

FREE EXCERPT

WALKING
with
JESUS

Devotions for
Lent & Easter 2024



Editors of *Mornings with Jesus*

A GUIDEPOSTS DEVOTIONAL

INTRODUCTION

What does Lent mean to you? Is it all about sacrifice and self-denial? A penitential road to Easter's joyous Resurrection? It's certainly easy to argue that today's world of instant gratification has made Lent more of a hard sell.

And yet Lent offers us Christians an incomparable gift: a means of walking alongside Christ. As a time of praying, fasting, and giving alms, Lent gives us the ability to draw closer to the Redeemer who died for us by emulating His living example here on earth. What a privilege to become the people He intends us to be! *Walking with Jesus: Devotions for Lent and Easter* is a tender reminder that Jesus's Crucifixion, though brutal and merciless, offers all of us a new beginning full of forgiveness, purpose, and joy.

Like Advent, Lent is never mentioned in the Bible, though its roots are deeply biblical. Stretching from Ash Wednesday through Holy Week, Lent draws from Jesus's 40 days in the wilderness. (Are you wondering about those extra days on the calendar beyond 40? Sundays are meant for celebrating the Resurrection, no matter the season, and are exempt from our Lenten intentions and restrictions.) Jesus had been guided by the Spirit to the remote location, where, alone and fasting, He battled not only Satan's sinful offers but also the very human and perilous conditions of hunger and loneliness (Matthew 4:1–11).

Still, Christ's trek in the wilderness would be a fortifying, formative experience. Only afterward would Jesus gather His disciples and begin His ministry and miracles. As one of His followers later wrote, "You know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance" (James 1:3, NIV).

Lent derives from an Old English word for "spring," i.e., the time of year when days are lengthening. Appropriately, the colors of Lent often mirror the colors of spring. The vibrant greens, yellows, blues, purples, and reds—the last two common in liturgical garb—evoke the season's bursting into flower after a dormant winter, as we are called to blossom into better followers of Christ.

To do that, Lent challenges us to commit ourselves to the following practices:

Pray. The Parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18) teaches us that God answers the faithful. In fact, prayer was a staple of Jesus's earthly life all the way through the Crucifixion. By focusing our attention and praise on God and by reading Scripture, we seek to grow closer to Him and be transformed by the encounter. As Paul once counseled, "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer" (Romans 12:12, NIV).

Fast. Forgoing food and comforts is a theme dating to the Old Testament. Fasting purifies the self and separates us very deliberately from earthly distractions. As Acts tells us, such self-control also earns divine notice: "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'" (Acts 13:2, NIV).

Give. God's constant care for the impoverished is a refrain throughout the Bible, including His laws to Moses on gleaning (Leviticus 19:9). Our chosen Lenten sacrifices enable us to look with fresh compassion on others whose sufferings are not by choice; by showing charity and mercy to others, we draw closer to Jesus's holy example and please God. We may not have the ability to multiply loaves of bread and fish, but we can witness and ease the burden of a fellow child of God, as we have been instructed to do: "Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God" (Proverbs 14:31, NIV).

As Lent comes to an end, Holy Week begins. Over the course of one tempestuous week, Jesus would experience, as the Gospels show, the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. Palm Sunday would see Jesus triumphantly welcomed to Jerusalem with hosannas and palm branches (John 12:12–13). Yet days later, on Holy Thursday, He would be sold into imprisonment by Judas and denied three times by Simon Peter (Matthew 27, John 18). By Good Friday's end, He would be tortured, mocked, and crucified, His body entombed in a borrowed grave (John 19). And yet, two days later, Jesus's followers would find His body gone from the tomb and then interact with angels and the risen Christ Himself

(John 20). Out of His great love for us, imperfect as we are, He sacrificed Himself and was Resurrected. What a glorious example for all of us!

Within *Walking with Jesus: Devotions for Lent and Easter*, you'll find daily devotions—personal stories with spiritual resonance—that mirror and examine a Lenten theme, carrying through God's lessons in a modern world. Devotionals have become increasingly popular for a reason: Reading them is a manifestation of our desire to know God and understand His expectations and tasks for us, a longing that supersedes even the needs of our bodies.

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

—MATTHEW 4:4 (NIV)

You may already know the beloved publication *Mornings with Jesus*. The devotions here, curated from those pages, were written by women of faith from every walk of life, and their unique perspectives on how Lent resonates in their life will invite you to contemplate and redirect the course of your own faith life. Consider reading this devotional with family members and friends to discuss your interpretations. Even if you do not have a daily devotional reading habit, Lent is a powerful time to incorporate devotions into your worship practice.

Lent offers us so much more than an opportunity to give up chocolate, gossip, or wine. Through the choices we make—by praying, fasting, and giving to others—we can enrich our faith and strengthen our relationship with Christ. It is simple really: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time” (1 Peter 5:6, NIV).

Lisa Guernsey

ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 14

*To console those who mourn in Zion,
to give them beauty for ashes, the oil
of joy for mourning, the garment of
praise for the spirit of heaviness. . . .*

ISAIAH 61:3 (NKJV)

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, PEOPLE expressed sorrow and repentance by dressing in sackcloth and ashes. After Job lost almost everything he had, he was confused about the nature of God. He said, “I take back everything I said, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance” (Job 42:6, NLT).

Upon hearing that the Jewish people were about to be eradicated, Mordecai—Esther’s cousin—mourned with sackcloth and ashes (Esther 4:1). But it was Jesus who challenged all with His words: “Unless you repent you will all . . . perish” (Luke 13:5, NKJV).

The tradition of Ash Wednesday can symbolically remind us of Jesus’s sacrifice at Easter. Some believers wear the symbol of the cross in ashes on their foreheads. Others simply

begin a season of sacrificing something in their lives to show their repentance.

Repentance is a teaching I've embraced and understood ever since I first gave my heart to Jesus as a child. As I've grown older, I've come to understand an enlarged view of the symbolism of ashes. It takes my breath away, just thinking about it.

Isaiah prophesied Jesus would bring beauty for ashes, joy for mourning, and garments of praise through His death, Resurrection, and second coming. When we repent and believe in the promises of God, Jesus gives us the beauty of His complete forgiveness, now and forever. Our sins lie in ashes, with no more power to overcome us. Tears of sadness—for cheers of gladness. What a beautiful exchange!

REBECCA BARLOW JORDAN

FAITH STEP

Confess any sinful habits that may have crept into your life. Then thank Jesus for taking the ashes of your sin in exchange for the beauty of His forgiveness.

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15

No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did.

LUKE 13:3 (CEB)

MY MIDDLE SON WAS QUICK to seek forgiveness when he did something wrong. In that respect he fit the mold of a middle-child personality wanting to make things right between us as soon as possible.

But he was a child. And human. So he had plenty of opportunities to put that into practice.

On one particularly “Mommy’s had enough” day, he came to me with his traditional “I’m sorry” for a familiar infraction. Without thinking of the consequences the words would have as they resonated in my own soul, I said, “Honey, if you were really sorry, you wouldn’t do it again.”

That was the day I understood the true meaning of repentance. It’s not a word on a billboard. Not a ritual at the beginning of Lent. Not a puppy’s tail between his legs, head-hanging-low heart response for our mess-ups.

Repentance, as Jesus described it, is a change of heart. It's honoring what Jesus wants more than the pull of a temptation, changing our way of thinking about what we're entitled to, what we deserve, if that runs contrary to what the Bible teaches. It's a transformation from one way of thinking—one mindset—to another that is not only spiritually healthy but God-pleasing.

The ashes of Ash Wednesday represent repentance, a symbol of grief over our sins, sins that sent Jesus to the Cross. But commemorating grief stops short if it doesn't commemorate true repentance, the change of heart that marks us for life.

My son had a vast reservoir of "I'm sorry's." The day eventually came when he didn't need them so often. He'd had a change of heart.

CYNTHIA RUCHTI

FAITH STEP

At the beginning of the 40 days of Lent, purchase a charcoal or gray notebook (or re-cover another notebook with gray or charcoal cloth or paper) and record the ways you've had a change of heart in how you think about yourself, others, and Jesus.

FRIDAY,
FEBRUARY 16

For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives.

ROMANS 6:4 (NLT)

MY NEIGHBOR'S WEEPING WILLOW SLOUCHES, with ominous melancholy, toward our back fence. Its branches do just that—weep—onto our yard: twigs and small, slender, tear-shaped leaves. It invades the airspace of my backyard, and has, on windy days, dropped large branches, oblivious to the nuisance and danger it creates. All right, it does provide shade for the house, which is sometimes appreciated. But as the weather cools and the leaves drop in earnest, I'm not so appreciative.

One branch in particular annoys me—completely dead, leafless, the gray pallor of its skeletal limbs, which are like finger bones reaching for the sky. It waits for the next storm to crash into my back deck, but until then does nothing,

serves nothing. Provides no shade and disrupts the otherwise lovely view.

This morning, washing dishes, I looked out at the branch, my eye pulled by a flash of red against the gray. A woodpecker clung to the underside of the branch, its bright red-capped head drawing my attention. It pecked at the wood, apparently finding food within. Then a pair of cardinals flitted among the branches, stopping on the smooth, dead branch to offer a trilling song.

What appears useless or annoying is not always so. Sometimes the starkness allows a better view of the beauty we would otherwise miss.

Jesus let go of His privilege and power, and actually died for us, in order to bring us life. Following Jesus requires us to also let go of our ambitions and die to ourselves, so that we can live new lives.

KERI WYATT KENT

FAITH STEP

What annoying or useless thing in your life might actually serve a purpose, even if that purpose is to provide a backdrop to the beauty you might not otherwise see?

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 17

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.

MATTHEW 28:1–4 (NRSVUE)

EVERY YEAR, AS LENT BEGINS, I wonder if Easter will really “happen” for me again this year. And every year, I am surprised that Holy Week can feel new and real. There is always more of me that can wake up to the dawn of Christ’s Resurrection.

Finding these new places in myself that need resurrection rests in the fact that I can always relate to the guards in this story. They are the ones who have been placed there to guard Jesus’s body. They are the ones who experience

His Resurrection as a great earthquake. They are the ones who shake and become like dead men in the presence of the angel at the empty tomb.

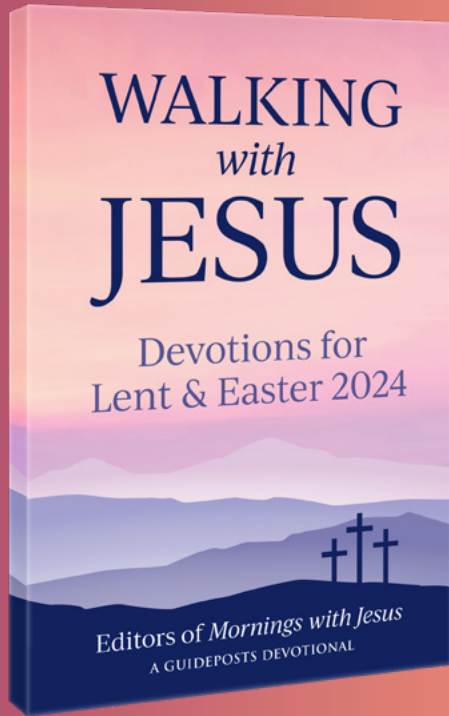
There is always some part of my own faith life that relates to the guards. Some part of me that has become comfortable with protecting authority—whether it’s the authority of the institutions I put my trust in or my own. And then sometime during Lent and Holy Week, something happens to challenge that comfort and to show me the empty nature of it all. It usually feels like an earthquake, a disruption that terrifies my defenses. During this sacred week, I am given the grace to let this part of me—this “guard,” this defensive posture—be shaken off in the presence of the angel of the Lord.

ELIZABETH BERNE DEGEAR

FAITH STEP

Assess your faith life. Which parts guard beliefs or practices that are no longer genuinely alive for you? Try shaking them off to make room for some new aspect of Christ to enter your life, even if it feels like an earthquake or a bolt of lightning.

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