40 Days of Decrease: A Different Kind of Hunger. A Different Kind of Fast.

Weekly Discussion/Reflection Guide

Welcome! This tool's purpose is to prompt honest personal reflection and engaging group discussion as participants journey devotionally and/or as a community through 40 Days of Decrease.

If your use of 40 Days of Decrease is paralleling Lent, begin Day One on Ash Wednesday and encourage participants to do six of the forty days each week. If using this study at another time of the year, simply divide the forty readings into the number of weeks your group will meet. For example, if your group will meet for eight weeks, participants will complete five of the forty days each week.

The group facilitator can reserve these questions for group discussion times or make the questions available for participants' reflective journaling and group meeting preparation. The questions are designed to help each participant process their 40 Days of Decrease journey with intentionality.

Additional resources are available to your group, including a six-day reading plan on YouVersion with brief videos and promotional resources to encourage participation. Six sermon outlines are also available for those experiencing 40 Days of Decrease as a congregation. You can find more of these resources at www.40fasts.com or on Alicia Britt Chole's site: www.aliciachole.com.

We are so grateful you have chosen this timely study. Many will find great freedom and healing as 40 Days of Decrease mentors us in re-centering and deepening our spiritual lives. **May we all honor sacred decrease for the love of God.**

At A Glance Daily Summary

Day	Reading Theme	Heart Fast	Featured Quote	Journaling Scripture
1	Our ache to live awed by Christ's Resurrection	Lent as Project	Peterson, Coe	John 12:1-11
2	Lent as a much-needed mentor	Regrets	Abba Theodore of Scetis	John 12:12-19
3	John the Baptist on sacred decrease	Collecting Praise	John of the Cross	John 12:20-28
4	John the Baptist on uncertainty	Artificial Light	Dillard	John 12:29-36
5	Questions as a friend of faith	Tidy Faith	Lewis	John 12:37-43
6	Jesus' response to John the Baptist's death	Speeding Past Sorrow	Spurgeon	John 12:44-50
7	Jesus' call to take up your cross and die	A Meal	Bonhoeffer	John 13:1-7
8	The problem with miracles	Fixing It	Coe	John 13:8-17
9	When we don't understand God's voice	Rationalism	Yancey	John 13:18-30
10	How the unknown reveals our defaults	Avoidance	May	John 13:31-36
11	Bartimaeus' moment	Religious Profiling	The Lenten Triodion	John 14:1-14
12	Zacchaeus and interconnectedness	Isolation	Martin Luther King, Jr.	John 14:15-22
13	Jesus' anointing for burial	Stinginess	Spanish poet	John 14:23-31
14	Jesus' response to the crowds' praise	Spectatorship	Andrew of Crete	John 15:1-17
15	Lessons from Jesus on vulnerability	Spiritual Self-Protection	May	John 15:18-16:4
16	When Jesus grieved	Halos	Yancey	John 16:5-16
17	When Jesus cleansed the courts	Apathy	Nouwen	John 16:17-33
18	When Jesus cursed a fig tree	Appearances	Traditional Orthodox hymn	John 17:1-5
19	When Jesus closed a question	Revisionism	Fryling	John 17:6-19

20	When Jesus rebuked the leadership	Leavened Bread	Kalentzis	John 17:20-26
21	When Jesus felt troubled	Premature Resolution	Yancey	John 18:1-11
22	God's sound from heaven	Sound	Hunter	John 18:12-14
23	Possible purposes of the foot-washing	Armchair Jesus	Nouwen	John 18:15-18
24	John 14:31 and the Crux	Nuetrality	Sweet	John 18:19-24
25	Jesus' overwhelming sorrow	Denial	Bonhoeffer	John 18:25-27
26	The disciples' sorrow	Comparison	Merton	John 18:28-32
27	A co-worker's betrayal	Discontentment	Laubach	John 18:33-40
28	Jesus' voluntarily restricted freedom	Formulas	MacDonald	John 19:1-6
29	The misrepresentation of Jesus	Intimidation	Merton	John 19:7-16
30	Jesus' friend's failure—Peter's denial	Self-Confidence	Keating	John 19:17-27
31	The violent mockery of Jesus	Mocking Jesus	Yancey	John 19:28-37
32	Jesus' final rejection	Addition	Spurgeon	John 19:38-42
33	Jesus' crucifixion	Willful Sin	Yancey	John 20:1-9
34	The 7 groups surrounding Jesus, part 1	Criticism	Francis of Assisi	John 20:10-18
35	The 7 groups surrounding Jesus, part 2	God-As-Job	Gregory of Nazianzus	John 20:19-23
36	Joseph of Arimathea's gift	Withholding	Azevedo	John 20:24-31
37	Jesus' time in the tomb	Your Voice	Abba Doulas	John 21:1-9
38	The disciples response to loss	Escapism	Swoboda	John 21:10-14
39	At the empty tomb	Guarding Tombs	Saint John Chrysostom	John 21:15-19
40	Seeing Jesus	Fasting	Chesterton	John 21:20-25

Life Group Discussion Guide Questions

General Discussion Prompts (select 1 or more of these questions to begin your group discussions each week)

- 1. Was there a phrase or concept that stood out to you from this week's readings?
- 2. Which were your most and least favorite fasts of the week?
- 3. Everything we do affects everything we do. How is this *40 Day* journey affecting your life? Your perspective? Your relationships?
- 4. What are some of the factors that make seeing decrease positively a challenge in our day?
- 5. Read Isaiah 58:3-14. From God's perspective, what makes a fast acceptable?
- 6. Describe your experience with Lent to date.
- 7. Share any experiences you have had with fasting. What were your primary motivations in choosing to fast?
- 8. As you experience your 40 Day journey, in what ways do you hope that a less cluttered soul might affect those near you?
- 9. What is your favorite day so far? Why?
- 10. If you were to give this book to one other person, whom would you choose? Why?

Daily Reading Discussion/Reflection Questions

Prologue – Day One, page xiii–5

- 1. What stood out to you from the Prologue reading, The Grand Reduction?
- 2. Alicia speaks of "sins of addition" (p. xvi). In what ways can achievements weigh us down spiritually?
- 3. Have you ever "given up" anything for Lent or for a forty-day fast? If so, share your experience.
- 4. Whether you are reading 40 Days of Decrease as a preparation for Resurrection Sunday or at another time of the year, what would it mean to you to fast Lent as a project?
- 5. *Bonus content*: visit https://vimeo.com/149386646 to watch a 02:18 video from Alicia on fasting *Lent as a project*.

Day Two, pages 7-10

- 1. In what ways can Lent become a "much-needed mentor"?
- 2. Share any thoughts you had as you contrasted Bernard of Clairvaux's first and fourth degrees of love.
- 3. In Days Two's fast, Alicia calls *regret* a "sickly substance." How can regret "steal our strength...flatten dreams, and suffocate hope"?

Day Three, pages 11-14

- 1. In what ways can attention be positive? Negative?
- 2. Why did John want to decrease?
- 3. Is it always dangerous to be famous? Why or why not?
- 4. How did John the Baptist manage his season in the spotlight?
- 5. *Bonus content*: visit https://vimeo.com/149386650 to watch a 02:09 video from Alicia on fasting *collecting praise*.

Day Four, pages 15-19

- 1. John's disciples said, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him." (John 3:26) What is your guess regarding what may have motivated this question?
- 2. Have you ever helped someone who eventually "surpassed" you? What emotions did you experience? Did anyone else feel offended on your behalf?
- 3. Imagine John in prison. What questions might you have had in John's place?
- 4. Share your experience with Day Four's fast of artificial light.

Day Five, page 20-24

- 1. Alicia states that our God-concept and our self-concept are connected. (p. 21) Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- 2. Dr. Sweet explains that in the Jewish culture, "it's an act of reverence to ask questions of the story. The Jews are confident that the story is strong enough to be tried and tested.... Around the table, a Jewish child has 'That's a good question!' drummed into his or her soul, not, 'You don't ask that question'... Questions are as sacred as answers." (p. 21-22) How comfortable are you asking questions about your faith?
- 3. What do you think John's response was when his disciples returned with Jesus' answer?
- 4. Day Four invites us to fast *tidy faith*. Is there a difference between doubt and unbelief?

Day Six, page 25-28

- 1. Have you ever lost someone who truly believed in you? What was it like?
- 2. When grieving, when do you prefer to be alone? To be with others?
- 3. Share any of the names and stories that came to mind as you answered today's reflection question.
- 4. Today's fast is *speeding past sorrow*. Why do some prefer to hurry through sadness?

Day Seven, page 29-32

- 1. How does "fear, by nature, distort reality"? (p. 29)
- 2. Imagine surveying your neighbors with this question: "What comes to you mind when I say 'the cross'?" What responses do you guess they might offer?
- 3. What do you think "the cross" meant to Jesus' disciples before His death? After His resurrection?
- 4. Share your experience fasting *a meal* if you were able to participate in today's fast.

Day Eight, page 33-36

- 1. On page 34, Alicia states: "Tomorrow's needs and storms cannot void the reality of today's miracles any more than today's miracles can void the potential of tomorrow's needs and storms." How can today's storms prompt us to forget yesterday's miracles?
- 2. Why are we tempted to offer platitudes in the face of another's pain?
- 3. In your own words, what does it mean to "fast fixing it"?

Day Nine, page 37-41

- 1. How would you answer the question Alicia poses on page 38: "Why does Jesus speak words that He knows we cannot understand?"
- 2. Countless studies have been conducted on how music affects the developing brain of a baby. Clearly then, we do not have to understand something's complexity in order to be affected by its sound. What do you believe happens in your mind whenever you read or hear God's Word?
- 3. List things you enjoy that may be beyond your current understanding as you fast *rationalism*. For example, a skillful saxophone solo or a star-filled sky.

Day Ten, page 43-46

- 1. What does the request of John and James (and their mom) tell you about how the disciples viewed Jesus' kingdom? (p. 43)
- 2. How do you most often respond when faced with uncertainty?
- 3. Share your response to today's featured quote from Gerald G. May on page 44.
- 4. *Bonus content*: visit https://vimeo.com/149386647 to watch a 01:55 video from Alicia on fasting *avoidance*.

Day Eleven, page 47-51

- 1. If you were given one week to live, how do you think you would spend it?
- 2. Think about making a movie of Bartimaeus' story. Which scene would you pick as your favorite? Why?
- 3. What possibilities did you list in today's reflection question concerning the reasons why the disciples' might have sought to silence and turn away children and Bartimaeus?
- 4. Concerning today's fast of *religious profiling*, what would it look like to discount the faith or potential of the beautiful? The poor? The highly educated? The mentally broken?

Day Twelve, page 53-57

- 1. Picture Zacchaeus and Bartimaeus in the same hometown before and after they met Jesus. Which one of these men, if either, do you personally identify with more?
- 2. Reread Martin Luther King, Jr.'s featured quote about interrelatedness (p. 54). How authentically connected to others to you feel currently?
- 3. *Bonus content*: visit https://vimeo.com/149386649 to watch a 02:11 video from Alicia on fasting *isolation*.

Day Thirteen, page 59-63

- 1. Imagine yourself in any of the anointing accounts (p. 60) as another dinner guest. What thoughts might you have experienced while observing a woman pouring perfume on Jesus?
- 2. Read aloud the featured quote by an anonymous Spanish poet (p. 61). Share what line stands out to you and why.
- 3. Today's fast is *stinginess*. Brainstorm ways in which you might be able to be "irrationally lavish toward someone who cannot possibly return the favor" this week. (p. 62)

Day Fourteen, page 65-68

- 1. What do you think would motivate someone to throw their (possibly only) cloak on the ground to form part of a carpet that a donkey would walk over while carrying Jesus?
- 2. Why did the leaders ask Jesus to stop the parade?
- 3. On a scale of one (reckless spontaneity) to ten (paralyzing over-think), how would you describe yourself? How does your answer affect your spiritual life? Reflect on ways to fast *spectatorship*.

Day Fifteen, page 69-73

- 1. Alicia states that, "Knowing that the Twelve would soon run for their lives and that the masses would soon reject Him, Jesus still stayed fully present for the party." (p. 69) What would someone have to believe in order to joyfully stay present to favor that would not endure?
- 2. Under what circumstances can self-protection be healthy? Unhealthy?
- 3. How would you define *spiritual self-protection*? If you can, share how and/or when spiritual self-protection seems to manifest in your life.

Day Sixteen, page 75-78

- 1. Imagine Jesus grieving over Jerusalem. What is your guess regarding what his disciples were thinking or doing during this time?
- 2. Close your eyes and picture Jesus. Is He glowing? What color is His hair, eyes, or skin? Are His feet dirty? Are His nails clean? Discuss how your image has or has not been affected by artistic and cultural depictions of Jesus.
- 3. Where do you sense that God is weeping in the world today? Pause to intercede over that need.
- 4. *Bonus content*: visit https://vimeo.com/14938664 to watch a 02:01 video from Alicia on fasting *halos*.

Day Seventeen, page 79-83

- 1. What do you think motivated Jesus to clear the temple?
- 2. Share any responses to the questions Alicia asked regarding the physical nature of the temple clearing: "How would you have felt about Jesus in the temple that day if you were a Gentile? A moneychanger? A religious leader? His disciple?" (p. 80)
- 3. Regarding today's fast, how would you describe the difference between *apathy* and *patient waiting*? Between *apathy* and *passivity*?

Day Eighteen, page 85-89

- 1. If you could ask Jesus one question about this passage (p. 85), what would it be?
- 2. Share your reflections on the following statement: "Jesus, evidently, finds utter fruitlessness frustrating." (p. 87)
- 3. In today's fast of *appearances*, what do you think motivates us to "inflate or deflate, exaggerate or belittle" our real selves? (p. 88)

Day Nineteen, page 91-95

- 1. In your own words, explain why Jesus "closed the question" in this discussion with the chief priests and elders. (p. 92)
- 2. Jesus was speaking in this passage to the religious of his day. In our churches today, what do we tend to value more than truth?
- 3. Today's fast is *revisionism*. This could be a difficult fast because it addresses a form of self-deception. In the 1994 version of *Miracle on 34th Street*, a lawyer states in a courtroom, "Ask yourself which is better a lie that brings a smile, or a truth that brings a tear." What are some of ways in which we justify telling lies?

Day Twenty, page 97-102

- 1. Jesus reserves His harshest words for hypocrites. What is your definition of hypocrisy?
- 2. Share any thoughts from the parable you selected in the reflection section.
- 3. Today's fast is *leavened bread* as a symbol of rejecting hypocrisy in our lives. Many today accuse the church of hypocrisy. Why?
- 4. How do you discern the difference in your life between willful hypocrisy and broken humanity?

Day Twenty-One, page 103-107

- 1. What factors may have contributed to Jesus's soul being troubled at this time in His ministry? (p. 104)
- 2. Do you agree or disagree with the following: "Obedience is not a moment: it is a process connected by countless moments." (p. 104)
- 3. Share a time when your heart was troubled due to "obedience-in-the-making." (p. 105)
- 4. Regarding today's fast of *premature resolution*, what is it about the middle of the process of obedience that is so trying?

Day Twenty-Two, page 109-112

- 1. Of all the things Father God could have said, what is your guess as to why He chose to say, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again" (John 12:28-30) over Jesus as He approached "this hour"?
- 2. Inaudibly, how does God most often "speak" to you?
- 3. If you were to hear God's audible voice at least once, what would you hope that He said? (e.g., your name, an answer to a question, specific direction, etc.)
- 4. Share your experience with fasting *sound* today.

Day Twenty-Three, page 113-118

- 1. If you have ever washed someone's feet or had someone wash yours, share the how, why, and outcome of the experience.
- 2. Is there an area in which you struggle to receive Jesus' forgiveness? If so, spend a minute picturing Jesus washing your feet saying, "I forgive you. Though what happened surprised you, remember that it did not surprise Me. My love is still here. Return."
- 3. For today's fast of *armchair Jesus*, picture a football game. Where do you see Jesus? The coach on the sidelines? The owner in the exclusive box? The announcer? A cheerleader? The quarterback? Try to answer as honestly as possible.

Day Twenty-Four, page 118-123

- 1. "Get up. Get going cross-ward." (p. 120) What does this mean to you personally?
- 2. Share your response to the reflection question: "How would you describe the difference between passion and love"?
- 3. In today's fast, Alicia defines fasting *neutrality* as taking a side in the seemingly small moments of life and choosing Jesus over self. In what areas do you tend to go passive? Ask for prayer if you would like support for the battle.

Day Twenty-Five, page 125-128

- 1. A few days ago we studied Jesus' description of His soul as troubled. Today we hear Him saying, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." (Matthew 27:37-38) What would you be feeling if you described your soul in this way?
- 2. Jesus specifically asked Father God to, if possible, take the cup away and clearly God's response was for Jesus to continue cross-ward. What do you think Alicia meant by the statement: "Sharing Jesus' certainty honors Jesus' sacrifice"? (p. 126)
- 3. Alicia points out the misalignment between Jesus' emotions (overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of asking for the cup to pass) and God's will (that Jesus would continue cross-ward). In other words, Jesus was not emotionally thrilled to continue the journey and yet was still without sin. Why then do we so often pray, "God, if this isn't your will, then change my emotions"?

Day Twenty-Six, page 129-133

- 1. If you were Peter, James, or John, how might you have felt when Jesus returned to find you sleeping?
- 2. Alicia relayed how she sometimes defaults to taking a nap when she is sorrowful. How do you respond to deep sorrow?
- 3. Today's fast is *comparison*. Have you ever looked at others' lives and assumed them more spiritual and/or more favored? What creates these assumptions? What dissolves them?

Day Twenty-Seven, page 135-139

- 1. Think of the movies you have seen and/or fiction books you have read in the past year. How often was some form of betrayal part of the plot?
- 2. What is it about betrayal that makes it a particularly painful wound?
- 3. From the featured quote, what do you think Frank Laubach meant by the phrase, "I can turn life's rough spots into Your vocabulary"? (p. 137) How might that perspective help you right now?
- 4. What does Alicia mean in today's fast of *discontentment* that, "one of the fiercest allies of not-enough-ness is our imaginations"? (p. 138)

Day Twenty-Eight, page 141-145

- 1. Reread the featured quote by George MacDonald. (p. 143) In what ways did Jesus resist, "every impulse to work more rapidly for a lower good"?
- 2. In your own words, what does Alicia mean by the "Discipline of Restraint"? How did Jesus model this strength at His arrest?
- 3. Are you currently experiencing any forms of restricted freedom?
- 4. Share any thoughts you had from today's fast of formulas.

Day Twenty-Nine, page 147-151

- 1. Consider each of the eight recorded accusations against Jesus. Which were valid? Which were misrepresentations?
- 2. Alicia states that, "Jesus had no fear for Pilate to exploit." (p. 149) How might Pilate have exploited the fears of his prisoners?
- 3. Share your responses to the questions posed in today's fast of *intimidation*: "What do you fear? Being misunderstood or misrepresented? Being unwanted or unneeded? Illness or injury?"
- 4. How can awareness of our fears be a weapon of spiritual warfare?

Day Thirty, page 153-157

- 1. What emotions do you think Peter might have felt after the rooster crowed?
- 2. Reread today's featured quote from Keating. (p. 155) How can our failure become a "triumph of grace"?
- 3. In your own words, what does Alicia mean by fasting self-confidence?
- 4. *Bonus content*: visit https://vimeo.com/149386651 to watch a 01:57 video from Alicia on fasting *self-diagnosis*.

Day Thirty-One, page 159-163

- 1. Reread the list on pages 160-161 of all that Jesus experienced prior to the crucifixion. What might the abusers have believed in order to mentally justify their treatment of Jesus?
- 2. Share any thoughts you had during today's reflection exercise.
- 3. In today's fast of *mocking Jesus*, Alicia states, "Perhaps we mock Jesus more than we know." (p. 162) Pause prayerfully asking God to search your heart for any ways in which you are mocking Him.

Day Thirty-Two, page 165-170

- 1. Why do you think Pilate tried repeatedly to free Jesus?
- 2. Rejection is often at the root of our greatest pains. Jesus absorbed the world's utter rejection to make the way for our complete acceptance. How can His offering affect our pain in daily life?
- 3. How easy or hard, meaningful or mundane was today's fast of addition for you?

Day Thirty-Three, page 171-176

- 1. Alicia states, "Perhaps we would live differently if we remembered more frequently (and more accurately) what the cross cost." (p. 171) Do you agree? Disagree? Why?
- 2. Share your responses to today's featured quote from Philip Yancey. (p. 172)
- 3. Reread Psalm 22. Underline the phrases that describe Jesus' experience—one thousand years after they were prophesied.
- 4. Today's fast is willful sin. What motivates us to keep sin alive in our lives?

Day Thirty-Four, page 177-181

- 1. Who would you surround yourself with if you had six hours to live?
- 2. In what ways were the taunts Jesus heard on the cross at the end of his earthly ministry similar to the temptations Jesus heard in the desert at the beginning of his earthly ministry?
- 3. Today's fast is *criticism*. How can we distinguish between being a critical thinker and being critical?

Day Thirty-Five, page 183-187

- 1. Consider the rebel's request of Jesus to remember him when Jesus came into His kingdom. (Luke 23:41-42) Why do you think Alicia considers this statement "among the most insightful statements of faith in Christ in the Gospels"? (p. 184)
- 2. Share any stories you know of believers who saw death as a finish line instead of defeat.
- 3. What came to mind as you read today's fast of God-as-job?

Day Thirty-Six, page 189-193

- 1. Joseph kept his commitment to Jesus a secret while He was alive and made a bold proclamation of faith in Christ at His death. What might have occurred in Joseph's soul to prompt the change?
- 2. What does it mean to you to give Jesus your "resting place"? (p. 191)
- 3. Considering the fast of *withholding*, in what ways do you withhold love from others? From God? From yourself?

Day Thirty-Seven, page 195-201

- 1. What comes to mind when you think of the disciples after Jesus' burial and before the resurrection? Where do you picture them? What conversations or thoughts do you guess they might have had?
- 2. As we did a few days ago with Psalm 22, reread Isaiah 53 and underline the phrases that depict Jesus' cross-ward journey.
- 3. Describe your experience with today's fast of your *voice*. Was the silence loud for you? Did your mind wander every second or every few minutes?
- 4. Was the fast valuable? Why or why not?

Day Thirty-Eight, page 203-207

- 1. If you have ever buried dreams, share how the experience has affected, challenged, strengthened, etc. your faith.
- 2. Why do some try to rush through the grief process?
- 3. When disillusioned or experiencing spiritual pain, do you naturally seek company or solitude or both?
- 4. Reflect on today's fast of *escapism*. Long-term, how does using escapism as an anesthesia affect our personal development? Our relationships?

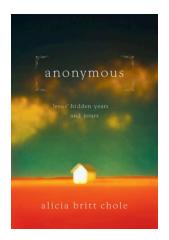
Day Thirty-Nine, page 209-213

- 1. Picture the guards in front of the tomb, unknowingly hand-selected by God for this moment. Why did they think they were there?
- 2. Just as the angelic choir sang their God-song to an audience of shepherds, now an angel comes in blinding light to move a stone in front of guards. What do shepherds and guards have in common? Why do you think they responded so differently to the angelic visitation?
- 3. What does Alicia mean by her invitation to fast guarding tombs? (p. 211-212)

Day Forty, page 215-213

- 1. Though the reality is beyond our imaginations, what comes to mind when you think of one day seeing Jesus?
- 2. Reflect once again on John the Baptist's commit to decrease that we examined toward the beginning of *40 Days of Decrease*. In what ways have you experienced sacred decrease during this journey?
- 3. Share any responses you had to the questions Alicia posed in today's reflection section: "What concepts stood out to you? Were there any areas in which a discrepancy was revealed between God's thoughts toward you and the thoughts you have toward yourself? In what ways has the journey enriched your portrait of God?" (p. 217-218)
- 4. End your 40 days with others thanking Jesus for the holy decrease that set us free!

If you and your group enjoyed 40 Days of Decrease, you will love three other offerings from Alicia!



Anonymous: Jesus' Hidden Years and Yours addresses those spaces in life where it seems as though someone pressed the pause button on our dreams and potential. Available as a book and a DVD/bible study 7-week small group experience, Alicia's study of Jesus' wilderness experience fills seemingly barren seasons with eternal purpose. Find the book, study companion guide, and DVD teaching series at www.aliciachole.com.



The Night is Normal

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