



Take Up Your Cross

DEVOTIONS FOR LENT

David Boyd

ASH WEDNESDAY

Lay It Down, Pick It Up

*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself
and take up his cross ... MATTHEW 16:24*

When Jesus spoke of his impending death, his disciples didn't like it. They pushed back: "Jesus, why put everything at risk by talking like that?" But when Jesus spoke of the necessity of his suffering and death, he also spoke of his resurrection. The disciples got stuck on the "death" part, so they couldn't hear the "life" part.

That's the Lenten danger for us. We hear "deny yourself ... take up your cross," and we don't want to hear it—not really. But Jesus said it, and of course, he meant it.

During the next 47 days, we're going to try to figure out what it means to "take up our cross." This kind of learning can be scary. But we know we are always safe with Jesus. It is he who will drive away our fears and bring peace and quietness to our minds and hearts as Jesus unfolds for us what it means to follow him.

**Lord Jesus, during the coming days, help me to keep my eyes
on you as I follow you all the way home. Amen.**



THURSDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

The "R" Word

*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand;
repent and believe in the gospel. MARK 1:15*

The first words Jesus spoke were not, "Why can't we all just get along?" but rather, "Repent and believe in the gospel." Message: We're not permitted into God's presence on our terms—but only God's.

Repentance is often misunderstood among us. Does repentance mean that Jesus wants me to grovel before him? Sometimes we think like that.

But Peter knew well that repentance leads to something very good. After he'd been restored by Jesus, he stood and told the folks gathered near the temple, "Repent ... and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come" (Acts 3:19-20).

The image is stunning: Exhausted, burning with fever, sweat beading at the hairline, we are led to a pool of cool, crystalline water where two unseen hands

scoop water over our heads, necks and faces. This refreshment happens when we tell the truth about ourselves and then hear a greater truth. “I will remember your sins no more” (Hebrews 8:12).

**Refresh me, Lord, with your good announcement
that my sins are remembered no more. Amen.**



FRIDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

Feels Like Dying

I acknowledged my sin to you ... and you forgave ... PSALM 32:5

Jesus told us to deny ourselves as we follow him, and we ask, “Yes, Lord, but what must I deny?”

He answers: “Deny that you deserve my love, that you have earned it somehow, that your intentions were always good. This you must deny.”

We answer: “Yes, Lord, but it feels like I’m dying when I do.”

It is impossibly hard to be that truthful about ourselves. We’re experts at defending ourselves.

The psalmist tells us, “Hard, yes, but harder still to deny the truth, ‘for when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long ... my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer’” (Psalm 32:3-4).

At first the psalmist refuses to tell the truth about himself, and every part of him suffers. But then something remarkable happens. The very thing he thought would kill him liberates him: “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord and you forgave ... my sin!” Now he’s free to live a life worth living as one redeemed by the blood of the Lamb!

**Jesus, give me strength to deny myself,
knowing that you won’t deny me. Amen.**



SATURDAY AFTER ASH WEDNESDAY

The Life Road

... the way is hard that leads to life ... MATTHEW 7:14

Some years after he’d become a Christian, a man confided to a friend, “I thought

when I became a Christian, everything would get better in my life, but it hasn't turned out that way. In fact, sometimes I think that Jesus kind of ruined my life."

But Jesus never promised us a rose garden as we follow him. A life following Jesus is more like placing an ungloved hand round the thorny stem of a rose than touching the velvety petals.

Jesus (paraphrased): "There are two roads you might travel. The first road? Wide as an L.A. freeway, smooth as a German autobahn—and level. The other? Strewn with rocks sharp as razors, exposed roots hindering every step—always up. It seems like a hard road, but it is the very road I am on: The Life Road. I have set you on this road with me—on it you will never walk alone, for I am with you; my rod and staff will comfort you."

**Lord, you've placed me on The Life Road.
Give me courage to follow you all the way—to you. Amen.**



FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Whose Cross?

They found a man of Cyrene, Simon ... They compelled this man to carry [Jesus'] cross. MATTHEW 27:32

"Well, I suppose it's just my cross to bear!" We might not say it, but when things go wrong, we might be sorely tempted to say it. But in such a case, whose cross have I taken up—my own or Christ's? It matters that we understand the difference.

Simon was forced to take up the literal cross of Jesus. He didn't want it. It was placed upon him.

The crosses Jesus refers to aren't the ones we take up for ourselves, but rather the ones Jesus places upon us.

But how would we know the difference between them?

- Whatever prevents you from following Jesus, deny it; lay it down.
- Whatever you must suffer in following him, take it up, carry it.

And we think, "Can't do it—too hard." Jesus replies, "You can bear up under it or I would not have placed it there, and one sweet day you'll understand how light it really was."

O Lamb of God, why would you pick up the cross that should have been mine? Do you love me that much? Amen.

MONDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

Child's Play?

Jesus said to him, "... go, sell what you possess and give it to the poor ... and come, follow me." MATTHEW 19:21

A man comes to Jesus. He's got lots of stuff. He asks, "Jesus, what good must I do to gain eternal life?" Good question. (We've all asked it.) Jesus ticks off the last seven commandments. The man's reassured. "Whew! I thought it was something hard. No worries, I checked those boxes already. Child's play! Got something hard for me?"

Jesus responds to the man's arrogance—by loving him. Like a skilled surgeon intent on saving a life, Jesus goes to the man's heart to cut something out of it: the man's *attitude* about his wealth.

The man's wealth had taken up all the room in his heart. There wasn't room for Jesus there. Without his wealth to prop him up, the man thought he'd fall. What he didn't know was that Jesus would have held him up, would have held him fast to his own heart and carried him. Why? Because he loved him (Mark 10:21).

**Jesus, I'm afraid of letting go of some things in my life.
Help me to strive each day to lay them at your feet. Amen.**



TUESDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

Big Bill

Nathan said to [King] David, "You are the man!" 2 SAMUEL 12:7

Bill stood well over six feet. Big Bill. Past retirement, he was still all football coach; a leader of Zion Christian Church, Bill had everything figured out. "We're Zion Christian, after all!"

Then it all went wrong at Zion. Bill wants it his way, George wants it his way. Desires became demands as the church became a shell.

In desperation, they sought help. Months later, the pastor proposed a "Service of Repentance and Healing." Bill didn't like the idea. "I'm not blubbering some confession!"

The service begins, building on Christ's redemptive love. The dreaded moment arrives. God's people are invited to speak. No one moves. Finally

someone does. The pastor panics. “What’s Bill going to say?”

Bill stood at the lectern shaking and sobbed his way through a confession that sounded like, “It’s not George—it’s me! I am the man! Please forgive me!”

From that moment on, things began to change. Decades later, Zion thrives. The hinge was Bill. Bill laid down his pride and became weak. But at that very moment, Christ was very strong in him.

**Lord, when you became weak on the cross,
your power was never stronger. Amen.**



WEDNESDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

Risky Love

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself ...

HEBREWS 12:3

The birthrate in Japan is plummeting. If nothing changes, the population will shrink to 50 million by 2065—a 60% drop! The reason? Japanese young men and women are terrified of risking love. The risk of rejection is too great, they think.

But risking rejection is the “price of admission” if we are to love and be loved. What virtually everyone desires in this life is to love and be loved. The internet cannot break your heart, but another human being can.

Jesus risked everything by coming for us—and we broke his heart, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... How often would I have gathered [you] together as a hen gathers her brood ... and you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:37). But he stayed; risky love is the only kind of love Jesus knows.

Following Jesus is risky business. Am I willing to risk ridicule, shame, soft shunning by family, friends, co-workers, a job—my life—in order to follow Jesus? Doesn’t make sense to risk any of that, except that Jesus got up from his knees, faced the shame, the ridicule and risked it all for me.

**Jesus, help me overcome my fears and take
the risk of loving you. Amen.**

THURSDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

Witness for the Prosecution

*There is therefore now no condemnation for those
who are in Christ Jesus. ROMANS 8:1*

We are natural-born attorneys, prosecuting others while defending ourselves. We're good at it.

Often, though, we end up prosecuting the one who's innocent (others) while defending the one who's not (ourselves). "For with the judgment you pronounce [against others], you will be judged ..." (Matthew 7:2). Yikes! So we tread carefully here, self-examination being the key.

Ironically, however, our accusing fingers are increasingly pointed at us! "I messed up. I can't seem to get it right. I know I'm forgiven, but I can't forgive myself. I keep hearing it in my head—guilty, guilty, guilty."

But a sin covered by the blood of Christ is a sin forgiven—period. "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies" (Romans 8:33), as though to say, "Why is it that you keep prosecuting yourself, when I've already paid the penalty for that sin?"

It's hard following Jesus because it means laying down the accusing finger, the one pointed at others, even the one I keep pointing at myself.

**Jesus, thank you for releasing me.
Help me live in your freedom today. Amen.**



FRIDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

Higher Ground

... they came to a place called Golgotha ...

MATTHEW 27:33

In war, whoever holds the highest ground wins the battle.

We won't often go to "war" against others. But we do compare ourselves with others just before competing with them. We like the "higher ground."

James and John did. Their mother did all the talking: "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom" (Matthew 20:21).

Jesus puts her request in reverse: "... the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over

them ... It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant ..." (Matthew 20:25, 26).

On one very bad Friday, it was the Son of Man who took the "highest ground." No witness of Jesus' crucifixion could know that because he'd taken the highest ground, he was winning not a battle but the War.

Now we understand: The ground upon which we stand with our brothers and sisters in Christ at the foot of the cross is level ground.

**Help me, Lord, understand that I stand on the safe
and level ground at the foot of your cross. Amen.**



SATURDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

Witness for the Defense

... *I will remember their sins no more.* HEBREWS 8:12

The husband went prodigal. He wallowed before "coming to his senses." Then it got bad: confession, followed by anger, shame, guilt, but then forgiveness and rebuilding trust.

But there was a "ghost" in the home. It had a name: un-forgiveness. During the course of married life, they had their share of dustups. The last word was always hers—the affair.

Years later, the husband was thunderstruck by a passage he'd read from Romans 8: "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? ... Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died" (verses 33-34). Once he understood it, he knew what he must do to help them both.

"Linda, for years you've come hard at me with the affair, but according to Christ, there was no affair, there was no other woman!"

Linda was stunned, furious. Then he read the passage. "Linda, in the Lord's eyes, the affair never happened. It will be hard, but can't we both try hard to see this God's way?"

It was hard, but in time, he laid down his shame and she, her bitterness—at the foot of the cross.

**Reconnect us with you and with each other
through your cross, O Lord. Amen.**

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

Joy Behind the Tears

*[Jesus], for the joy that was set before him
endured the cross ... HEBREWS 12:2*

Your wedding day—were you happy? The day you got the job—happy? You failed spectacularly—happy then? The tests came back positive—happy?

God doesn't say much about "happy," but he has much to say about joy. Happiness depends on things going well for us. Things go well, we're happy; things don't—we aren't.

Joy is not like that. Joy hovers above life's circumstances and is present even when things go darker.

Circumstances for Jesus went darker. Before him lay humiliation, pain and death, and yet—joy? What did Jesus see that we couldn't? Answer: Us! He knew that through his death, he was bringing us back to our Creator in peace. What joy!

Standing at an open grave, lying in a hospital bed, we won't be happy—but joy *will* be present. Because nothing has changed: We're still treasured by our gracious God, still wearing the same righteous robe. Jesus is still for us and stands with us through the pain! Yea, joy!

**Lord, even when I'm not happy, remind me that joy
is still mine because I am yours. Amen.**



MONDAY, THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT

Words

*Those who are well, have no need of a physician,
but those who are sick. MATTHEW 9:12*

A young boy comes home from playing with his friends. He runs to his mother with tears streaking his flushed cheeks. "Mom! They said I was ...!"

"Just remember, son, 'sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can never hurt you.'"

He tried hard to believe it but knew it wasn't true. Later, he would put it like this: "Go ahead, break my arm but not my heart." Stones can break a bone; only words can break a heart.



Jesus told his disciples (and us), “Take up your cross and follow me.” In these daily devotions for Lent, author David Boyd explores what it means for us to take up our cross for Christ and outlines various ways in which this “cross carrying” happens in our lives as Christ’s disciples as we follow in his footsteps during the days of Lent on the way to his ultimate sacrifice for us on the cross of Calvary.

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By David Boyd. Design by Jeff McCall. Cover image: iStock.
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