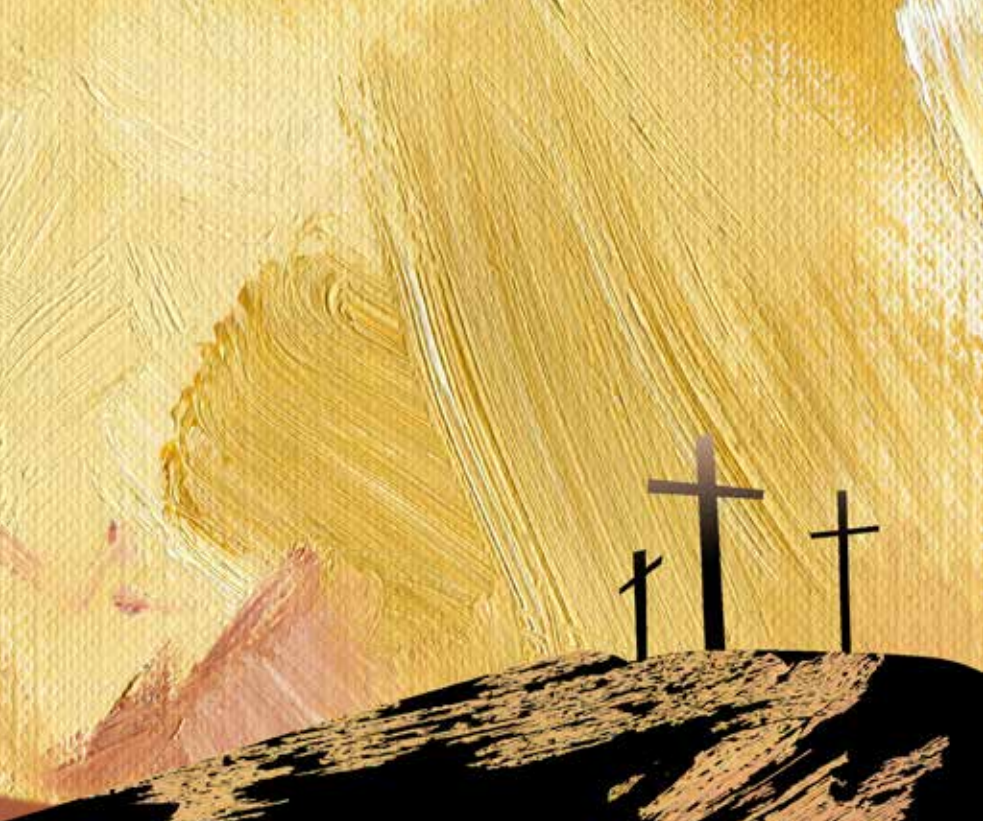




BRF Lent Book

# Giving It Up

Maggi Dawn

Daily Bible readings from  
Ash Wednesday to Easter Day

Giving  
It Up



**BRF** Ministries

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EU Authorised Representative: Easy Access System Europe –  
Mustamäe tee 50, 10621 Tallinn, Estonia, [gpsr.requests@easproject.com](mailto:gpsr.requests@easproject.com)

ISBN 978 1 80039 553 4  
First published 2009  
This edition published 2025  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0  
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### **Acknowledgements**

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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*My thanks to the publishing team at BRF Ministries,  
to my family and friends, and also to the many readers  
of the first edition, whose words of encouragement have led  
to this new edition.*

*Dedicated to my son Benedict.*



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## Preface to the second edition

In the years since I first wrote this book, it has become something of a cliché to say that ‘life is a journey’ – a phrase that seems to carry with it the assumption that it does not matter very much where you are going, it only matters that you enjoy the ride.

The journey through Lent, however, is based on a different idea. First, because the season of Lent follows Jesus on a physical journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, which parallels his metaphysical journey from life to death and beyond. And second, because – following in the same vein – while Christian theology certainly values the journey, it gives immense importance to the destination. St Augustine, in his classic text *The City of God*, described the Christian experience, not as an ever-repeating circle, but as a linear concept. Life on earth is a pilgrimage that starts in one place and ends somewhere else completely; the journey through life is a gradual pathway towards heaven.

I invite you to join me in these daily readings, which aim to help us make Lent an annual pilgrimage – but rather than treading the same path we have before, to travel ever deeper into the truth of the gospel. It is an invitation to something more consequential than merely giving up chocolate: instead, let us open ourselves up to shedding some of the ‘baggage’ of our misconceptions and entrenched ideas about God, so that, as Richard of Chichester famously prayed, we might see God more clearly.



# Introduction

**The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.**

Marcel Proust

Of all the traditions associated with Lent, probably the best known is the practice of giving something up, for the six-and-a-half weeks from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. Some people give up chocolate, alcohol, coffee or sweets, while others give up something non-edible, such as a time-consuming habit like social media. A few take the opportunity of Lent to kick a habit. But why do we give things up? Where did the tradition begin, and what is it supposed to achieve?

There is clear evidence that, for at least 1,500 years, the church has kept a period of fasting during the weeks before Easter, and it's thought the tradition may date even further back to the very early church. The word 'Lent' comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *Lencten*, from which we get our word 'lengthen', and it referred simply to the fact that, in the northern hemisphere, the weeks leading up to Easter were the early spring days that were lengthening after the winter solstice. The oldest traditions of Lent are interwoven with the idea of spring. Greek Orthodox communities treat the first day of Lent as a celebration of the first outdoor day of the new year: because spring is the beginning of new life after the death that came with winter, we should go outside to greet it.

In medieval Europe, fasting and abstinence were not restricted to Lent. Eating meat was prohibited by the church at least one day in every week of the year, and Friday continued to be a 'fish day' until late into the 20th century, as a reminder that it was on Friday that Christ died. In addition to Friday, there were often two or three more

days of abstinence in the week, with a great deal of local variation. For instance, in some areas Wednesday was a meat-free day to remember the treason of Judas Iscariot, and Saturday was a day to honour the Virgin Mary. There was also a cycle of fasting through the year – the four Ember Days, which mark the beginning of the new seasons, and Advent (the four weeks before Christmas) as well as Lent. For the medieval Christian, then, meat was prohibited for somewhere between a third and a half of all the days in the year; but the Lent fast, representing the 40 days during which Jesus withdrew into the wilderness, was the toughest of the fasts.

This fast has several purposes. It is supposed to be a daily reminder that we depend upon God for everything. It is also intended to draw us closer to God in prayer, to reconnect us to the idea of community, and to help us follow Christ's journey through the wilderness and on to Jerusalem. It is all too easy, though, to reduce this simply to giving up some treat or other for the duration of Lent, and then either feel pleased with ourselves for breaking a bad habit or losing a little weight, or feel a little guilty at not keeping our resolution, but either way not really to engage with the deeper meanings of Lent.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophets called the people of God to a 'true fast' – not merely the observance of traditions, but a fast that transformed their lives. With this in mind, Lent offers the opportunity to explore another kind of 'giving up'. In order to draw closer to God, and to see him more clearly, we may need to give up some of our entrenched ideas about him. This is less about giving up 'false gods' than it is about identifying false or blurred images of God that have been picked up from the surrounding culture or from our imagination, and allowing these to be replaced. We need to allow light to be shed on those places where our idea of God is too harsh, too weak, too small, too fragile, too stern.

We will begin this Lent journey, then, by looking at the traditions of Lent to gain a clearer picture of their purpose, and the biblical imagery they reflect. We will see what Jesus said about fasting and

what he gave up when he fasted in the wilderness. We will look at the way some biblical characters traded in their old idea of God for a true encounter, and notice how different the real God was from the god of their expectations. Then we will look at the way Jesus turned people's ideas about God upside down. Finally, in Holy Week, we will follow the events of the last week in Jesus' life, to discover how different he was from the Messiah people were anticipating. In the process, we may find that we, too, have preconceived notions of what God 'ought' to be like, and these might come in for some re-examination.

This Lent, then, whether or not you are giving up chocolate, social media, or anything else, I invite you to take a journey with me through biblical tales of fasts and wildernesses to seek a clearer vision of God. As I have written this book, I have been surprised at the way in which my own ideas have been changed all over again. To see God more clearly almost certainly means being surprised, regularly and often, at what we discover. So, as we travel together, let us pray for the grace to be flexible enough in our thinking to allow God to reveal himself to us, using the prayer of St Richard of Chichester (1197–1253) as our daily prayer:

*Thanks be to thee, my Lord Jesus Christ,  
For all the benefits thou hast won for me,  
For all the pains and insults thou hast borne for me.  
O most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother,  
May I know thee more clearly,  
Love thee more dearly,  
And follow thee more nearly,  
Day by day.*



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The idea of 'giving something up for Lent' is widely known and discussed today – yet how many know that the ancient discipline of the Lenten fast had several purposes? It was designed as a reminder of our daily dependence on God for all our needs, to draw us closer to God in prayer, to reconnect with the idea of community, and to help us follow Christ's journey through the wilderness and on to Jerusalem. How many of us simply abstain from some treat or other for a few weeks and fail to engage with this deeper meaning of Lent?

This book shows how Lent can be a time for exploring a different kind of 'giving up', one that can transform our lives. If we are to draw closer to God, we have to be willing to give up some of our entrenched ideas about him, in order to see him more clearly. In a series of daily studies, Maggi Dawn shows how, throughout scripture, people were radically changed by encountering the true God. If we follow their examples, we can allow the Holy Spirit to shed new light on our ideas of God that are too harsh, too small, too fragile or too stern. Then God will graciously reveal himself to us and bring us to an Easter joy that is richer and more profound than ever before.



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