

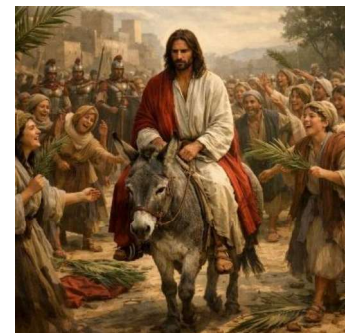
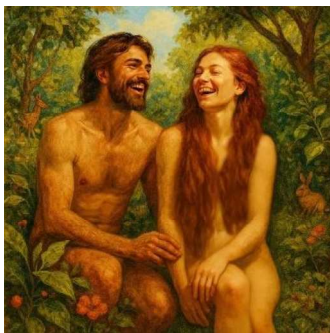
# **The Lenten Walk**

## ***A Six-Week Journey to Mature Faith***

**Based on *Worship at Hand* resources**



**By**  
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## About this Study Guide

This six-week study guide reimagines the season of Lent as a **transformative journey toward spiritual maturity**, moving away from traditional narratives of guilt and toward a faith defined by **responsibility and discernment**.

Structured as a progressive "long-distance walk," the course explores biblical encounters that challenge us to embrace **subversive grace** and adopt a **new way of seeing** that prioritises the heart over outward status. From the shadows of honest questioning to the "dry bones" of collective grief, the material encourages participants to find **holy presence in the ordinary** and messy realities of life.

I hope this course will encourage participants to embrace a "faith for grown-ups" that rejects worldly power in favour of **radical, self-emptying love** and humble service.

The study materials are based on the ***Worship at Hand*** worship resources for the six Sundays in Lent 2026, which can be ordered here:

<https://philipgarsidebooks.com/collections/worship-at-hand>

Expect the sessions to last 45-60 minutes.

This study package also includes a PowerPoint slideshow covering all six sessions, which can be projected for in-person sessions or screen shared for Zoom sessions, and a .jpg image illustrating each session's theme which you can use to help publicise the course.

After purchasing a copy of the course package for your church or group, you are welcome to share, copy or email extracts among course leaders and participants to help run the sessions.

*Philip Garside*  
30 December 2025

## Instructions

1. Welcome people to the session.
2. At the start of each session, say:

“Discussions about faith, belief and theology can be emotional and sensitive. Please listen to each other carefully and respect each other’s views. Let’s resist the temptation to impose your ideas on others. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions.”
3. Read aloud the Introduction to the session.
4. Say together the Opening Prayer
5. Read aloud the Revised Common Lectionary Bible reading/s on which the week’s sermon is based.

Bible Gateway <https://www.biblegateway.com/> offers many translations of Bible texts. We recommend the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE)
6. Read aloud the Sermon Summary.

(The Full Sermon text is also provided for you to refer to for additional ideas and context).
7. Discuss the six questions provided for the session.

Or allow a free discussion of anything in the sermon summary or readings which captures the group’s imagination.
8. As leader of the session, take notice of people who have yet to speak and invite them to contribute to the discussion.
9. At the end, thank people for taking part. Tell people when the next session will be and who will be leading it.
10. Close with the Blessing for the session and The Grace.

## Lent 1 — Awakening to Maturity



### Introduction

This session explores the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden not as a tale of shame, but as a "growing up moment" for humanity. It invites participants to move past inherited guilt and embrace a faith that values **responsibility, questioning, and spiritual evolution**.

By looking at Jesus' time in the wilderness, we see a model for mature discernment – choosing trust and service over the shortcuts of power and ego.

### Opening Prayer

God of every beginning, you plant us in places of purpose

**Renew us in your way of love**

You call us into knowledge and agency, not fear

**Renew us in your way of compassion**

You invite us to grow up in grace, not guilt

**Renew us in your way of respect**

You show us how to resist the illusions of domination

**Renew us in your way of simplicity. Amen.**

**Read aloud the Bible Readings:** Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11

## Sermon summary

### Growing Up in God – Choosing Life with Eyes Wide Open

Lent invites honest reflection, not fear or self-blame. The readings from Genesis and Matthew open space for a deeper conversation about temptation, maturity, and what it means to grow into a thoughtful, life-giving faith.

The story of Adam and Eve is often described as “The Fall,” a moment when humanity supposedly failed and dragged sin into the world. But another way of reading this ancient story is as an awakening rather than a catastrophe. In the garden, humanity is created for partnership and responsibility. The first humans are placed there not to obey blindly, but to care, tend, and participate in God’s creative work. The choice to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil brings awareness, not instant condemnation. Their eyes are opened. They become conscious of vulnerability, freedom, and consequence. Even God later acknowledges that they have gained moral understanding.

Shame doesn’t come from God in this story. Nakedness itself is not wrong or sinful. Bodies are not cursed. The fear and covering that follow emerge from human anxiety, not divine rejection. This opens the door to a more life-affirming spirituality, one that honours the body, curiosity, and human longing as part of being made in God’s image. In te ao Māori, the idea of *tapu* reminds us that bodies are sacred and that physical and spiritual life belong together. God’s blessing rests on the whole person.

God’s response in the garden reveals a compassionate presence rather than an angry judge. The questions God asks are gentle and relational. They sound like the voice of a parent noticing change, not a ruler seeking punishment. Humanity doesn’t remain in a sheltered innocence forever. Growth requires risk, learning, and sometimes painful awareness. Faith matures through discernment rather than rigid rule-keeping.

Jesus’ time in the wilderness deepens this vision of mature faith. After 40 days of testing, he faces temptations that echo everyday human struggles – hunger and survival, the desire for recognition, and the lure of power and control. These moments are not traps designed to make him fail. They are invitations to choose what kind of life he will live. Jesus refuses shortcuts. He chooses trust over manipulation, wisdom over spectacle, and service over domination. Temptation becomes a place of clarity rather than shame.

These stories speak powerfully into contemporary life. Growth often involves unlearning inherited shame. Wisdom comes through experience, reflection, and honest self-knowledge. Moments of testing reveal values and priorities. Faith expands when simplistic images of a punishing God give way to a deeper trust in grace.

Lent becomes a season of re-orientation rather than self-condemnation. People wander, question, and stumble, yet God continues to provide clothing, care, and companionship. The path forward remains open. Life with God calls for open eyes, courageous choices, and a willingness to grow. Grace doesn’t disappear when innocence ends. It deepens as wisdom grows.

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## Full Sermon

### Growing Up in God – Choosing Life with Eyes Wide Open

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11

Let's pray:

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and redeemer. Amen.

#### Introduction: What If the Fall Wasn't a Fall?

Let's begin today with a question that might make you pause: *What if the story we call "The Fall" isn't really about a fall at all?* What if Adam and Eve's encounter with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil isn't a moral catastrophe, but a necessary awakening – a growing up moment in the life of humanity?

For centuries, the Christian tradition has framed Genesis 3 as the moment sin entered the world – Eve tempted, Adam failed, nakedness was shamed, and the rest of us were cursed because of their disobedience. But what if we've misread the story? What if we've layered onto this ancient Jewish tale a burden it was never meant to carry?

Today's readings – from Genesis and from Matthew – both deal with temptation and choice. They speak to our human longing to understand, to grow, to be in relationship with God. And they invite us into a different way of understanding what it means to be faithful, mature, and truly human.

#### Re-reading Eden: A Story of Awakening, Not Shame

In the Genesis passage, we see a beautiful, symbolic world. God creates a garden – a place of delight – and places the first human beings in it. The purpose? "To till it and keep it." From the beginning, humanity is given *responsibility, partnership, and purpose*. This is not a story of unthinking servitude; it is one of stewardship and care.

But then comes the command: "You may freely eat of every tree... but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat." And here, things get tricky.

The traditional interpretation suggests that Eve disobeys, drags Adam down with her, and gets all of humanity in trouble. This reading blames women, shames bodies, and introduces the idea of "original sin" – a concept that's not found in this text at all, and only appears centuries later in Christian theology. It's time we challenge that framing, not with anger or disdain, but with deeper faith and curiosity.

Look again at the story. What actually happens?

The serpent – described as clever, not evil – raises a provocative idea: that knowing the difference between good and evil will make the humans more like God. And... God confirms this later in verse 22: "Now they have become like one of us, knowing good and evil."

There's no hint that God was caught off guard. No thunderous condemnation. What we see is a moment of change – of awakening. The humans gain knowledge. Their eyes are opened. They recognise their vulnerability, their bodies, and their freedom.

This is not a story about the origin of sin – it’s a story about *what it means to be human*.

### **Naked and Unashamed – A Reclamation**

Let’s talk about nakedness for a moment. The text tells us that “they were naked, and they were not ashamed.” Only after eating the fruit do they feel exposed.

But being naked is not sinful. Being sexual is not shameful. The beauty of our bodies – in all their diversity, their wrinkles and curves, their capacity for pleasure and for creating life – is something to honour, not to hide. God didn’t curse the body. The shame came from human fear, not divine judgment.

As mature people of faith, we can embrace a spirituality that says the body is good, that sexuality is a gift, that human longing – even for knowledge and growth – is part of what it means to be made in God’s image.

In te ao Māori, the concept of *tapu* can help us here. Bodies are not shameful – they are sacred. *Wairua* and *tinana* are not split apart; they are woven together. This holistic view invites us to remember that God’s blessing covers the whole of who we are – physical, emotional, spiritual.

### **The God Who Lets Us Grow**

Another traditional idea worth challenging is the picture of God as a strict parent issuing commands and punishing disobedience. In this story, God’s tone is not wrathful. God asks questions. “Where are you?” “Who told you that you were naked?” These are not courtroom interrogations. They are the gentle questions of a parent realising their children are changing – growing, stretching, stumbling towards independence.

God is not a tyrant in Eden. God is a companion. God is a guide who walks with us as we move from innocence to wisdom.

Mature faith doesn’t mean blind obedience. It means growing into discernment. It means wrestling with choices. It means learning from mistakes. It means becoming co-creators with God, not just passive followers.

### **Jesus in the Wilderness: A Model of Mature Faith**

This brings us to the Gospel reading: Jesus in the wilderness. If Genesis is the story of first awakening, then Matthew is the story of mature discernment.

Jesus is tested – not for a moment, but over a long, gruelling period. “Forty” echoes the days Moses spent on the mountain, the years Israelites spent in the wilderness, and the days of flood endured by Noah. It’s a long time. A soul-shaping time.

And what is Jesus tested with?

Physical need: “Turn these stones to bread.”

Ego and magical thinking: “Throw yourself down; God will catch you.”

Power and domination: “Worship me, and all this can be yours.”



These are real temptations, subtle, persistent. And in facing them, Jesus shows us that temptation is not about moral failure – it's about *choice*. It's about relationship with God. It's about knowing what matters most.

Jesus refuses the shortcuts. He doesn't say, "I can't." He says, "I won't." He chooses trust over control. Wisdom over spectacle. Service over domination.

## Embodying the Message Today

What can we take from all this? How do these stories speak into our lives – here and now, in Aotearoa, in our families, churches, workplaces?

Here are some ways we might embody these messages:

**Let go of inherited shame.** If you've been taught that your body, your questions, or your desires are shameful – lay that burden down. It's not from God. God walks with us in our vulnerability, not against us.

**Celebrate wisdom and experience.** Adam and Eve's story reminds us that growth involves risk. We learn by doing, by trying, by failing sometimes. That's not sin – that's learning.

**Don't fear temptation – learn from it.** Like Jesus, we will all face moments of testing. The goal is not to pretend these moments don't exist. The invitation is to know ourselves well enough to make wise choices – to align ourselves with what brings life.

**Reject simplistic theology.** When we move past ideas of a punishing God and inherited sin, we make room for a bigger Gospel – one of grace, growth, and ongoing invitation.

**Practise regular reorientation.** Worship, prayer, scripture, and community help re-centre us. We all wander. But God always offers a way back.

## God Always Offers a Second Chance

This might be the most important message of all: *God always offers a second chance.*

Adam and Eve are not cast out in rage. They are clothed. Cared for. Sent out to continue the human story. Jesus, after the wilderness, is ministered to by angels. Even in hardship, God is near.

Whatever wilderness you are in today, whatever fruit you have tasted, whatever shame you carry – know this: God is not finished with you. There is a path forward. There is healing. There is grace.

## Conclusion: Choosing Life with Eyes Wide Open

We are not called to stay in Eden-like innocence. We are called to grow up in our faith – to choose life, eyes wide open. To be aware of good and evil. To resist what harms. To lean into what heals. To trust that God is not afraid of our questions, our bodies, our journeys.

Jesus shows us the way. Not by avoiding struggle, but by facing it. Not by pretending to be innocent, but by choosing what is good.

May we grow wise. May we grow compassionate. May we grow bold.

And may we always keep turning towards the sacred energy of God, who walks with us still.

Amen.

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## Discussion Questions

1. How does reframing the "Fall" as a "necessary awakening" change your view of yourself and your relationship with God?
2. In the garden, humanity was given the responsibility to "till and keep" the earth. How does this shape your understanding of your own life's purpose?
3. Jesus responded to temptation not by saying "I can't," but "I won't." What's the difference between those two stances in your own spiritual life?
4. The sermon suggests that God acts as a companion and a guide rather than a tyrant. How have you experienced God's "gentle questions" in your life?
5. How can we, as a community, help one another let go of inherited shame regarding our bodies or our doubts?
6. What does it mean to you to "choose life with eyes wide open" rather than staying in a state of "Eden-like innocence"?

## Blessing

Go now, not in fear of your questions,  
but with eyes open to the sacred in all things.

Walk not in shame, but in truth,  
knowing Christ chooses courage over control.

Go into the world, clothed in compassion,  
resisting the powers that promise ease over justice.

Grow wise, grow bold, grow kind –  
for God walks with you, still.

## The Grace

Kia tau ki a tātou katoa,  
te atawhai o to tātou Ariki o Ihu Karaiti,  
me te aroha o te Atua,  
me te whiwhinga tahitanga  
ki te Wairua Tapu. Amine.