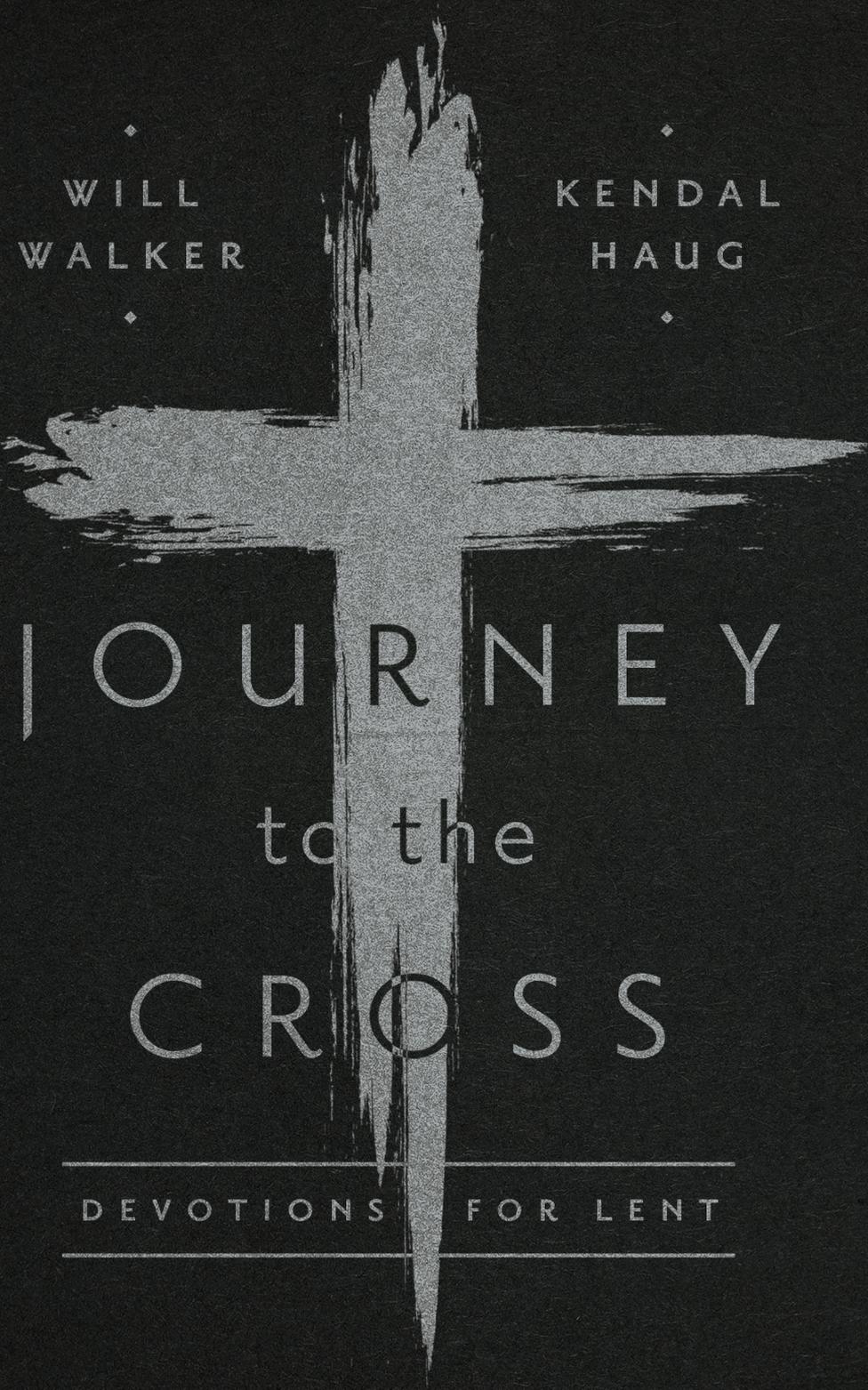


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JOURNEY
to the
CROSS

DEVOTIONS FOR LENT

“The importance of gospel rhythms for liturgical observances like Lent cannot be overstated. This Lenten guide will take you into that season of preparation for Easter through readings from Scripture, confession of sin, prayers of thanksgiving, devotionals, and questions for reflection. Prepare yourself to be a sojourner on a journey to the cross.”

Gregg R. Allison, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“This is the most helpful resource for Lent I have found. If you are looking for something to guide you through the Lent season—to serve as a tool of preparation and repentance as you immerse in the story of the gospel—I highly recommend this guide.”

Ben Peays, Executive Director, The Gospel Coalition

“In one of my favorite hymns, Isaac Watts invites us to ‘survey the wonders of the cross.’ Many thanks to Kendal Haug and Will Walker, for helping us enter that grace-laden exploration. *Journey to the Cross* is the newest, and now the finest, devotional resource in my library for the season of Lent. These daily meditations will help you see more of the beauty of Jesus; understand afresh the depth of your need; and marvel at the immeasurable riches of grace—freely ours, through the costly work of the cross. Thank you, my brothers, for helping me understand a little better, what ‘boasting in the cross’ is all about. Buy a copy for yourself, and several for friends.”

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“If you’re skeptical of Lent, if you doubt the relevance of the church calendar for gospel-loving Christians, this resource is for you. Will and Kendal helped awaken me to the richness of the Lenten season as a time for gospel renewal. This isn’t stuffy, archaic liturgy; it’s gospel-saturated reflection that will deepen your affection for Christ.”

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“*Journey to the Cross* makes Lent accessible and meaningful to those unfamiliar with its place in the Christian calendar. Its simple structure, biblical focus, and reflective tone make it a spiritually formative tool to anticipate the sin-forgiving, death-defeating, and evil-trouncing event of the resurrection.”

Jonathan K. Dodson, Founding Pastor of City Life Church; author of *Gospel-Centered Discipleship*, *Raised? Finding Jesus by Doubting the Resurrection*, and *The Unbelievable Gospel: Say Something Worth Believing*

“With their Lenten devotional, Will Walker and Kendal Haug have beautifully answered questions Protestant disciples often ask: What is Lent? How should I observe Lent? *Journey to the Cross* is a wise, pastoral, and Christ-centered approach to Lent. It focuses on Jesus’s journey to the cross. It points to Jesus’s love, devotion, and sacrifice, and so enriches our preparation to receive his gracious redemption.”

Dan Doriani, Professor and Vice President, Covenant Theological Seminary

JOURNEY TO THE CROSS

Devotions for Lent

Will Walker and Kendal Haug



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Foreword

The Lenten Season in the early church was the prelude to the most important celebration in the church's calendar, the greatest event of all history, the culmination of the incarnation, the death of death procured in the death of Jesus Christ (and subsequently evidenced by the empty tomb three days later). Early Christians prepared for these events by stepping out of their normal routine for special times of devotion, prayer and sacrifice, focusing their minds and hearts on the meaning and implications of Calvary.

While the centuries have passed and some traditions have changed, the "Easter Event," encompassing the redeeming event through Christ and his triumph, with significant implications for us, remains extremely significant. In the facilitation of that celebration, the work before you is a wonderful tool to assist any Christian regardless of traditional background. Let me explain why this volume can be of significant benefit to you spiritually as you and your family prepare for the celebration of Jesus's death.

First, what follows is a daily devotional guide that walks through each day of the Lenten Season as preparation for that "dark" Friday and "glorious" Sunday. The structure follows the traditional pattern of Scripture readings, prayer, confession, and exposition of a text, followed by application questions. It is skillfully designed and reader accessible. Second, the quality of each daily devotional, encompassed in two pages, is markedly poignant, doctrinally accurate, and well constructed literarily. Third, this type of devotional literature, that seeks to reinstate the historic celebrations in the Christian calendar, goes a long way in rooting Christians in a rich heritage that has been eroded over recent centuries by modern and postmodern impulses.

I found reading it a delight to my mind and refreshment to my soul.

John D. Hannah

Distinguished Professor of Historical Theology; Research
Professor of Theological Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

Introduction

What Is Lent?

Lent is first and foremost about the gospel making its way deeper into our lives. This season is an opportunity to root ourselves in the good news that God saves sinners through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is a time to take stock, examine our hearts, repent of sin, turn to God, reflect on the suffering our Savior endured to accomplish our salvation, and finally, rest in the assurance of that salvation.

Observing Lent is not necessary or central to experiencing life in Christ. Furthermore, this is not a season of “doing penance.” Rather, having been sealed in Christ with the Holy Spirit, Lent is a season where we intentionally set aside time to remember Jesus and the grace that is found through faith in him alone. Lent is not about our faithfulness, but rather about the faithfulness of Jesus on our behalf.

Lent is the season leading up to Easter. We are all familiar with the celebration of Easter, and even the somber reflection of Good Friday. But Lent is an extended time of repentance and preparation leading up to those two days. In the fourth century, the church marked the beginning of Lent by counting back forty days from Easter (excluding Sundays), which takes you to the Wednesday seven weeks before Easter. Sundays themselves are not counted in these forty days, as they are generally set aside as days of renewal and celebration (“mini-Easters” of sorts).

The number forty carries great biblical significance. There were the forty days of rain that Noah and his family endured in the flood, the forty years that Israel spent in the wilderness, Jesus’s forty-day fast in the wilderness, and the forty days Jesus spent on the earth after his resurrection. The time period of forty days was used by God to represent periods of trial, testing, and preparation.

Likewise, Lent is a season of preparation and repentance during which we anticipate the death (Good Friday) and resurrection (Easter Sunday) of Jesus. It is this preparation and repentance—aimed at grasping the

intense significance of the crucifixion—that gives us a deep and powerful longing for the resurrection, the joy of Easter.

As the title of this devotional suggests, Lent is a journey to the cross: meditating on our sin and weakness, looking to Jesus as our perfect example and substitute, and being thankful for his victory over Satan, sin, and death. On the cross, Jesus took our place to appease God’s righteous anger toward our sin and rebellion. He was cursed by God so that we could be blessed by God. He was forsaken by God so that we could be adopted by God. He was raised with God so that we too might walk in newness of life.

The journey of Lent is to immerse ourselves in this grand story so that it might increase our appreciation of Easter and love for Jesus. Throughout this journey, may we continually be “looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2).

How to Use This Book

This book is a devotional guide for the season of Lent. Each day consists of Scripture readings, meditations, reflection questions, and prayers—all aimed toward directing your heart to God and deepening your understanding of the events that led to Easter.

Each week of the devotional is focused on a different theme: repentance, humility, suffering, lament, sacrifice, and death. Although not exclusive to Lent, these themes capture the content and tone of the season. They point us to Jesus, and to put it simply, Lent is about Jesus. Our aim is to reflect meaningfully on his journey to the cross, so that we might take up our cross and follow him. Every day will follow a distinct pattern:

Daily Readings

CALL TO WORSHIP

Worship starts with God. He calls us into his presence, and we respond by coming before him in faith. Each day in this guide begins with a *Call to Worship*, which is generally a Scripture reading or Psalm that directs

our focus to God as the initiator of our salvation and our covenant Lord. Use these passages to orient your heart and mind toward him.

CONFESSION

As we consider the greatness of a holy God and experience his presence in our lives, we are mindful of our sin and idolatry. God does not turn us away, but invites us to confess our sins and be cleansed. This is a normal rhythm of worship, but during Lent we have a heightened sense of our deep need for forgiveness. Use these moments each day as a way to walk humbly before God and deepen your desire to live in the light with him.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Reading straight through Mark's gospel account (starting with Peter confessing Jesus as the Christ) will provide not only a backdrop for our own Lenten journey, but also a reminder of the grander story we are a part of every day. Read these narrative sections as a way to immerse yourself in the life of Jesus and his journey to the cross.

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Simple prayers of thanksgiving remind us of the forgiveness we have through Jesus and our new life in the Spirit. We are cleansed and sustained by him alone.

Daily Devotion

This section begins with a Scripture passage and devotional writings that touch on some aspect of that week's theme. As you begin this portion of the devotional each day, pray that God would speak to you through his Word and Spirit.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

These questions flow directly out of the devotional and are intended to press us deeper into repentance and faith in Jesus. Approach these questions each day with this simple mindset: How is God speaking to you, and how do you want to respond? The journey is a Spirit-led journey, so learn to trust his leading and power in your life.

CLOSING PRAYER

Using the words from various liturgical resources, these prayers close each day as an added way to commune with God and express your desire to be transformed by his Spirit.

A word about Sundays: Sundays in Lent are intended as a foretaste of Easter Sunday—they are “mini-Easters.” This guide includes professions (statements) of faith in Christ and hymns about his resurrection on each Sunday in order to allow you to rest, reflect, and rejoice. When Sunday comes each week, feast on these great truths with much joy and celebration in your heart.

A word about fasting: Traditionally, Lent is a time when we fast, or give things up. When we deny ourselves familiar comforts, we learn something powerful about our weaknesses, our needs, and our deepest longing for God. Fasting is a tangible, physical activity that points to our spiritual longing to be rooted in Jesus alone and find our true comfort and joy in him. Fasting is not essential to observing Lent, and certainly not essential to our life in Christ. We have received Christ Jesus through faith alone in him, and we walk in Christ in the same way. However, as Dallas Willard so wisely said, “Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning.”¹ Our own personal encouragement to you then, not from the Lord, is to consider how you might meaningfully engage in the discipline of fasting this Lenten season as a means of further soaking in the grace of God.

Lastly, our God is “able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20). Give yourself to him this Lenten season through meditation, preparation, and repentance. Your reward will be the same as that of Jesus: the overwhelming joy of Easter resurrection. May you be renewed in your love and affection for him!

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 34.

THE FIRST DAYS OF LENT

Day 1: Ash Wednesday

Daily Readings

CALL TO WORSHIP

Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming; it is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people; their like has never been before, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations. “Yet even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments.” Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.

Joel 2:1–2, 12–13

CONFESSION

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Amen.

Psalms 51:1–2, 6, 10–12

GOSPEL OF MARK

And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they told him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.” And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Christ.” And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

Mark 8:27–30

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Father God, in your steadfast love and mercy you have not despised the broken and contrite heart. Christ Jesus, you have borne our sins in your body on the tree and healed us by your wounds. Holy Spirit, you have led us into truth and spoken words of pardon and peace. Thanks be to our gracious and merciful Triune God.

Daily Devotion

Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Romans 6:8–11

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Lenten season. The aim of Ash Wednesday is threefold: to meditate on our need for a Savior; to renew our commitment to daily repentance; and to remember with confidence and gratitude that Jesus has conquered sin and death. Our worship today should be filled with dependence and hope in Christ because of the power of our union with him and to the daily dying and rising with Christ that comes with this unity.

During a traditional Ash Wednesday service, ashes are applied to the worshiper's forehead (the "imposition") in the shape of a cross. In Scripture ashes or dust symbolize mortality (Genesis 18:27), mourning (Esther 4:3), judgment (Lamentations 3:16), and repentance (John 3:6). An ashen cross serves as a reminder that you come from dust and to dust you shall return one day. It is also a call to "consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:11).

As you begin this journey of Lent, you must start with rending your heart—tearing it from self-absorption and binding yourself (mind and devotion) to Jesus. Regardless of your current state or your proneness to wander, heed the call of the prophet Joel: "Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast

love” (Joel 2:13). After all, Lent is not about your faithfulness, but rather about the faithfulness of Jesus on your behalf. He is the faithful One!

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Spend some time being still before God, asking the Spirit to search you: “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Psalm 139:23–24).
2. What hesitations or hindrances do you have in beginning this journey of Lent?
3. What habits and/or tendencies of self-absorption do you need to tear yourself from?

CLOSING PRAYER

Journey with us, O holy God, as we begin our way to the cross. Sharpen our focus, that our attention may center more on you than ourselves. Lead us through the shadows of darkness and prepare our hearts, that we might be a people of prayer, ready to perceive and respond to your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. In his name we pray. Amen.¹

¹ *The Worship Sourcebook* (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, 2004), 557.

Day 2

Daily Readings

CALL TO WORSHIP

The LORD upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing. The LORD is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works. The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them. The LORD preserves all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy. My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD, and let all flesh bless his holy name forever and ever.

Psalm 145:14–21

CONFESSION

Holy and merciful Father, we confess to you . . . that we have sinned by our own fault in thought, word, and deed; by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart, and mind, and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not forgiven others as we have been forgiven. We have been deaf to your call to serve, as Christ served us . . . We have grieved your Holy Spirit.²

GOSPEL OF MARK

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” And calling the crowd to him with

² *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal, 1979), 267.

his disciples, he said to them, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

Mark 8:31–38

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Lord Jesus, in submitting yourself to your Father’s will, you denied yourself, laid down your life, and took up death on a cross. You willingly gave up your life to save ours. All praise and blessing be to your holy name.

Daily Devotion

And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Matthew 6:16–18

You may be familiar with the outward aspects of Lent: ashes on foreheads, conversation about giving up some kind of food or technology. But Lent, like spiritual life in general, is not merely external. There are internal realities that give depth and meaning to our actions; things like humility, sacrifice, repentance, and faith.

Jesus warned against focusing on wanting others to praise you for your acts of worship. He doesn’t mean that it’s wrong for people to see our actions. In fact, in the previous chapter, Jesus said, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Jesus’s point is that whatever we do should shine with the glory of God and be giving glory to God.

So if we are giving up caffeine, for example, we are doing it as a means of focusing our attention on God. We will be tempted to make it a measure of our devotion and maturity, but that is precisely the kind of thing Jesus criticizes in Matthew 6. If your focus were on giving up coffee for forty days, then you would be depriving yourself of far more than coffee. You would miss something that God wants to do in you during this season.

Jesus fasted from food and water for forty days in the wilderness. It was not a religious ritual or even a display of his self-control. Rather, it was a time of trial and temptation which he endured by entrusting himself to God and being nourished on the Word of God. The point of the wilderness, for Jesus, was to experience the real presence of God with him, and power of God at work in him.

The Lenten practice of denying ourselves usual comforts is a means of deepening our sense of union with Jesus, and reorienting our life around the things of God. We give up that which distracts and entangles because we want to experience our joy and freedom in Christ.

The Bible talks about fasting, but it does not prescribe a specific practice of fasting. Giving something up for Lent is not an issue of Christian obedience. The real goal is to feast on Jesus, and for some, a period of self-denial can whet the appetite in good and godly ways.

If you are considering what to give up for Lent, begin with whatever habits or things lie at the heart of your consumer lifestyle. What do you run to for comfort and pleasure and entertainment? What, if you didn't have it, would be a persistent reminder to run to Jesus?

Lent is not about what we do for Christ. It is about plumbing the depths of what he has done for us. It can be a deeply meaningful journey so long as we are focused on Jesus and dependent on the Holy Spirit. The journey is not made by willpower, but by faith.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Think about your day, your week. What activities consume the most of your time and attention?
2. Which of these activities might you give up for a time so that you could focus on your relationship with Jesus?

3. In what ways do you sense a need for the Spirit of God to make Jesus real to you?

CLOSING PRAYER

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. Teach us, Lord, to count our days that we may gain a wise heart. Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.³

³ *The Worship Sourcebook*, 543.

Day 3

Daily Readings

CALL TO WORSHIP

A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” A voice says, “Cry!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Isaiah 40:3–8

CONFESSION

Almighty God, we enter your presence humbly, aware that we approach you from a world that chooses to walk in darkness, apart from you. Each one of us has ignored and even denied the enlightening power of Jesus Christ. We confess now our sins to you, God of power and might. Penetrate our darkness by the power of Christ’s light, that we may live in the joy of knowing and loving you and each other. We pray through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.⁴

GOSPEL OF MARK

And he said to them, “Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power.” And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were

⁴ *The Worship Sourcebook*, 535.

talking with Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.

Mark 9:1–8

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Eternal God, you have straightened our paths and made a way for us. You have illumined us with the light of Christ, in whose face we see your glory. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven and transformed! Thanks be to God!

Daily Devotion

But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him”—these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

1 Corinthians 2:9–10

At the onset of Jesus’s ministry, John announced his coming in fulfillment of Isaiah 40: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” This is also the cry of Lent: Prepare the way of the Lord! Make room for him in your thoughts and activities and affections.

An appropriate response to this announcement is to take stock of our lives, to reconsider how we are living in light of God’s presence and power made available to us in Jesus. That is what Lent is for—to reflect on our lives as they are and as they could be.

But take note: we could never imagine “what God has prepared for those who love him . . . for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God” (1 Corinthians 2:9–10). In every step of this journey, we yield to the Spirit’s leading and power.

Giving up a habit or a food or a pleasure is not distinctly Christian. People give up things all the time in the name of self-help, or worse, vanity and

even vengeance. The point of Lent is to reorient life God-ward. This reorientation has to do with desert and wilderness.

A “wilderness experience” in our language usually means one has been gone for a while and now returns with new insight or perspective, “a new lease on life.” Whether it is a trip to the third world, or a hike in the mountains, people are stripped of their usual comforts, removed from the safety of familiarity, and are forced to see the world from a different vantage point.

Our aim during Lent is something like a wilderness experience. We want to shake up our lives significantly enough that when we reach for our usual comforts and grasp a fistful of air, we are forced to cling to Christ—his body, his blood. We want to see just how upside down our world really is as our “important things” prove to be perishable goods, and as our “busy” lives are shown to simply lack wisdom.

The point of giving things up is not to be reminded of how much we miss them, but rather to be awakened to how much we miss God and long for his life-giving Spirit. This means, of course, that Lent is not only about giving up things. It is also about adding things, God-things.

- » Having given up junk food for a healthy diet, what will you do with the energy you gain?
- » Having given up internet surfing, what will you read now?
- » Having given up lunch, how will you rely on God for the strength of “food from heaven”?
- » Having given up TV as a default activity, how will you use that time to cultivate quality time with friends and family?
- » Having given up isolation, how will you immerse yourself in community?
- » Having given up shopping, how will you reach out to share what you have with people in your community?

Don't worry about whether or not your sacrifice is a good one. It's not a contest. Just make your aim to know Christ more fully, and trust him to lead you. Seek to replace that thing with devotion to Christ—his Word

and his mission. God may lead you to give up and take up more as you go. That's good. Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Is the Lord leading you to give something up for Lent? If so, what?
2. Is God leading you to add something during this season? If so, what?

CLOSING PRAYER

Merciful God, we come to you today realizing that we are not how you want us to be. Help us let go of our past, that we may turn toward you and live again the life of faith. Help us call out our fear and hatred, our anger and self-pity. Lift the burden they place on our shoulders. Help us set aside our guilt and enter a season of healing. As we pray and fast today, help us become simple people, that we may see you plainly. Let us draw near to you now. Amen.⁵

⁵ *The Worship Sourcebook*, 544.

Day 4

Daily Readings

CALL TO WORSHIP

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

Hebrews 12:1–3

CONFESSION

Father of mercies, we confess that we have sinned against you. By your Holy Spirit, come and work repentance into our hearts. Help us to see you as you are: with outstretched arms, a loving heart, and power to save. Help us to see Jesus, the friend of sinners, and to follow him more faithfully. As we have received him, so strengthen us to walk in him, depend on him, commune with him, and be conformed to him. Give us an experience of your grace that makes us bold, that we might joyfully live for the good of others. Amen.

GOSPEL OF MARK

And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean. And they asked him, “Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” And he said to them, “Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated

with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.”

Mark 9:9–13

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING

Lord Jesus, we turn our eyes to you: who endured the cross, who despised the shame, who suffered many things, and who is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God. You are the founder and perfecter of our faith!

Daily Devotion

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Romans 8:1–4

Lent is a journey that ends with resurrection, but by way of the desert and the cross. Anyone who takes it seriously quickly discovers the challenge of entering into this wilderness. It is not a casual shift—we must devote ourselves to it as a matter of the heart. Nor is it a sudden shift—we have to unravel our entangled habits and settle down our preoccupied minds. In these first few days, we have been trying to downshift slowly and thoughtfully from our normal routine into the rhythms of Lent.

There are perhaps a few groups of people at this point: latecomers, early goers, and those who are neither here nor there.

Latecomers: If Lent were a party, you just walked in the door and aren't quite sure what has already been said and done. Part of you wants to blend in like you know what you are doing, and part of you wonders if you should just go home and try to make it on time next year. Good news for you: The Lent party is a gospel party! The gospel of Jesus does not discriminate against when or how you got here. It only beckons you to come as you are.

What should you do now that you are here? Set aside some time for understanding and prayer. Catch up on the readings, worship Jesus, and ask him to lead you in this journey. Decide on something that you will give up and something that you will take up in order to draw near to God. Or, perhaps God is not leading you to give anything up, but simply to focus your attention on him. Do not worry about what you have missed or whether or not you are doing it right. “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).

Early Goers: If Lent were a race, you are starting to lose energy. You began with enthusiasm, but you have already forgotten at times what you are supposed to be doing, or you may simply feel defeated by how well everyone else seems to be doing. Good news for you: You are worse than you think, but also far more loved by God than you ever imagined.⁶ There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1), which means you have been set free from “performing Lent.” Indeed, the very thing that Lent beckons us to consider is Jesus, who on the cross took the blow for all of our unfaithfulness and shame once for all, so that we may breathe easy in the company of God’s family.

What should you do if you have already strayed? Get back on course. Repent of making Lent about what you do or don’t do (or what other people do) and run to the cross where “God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do . . . by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh” (Romans 8:3).

Neither Here nor There: You are neither here (late) nor there (gone). You are running with the pack, fully present at the party. Good news for you: The gospel is deeper and fuller than you ever imagined! “Run the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus” (Hebrews 12:1–2).

This is what Lent is about: joining the company of God’s people to consider Jesus’s suffering and death; denying ourselves and being sustained by God so that we may run straighter and stronger; gaining hope and strength from the faithfulness of God in Christ Jesus. Wherever you are today—behind, astray, on course—fix your eyes on Jesus, our brave frontrunner and generous host.

⁶ Quoted in *Saving Grace: Devotions from Jack Miller*, (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2014), xv.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What have you learned about God and yourself in these first days of Lent?
2. What areas of fear or pride are hindering you from fully committing to this journey?
3. Write down one area in your life where you can clearly see your need for the forgiveness Jesus provided at the cross. Then write down one area in your life where you are weak and need the power of the Holy Spirit to help you.

CLOSING PRAYER

O Lord our God, long-suffering and full of compassion: Be present with us as we enter this season in which we recall our Savior's sufferings and celebrate his triumph. Give us your Holy Spirit, so that as we acknowledge our sins and implore your pardon, we may also have the strength to deny ourselves and be upheld in times of temptation through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.⁷

⁷ *The Worship Sourcebook*, 544.