

## Introduction

### Fasting and Feasting in Lent

After He was baptized, after God spoke those words that Jesus is His beloved Son, and after the Holy Spirit descended from heaven upon Him, Jesus was led by that Spirit into the wilderness. He fasted there for 40 days. Fasting was something Jesus expected that His followers would do, as He says in Matthew 6:16 "When you fast..." Fasting was something that Jesus Himself did. Fasting is something the church encourages her members to do during these 40 days of Lent leading up to Easter.



If you are fasting, or if you choose to fast, you might find encouragement in Jesus words in the wilderness. Satan comes to Him to tempt Him and suggests that He use His power to turn stones into bread to satisfy His hunger. And Jesus responds quoting from Deuteronomy chapter eight, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4)



**This Lent, these devotionals are offered to encourage you to find sustenance not merely for your physical body in food, but to find nourishment for your soul in God's word.** You are encouraged to fast, to deny yourself this Lent in this way to remind yourself that it is not all about you. Life is about more than satisfying your immediate wants and desires. Life is about something much bigger than yourself. Life is about relationship, relationship to God and relationship to His people. **As you fast, take Jesus' words to heart and feast on God's word.** When you are hungry, when you find yourself craving that thing you have given up for Lent, you might try repeating Jesus' words from Matthew 4:4. These devotionals focus on feasting on God's word as found in the Epistle to the Ephesians. May you find they lead you to the One who sustains you, body, mind, and spirit with His Word.

## Day 1, Ash Wednesday

Preparation: Take a moment and center yourself. Get comfortable and open your heart to God in prayer. Seek to deliberately and consciously remind yourself that God is near to you, that He is with you now. Let your attitude this day be to seek Him. Begin with prayer. It can be quite a simple prayer, something like: "O God, my Father, I am here. I come to hear from You. Please speak to me today. Come Holy Spirit within me. In Jesus, Name. Amen."

Introduction: We begin our study of Ephesians by going back in time. It is as if we have boarded a time machine and are going back to the ancient city of Ephesus. There we will encounter a variety of people and circumstances. Ephesus was the third largest city in the Roman empire during Paul's lifetime. It was a destination that boasted one of the seven wonders of the world: The Temple of Artemis the Greek goddess (aka Diana in the Roman Pantheon). The Temple of Artemis was four times larger than the Parthenon in Athens. Ephesus was a bustling port city which was multi-cultural and quite prosperous. Over the next four days, you are invited to walk the streets of Ephesus and notice the circumstances in which the people lived. This may provide insight into our lives today by comparison, and this sets the context into which Paul wrote his Epistle to the Ephesians.

Reading: Acts 19:1-7 **Incomplete Teaching in the Way**

Questions for Reflection:

1. What were the people Paul encounters lacking?
2. Who were they following?
3. What happens to them before receiving the Holy Spirit?
4. What is happening when they receive the Holy Spirit?

*Note: this is not necessarily meant to be normative, that is laying on of hands and prayer leads to receiving the Holy Spirit. Many Christians today believe that we receive the Holy Spirit through baptism, or as we come to faith, though in the Episcopal Church, the bishop does lay hands on those being confirmed and prays they be filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not so easily understood and certainly not controlled by the actions of human beings. Thus while this doesn't mean it is the only way people are filled with the Holy Spirit, it certainly is a way. (Remember Jesus said the Spirit is mysterious like the wind in John 3).*

5. As you embark on these studies in Lent, you are encouraged to seek the Lord in earnest, and with humility and self-examination, realizing your faults and your desperate need of God. The men in this passage were lacking understanding and the blessings of being filled with the Holy Spirit. What might you be lacking in your Christian understanding? What would you like to experience more fully in your faith and relationship to God? What might be your next step?
6. Are you filled with the Holy Spirit? How would you know? (For many it is not so dramatic as tongues and prophesying as here.) If you are uncertain why not ask the Holy Spirit to fill you now? If you know the Spirit within you, why not ask the Holy Spirit to fill you with all His fullness?

## Day 2, Thursday

Preparation: Make yourself available to God (see Day 1's preparation). Check the attitude of your heart. Are you coming as an empty vessel seeking God to fill you today? Pray: "Come Holy Spirit."

Introduction: Today as we continue our tour through Ephesus we are witnessing factions and division. Not everyone is open to God and the good news of Jesus Christ.

Reading: Acts 19:8-10 **Opposition of Some Jews to the Way of Christ**

1. In what manner, with what approach and attitude did Paul teach about the Kingdom of God?
2. Why do you think Paul approached witnessing to others this way?
3. What was the response of many of the Jews?
4. What resulted from their opposition?
5. When you think of sharing Christ with others, what is your attitude, what is your strategy, in what manner do you share?
6. What might you learn from Paul? How might you follow His example?
7. What are your next steps?

## Day 3, Friday:

Preparation: As you prepare to enter God's presence today, ask God to protect you and guide your inner mind to Him and His ways.

Introduction: Today's reading includes wild stories of exorcisms gone bad and magic. The cult of Artemis had words and incantations that were used to cast spells and seek to control the spirits. There is evidence that even some Jews adopted a kind of "Folk Judaism" which incorporated incantations and magic. Such is the spiritual milieu into which the gospel of Jesus Christ comes with power. The miracles done through Paul bear witness to the supreme power of the One True God, superior to all the others.

Reading: Acts 19:11-20 **The Healing Power of Christ vs. Magic**

1. Try to visualize what it would have been like to be a resident of Ephesus and to see God working through Paul in this way. What impact would that have on you?
2. If God could do that then through Paul, why wouldn't He do it now still today? Could He? Do you believe He does?
3. What are these sons of Sceva like? Why do they start using the name of Jesus?
4. In what ways might people today invoke the name of Jesus with improper motives?
5. What are the motives within your heart as you seek Jesus? What improper motives do you need to confess to God that are within you at times?

6. Why not talk to God about those now.
7. Is such drastic action as burning the magic books of incantations necessary? Why did the people do it, do you think?
8. What sins in your life might require such drastic action?

#### **Day 4: Saturday/Sunday**

Preparation: Will you come to God today surrendering yourself, your pride and letting Him have the things that have a hold on you? Pray with your palms facing upward as a sign of your surrender to God. Ask Him to speak to your heart today.

Introduction: The message of the gospel has been making such an impact that many are turning away from the worship of the Greek and Roman gods, especially the worship of the goddess, Artemis. The economy of the city of Ephesus is in large part dominated by tourism to worship at the grand temple of Artemis and the accompanying trinkets that were sold. Much of the city life and marketplace revolves around that cultic worship. The threat of the gospel to the very way of life of the city has not gone unnoticed.

Reading: Acts 19: 21-40 **The Disruption to Pride and Greed that the Gospel Brings**

1. What is Demetrius' concern about "the Way" that Paul is proclaiming? Is he wanting to discern the truth of that claim or is it something else that has provoked him?
2. Try to imagine the scene of this uproar. Note how long they shout down Alexander! There is no listening. There is no careful consideration. If there had been a genuine dialogue and reasoned listening how might this scene have gone differently?
3. In what ways is our world today risking being like Demetrius and his fellow tradesmen? What are the dangers for us?
4. How are you when you are in the presence of others who are demeaning Christ?
5. If receiving Christ meant you had to renounce the achievement of which you are the most proud, and forsake your livelihood and financial resources, what might be your response?
6. Take some time to talk with God about this.

Reflection: Such is the background in Ephesus and the culture of Asia. We have noted 1) false/incomplete teaching, 2) division and resistance from the Jews, 3) magic and incantations and 4) pride in the great temple of Artemis and the worship of that goddess, as well as a focus on material gain. If you were to write a Christian letter to people living in such circumstances what subjects would be important to emphasize about Christ and our life in God? What might you say to these people? Next week we will see how, after he left, Paul writes to the Ephesian believers at a time when new believers whom Paul does not know have joined the Ephesian church.