

THREE DAYS THAT CHANGE EVERYTHING



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MID-WAY THROUGH THE FIRST CENTURY, a generation after Jesus walked the hills and seaside of Palestine, Rome was the largest city on earth, at the center of the largest, most powerful empire the world had ever seen. The Roman imperial cult dominated civic life. Emperors claimed divine status, and their birth was heralded as good news. The glory of Rome promised its citizens peace, order, and salvation from the unworthy, uneducated living associated with the barbarians outside of Rome's rule.

By contrast, followers of Jesus were an obscure sect, an oddly fast-growing offshoot of Judaism. Communities met in small gatherings in homes and tenements. Their members were called atheists, since they didn't worship the Roman emperor or venerate the Greco-Roman gods. Instead, these Christians claimed that a Jewish carpenter was the Son of God, and that his good news brought salvation and peace. They were active in rescuing orphans, but rumor had it they also had love feasts at their gatherings, feasts with bread and wine, or was it a body and blood? Maybe that's why they needed all those orphans! This led to the obvious speculation of scandal.

These followers of Jesus were so powerless that when Rome suffered an enormous fire in 64 A.D., they were an easy scapegoat. Nero, the young emperor, blamed the tragedy on Christians, and publicly burned to death those he could round up.

Perhaps most scandalously, these Christians worshipped a man who had been executed on a cross, killed as an enemy of the Roman state.

These were not promising beginnings for a spiritual or social movement.

And yet, in two and a half centuries, the good news of Jesus had become such a powerful movement that a Roman emperor consolidating his power found it politically expedient to align himself and his military feats with Christianity and, in time, his successors would make this relatively new movement the official state religion. Neither Rome nor Christianity would ever be the same.

The alignment of the Jesus-community with a mighty political empire dramatically changed the early Christian story. In the many centuries since, Christianity – sometimes aligned with state power, sometimes not – has had a long and complicated story. It has been a force behind much beautiful art and spirituality and human relief and societal good, even as it has also been aligned with a great deal of oppression and harm and human suffering.

In recent decades, Christianity has declined in its influence and number of adherents in a rapidly secularizing Western world, even as it has grown dramatically by all the same measures in the Global South. Again, it's a complicated story. Where Christianity has declined or has risen in influence, it's not been a universally bad or good story either way.

Yet the original growth of the Jesus movement over its first three centuries remains fascinating. How did an obscure and reviled spiritual sect with so many embarrassing, disadvantageous associations grow so rapidly, eventually becoming the dominant faith of Western civilization?

This first Jesus movement was remarkable for its strong and diverse social networks. They were people who enjoyed rich community. They were also known for their service and justice – caring for the weakest and most marginal members of society and resisting humanitarian injustices as well. When asked about their courage and love, they always linked it to what they had learned about God through Jesus, and specifically the heart of the Jesus story – his execution on a Roman cross and his subsequent resurrection from the dead.

Memory and celebration of these events yielded tremendous courage and profound love that changed history. Three days at the center of the center of God’s story. These three days have changed everything. Can they still?

During this year’s 40 Days of Faith, we’ll explore the heart of the good news of Jesus. How has the cross, a vehicle of brutal state torture and execution, become an emblem associated with churches and hospitals and spiritual devotion? What is it about the Jesus story that shaped such love and courage in its early faith communities? How does a Jesus movement start, and what would it look like today?

This 40 day season is a kind of experiment. Along with exploring the Jesus story, this is an opportunity to immerse yourself in a spiritual experience with enormous potential to enrich your life well beyond these forty days. It is an invitation to interrupt the fabric of your status quo and experience life and faith on more expectant terms. It’s an invitation to forty days of a more intentionally spiritual way of living. It’s an invitation to acknowledge some of your most significant hopes and dreams. And while it will take energy and thought and risk and time, it’s meant to fit within the rhythms of anybody’s active life.

The church I pastor has been running some form of these forty day experiments each year for over a decade now, and while the details of people’s experiences have varied widely, the great majority of participants have found this experience to be illuminating and transformative.

Whether you’re a past participant or are hearing about this for the first time, and whether you’re skeptical or hopeful, let me invite you to read through this short guide and try this experiment out for at least a week. I think you’ll be glad you did and will want to continue.

40 DAYS...

We didn’t choose this time period, it chose us. Trying something for 40 days seems to have the magical quality of being short enough to be able to pull off with some focus, but long enough to make a difference. We hear about 40-day diets, 40 days of dating, and 40 day efforts to make you kinder or more creative or all kinds of things. Some people say that forty days is long enough to make a new habit, or undo an old one. And many religious traditions seem to find significance in forty day time periods.

Traditions rooted in the life and experience of Jesus are no exception. Jesus is said to have spent forty days alone in preparation for his public work. And for millennia now, Christians have marked the forty days before Easter with increased spiritual focus, in a season called Lent, a word related to the Anglo-Saxon word for spring.

Our forty-day season will run from Sunday, February 14 through Easter, which this year falls on Sunday, March 27th. During this time, you're invited to a combination of practices that have been spiritually potent for millions of people throughout the earth, ranging from centuries ago to the present day.

I'll describe these five spiritual practices in detail at the end of this guide, but here they are:

- Gathering with others for learning and celebration,
- Daily prayer and meditation,
- Daily Bible reading,
- Fasting, and
- Doing these things in the company of other people.

Think of these practices as a really thoughtfully prepared prix-fix menu. You can try just some of them in any combination, but they're prepared to interact with and enrich one another as you enjoy them together. At the end of the guide, I'll describe each of these practices and how you might fruitfully engage in them before asking you to commit to whatever version of these things you will practice over the next forty days.

...OF FAITH

The goal of all this spiritual practice is to help you connect as deeply as possible with a living God. It's the kind of connection that along the way might just help you feel more connected to yourself and the world around you as well. When the first followers of Jesus tried to put words to this connection, they called it faith. And they said that faith only requires that you consider that there is a person at the heart of the universe who wants to do good for you. Here it is in their own words:

Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

In the church I lead, and in dozens of other faith communities, people have tried these 40-day faith experiments for over a decade now. The participants have been long-time churchgoers and never-before churchgoers. They've represented all ages and cultures and walks of life. They've been devout believers in God and people who aren't sure they have any spiritual belief, but are just trying it on for size.

As these many individuals have made an effort to engage a God who rewards those who sincerely seek him, they've found new freedom and contentment and purpose. They've had stubborn illnesses healed, broken relationships mended, improbable pregnancies occur, and have experienced so many other stunning answers to their prayers. Even those that didn't receive the particular thing they were hoping for almost universally experienced something good during the season, or upon its completion: deeper direction and satisfaction in their lives or a positive outcome different from or even better than what they were hoping for.

In case you're feeling shy about engaging the God of the Universe with your personal concerns, here are a few more lines right out of the Bible about what faith looks like and how it is we engage with the Heart of the Universe.

Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. You parents—if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him. (Matthew 7:7-11)

I also tell you this: If two of you agree down here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you. (Matthew 18:19)

If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer. (Matthew 21:22)

Please, Lord, please give us success. (Psalm 118:25b)

**I love the Lord because he hears and answers my prayers.
Because he bends down and listens, I will pray as long as I have breath! (Psalm 116:1-2)**

Or, if you like your encouragement a little more strongly and negatively worded:

You don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. (James 4:2)

So there. The pretty consistent upshot is that God is delighted to get to work on our behalf. But that work is a byproduct of connection, taking our deepest desires and needs and engaging an unseen but very powerful God with them.

So take a minute, and ask yourself: **What do I want God to do for me?**

You can change this later if you like. There's a summary page at the end of this manual for you to put everything in one place. But for now, write down the first thing that comes to mind.

Congratulations – just the thoughtfulness and courage to name this thing you want God to do for you is a really big first step! **Now pray for this every day and tell someone else what it is you’re praying for.** Again, as these 40 days continue, you may find your prayer evolving. God might speak to you about what you’re asking for. Obviously, pay attention if that happens! Sometimes, we think we know what we want most but discover that for God, even that was in some way too small, and we’re directed somewhere deeper or different. No problem. But keep praying; as we just read, God gives good gifts to people who “keep on asking” for them.

And to spread the wealth a bit, you’re invited to pray that God will extend this generosity you’re hoping for to other people as well. Good things come to those who wait, the cliché goes, but good things tend to come to those that don’t just want to hoard them for themselves, which is why you’re invited to pray two other prayers daily for these forty days.

What do I want God to do for “my six?”

What do I want God to do for my church and my city?

This presumes you have a church. If not, no sweat. Save yourself some time, and just pray for your city. The first prayer requires a word of explanation, though.

Other than praying for ourselves, we’ve found that a potent way to go through this season of increased faith is also to **invite God to do something exciting for other people**, perhaps especially other people who don’t seem to be experiencing much at all from God, as far as we can tell. Again, you can do this however you like, or not do it at all, but over the years, we’ve developed a little tradition we like so much, that some of us do it year round, all the time, and we call it **Praying for Our Six**.

Why Six? I don’t know, six people just seems like few enough that we can actually remember them, but many enough that we’re being generous and increasing our odds that we’ll see something neat happen in answer to our prayers.

The rules of the game are that you think of **six people that are local and that you’ll actually see** at least now and then. They can be people you barely know, like the person I heard prayed for the friendly barista he saw three times a week at his favorite coffee shop or the year I was praying for a kid in the back row of one of the high school English classes I was teaching. Or they can be the best of friends, like your favorite cousin or your housemate or next door neighbor. Other than knowing them a bit and seeing them around, the only other rule is that **as far as you can tell, they don’t seem to be getting as much from God as they could or connecting too much to God at all.**

So again, six people – you know them to some degree, they’re local, and you’d like them to get more from God. Who comes to mind?

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____
- 5) _____
- 6) _____

The idea is that each day in the 40 Days of Faith, **in addition to praying for yourself, you pray for these six folks as well.** The daily Bible guide (more on that at the end) will have some structured ideas on how to do this. But you can also just pray that God will be kind and good to each of these people. Or you can ask God to direct you to pray more specifically for them. Or you can tell them you’d like to pray for them for the next six weeks and ask *them* how *they’d* like you to pray for them. The possibilities are endless!

And then, if you’re excited about seeing how God will answer prayer, one more. **What would you like God to do for your church or for your city?** Some years our church has banded around a very specific common need. One year we asked God to provide a building for our church and money to buy it and we saw stunning, and by some measures, historic results. Another year we asked God to give us desire and resources to make a big impact for good in our neighborhood of North Cambridge, and birthed our neighbor-building, community development arm, now called Reservoir in the City. This year, we’re inviting you to consider what a Jesus movement – seeing three days that change everything – would look like in our church, our city, and our region.

And now, I ask you, **what would you like God to do for your church or your city?**

Finally, there will be no fill-in for this one, but as we explore the story of Jesus in our Bible guide and on Sunday mornings, we’ll be inviting you to consider how this might impact your story. In other words, **what might Jesus want to do for you?**

THE SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Alright, if you're still with me, you'll remember that for these forty days, from February 14 through Easter, March 27, we're recommending that you try a combination of spiritual practices that have been spiritually potent for millions of people throughout the earth, ranging from centuries ago to the present day.

If you do these things with anything approaching whole-heartedness, then I expect that when Easter's come and gone, you'll feel that one way or another, the results have been marvelous.

▶ GATHERING FOR LEARNING AND CELEBRATION

Each Sunday, **show up on Sunday mornings ready for something good to happen.** You'll get a chance to hear some music and join in if you like, pray or be prayed for, and hear a talk given on the impact of the story of Jesus on our story. It'll be practical, spiritual, and fun, and failing that, you'll at least get a chance to have a good cup of coffee and meet someone new. Show up each Sunday, expecting something good. This is your most basic level of participation.

▶ FOUR DAILY PRAYERS

I recommend that these daily prayers be the heart of your 40 Days of Faith participation. By now, I've talked about these at some length, but here they are once more.

- What do I want God to do for me?
- What do I want God to do for my six?
- What do I want God to do for my church or my city?
- Best as I can tell, what does Jesus want to do for me?

▶ DAILY BIBLE GUIDE

Each year, we produce a remarkably illuminating and practical daily Bible guide that helps us understand, explore, and make use of a different section of the Bible. These guides give you a smallish section of Scripture to read each day, along with interesting background knowledge, points of observation, and ideas for things you might pray or try to do after reading the passages. **Reading these daily guides has proven to be fascinating and inspiring for hundreds and hundreds of people.** You could be next. This year, we'll be looking at the Romans, the New Testament's longest letter, written in Greek by one of the first and most famous followers of Jesus, the apostle Paul. There's lots more introduction to this powerful material in the introduction to the guide itself.

▶ FASTING

Fasting is the abstention from some or all food (usually) or some other activity (sometimes) for a period of time in order to focus ourselves more fully on God. It's also the most traditional element of our 40 Days of Faith, something lots of churches have promoted for centuries at this time of year.

Most people find themselves **fasting from one or two particular things**, like caffeine or desserts. However many people are helped by more-aggressive choices. So, for shorter fasts, that can be a total abstention from food. These are usually called "**water fasts**," because water is the only thing going into us. For the most part, these aren't recommended beyond a week's time, because after that, health problems can ensue. (Clearly God can speak and call you into anything—but I'd just be aware of the risks if you water fast for more than a week, and be in good touch with a doctor.)

Other food-abstention fasts involve imposing some sort of **conditions** on our eating over a period of time. This can involve anything from giving up some beloved food item for a time to something more challenging, like the so-called "**Daniel fast**," which involves abstaining from everything but vegetables.

For longer fasts, many people have tried a "**one meal a day**" fast. It's pretty much what it sounds like. You eat one simple meal and make that it for the day. People often pursue "**juice fasts**." Again, this would customarily apply to *shorter fasts*, but it's just like a water fast, except you're allowed to drink juice, which will keep your blood sugar up and actually allow you to function at near-normal capacity.

Also, I do not recommend water fasts if you've ever suffered from an eating disorder. Those in our midst who've suffered from eating disorders historically have a difficult time separating this sort of fasting from the very motivation that drove them to the disorder, and thereby risk serious health problems. There are other great fasts that will do you a lot of good, if you've been in this situation.

Other than food, there are all kinds of other things you could abstain from that while less traditional, could pack some of the same spiritual punch for you. Fasting from **television** or **Internet use** or **particular websites** or **computer games** are popular choices for folks who aren't fasting from food. These can really involve, under God's direction, doing without *anything* that feels costly to give up for a season. I've heard about fasts from *criticism*!

The point of fasting is that, under God's direction, we're feeling desperate for something – not just fasting *from* something but fasting *for* what it is we want Jesus to do during the 40 Days of Faith – and we direct that hunger towards God. It's just hard to truly be desperate for God and what he might do for us when our bellies are full and all our needs are abundantly provided for.

Finally, I'll mention that some of you have likely been thinking there is this great built-in weight loss strategy to the 40 Days of Faith. Well, it's a long story, but I'll simply let you know that's likely not true. Given that our metabolism tends to slow down in response to fasting and that most people quickly

regain short-term weight losses, fasting isn't recommended so much for this purpose. But it does add some significant power and urgency to our faith; it's about our connection to God and his response to our needs, not our body image.

▶ DOING THIS IN THE COMPANY OF OTHERS: TRY A COMMUNITY GROUP, INVITE A FRIEND

While the 40 Days of Faith is certainly an intensely personal experience, we've found that people enjoy it most and get the most benefit from it when they participate with friends. One way you can do that is to **invite a friend who's not part of this faith community to participate in some way with you** – whether by joining in the prayers, reading the Bible guide, or coming to Sunday services. Another is to **come to one of our church-sponsored community groups that meet throughout the week**. We have dozens of community groups that meet at the church campus or in people's homes and other gathering spots throughout Cambridge and our surrounding communities. A full list is on our website at <http://www.reservoirchurch.org/small-groups/>.

You're welcome to visit a group and never come back, or to join a group and – if you like it – to continue well past Easter. But if you're not in a group, join it just for these forty days. You'll have the opportunity to talk about what you're praying for and hear others do the same and hear all about interesting things other people are learning and experiencing during their 40 Days of Faith. Sometimes, you hear some pretty great stories too.

HELPFUL THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

Before I finish, let me close with a word or three about how to engage most fruitfully in these spiritual practices.

- 1) **Be serious, but not rigid for the forty days.** We're pursuing a God who is serious about *our welfare*. This season is a way to really go after that, so take it as seriously as you can, but do what you can do gladly. I, for instance, have a horrible track record on fasting. I'm not a highly disciplined person by nature and am about as food-driven as people can get. So when I fast, I give it a real go, since I expect it to be good for my connection with God, but I expect some ups and downs in the process and don't get too bent out of shape about those.
- 2) **Don't worry about days skipped or imperfect spiritual practice.** This is not a contest, with ourselves or anyone else, so you have nothing to prove, certainly not to God! If you miss a day or more of the Bible guide, don't try to go back and make it up. Just pick up where you left off. And if you slip up on your fasting or miss a community group meeting or day of prayer, don't sweat it and just jump back in when you can.
- 3) **Feel free to practice what educators call differentiated learning.** Not all people learn alike, and not all people respond to God in faith alike. Do the things you can do wholeheartedly, even if that's somewhat less than the full package recommended here.

Sometimes, even the boldest things we could summon up faith to imagine God doing are, in the end, too small a thing for God. They're not small in that God won't care or perhaps do those very things, but in that God has even bigger and better things up his sleeve for us, for our friends, for our church and our city, and for our world. Here's to a great season of discovering all that God has for us together, big and small!



FOUR DAILY PRAYERS

What do I want God to do for me?

What do I want God to do for my six?

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____
- 5) _____
- 6) _____

What do I want God to do for my church or my city?

What does Jesus want to do for me? (Leave blank for now - this prayer is for discovery.)

DAILY BIBLE GUIDE: ROMANS

DOING THIS WITH OTHERS: TRY A COMMUNITY GROUP, INVITE A FRIEND

Community Group to Try: _____

Someone Who Can Participate with Me: _____

FASTING

How You'll Fast (if you do): _____