

INTRO

Welcome! Peace be with you as we enter the season of Lent.

Lent is a season of fasting and repentance that reminds us, in an embodied way, that we have not yet reached the promised land. In this mortal life, we are on pilgrimage. God gives us nourishment, which can offer a foretaste of our final destination. But we're not there yet.

The 40 days of Lent remind us that Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness, facing temptation, completely dependent upon the Lord's provision for food and water. Likewise, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, facing temptation. He fasted from food but fed upon the word of God (Matt. 4:4). Jesus is our pioneer in the wilderness, showing us that we need not build idols to receive true deliverance. Rather, in Christ, we are freed to live in dependence upon and active obedience to the Father.

Beginning on Ash Wednesday, we're reminded: "you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). The next 39 days build upon the reality that we are mortal creatures, utterly dependent upon God for each breath. We also recognize and repent of the ways in which we have been building idols for ourselves in the wilderness. Following Christ, we are called to a path of prayer, meditation upon scripture, and fasting — a different path through the wilderness. For this reason, many people choose to mark this season by taking on spiritual practices or giving things up. All of this leads to the commemoration of the moment when the promised land — the Temple — Jesus Christ himself — brings together heaven and earth in his work on the cross (on Good Friday) and resurrection of Christ (on Easter).

In this guide, you'll find a reflection for each of the seven weeks of Lent, beginning with the half week that starts on Ash Wednesday. Each week's entry draws on themes from the seven chapters of *The End of the Christian Life* and includes a psalm to orient our lives and our practices within the Word of God, a brief reflection, a prompt for prayer, and suggestions for daily and weekly practices. As the introduction to *The End of the Christian Life* notes, the book itself is a journey, a Christ-shaped path of recognizing and repenting of the idols that bind us. It is a journey from darkness to light, culminating in the God of life revealed in the crucified and resurrected Christ. It brings readers on a pilgrimage to cultivate true Easter hope. As such, the book is an ideal companion in the season of Lent, though it was not written exclusively for that purpose. We invite you to use this guide in conjunction with your individual or group reading of *The End of the Christian Life*.

We are mortal. We are limited. We are dust. Yet, we are also beloved creatures, embraced by the Living God in Christ and given an astonishing hope and vocation on this earthly pilgrimage. Join us on this journey, as we deepen our hope in the cross and resurrection of Christ on this dusty path.

In Christ,

J. Todd Billings and Katlyn DeVries

LENT 2021

Week 1: February 17-20

Week 2: February 21-27

Week 3: February 28-March 6

Week 4: March 7-13

Week 5: March 14-20

Week 6: March 21-27

Week 7: March 28-April 3

WEEK 1

Chapter 1: Welcome to Sheol: A Guided Tour of Life in the Pit

*“I waited patiently for the LORD;
he turned to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.”*

—Psalm 40

Tense neck. Tightened shoulders. Furrowed brow. As I sit at my computer, I suddenly realize that, while I thought I was relaxed, my body is still holding the stress that I’m feeling. Maybe, in the back of my mind while I check emails, I’m thinking about my upcoming doctor appointment. Maybe it’s continued worries about the ways COVID-19 is impacting my community, or even the weight of the sharp disagreements that divide our nation. Suddenly, I’m sucked down into ‘the pit,’ and my body enters ‘fight or flight,’ the natural self-protection mode that seeks to control the threat, even if that threat is subconscious. In a subtle way, my body is reacting as if a bear might jump out from around the corner. I take a deep breath, stand up, and grab my coat. It’s time to take a walk.

At times, all of us find ourselves in a dark and miry pit, in Sheol. This pit has many forms, but they all share a sense of feeling somehow abandoned. Perhaps we struggle with illness, fear of violence, or the grief of a broken relationship. Scripture offers guidance to those of us in the pit --wait patiently for the Lord. This doesn’t mean passivity, a hopeless self-resignation in the midst of defeat. But, instead of fighting or fleeing, we are invited to open our eyes, even if just for a moment. In an act of courage, we can slow down, look around, and become accustomed to the strange terrain. In this place, we know we need a Deliverer. We can’t get out of the pit on our own. Yet, in this place, we can also find that we aren’t alone after all. For through Christ, the perfect dwelling place of God, “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (Jn. 1:5).

Practice:

- **Daily:** Is your body carrying the tension of the ‘flight or fight’ response? Take a moment to pay attention to your body. Close your eyes. Release the tension from your neck, your shoulders, your face. Take a few slow, deep breaths, thanking God for the gifts of life, breath, and creation in its wonders. Thank God that even “if I make my bed in Sheol, you [the Lord] are there” (Ps. 139:8)
- **This Week:** Take a walk. I find a local cemetery to be a relaxing place. It’s cold in Michigan this time of year, so if you’re like me, you may need to bundle up. Walk slowly and carefully. Take time to notice what’s around you. In a cemetery, notice the names and dates on the headstones. Wonder about the lives lived and lost, each person’s hopes and fears. Giving thanks for the gift of life, remind yourself that someday you too will be among the dead.
- **Reflect/Discuss:** Review the discussion questions on pages 47-48. Journal your responses, or if you’re in a group, share your thoughts with others. What questions, insights, and hopes do you carry with you from the reading into this coming week?

Prayer:

Read Psalm 40 again, this time as a prayer. As you pray, name some ways in which the Lord has turned to you and heard your cry. Name also some areas in which you are still waiting.

WEEK 2

Chapter 2: Two Views of Mortality: Is Death an Enemy or a Friend?

*“Naked I came from my mother’s womb,
and naked I will depart.*

*The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away;
may the name of the Lord be praised.”*

—Job 1:21 (NIV)

My elderly friend Walter always seemed thrilled to see me and anyone else he met. He embodied a gratitude and energy for life. Yet, still with a smile on his face, he would tell me how he sure was thankful that he wasn’t going to live forever! He entered into each day he was given. But he also realized that the goodness of creaturely life is not static, separated from passing of time. He had lived many decades and was now in the final arc of his life. The Lord gave, and the Lord would take away. His family and fortune would return to dust. And the Lord would continue to be worthy of trust, worthy of praise.

As this chapter explored, scripture contains more than one view of death that can fit with our stories of dying. For Walter, dying was a dimension of a God-given arc of living. Even the losses and challenges in aging were approached as opportunities to deepen his trust in the One true source of life.

At other times, death strikes down a loved one, and we are undone, left speechless. As in the story of Melissa in the book, we cry out deeply and lament. This view of death is also scriptural. Death will be the final enemy to be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26). In the meantime, death is a raw wound, a stinging offense. We can’t discern the logic of why God would allow the death of, and even take away, our loved one. It is beyond our human understanding.

As we walk the journey of Lent this season, we are invited to live as creatures who are dying. Whether death comes to us in a way similar to Walter or Melissa, we are invited to offer up to God the temporary gifts we have -- of breath, of family, of material provision. They all belong to God and will be taken away when “naked [we] will depart.” In gratitude for these temporary gifts, our Lord invites us to trust that he alone can deliver us from death.

Practice:

- **Daily:** Whether we are young or old, ill or healthy, life is a gift, completely dependent upon God the giver. At the end of each day this week, write down three gifts that you thank God for. These can be very mundane but are nevertheless significant — the softness of bedsheets, the smile of a family member, the delight of eating a pear. Thank God for these gifts and seek to be attentive to the many daily ways God provides for you.
- **This Week:** Do you know of someone like Walter, full of years, accepting the reality of their approaching death? Do you know someone who has lost a family member suddenly and unexpectedly, like in the story of Melissa? In a way that is fitting for the circumstance, reach out to that person this week.
- **Reflect/Discuss:** Review the discussion questions on page 71. Journal your responses, or if you’re in a group, share your thoughts with others. What questions, insights, and hopes do you carry with you from the reading into this coming week?

Prayer

As you pray, thank the Lord for the good, but temporary, gifts of life, of breath, and of material possessions. Can you say with Job, no matter the circumstance, “May the name of the Lord be praised”?

WEEK 3

Chapter 3: Mortals in Denial: Living as Dying Creatures

*“LORD, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.*

*Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.*

*You turn us back to dust,
and say, ‘Turn back, you mortals.’*

*For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.”*

—Psalm 90:1-4

Lent is a fitting time to explore a key theme in chapter 3, that we are children of the Lord — and embodied, mortal creatures of the earth. The Lord is our “dwelling place,” our hope before we took our first breath and the hope of creation after we take our last. We walk this dusty Lenten road before the everlasting Lord, who will be just as glorious and wondrous when our generation has passed. For “from everlasting to everlasting you are God.”

God is everlasting and we are mortals, who will return to dust, as the Psalm reminds us. But far from devaluing our mortal flesh, the God of scripture makes claim upon his people in embodied ways: through the mark of circumcision; laws related to bodily fluids and the temple; the water claiming us in baptism; the bread and cup of our communion with Christ and one another; and, in the most supreme way, God values our mortal flesh through taking it on himself, in Jesus Christ. Indeed, through his fasting in the wilderness, Jesus experienced the weakness of what it means to be deeply hungry, for the body to ache and yearn for nourishment as a sign of our profound dependence upon God. In his resurrection, he renews and exalts the body, bringing it to the right hand of the Father.

God is not distant from our mortal flesh in its vulnerabilities and smallness. Rather, the days we have in this messy, mortal life are a blessing from his hand. Drawing upon the Talmud in the fourth century, observant Jews use a variety of blessings to name God’s gifts in a wide variety of daily creaturely tasks, including using the restroom! After urinating or defecating, washing and drying one’s hands, and stepping out of the bathroom, it is proper for an observant Jew to recite in Hebrew:

*Blessed are You, God, our God, sovereign of the universe, who formed humans with wisdom and created within them many openings and many hollows. It is obvious in the presence of your glorious throne that if one of them were ruptured, or if one of them were blocked, it would be impossible to exist and stand in your presence. Blessed are You, God, who heals all flesh and performs wonders.*¹

This prayer is called the *Asher yatzar*, “[God] has formed humankind.” Remember on this Lenten journey that our life is short and fleeting, and often messy and embarrassing. Yet, God made even these creaturely functions to be good. While we often live in denial of our dusty frame and the fact that we are pooping, peeing, flatulent creatures, it is good and right for us to praise our Lord for his marvelous works. We need not pretend that we float above the creaturely processes that our Creator provides for us in the amazing gift of creaturely life.

Practice:

- **Daily:** Write out the *Asher yatzar*, or a similar prayer that you compose, and tape it to your bathroom mirror. Practice saying the prayer after you use the bathroom this week.
- **This Week:** If you are able, pick one meal this week to forego and spend that time in prayer. As a part of this time, reflect upon Christ’s time of fasting in the wilderness, and the temptations he faced in Matthew 4:1-11. What do you notice about the passage? What does this practice of fasting show you about your bodily existence? Take time to thank the Lord, our creator, provider, and hope, for his daily provision.
- **Reflect/Discuss:** Review the discussion questions on pages 93-94. Journal your responses, or if you’re in a group, share your thoughts with others. What questions, insights, and hopes do you carry with you from the reading into this coming week?

Prayer

Praise God for the gift of your body. Rest in the comfort that God created the intricacies of your mortal body, even the parts you may be embarrassed to mention.

1 AJWS Staff, “Bracha After Going to the Bathroom (Asher Yatzar),” Sefaria, accessed January 9, 2021, <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/115465.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>.

WEEK 4

Chapter 4: Interplanetary Exploration: The Strange New World of Modern Medicine

*“LORD, let me know my end,
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting my life is.
You have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight.
Surely everyone stands as a mere breath.”*

—Psalm 39:4-5

I’ve been staring at this computer screen for much too long, and I can feel a dull ache growing above my left eyebrow. Almost without thinking, I walk to the cabinet, grab two white Tylenol capsules and swallow them with a glass of water. Praise God for the gift of medicine! But, if I’m not careful, medicine can easily shift in my mind from a good gift to a cloak that masks my mortal limits. Medicine can keep us alive indefinitely, so it seems; at least technically. Ventilators, pacemakers, and intravenous nutrition could keep my lungs breathing, my heart pumping, and my body nourished far beyond the point when the rest of my body’s systems begin to shut down. Suddenly, knowing when my life is actually ending becomes more complicated. If medical options seem to have no ending, how do we come to terms with ours?

Psalm 39 says, “LORD, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days.” This is a very fitting prayer in this season of Lent. As we journey in the wilderness, we can come to recognize all of the clutter and extra weight we are carrying. We may live some of our lives before God and in service of others; but usually we’re sucked into carrying extra weight that assumes *we are the end* of the journey rather than the pilgrims. Our cell phone puts our own interests at the center. Our culture asks us to act as if we are forever young. And the practices of medicine sometimes make us think that “anything is possible.” All too easily, we can assume that the inconvenience of mortal limits is for other people.

But the psalmist knows better. Our lives are valuable and precious, but short. In relation to the everlasting Lord, our lives are a “mere breath” -- that is their measure. Walking on the Lenten path, we can speak these words from God back to God. Praying this with the psalmist can be an opportunity to let our priorities be shaken, to let our lives be laid bare before the holy and gracious Lord.

Practice:

- **Daily:** If you take daily medication, take a moment each day this week to view that medicine as a gift.
- **This Week:** The wonders of modern medicine can make it hard to navigate end-of-life issues. We are faced with choices today about the kind of end we prefer. Palliative medicine expert Susan Block recommends asking four questions as we think about medical decisions at the end of life: *What is your understanding of what’s happening to you? What are your fears? What are your goals as time runs out? What trade-offs are you willing to make?* If possible, find a family member or friend to discuss each of these questions with this week. As you consider these questions, read Romans 14:7-9 and dwell on the significance of claiming “whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”
- **Reflect/Discuss:** Review the discussion questions on page 120. Journal your responses, or if you’re in a group, share your thoughts with others. What questions, insights, and hopes do you carry with you from the reading into this coming week?

Prayer

Pray the words of Psalm 39. What thoughts or feelings arise in you as you pray, “LORD, let me know my end and what is the measure of my days”? Bring these thoughts and feelings before the LORD and rest in his presence.

WEEK 5

Chapter 5: The Way of Prosperity and the Christian Way

“But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.”

– 2 Corinthians 4:7-12

Twelve new likes on a Facebook post. Two pounds down; thirteen to go! When will I get Employee of the Month, the next promotion, just a note of appreciation from my boss? As humans, created good and fallen in sin, we love visible signs of our own success. Creativity, cooperation, and hard work are, indeed, good gifts from God. But we easily twist acts of humble stewardship into signs of status. Whether we are pursuing a goal for our career or seeking to “change the world” for the good, we tend to take particular delight when our accomplishments are visible to others. We want to be recognized and given the honor and admiration that we think is due. Sometimes we approach our prayers for health and healing in the same way. If we don’t see visible results of our prayers, if healing doesn’t happen in terms of a cure for illness or pain, we wonder if we are being faithful enough or if God really sees and knows.

In fact, we *are* recognized and beloved, in Christ. By the Spirit, we are embraced and our very bodies have become sanctuaries of the very presence of God. But the gospel of Jesus does not bestow a visible glory, at least not right now. Our bodies are good, but crumbling. Whether we lose the weight or get the promotion, whether we experience a cure or not, we do not always face visible victory, but what appears to be failure — in being “crushed,” “perplexed,” “persecuted,” and “struck down” (2 Cor. 4:8-9).

Indeed, this is the path of Lent — a path energized by hope in the crucified and risen Lord. The journey of Lent doesn’t take place in the promised land, but the wilderness. We taste the very presence of God — Jesus — the one who is the promised land in his own person. But he has not yet come again visibly, in fullness, to the earth. As we continue our pilgrimage, wealth and status and worldly accomplishments are not signs of the deepest forms of “flourishing.” Rather, in the wisdom of God, human flourishing has a cross-shaped character. In a strange and amazing way, Jesus himself becomes visible in weakness and mortal frailty.

Practice:

- **Daily:** If you know someone who is ill, pray for that person by name. But, rather than focusing on praying only for a cure, practice praying that the life of Jesus would be made visible in their life, even in the midst of illness.
- **This Week:** Consider areas of your life in which you’re looking for a visible sign of success. What would it look like to let go of that reward, at least for a time? If you’re on a diet, avoid stepping on the scale this week. If you post on social media, turn off your notifications. Try doing a “Random Act of Kindness” for a stranger who will never know it was you.
- **Reflect/Discuss:** Review the discussion questions on page 146-147. Journal your responses, or if you’re in a group, share your thoughts with others. What questions, insights, and hopes do you carry with you from the reading into this coming week?

Prayer

As you pray, consider that your body is like a clay jar. Take this time to offer your mortal flesh back to God, “so that the life of Jesus may also be visible in our bodies” (2 Cor. 4:11).

WEEK 6

The Fracturing of Our Stories and Life After Death

“The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.

All this I will give you,’ he said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me.’

Jesus said to him, ‘Away from me, Satan! For it is written: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.”’

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.”

—Matthew 4:8-11

“It’s getting late, honey; we’ll finish the story tomorrow,” I say, closing my daughter’s bedtime storybook. “No, please finish it! I want to know how it ends,” she pleads. We are story-loving creatures. On a very deep level we not only love to tell and hear stories, we want our life itself, with all of its ambiguities and mysteries, to make a story-type of sense. This storytelling instinct is fundamentally a good gift from God. But like all good gifts, we can curve our stories inward, toward the self, rather than recognizing them as part of the larger story of God’s work in our lives and in this world..

When the reality of death hits, it can be like a story cut short, a song that is building, interrupted by silence. The silence stings. We want resolution. We want for all of the pieces to fit together.

On the Lenten path, we follow a King who breaks with the expected storyline for a royal ruler. Rather than claiming the power over the kingdoms of this world that was offered to him in the desert, Jesus freely chooses the path of the cross with all of its scorn and shame. A crucified king seems like a contradiction in terms! What could be a greater rupture in the royal storyline than death on a cross?

As ones who belong to Christ, we are given the freedom not to manufacture a resolution to our broken life stories. We belong to Christ, crucified and risen. He has gone before us in death, and he has gone before us in resurrection as well. God writes the final chapter of our life story, so that we are freed from the burden of writing it ourselves. Thankfully, this means that we need not pretend that our lives’ stories are less jagged and broken than they are. Jesus himself has gone before us, into the final chapter. Jesus has made straight the way of the Lord (Isa. 40:3-5).

Practice:

- **Daily:** Jesus said “no” to the worldly power offered to him, and instead displayed profound trust in God his Father to provide. What activity, habit, or entitlement might you give up today to practice trust in God’s provision? Perhaps avoid using your microwave or dishwasher, or turn off your internet connection for an hour or two. What does giving up these small “powers” reveal about our dependence on them? What might we learn about dependence on God?
- **This Week:** Pick a favorite short story, song, or movie and read, listen, or watch just part of it. Notice any longing you feel for resolution. Take a moment to reflect on places you long for resolution in your own life. Bring those longings before God in prayer.
- **Reflect/Discuss:** Review the discussion questions on page 176. Journal your responses, or if you’re in a group, share your thoughts with others. What questions, insights, and hopes do you carry with you from the reading into this coming week?

Prayer

As you pray, name the pieces of your life’s story that seem disconnected. Take a moment to praise God that you are free from manufacturing your story’s resolution and that, by the Spirit, you are enveloped in the grand story of God’s redemption in Christ.

WEEK 7

“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, ‘Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?’ But he turned and rebuked them.”

—*Luke 9:51-55*

As we enter this Holy Week, we follow Jesus who ‘set his face to go to Jerusalem.’ Jerusalem, where our Lord would be mocked and crucified. In contrast to the disciples, who would have had Jesus show his royal power by calling down the fire of judgment, Jesus knew and tried to tell them that “the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands” (Luke 9:44).

The disciples didn’t understand. In our daily lives, we don’t either. We want resurrection power without the cross. We don’t want to turn our face toward Jerusalem, carry our cross, and follow him.

Our earthly pilgrimage in Christ will involve trials and suffering. Yet, Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, not to suffer as an end in itself, but to bring reconciliation through his death. And we set our faces toward our trials in a hope grounded in that reconciliation in Christ.

Jerusalem was a special city because God claimed the center of it — the temple — to be his own dwelling place. In the temple, heaven and earth came together, like in the garden of Eden. In a great mystery, Christ himself, in his death and resurrection, shows how he is the true Temple, the ultimate dwelling place of God. When Christ died on the cross, the veil separating the holy of holies from the rest of the temple was torn “from top to bottom” (Matt. 27:51). The sin separating sinners from God was likewise torn, opening the way for an astonishing Easter hope: that those who dwell in Christ, the Temple, will dwell with God in the new creation. Christ will return, to shake our good but corrupted cosmos; and then, raised with Christ and covered in his righteousness, we will dwell with God as his people. This is an astonishing, life-giving hope for mortal pilgrims like us!

Practice:

- **Daily:** Prayer is a way to ‘set our faces,’ aligning our priorities with God’s. This chapter points to an old children’s bedtime prayer (181) that sets our faces to rest our living and dying in God’s hands. Practice saying this prayer before you go to bed each night this week: *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen.*
- **This Week:** If you are able, attend a Good Friday service at a church you are connected to. Remembering the story of Jesus’ death, note especially the moment when the temple curtain is torn (Matt. 27:51). As you mourn Christ’s death, celebrate the reconciliation that we find in him.
- **Reflect/Discuss:** Review the discussion questions on page 211-212. Journal your responses, or if you’re in a group, share your thoughts with others. What questions, insights, and hopes do you carry with you from the reading into this coming week?

Prayer

As you pray, ask the Spirit to empower you to carry your cross in following Jesus, grounded in the deep hope of reconciliation through Christ’s death and resurrection.