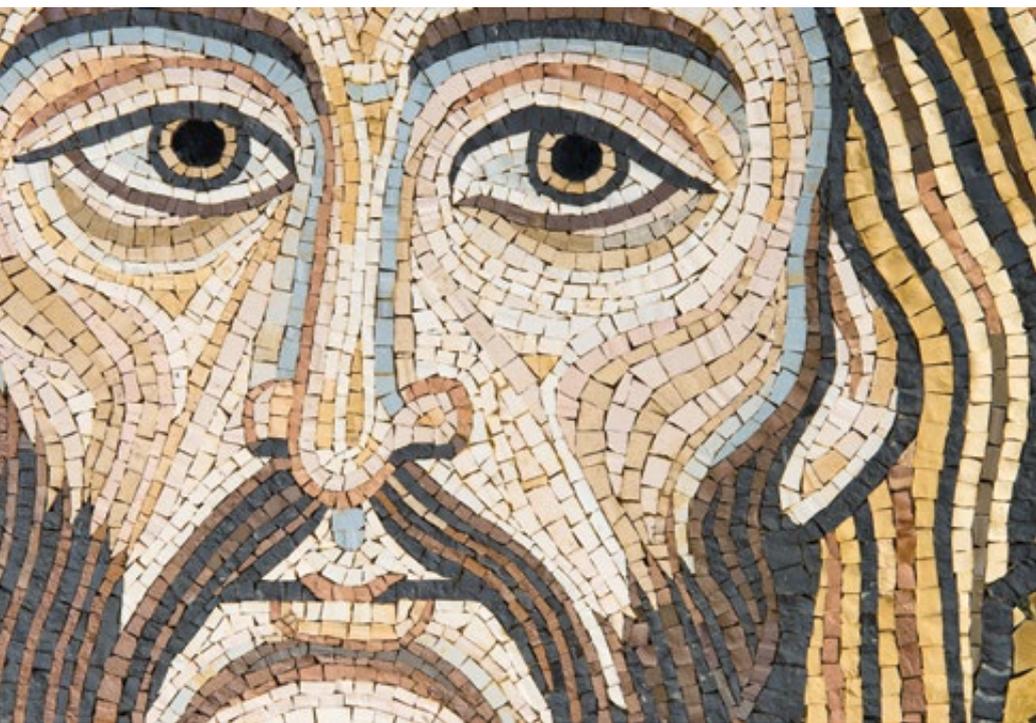


FROM
SUFFERING
TO
SALVATION

LENTEN DEVOTIONS



INSPIRATION FROM
HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

ASH WEDNESDAY/
THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

WE ARE SINNERS

Return to the LORD, your God,
for he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
and relents from punishing.

Joel 2:13

“Lord, have mercy, Lord, have mercy, Lord, have mercy.” That’s the prayer that keeps emerging from the depth of our being and breaking through the walls of our cynicism. Yes, we are sinners, hopeless sinners; everything is lost and nothing is left of our hopes and dreams. Still, there is a voice: “My grace is enough for you!” and we cry again for the healing of our cynical hearts and dare to believe that, indeed, in the midst of our mourning, we can find a gift to be grateful for. (With Burning Hearts, 35)

At the beginning of this Lenten season, we are faced with the unavoidable truth that we are sinners. We don’t deserve redemption, and we can’t earn redemption. Somewhere in the depths of our hearts, we know this.

Faced with this reality, we are given only two existential choices. The first is to retreat into the delusion that I can make it on my own, that I can sustain myself apart from God, that if I ignore my reality, maybe it will go away.

Or I can turn to God’s mercy and let myself be healed. In this season of grace, I can choose to let Christ transform my heart and transform my life. I can dare to believe that I can be more than I ever expected of myself.

Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Amen.

FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

A BLESSING IN OUR GRIEF

Jesus said...“The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them...The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast.”

Matthew 9:15

But in the midst of all this pain, there is a strange, shocking, yet very surprising voice. It is the voice of the one who says: “Blessed are those who mourn: they shall be comforted.” That’s the unexpected news: there is a blessing hidden in our grief. Not those who comfort are blessed, but those who mourn! Somehow, in the midst of our tears, a gift is hidden. (With Burning Hearts, 28)

The greatest paradox of Christianity is constantly revealed to us in the season of Lent—through suffering, we find salvation. This is revealed to us most vividly in the cross of Christ. But any honest assessment of our own lives reveals the pain and sadness that is necessary in order for us to find God waiting on the other side.

Often, whatever causes our sadness also brings with it a profound sense of loneliness and alienation. We wonder where God is in our grief. He’s on the other side of sadness, waiting for us—we just have to go meet him.

This is good news because we can be confident that God wants to comfort us, wants to bless us. The original meaning of this “blessing” is to be made happy!

Loving Father, my heart is breaking. Come to me in my mourning and show me yourself! Amen.

SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

HEARTFELT

If you remove...the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil...
then your light shall rise in the darkness
and your gloom be like the noonday.

Isaiah 58:9-10

I look at your pierced side and see blood flowing from your heart. Your heart knows no revenge, only forgiveness, no jealousy, only encouragement, no resentment, only gratitude, no hatred, only peace. Your heart is a heart where evil has no place, only love. The blood flowing from your heart is the blood of the innocent Lamb by which the sins of the world are washed away. (Heart Speaks to Heart, 41)

How easy it is for me to hold on to my grudges, my perceived slights and petty injustices! There is a fire that rises up in my heart when I feel that I have been treated wrongly: I demand justice!

But that fire is often not the fire of the Holy Spirit. That heart is often not the heart of Christ. Rather, Christ invites me to see my own need for healing and forgiveness and to recognize that in others. Instead of being quick to see how others have wronged me, I have to take account of how I have wronged others. I have to take account of how I have failed to hold up my side of the relationship with Christ.

Lord, give me a heart like yours and spare me from false self-righteousness. Jesus, I trust in you! Amen.

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

OUT OF CONTROL?

You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

Psalm 32:7

Life is an increasing call to let go of desires, of success and accomplishment, to give up the need to be in control, to die to the illusion of greatness. The joy and peace that Jesus offers is hidden in the descending way of the cross. There lie hope, victory, and new life, but they are given to us where we are losing all. "Those who lose their life will gain it" (Luke 9:24). (The Selfless Way of Christ, 64)

No one likes to feel out of control. In fact, for many of us, we take pride in our ability to be ordered and organized, in control of our days. But no matter how much we want to enforce order on our lives, inevitably, something happens and we lose control.

Loss of control is not something that just happens to us; it is the inevitable consequence of living in a fallen world. In this season of Lent, we are reminded that there is only one who is actually in control. Only God can give us the meaning and the satisfaction in life that we all crave.

When we let God take over, we actually find that we don't need to always be in control. And then we also discover that we are truly free.

Merciful Father, help me to let go of myself and cling to you in my troubles.
Amen.

MONDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

THE NEEDS OF OTHERS

And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Matthew 25:40

The whole life of Jesus of Nazareth was a life in which all upward mobility was resisted. Some people wanted to make him king. They wanted him to show power. They wanted to share in his influence and sit on thrones with him. But he consistently said “no” to all these desires and pointed to the downward way. “The Son of Man has to suffer...can you drink the cup?” (The Selfless Way of Christ, 30-31)

Being baptized into the kingship of Jesus is a real challenge for us. After all, kings are people in positions of authority, accustomed to having others take care of their needs and in turn doing as they wish. Jesus inverts this vision of kingship and reveals a much different way.

To participate in the kingship of Jesus means to have an awareness of those around us, a sense of responsibility toward the needs of others and a generosity to put these needs before our own. To be the king is not to rule over others, but to bear the burden of taking care of the needs of others before ourselves.

Lord Jesus, help me to really see those in need around me. Help me to forget myself and live for others. Amen.

TUESDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

EMPTY, THEN FULL

My word...shall not return to me empty...
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Isaiah 55:11

Thus the cup which Jesus was willing to drink, and which he drank until it was completely empty, became the cup of salvation. In the garden of Gethsemane, the garden of fear, Jesus' heart cried out with the psalmist: "No human being can be relied on...I shall take up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord." Drinking the cup of salvation means emptying the cup of sorrow and joy so that God can fill it with pure life. (Can You Drink the Cup?, 89)

In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus embraces the cup given to him by his Father. Jesus emptied the cup by accepting suffering and death and, in turn, emptied himself out for our salvation.

In the passage from Isaiah, however, the Lord says that his Word shall not return to him empty. The incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ, did not return to the Father empty. No, God filled his Son with life in the resurrection. Christ returned full to the Father.

Lent invites us to empty ourselves of all those attitudes and actions that prevent God from filling us with the joy of his divine life in us. This joy is God's free gift to us, but we have to be willing to be emptied first.

Heavenly Father, grant me the will to empty myself so that you can fill me with new life. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

PROMISES MADE

All shall turn from their evil ways... Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.

Jonah 3:8-9

“The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter, and Peter remembered what the Lord had said to him” (Luke 22:61). Like Peter, we need to be reminded of our self-confident promises, our failure to keep them, our lack of faithfulness and our powerlessness when we are on our own. But like Peter, we are also reminded of a love that does not leave us, a compassion that has no limits and a forgiveness which is always offered to us again. (Behold the Beauty of the Lord, 49)

What a crazy thing sin is! When we sin, we turn away from the one who created us—the one who created the whole universe—in order to follow our own petty desires. We essentially pretend we’re God!

But sins are not the only stumbling blocks in our relationship with God. Sometimes we just make promises that we intend to keep: “I’m going to pray more.” “I’m going to do more to help others.” “I’m going to change my habits.” And then we don’t.

When we sin and when we fail to keep our good-intentioned promises, we have to turn back to Jesus. We have to be willing to say we’re sorry. And we have to have confidence in his power to save us.

Lord, forgive me when I have been unfaithful in my promises to you. Amen.

THURSDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

GIVING ALL OF OURSELVES

If you...know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Matthew 7:11

Jesus lived his dying completely for others. The total exhaustion of his body, the abandonment by his friends, and even of his God, all became the gift of self. And as he hung dying in complete powerlessness, nailed against the wood of a tree, there was no bitterness, no desire for revenge, no resentment. Nothing to cling to. All to give. (The Selfless Way of Christ, 69-70)

God is love. Therefore, whenever we reflect on who God is and what it means to be in covenantal relationship with him, we are reflecting on how to love.

The greatest example of God's love is the Incarnation: God became one of us to show us how to love and then demanded that we, in turn, love like he does. Jesus held nothing back from us—he shared the entirety of his divine life with us through his life, death and resurrection. That means that if we strive to be perfect, we have to be willing to let God empower us to give all of ourselves to one another, without resentment or holding back, even when it's hard, even when it's not appreciated.

Jesus, teach me to give of myself like you do. Give me a heart that loves truthfully. Amen.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Henri Nouwen was one of the most innovative and influential spiritual writers of the past century. His vision of spirituality was broad and inclusive, and his compassion embraced all of humankind. Nouwen wrote 39 books on spirituality and the spiritual life that have sold millions of copies and been translated into over 30 languages. The passages quoted in this booklet are taken from certain of his published works, listed here, all of which are available through www.henrinouwen.org.

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