

A close-up, black and white photograph of the upper bulb of an hourglass. The glass is dark and reflective, with a thin stream of dark sand falling from the narrow neck. The background is solid black.

STUDY GUIDE

NICOLE M. ROCCAS

A close-up, black and white photograph of the lower bulb of an hourglass. The glass is dark and reflective, with a thin stream of light-colored sand falling from the narrow neck. The background is solid black.

Lenten Discussion
and Reflection Guide

Introduction

Welcome to the official Lenten discussion and reflection guide for the book *Time and Despondency: Regaining the Present in Faith and Life* (Ancient Faith Publishing, 2017). It is intended to be used while reading the book during the six weeks of Lent, which (per Eastern Orthodox practice) ends the Friday before Palm Sunday/Holy Week. The guide may be used on its own or as a supplement to the discussion questions printed in the back of the book. Moreover, it can serve as reflection points for individuals or as a discussion guide for a book group. All terms marked with an asterisk (*) are explained in the glossary at the back of this guide.

Each week has its own page that contains four elements:

- » **The readings** are listed at the top of each page/week. (See my note below concerning the readings.)
- » **Several quotes** follow the reading selections. These help focus on that week’s liturgical theme in Lent.
- » **Three discussion questions** are included for each week. These tie the reading selections directly to the journey of Lent. Many of these include multiple follow-ups to generate discussion and reflection.
- » **A stepping stone for the journey.** I’ve spread the different sections of Chapter 7—the most practical chapter—over the course of Lent so each week has one practical element in addition to the rest of the reading. At the bottom of the page, participants are asked to consider one stepping stone from that week which they’d like to try implementing in their everyday lives. This is not meant to replace traditional ascetical observances of Lent, such as fasting, but to garner creativity to go “above and beyond” and use our TIME in Lent more intentionally.

A final note about the readings: Because there are more chapters in the book than weeks in Lent, some weeks have multiple chapters to read. I have tried to combine the shorter chapters to aid readability. In addition, I have split Chapter 7 into six small chunks, so every week of Lent offers a small dose of practicality in addition to whatever other chapter(s) are being read. The final week—week six—culminates in reading the conclusion, which has a strong Holy Week flavor, thus making *Time and Despondency* a fitting way to both spend and end your Lent.

Καλή Σαρακοστή! A blessed Lent to us all!

Nicole Roccas
Afterfeast of the Presentation of Our Lord 2018
Toronto, Ontario

Week 1

CLEAN WEEK*

READING: Introduction (pp. 11–20); Chapter 1 (pp. 21–40); stepping stones of “Humility” (pp. 130–136)

Fasting opens the entrance to a territory that you have scarcely glimpsed: the expressions of life and all the events around you and within you get a new illumination, the hastening hours a new, wide-eyed and rich purpose. The vigil of groping thought is replaced by a vigil of clarity; troublesome searching is changed to quiet acceptance in gratitude and humility. Seemingly large, perplexing problems open their centres like the ripe calyces of flowers: with prayer, fasting and vigil in union, we may knock on the door we wish to see opened.

(Tito Colliander, *Way of the Ascetics*, Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1960, pp. 76–77)

When the Lord had fasted for forty days in the wilderness, He at last became hungry, showing His human nature. Do not be despondent, my soul, if the enemy attacks you, but let him be beaten off by prayer and fasting.

The Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete,* Ode 9, Troparion 8.

DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In the early days of Christian theology, despondency was seen as a strictly monastic ailment. Why do you think this was the case? During Lent, we get a small taste of monasticism. In what ways does or will despondency pose more of a challenge for you during Lent than at other times?
2. In the Introduction, Nicole mentions that one of the first things she learned upon gaining a father confessor was the need to be persistent in prayer, even in the boredom and tedium of life. Why and how is this a particularly relevant lesson to consider as we begin Lent? What are some of the blessings that can emerge from boredom?
3. The premise of *Time and Despondency* is that it’s “good to talk about these things.” Likewise, one of the main themes of the *Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete** involves dialoguing within our souls for transformation. In what ways is Lent a good time to “talk about these things” with and within our very selves? What are the things we need to begin saying to our souls this Lent? What is already in our souls that we need to begin listening to?

STEPPING STONES FOR THE JOURNEY

What is one way you’d like to try exercising humility this week, based on the readings?

Week 2

COMMEMORATION OF ST. GREGORY OF PALAMAS*

READING: Chapter 2 (pp. 41–66); stepping stones of “Patience & Perseverance” (pp. 136–140)

*You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth,
And the heavens are the work of Your hands.
They will perish, but You remain;
And they will all grow old like a garment;
Like a cloak You will fold them up,
And they will be changed.
But You are the same,
And Your years will not fail.*

(Hebrews 1:10–12 NKJV, epistle reading from the second Sunday of Great Lent)

A human being who does not endure courageously the unpleasant burdens of temptations will never produce fruit worthy of the divine winepress and eternal harvest, not even if one possesses all other virtues. For one is only perfected through zealously enduring both all the voluntary and involuntary afflictions.

(St. Gregory of Palamas, *Treatise on the Spiritual Life*, trans. Daniel Rogich, Minneapolis: Light and Life, 1995, p. 74)

DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. The first portion of this chapter discusses the spiritually destructive tendency to perceive time and eternity as separate realms. Perhaps we could expand on this idea to consider the Final Judgment, something we hear a lot about during Great Lent.* To what extent is our judgment ongoing, a state of being that unfolds in the here-and-now of lived relationship and encounter (or lack thereof)? If the opposite of desponding is responding, what do you think is the opposite of entering into judgment? In what ways do you see these two ways of living as being at odds with one another in your own life?
2. In what ways is the journey of Lent a metaphor for the *chronos* mode of time and being? In what ways is it a metaphor for *kairos*?
3. How does the “time” of Lent exacerbate despondency? What times or junctures in Lent are more difficult for you: the beginning, middle, or end? Why? How might shifting your perception of time reconnect you with a more redemptive experience of Great Lent?

STEPPING STONES FOR THE JOURNEY

What is one way you’d like to try exercising patience this week, based on the readings?

Week 3

VENERATION OF THE CROSS*

READING: Chapter 3 (pp. 67–74); stepping stones of “Gratitude” (pp. 140–145)

The Lenten season is a time for labor and effort. It is a season when we strive to energize ourselves, to wake ourselves up, to motivate ourselves to spiritual feats. It is a time when we declare a conscious struggle against sloth, and beg the Lord not to give us to this evil spirit, but to take it from us when we are caught in its snares.

(Thomas Hopko, *The Lenten Spring*, Crestwood: SVS Press, 1983, p. 81)

Becoming incarnate from a holy Virgin, He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, conforming to the body of our lowliness, that He might change us in the likeness of the image of His glory. . . . He gave Himself as ransom to death in which we were held captive, sold under sin. Descending into Hades through the Cross, that He might fill all things with Himself, He loosed the bonds of death.

(From the Holy Anaphora of the Divine Liturgy of St. Basil*)

DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Which traditional Lenten practices help you develop a more neptic (wakeful) attitude in the heart? How do they do this?
2. What are some of the pitfalls we face during Lent? How does our mind manipulate fasting and other ascetical efforts to pull us away from the “now-ness” of encountering Christ?
3. Think back to the example of the bus schedules at the end of this chapter. How does Lent open up spaces or “empty” margins in our time? What are the ways you tend to respond or despond to these margins?

STEPPING STONES FOR THE JOURNEY

What is one way you’d like to try exercising gratitude this week, based on the readings?

Week 4

ST. JOHN CLIMACUS*

READING: Chapter 4 (pp. 75–90); stepping stones of “Confession and Community” (pp. 146–150)

Tedium [despondency] is a paralysis of the soul, a slackness of the mind, a neglect of spiritual exercise, a hostility to vows taken. It is an approval of worldly things.

(St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 13)

Simply put, *tedium* is putting spiritual life on the back burner and subjecting it to convenience. We simply do not consider it as important as other things. . . . Of course, physical tiredness can play a part. It is natural for us sometimes to be so exhausted that we do not have as much time and energy for prayer as we would like. But this is tiredness, not despondency. Despondency is having the time and energy, but not caring enough to dedicate them to the spiritual life, though we have plenty of time and energy for entertainment, work, family, or other activities.

(Vassilios Papavassiliou, *Thirty Steps to Heaven: The Ladder of Divine Ascent for All Walks of Life*, Chester-ton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2013, p. 109)

DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. So far this Lent, what have been the new insights you’ve gleaned into the ways you escape from the present moment of prayer—physically, mentally, or spiritually?
2. How does (or can) Great Lent constitute a path back to that present moment of prayer—physically, mentally, and spiritually?
3. If you find yourself escaping more than returning to the present moment, or if you haven’t yet taken the *askesis** of Lent seriously, what is one small but tangible step you could take back to the arena of spiritual care and effort?

STEPPING STONES FOR THE JOURNEY

What is one way you’d like to try exercising the stepping stones of confession and community this week, based on the readings?

Week 5

ST. MARY OF EGYPT*

READING: Chapter 5 (pp. 91–108); stepping stones of “Labor & Leisure” (pp. 150–159)

And so it was I saw the life-giving Cross. I saw too the Mysteries of God and how the Lord accepts repentance. Throwing myself on the ground, I worshipped that holy earth and kissed it with trembling.

(From the *Vita of St. Mary of Egypt*, written by St. Sophronius of Jerusalem)

If our thoughts are kind, peaceful, and quiet, turned only toward good, then we also influence ourselves and radiate peace all around us—in our family, in the whole country, everywhere. This is true not only here on earth, but in the cosmos as well. When we labor in the fields of the Lord, we create harmony. Divine harmony, peace, and quiet spread everywhere.

(*Our Thoughts Determine Our Lives: The Life and Teachings of Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica*, Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2009, p. 63)

DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. We often think of Lent as a time of doing—praying, giving alms, going to church, etc. How is it (or can it become) also a time of being? What kind of being are you trying to cultivate during this season? How does the doing of prayer support that?
2. What are the ways this Lent has awakened you to the “monologues” in your life? How is Lent serving to open your heart back up to dialogue—with God and neighbor? What is one way you can begin to lean into—or keep leaning into—the dialogue of prayer and life in the remaining weeks of Lent?
3. It is easy to grow overwhelmed or discouraged in our Lenten effort(s). Perhaps we’ve focused on the “go big or go home” kind of fasting and burned out, or cares and anxieties have crowded out the blessings of this season. Either way: how can you begin (or continue) turning toward God in the small and regular moments of life this Lent? Where can you begin to re-begin if you’ve fallen off course?

STEPPING STONES FOR THE JOURNEY

What is one way you’d like to try practicing the disciplines of labor and leisure this week, based on the readings?

Week 6

PALM SUNDAY*

READING: Chapter 7, selections (pp. 127–130, 166–67); Conclusion (pp. 169–178); stepping stones of “Humor” (pp. 159–166)

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . . God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty.

1 Corinthians 1:18, 27 (NKJV)

Easter is not a commemoration of an event, but—every year—the fulfillment of time itself, of our real time. . . . One could describe the various rites, one could analyze the texts, one could mention a thousand details, but in the last count, all this is secondary. The only reality is joy and this joy is given.

Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, Crestwood: SVS Press, 2002, p. 57)

DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. The Conclusion of *Time and Despondency* delineates between two modes of interpreting the saving events of Christ’s life: re-enacting (or commemorating) it and re-*present*-ing it, making it actual in the here and now. As Holy Week approaches, how can we begin to “re-present” the Passion and Resurrection of Christ in our lives, our churches, and our world? How have we relegated Christ to the past in our hearts?
2. The end of Lent can often be bittersweet. Although we await the festal levity of Pascha, many of us are more aware of our regrets and shortcomings than ever. However, if that which Lent has been leading us toward—the Cross, Tomb, and Resurrection of Christ—is and ever has been *Now*, how does that change the nature of our struggles? How does it also change the shape and direction of our journey—our all-encompassing journey of Lent, life, faith, healing?
3. As we reflect on our experience of Lent this year, what are some of the scales that have fallen from our eyes (however small and thin)?

STEPPING STONES FOR THE JOURNEY

What is one way you’d like to try practicing the disciplines of humor based on the readings? Alternatively, what is one stepping stone you’d like to return to this last week of Lent?

Glossary

Askesis: A Greek word that means “training” or willful control of the body or passions. It refers to effort or discipline put forth in the spiritual life in general, particularly during Lent.

Clean week: Orthodox often use this term to refer to the first week of **Great Lent**.^{*} Lent begins the Sunday night prior to the Monday of clean week (i.e. Clean Monday), with a rite known as Forgiveness Vespers. One of the liturgical themes of this week is putting away the deeds and impulses of the flesh and settling into the long haul of Lent and repentance. As a result, there are numerous “little ‘t’ traditions” associated with this week that center on cleaning up, physically and spiritually. For example, some people do a thorough house cleaning this week, while others make it a point to go to confession. In some traditionally Orthodox countries, Clean Monday is a federal holiday. In Greece, there is a tradition of flying kites on this day—a beautiful reminder that fasting and drawing near to Christ is an occasion not to mourn but to rejoice.

Divine Liturgy of St. Basil: This is the Divine Liturgy (or Eucharist service) that the Orthodox celebrate every Sunday during **Great Lent**^{*} as well as Holy Thursday and Saturday. It is an older and longer version of the Liturgy than the one used more regularly (the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom).

The Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete: Also known as the Canon of Repentance or the Canon of Forgiveness, this is the longest canon in Orthodox hymnography and is traditionally celebrated one section at a time the first four nights of Great Lent (i.e. during **Clean Week**^{*}). In addition, it is sometimes celebrated in its entirety at Matins on the fifth Thursday of Lent. St. Andrew of Crete, venerated in both the Orthodox and Catholic traditions, was an eighth-century bishop in Crete as well as a praiseworthy theologian and hymnographer. His canon embroiders on examples of repentance and forgiveness throughout the Old and New Testaments.

Great Lent: Orthodox typically refer to Lent as “Great” Lent to distinguish it as the longest and most sacred fasting period of the church year.

St. Gregory of Palamas was a thirteenth-century monk, theologian, and bishop who is famous for his masterful articulation of complex theological truths. He is commemorated on the second Sunday of Great Lent, particularly for his defense of hesychasm, a form of interior prayer that is beloved in the Orthodox tradition (one example of this is the Jesus Prayer).

St. John Climacus is venerated in both the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. He is best known for his enduring work of ascetical theology, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (ca. 600), which is remembered on the fourth Sunday of Great Lent.

St. Mary of Egypt (d. ca. 421) is among the most beloved saints of the Orthodox tradition and provides a timeless picture of the extent of repentance and forgiveness that is possible in Christ. Having given herself over to a life of harlotry, St. Mary experienced an encounter with the presence of Christ through His life-giving Cross that completely changed her life. Her complete *Vita* is read aloud on the Thursday preceding the fifth Sunday of Great Lent.

Palm Sunday is technically not part of Lent in the Orthodox tradition, but I included it in this guide for the sake of formatting consistency. Unlike Lent in the Catholic Church, which by most accounts concludes on the evening of Holy Thursday, Lent in the Orthodox Church ends on the Friday prior to Palm Sunday. The days that remain until Pascha (Easter) are considered a separate, distinctive fasting period.

The Veneration of the Cross: This commemoration of the Holy Cross on the third Sunday of Lent marks the halfway point of the Lenten journey in the Orthodox tradition. Although Holy Friday commemorates the Passion of Christ on the Cross, this day is devoted to the Cross itself and contains echoes of the many times God has used wood to enact and foreshadow the salvation of humanity. It is marked by a solemn

procession of the cross (often bedecked with fragrant basil leaves, roses, and/or myrrh) around the nave of the Church. In Canada and elsewhere in North America, it is customary to distribute daffodils on this day as a symbol of spring and the regeneration of life that is enacted through the cross.