

AARON DAMIANI

THE
GOOD
OF
GIVING
UP

*Discovering the
Freedom of Lent*



Praise for *The Good of Giving Up*

For many modern Christians, Lent is a strange ritual that “other” people do. This should not be! Christians have observed a period of Easter preparation from the very beginning of church history. For those who are interested in Lent but don’t know where to begin, Aaron Damiani’s book is the perfect introduction. With biblical expertise and a pastor’s heart, Damiani invites modern Christians who are skeptical of Lent into its true meaning: deeper union with Jesus Himself. Don’t miss out on what Lent has to offer. Let this wise Anglican pastor lead you into the spiritual riches of the risen Christ.

BRYAN LITFIN

Professor of Historical Theology, Moody Bible Institute, and author of *After Acts*

This book will help Christians who are just discovering the practice of observing Lent or who need fresh inspiration regarding how to make their observation more meaningful. It is insightful, practical, and grounded in a wise understanding of our historic Christian faith. It will encourage you to discover how good giving up can be!

RUTH HALEY BARTON

Founder, Transforming Center, and author of *Sacred Rhythms and Life Together in Christ*

Aaron has done the church a great service by taking Lent, something many think is only for the “those other churches” or the super spiritual, and showing us why it is important for every follower of Jesus. His clear explanations and practical tips remove the confusion from this topic and make it possible for everyone to understand and practice Lent. I can’t wait to recommend Aaron’s book to our church!

JACKSON CRUM

Lead Pastor, Park Community Church, Chicago

Our deepest hunger is for bread that only Christ can provide. Anyone who knows this cherishes practices that reorder our desires and direct our longing toward Christ. Aaron has given us a clear and compelling way of entering into Lent as a life-giving spiritual practice. Pastoral, conversational, and practical, this book is a marvelous invitation to journey with Jesus through death and resurrection.

GLENN PACKIAM

Lead Pastor, New Life Downtown, a congregation of New Life Church, Colorado Springs, and author of *Discover the Muster of Faith*

In his preaching, pastoring, and personal life, Aaron Damiani is a gift to the church. A remarkable primer on the most overlooked season of the Christian year, *The Good of Giving Up* grounds and connects Christians of every background to our perennial need for God's gifts in the wilderness. I am grateful for this passionate introduction to Lent, at once challenging and inspirational. I will embrace the Lenten season more deeply because of this book.

PAUL J. PASTOR

Author of *The Face of the Deep*

Lent, like any unfamiliar practice, is best explored with a competent guide. *The Good of Giving Up* is just that. Aaron beautifully sets forth the practices of Lent as a gentle harness, yoking us to the goodness and power of Christ. Get in a Lenten yoke with Jesus and you'll discover that is not heavy or ill-fitting, but food for the soul.

TODD HUNTER

Founding pastor of Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Costa Mesa, CA, and author of *Our Favorite Sins*

For too long, Christianity has been dancing without any rhythm or beat. But to dance, we need music. Therein lies the brilliance of what Damiani does here. In these pages, we hear the music of Lent, if we are willing. This book invites us to a whole new rhythm that is both ancient and fresh.

A. J. SWOBODA

Pastor of Theophilus in Portland, OR, and author of *The Dusty Ones*

In a historical moment when the church seeks to stand on her toes to apprehend the inestimable beauty, excellence, and glorious light of Christ, Aaron makes a counterintuitive case: these gifts are not realized by self-elevation or white-knuckled effort; they come by following the sacrificial trajectory of the incarnate Son. Toward this end, he focuses on the manifold opportunities afforded by the Lenten season, making a case for its importance and forging a path toward its realization.

CHRIS CASTALDO

Lead Pastor of New Covenant Church in Naperville, IL, and author of *Talking with Catholics about the Gospel*

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Discovering the Freedom of Lent

AARON DAMIANI

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*To Laura, the love of my life and fellow pilgrim on the way;
Thank you for sowing, weeping, and rejoicing with me.
Though your birthday is always in Lent,
Our future is always a Feast,
And I can see Home from our window.*

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Thanks again, and may God bless you.

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Introduction

One day early in our engagement, my then-fiancée now-wife, Laura, and I were locked in a stalemate while sharing a Panera Bread “You Pick Two” lunch: where would we go to church once we were married?

It began politely enough but devolved into exasperation.

I wanted to find a church with great expository preaching and rich liturgy. Laura preferred a church with stirring worship and emotive stories of life-change.

“What’s wrong with testimonies?” she asked me. “What’s so bad about experiencing God’s love in worship?”

Deciding on a church was much harder than ordering what lunch to share that day, and this time we could not “order” separately.

In a patronizing tone, I—a confident graduate student in theology—answered Laura’s original question about what is wrong with testimonies in church: “The worship service is meant to exalt God, not humans. Testimonies should happen in small groups. There’s already enough hype and individualism in American churches!”

I was so proud of my highly sophisticated religious palate—or so I thought. This conversation went nowhere. Week after

week, we searched in vain to find the right church, and each experience gave us something new to critique.

Eventually a friend of ours recommended that we visit Church of the Resurrection, an Anglican church in the western suburbs of Chicago. I remember visiting the website for the first time and seeing a strange picture of people in robes standing behind a table with their arms reaching to the sky, smiling. *What kind of a church is this?* I thought.

We visited on the last Sunday of Epiphany, as the church was preparing for a journey we ourselves had never taken: the forty days of Lent. Without knowing why, we were drawn back to worship with them again, observing this strange communal practice like anthropologists visiting a foreign culture. *Don't all these rituals reflect a works-based understanding of salvation? What's the point of giving up the comforts of life? God doesn't need that from us!* Like many evangelicals who love the gospel, I had my doubts about Lent.

Yet, somehow, everyone we encountered who was practicing Lent seemed less burdened than I was. They appeared to be more joyful and satisfied, as if the Holy Spirit was working some magic on them. While I was preparing for my honeymoon, everyone around me was preparing for Easter. I had spent my extra money on a Caribbean cruise, while the weirdo Anglicans were freely giving their non-extra money to support the persecuted church in Jos, Nigeria. I was, admittedly, on the "Look Good Naked" diet, renouncing sweets for the sake of vanity. They were on the Good Friday diet, fasting from food to dwell more closely with Jesus Christ. I was feeding my cravings. They were confessing their sins. I was less obligated, but they were freer.

And no one was being pressured into Lent to make God or themselves happy. All were responding to a gracious, ancient invitation to walk with Jesus Christ in a tangible way for forty days. The people who said “Yes” to this invitation had only grace and joy for those of us who said “No” or “I’m not sure yet.”

When I was finally ready to take the plunge, I learned that observing Lent is not a forced march of works-righteousness. But it was good medicine for my autonomy, self-indulgence, spiritual independence, and the painful split between what I knew about God and what I experienced of Him.

Laura and I went on that cruise after all. It was exciting at first, but its luster diminished every day. We ate at the chocolate bar. We bought souvenirs. We played mini golf. By the time we stepped off the ship, we concluded that it was not really worth the cost. Meanwhile, everyone in our new home church had been celebrating that Jesus had turned history inside out.

In the thirteen years since, we have not taken another cruise. But we keep returning to Lent—sometimes reluctantly, always imperfectly. Now that we have four small kids to lead through the season, it is more costly than ever. Yet every time we arrive at Easter Sunday, we always rejoice that it has been worth the cost, and then some.

I now pastor an Anglican church in Chicago filled with people who have little to no background in the cycles of the church calendar—the ancient way of ordering time around the life of Christ and His church, which includes Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Eastertide, and Pentecost. I frequently have conversations with Christians and spiritual seekers who feel drawn to walk with Christ through the practice of Lent but need to be taught the basics. This book is a result of those conversations.

Perhaps you're reading this because you feel drawn to the journey of Lent but want to know more. You are intrigued as you watch others you respect embrace this practice, yet you are interested to understand how it squares with your Protestant evangelical background. You might be wondering, *Is Lent a solitary practice, a communal practice, or both? How can I practice Lent if my church does not?* You have practical questions about what Lenten fasting, personal confession, and generosity might look like for you. This book is a primer to answer your questions and to get you started.

You might be a pastor or church planter seeking to know how to lead your congregation through Lent. You are not looking to switch denominations but want to appropriate this “mere Christian” practice—basic to Christians of all streams—in a way that fits your context. You would like to know the history, intention, and theological underpinnings of Lent in order to best inform your leadership and structure your preaching. You could use some advice for leading special services like Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, and Maundy Thursday. This book is for you.

Or you might be a Lent skeptic. Perhaps you're reading this because you have a family member or loved one who observes Lent and you want to understand them, even if you disagree with their convictions and practices. If that describes you, give special attention to part 1, which makes the case for Lent, and chapter 7 in particular, where I answer common objections to Lent.

Finally, this book is meant to be a pastor's encouragement to those who sense a call to deal with endemic spiritual disquiet and numbness in American evangelicalism. You love Jesus, but your passion has waned. You are sick of pretending to mourn on Good Friday and faking the joy on Easter. Perhaps you've hit a

spiritual wall of some kind or feel the instability of our age and you need to rest in a larger, deeper, older practice that has stood the test of time. If that describes you, please keep reading. And know that I have been praying for you.

Part 1, “The Case for Lent,” explores the biblical and historical basis for Lent and how it offers life to everyone seeking to follow Jesus. Chapters 1–7 discuss how Lent bonds us to Jesus Christ—His Word, His church, and His work. As we give up what we do not need, we gain Christ and our true selves in the process.

Part 2, “The Path of Lent,” will guide you through the practicalities of Lenten fasting, prayer, and generosity (traditionally known as “almsgiving”). Since Lent is a season of gospel repentance, I have also included a chapter on how to make and hear confession of sin. And be sure not to skip chapter 12, “Tying It All Together,” which is designed to help you connect all the dots and make a personalized plan for Lent based on God’s work in your soul this year.

Part 3, “Leading Others through Lent,” is designed for parents, pastors, and church leaders, and offers practical help for leadership, liturgy, and preaching in Lent. I will also share with you how Laura and I lead our children through this season. It is wonderfully meaningful for them as well.

Throughout I have included testimonies of ordinary people—some of whose names and circumstances have been changed for confidentiality—who have walked the journey of Lent, all of whom are imperfect but found their life in Christ changed during Lent. Yes, in the last thirteen years, I have come to appreciate the power of personal testimonies! And like the saints and fathers who have gone before me, I have learned that my wife is always right.

PART 1

*THE
CASE
FOR
LENT*



CHAPTER I

Into the Wilderness

We are not ready for Easter. Not emotionally, not spiritually.

But we always seem to be ready for the trappings of Easter.

For most Christians, Easter Sunday is a polite and happy occasion. Families, including mine, dress up in pastels and bow ties for the after-church picture. Children paint eggs, hunt for eggs, and consume Peeps and chocolate bunnies. We eat brunch, including delicious ham, and then move on with our lives.

Meanwhile, church leaders see Easter Sunday as an opportunity unlike any other to reach out to the community. Easter is still one of the highest-attended services of the year. As a local church pastor, I appreciate that people are open in a unique way on Easter Sunday. And I feel the pressure every year to preach a homerun sermon and to connect personally with spiritually curious visitors. The reality of church growth competes with Jesus' resurrection for my headspace and personal energy.

Despite all the hoopla and mixed motives, I believe pastors and parishioners alike sincerely want to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. You can sense the sincerity in the smiles, the sermons, and the earnest declarations of "He is risen!"—as well as in the half-startled responses of "He is risen indeed!" My experience

before I practiced Lent was that this sincerity seemed to be somewhat forced. The attempts at celebration were often awkward. Easter Sunday is a victory feast, but in many churches it feels like a company picnic where everyone is expected to show up and be happy.

When Jesus Christ rose from the dead, history itself took a surprising, climactic turn. Even the people who had been preparing themselves for the reign of God could hardly believe it. To paraphrase Samwise Gamgee, Frodo's faithful companion in *The Lord of the Rings*, this meant that everything sad was coming untrue. Death itself had been turned on itself. Satan and his demons had run into the mousetrap of the cross, forfeiting their threats. And our Hero was making good on all His promises, sending His Spirit to renew the face of the earth, giving gifts as He ascended to His rightful throne.

It is the birthright of every Christian and gospel-proclaiming church to celebrate, feast, and exult in Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday. We are invited to participate in the stirring worship depicted in Revelation 4–5, giving honor and thanks with a loud voice to the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Every Sunday—and especially on Easter Sunday—we can overflow with hope every time we look upon Him whom we have pierced. He is not only seated on the throne, but is also healing our marriages, breaking our addictions, and uniting races and cultures into one family.

Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again! It is all true, gloriously so. Why, then, do we still feel awkward and halfhearted on Easter Sunday? In many cases, it's because our imaginations have been malnourished along the way to Resurrection Sunday. We have been secretly snacking on lesser stories—such as politics or our children's athletic success. In

theory the gospel is compelling, but in reality we would rather pay attention to whatever Netflix is offering. We are so full on the junk food of our culture that we cannot metabolize the feast on our Easter plates.

Augustine had a phrase for this: *incurvatus in se*, meaning “curved in on oneself.”¹ We were made to look upward and outward with our imaginations to behold the beauty of God in Christ. But like a Grand Canyon tourist who would rather look downward at his Instagram likes than outward at the breathtaking vistas in front of him, we have curved in on ourselves. We are called to worship, but we have chosen to fantasize. We have exchanged God’s exhilarating and expansive story for lesser stories shaped by our fears, pain, and unhealthy desires.

The truth is that well before Easter, Jesus can wash, prepare, and fill our imaginations for worship. And this is where the practice of Lent comes in. But before I go further, I must tell you about Zorro.

Jumping into the Story

When I was growing up, my parents set aside Fridays as a family night. After dinner, our family of six would huddle around the TV and watch classic reruns. I was taken with *Zorro*, the show about a swashbuckling hero who confronted the corrupt, oppressive tyrants of 1820s California. Zorro was everything Batman was, except with an enviable mustache and peerless fencing skills.

I loved watching the nobleman Don Diego de la Vega transform himself into Zorro with a cape, mask, and wide-brimmed hat—all black. Zorro would inevitably find himself in a battle of

wits and swords with evil men. After dominating them with his footwork and his horsewhip, he would leave a Z mark on their shirt with three swift movements of his sword. His enemies could only gape and curse in response.

I was so enthralled by Zorro that I wanted to jump inside the TV and become part of the story. But even more so, I wanted the story I was watching to jump outside the TV and transform my life. I wanted to become the type of person who could confront evil men and wield a sword like Zorro. So I started practicing with sticks from our backyard. Making the Z was tougher than it looked on TV! I remember asking my Dad to enroll me in fencing lessons. Zorro's story had captured my imagination to the extent that I wanted to live in it.

A compelling story has the effect of us wanting to participate, which is why my daughters want to become mermaids and my sons attend Hogwarts. And this, I believe, is why many Christians make, or aspire to make, a personal pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Walking the footsteps of Jesus allows them to tangibly inhabit His life and ministry. You can breathe the air of Bethlehem, be baptized in the Jordan River, and get your feet dusty on the road to Golgotha.

Perhaps you have heard the classic Holy Land testimony: "The Bible came alive for me!" I think such declarations communicate that salvation-history is not a spectator sport, but a vivid drama in which they participate.

Can you imagine taking a "Holy Land" pilgrimage every year in anticipation of Easter? This is the journey of Lent. Lent is an ancient pilgrimage that the Lord uses to recapture our imagination of and renew our participation in the greatest story ever told.

I doubt any Holy Land tour would take you to the wilderness for forty days. But perhaps they should. The desert is where God called his people to make them holy. We might assume that the wilderness is a place of exile and isolation, and it certainly can be that. But in the story of redemption, the wilderness has always been a sacred rendezvous spot for God and His beloved sons and daughters. In the wilderness, we detox from our false attachments and renew our sacred, primal bond with our loving Father.

Entering the Wilderness

When I am on a flight that is preparing for takeoff, I quietly defy the command to switch my electronic devices to airplane mode. Honestly, I chafe at this federal regulation. The plane will work just fine even if I send a few texts, right? I do not like airplane mode because it cuts me off from the stimulants and freedoms that I feel I need. It forces me to have an actual conversation with the person sitting next to me.

When God calls His people into the wilderness, He puts their whole existence on airplane mode. I resist this, and so might you. It means feeling out of control and out of the loop. Our go-to stimulants and stories are no longer on tap. We can no longer anesthetize our emotions. We can no longer avoid a conversation with our Father. It might feel like a restrictive punishment, but it's actually a heavenly gift. Lent is indeed a wilderness, and there are several reasons why we can and should enter it.

We enter the wilderness of Lent because the gospel is true. We do not go into the wilderness to find God. We enter the wilder-

ness because God has found us. He has delivered us, blessed us, and called us His own. The desolation and quiet gives us space to ponder the great salvation we have already witnessed. Even our struggles and failures in the wilderness teach us the truth of the gospel.

Consider the people of Israel. They journeyed into the wilderness after watching their oppressors drown in the Red Sea by the hand of God. Exodus details the song of praise that carried them out of Egypt: “The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation. . . . Pharaoh’s chariots and his host he cast into the sea” (Ex. 15:2, 4).

The wilderness was not where Israel earned their salvation. It is where they internalized what it meant to be saved. In a desolate place, salvation came that shattered the earth. Bread fell from heaven; water gushed from a rock. The multitudes were fed by faith and with thanksgiving. The Living Word was in their midst, working beautiful and wild miracles, changing slaves into sons. With each nourishing meal, the tyranny and pretense of Egypt lost its grip. It took Israel forty years to realize they were the Lord’s treasured possession, not Pharaoh’s unworthy slaves.

Consider Jesus, true Israel. He entered the wilderness with his Father’s baptismal endorsement ringing in His ears: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). Unlike Israel, and us, He had no false attachments of which to repent. His forty-day fast made space for Him to bask in His Father’s love and to draw upon the Spirit’s power. When the devil tempted Him with fantasies of dazzling self-love and godless power, Jesus was ready. He shut down the demonic chatter with the Word of God, which lived inside Him.

In the Lenten wilderness, our fantasies of glory, fear, or pleasure can give way to the reality of God's glory, love, and holiness. God acts in history, and we enter the wilderness to give our imaginations a chance to catch up.

We enter the wilderness of Lent to prepare for Easter. Why is Lent forty days?² Practically speaking, it takes at least that long to prepare our hearts for Easter. As Dallas Willard put it, "One drop of water every five minutes won't get you a shower."³ We need to be immersed in the reality of the kingdom of God for big doses at a time before we start seeing its impact on our lives. The same is true for Easter Sunday—and the "Eastertide" Sundays that follow. We need more than a Good Friday service two days in advance to get into the state of mind and heart to celebrate Jesus' victory over death and hell. We cannot prepare for Easter over the weekend. No, we need to walk a longer pilgrimage to get ready.

Most importantly, the forty days draw us into the gospel drama that Jesus lived. He went into the wilderness before us, and He goes there again with us. He knows that the struggle is real, that our frame is weak, and that we are dust. Because we are united to Him, His forty days become ours.

We enter the wilderness to get to the Promised Land. Lent is not our ultimate destination. The wilderness fast is temporary, thanks be to God! The bright light of the resurrection is ahead. Can you see it? In fact, the word *Lent* derives from the old Saxon word for "spring," and Christians of Eastern traditions love to refer to the "Bright Sadness" that marks every Christian who will endure the darkness leading up to Easter.

In the Lenten Spring, winter is giving way to summer—life and sunrise and a great feast are ahead. Each day's light is longer

than the last. Lent, then, is a profound picture of the Christian journey. It stands between our deliverance and our home. It is a time of faith and longing, hope and expectation.

No, we are not ready for Easter. Not yet. But with the world behind us and the cross before us, we go repenting and rejoicing one faltering step at a time. And everything sad is coming untrue.