ready to seek out and meet Jesus—person-to-person? What if Lent is forty days *in* and *through* the desert, and while there, you have an authentic, personal, life-changing encounter with the living God? What if Lent is a chance for you to pray daily, make meaningful sacrifices, and seek opportunities to serve those around you?

Lent isn’t just forty sequential days with extra spiritual things to do. It’s meant to be a time of true conversion, when you walk through the desert and come out on the other side having met Jesus, ready to continue growing in relationship with him as you contemplate the meaning of his death and resurrection for your own life.

If we really do believe Lent should shape and form our whole year, and it is not just these forty days that get us to jelly beans and chocolate bunnies, pastel colors and egg hunts, an empty tomb and *Alleluia*, then we have to walk through the Lenten desert with purpose, focus, and a real desire to meet Jesus and be changed by him. This little book is your guide and companion for that journey.

Using this Booklet

First things first: You will want to keep a Bible and a notepad or journal nearby when using this booklet. (The scripture quotations in this booklet are from the *New American Bible, Revised Edition*.)

Each Sunday, we'll give you three simple challenges based on a passage from one of the gospels to direct you through the week. You'll focus on building your prayer life, making intentional sacrifices, and giving of yourself in some way. We've built in room for you to make some notes or write your goals for the week.

Monday through Friday, you'll read a short reflection on a passage from scripture, usually the Psalms, and you'll be challenged to think about something very specific or do something to help unpack the day's verse. If you can, try to read the reflections and challenges in the morning, so you can think about them throughout the coming day. These challenges and questions are a chance to examine what's going on in your life, how you're approaching and encountering Jesus, and how you're being formed, one day at a time, into a person who is truly transformed by the Lord.

To wrap up each week, on Saturdays we'll give you three deep-dive questions to help you reflect on the week you just had. Hopefully, thinking through these questions will show you Christ active in the week gone by, prepare you for the next week, and draw you closer to the living God.

With *Lent: One Day at a Time for Catholic Teens*, you have everything you need to journey through Lent. You can focus on these forty days as a time to stretch and grow as you keep your eyes fixed on Jesus and deepen your relationship with him, and be truly transformed by, and in, this Lenten desert.

Ash Wednesday

And your Father who sees **in secret** will repay you.

—Matthew 6:4

Today Catholics around the world go to church and receive black crosses on their foreheads. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus says that we shouldn't do good deeds, give to the poor, or pray so that others notice. Rather, we should do these things quietly, or "in secret." Does walking around all day with ashes on our foreheads contradict what Jesus wants from us?

If you have ashes on your forehead today, don't worry. When Jesus says to do things of faith quietly, he's talking about the importance of our inner lives. He reminds us that God is watching, and sees what others don't. He knows what's in our hearts.

Pick a Challenge for this Week

- Write an encouraging or affirming note to someone anonymously.
- Post a prayer or reflection about your Lenten journey on social media and don't track likes, shares, or retweets.
- Do one of your siblings' chores or a household task/project that your parents normally take care of without telling them.

Feel Ambitious?

Read Matthew 6:1–21 and write a brief note to Jesus giving your plans for Lent. Try three things to match the three disciplines of Lent: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

Closing Prayer

Jesus, draw me close to you these forty days.

Let me seek you with focus.

Cleanse me of my pride.

Help me look to you alone,

and give me strength to love others as you do.

Amen.

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

To you I raise my eyes,
to you enthroned in heaven.
—Psalm 123:1

This Lenten journey through the desert with Jesus has just begun, but this is not *your* beginning. You have been on a journey since the day you were born. You've learned lots of lessons, made a few mistakes, established habits (both good and bad), and taken on burdens that may sometimes feel like they are too much to bear.

As you walk through the desert, there will be moments when you become more aware of who you are and see all that you've learned and where you need to grow. In these moments, it's important to look to Jesus, and remember he is with you on this journey. You are not alone in the desert. And when you lift your eyes, you will see that Jesus is walking with you, reminding you that he's already won victory over sin and death.

Grow Your Soul

Write about a struggle you have had to overcome. Ask yourself: How did I make it through? Who helped me along the way?

Feel Ambitious?

Read Psalm 123 and spend some time in quiet meditation, pondering the Lord's goodness. If you're able, go pray at an adoration chapel or an open church for a few minutes today.

Closing Prayer

*Jesus, I am often weighed down by the burdens I carry.
I am distracted by the struggles I face.
Help me to keep my eyes fixed on you,
so that I may share in your glory. Amen.*

Friday after Ash Wednesday

Have mercy on me, God,
in accord with your **merciful love**.

—Psalm 51:3

It's the third day of Lent. Maybe you've already indulged in what you promised to give up, or kept to yourself what you promised to give away, or maybe you accidentally ate meat on this first Friday of Lent.

Lapses in judgment or memory can lead us to think, "Oh well, maybe next year!" or even worse, "If I don't run to Confession, I'm going to hell!" If one of these reactions sounds like you, stop! Take a breath and read the line of scripture at the top of this page again.

God is not waiting for us to screw up so he can smack us down. When we fall short, God does not look at us with disappointment, anger, or vengeance. Rather, he looks at us with the gentleness of a father whose child is hurt; he swoops in, picks her up, and kisses what hurts. Turn to our heavenly Father today and accept his healing touch.

Grow Your Soul

Think of a moment when you fell short of being the person you want to be, and ask God for the grace to look at yourself with *his* gentleness.

Feel Ambitious?

Read Psalm 51. Write down as many interactions with your friends, teachers, and parents that you can remember from the last twenty-four hours. As you think about those moments, ask Jesus for help being gentle with yourself, and merciful toward others.

Closing Prayer

*Jesus, I am often my own worst critic.
Help me to see myself as you do,
and allow me to also see others through your eyes.
Amen.*

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

Lord, you are good and forgiving,
most merciful to all who call on you.

—Psalm 86:5

Giving up or fasting from something during Lent can make us cranky. Something as simple as your mom reminding you of a chore you forgot, or the homework you've put off, can push you over the proverbial edge. Or perhaps it's your sister droning on about the latest drama in her life. It may even be your best friend smacking his gum or annoying you with some other irritating habit. Some pet peeve gets under your skin, and suddenly you lose control and say something snarky to your unsuspecting loved one.

In this season of Lent, when tensions can run high as we move from being attached to certain things to giving those things up so we can focus on Jesus, it may be helpful to recall the reason we are doing all of this. We sacrifice (give something up or fast) not so that we can show off how good we are; we sacrifice so that we may better imitate Jesus in all that we say and in all that we do. He is good, forgiving, and merciful to all who turn to him, and we are called to be the same.

This Week's Wins

- Looking back on these first few days of Lent, in what ways have you stayed true to the sacrifices and fasting you promised?

- When did you set aside time for prayer or serving others? How did it feel to focus on talking to God?

- What small service did you do for someone else? Write about what that was like.

Feel Ambitious?

Read Psalm 86 and write down moments from the last few days when you felt anxious, frustrated, or stressed. Who did you take it out on? Pray for that person, then go and apologize.

Closing Prayer

Jesus, sometimes I am the least loving to those I love most.

Give me patience and peace to respond as you would.

Help me see myself and others as you do: with eyes of mercy and love.

Amen.