

Go to Jerusalem: A Lenten Devotional

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Saint Louis, Missouri

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INTRODUCTION

Dear Readers

Lots of Christians observe the season of Lent every year. Devotional books are created to help Christians learn something new and deepen their faith during a particular period. For Lent this year, Chalice Press encourages you to find a place where you plan to read the devotion each day. Keep a Bible there, too, because we believe for your Lenten devotional journey to strengthen and stretch your faith, you need to take time each day looking up and reading the scripture passage. *Go to Jerusalem* uses both Testaments in the Bible. If you aren't familiar with some of the books, don't be intimidated. You can look up page numbers for them in the front of your Bible. Reading the daily passages can be a special time to be open to what God may be trying to say to you. These devotionals were written using the *New Revised Standard Version*, and the brief excerpts each day are from that translation. You may want to use that translation, or you may prefer to use something else. A different translation is fine, but there may be slight differences in our references to the passages. We hope that makes your experience richer. To assist the process, you will want to get something that will function as a journal so you can keep notes throughout the season. It doesn't have to be fancy. An old spiral notebook will do nicely, or you can start something new. Each day you will want to write in it, responding to the day's questions and writing out the brief prayer that ends the selection. Throughout our weeks together, you should feel encouraged to look back at what you've written in the journal.

As we begin, let me share a story to frame our time together. A friend who is a Dominican friar once told me that each year he has a moment as Lent approaches when he senses Jesus extending his hand and saying, “Michael, let’s go to Jerusalem.” Some years, Michael puts his hand in Jesus’ hand more slowly than other years (after all, the cross is waiting in Jerusalem), but he always finally does, because Jesus is inviting him. Now, we invite you to sense Jesus extending his hand to you and saying, “Beloved disciple, let’s go to Jerusalem.” Day by day, as we move through Lent, we will travel on the journey with Jesus toward Jerusalem. Each week, we will start with the Sunday gospel reading, and then look at a theme for that week’s stretch of the journey. So now, imagine yourself placing your hand in the hand of Jesus for this year’s Lenten journey to Jerusalem.

What Does It Mean to Go with Jesus?

1st Day of Lent (Ash Wednesday)

Luke 9:51–62

“He set his face to go to Jerusalem.”

There is one little sentence less than halfway into the gospel of Luke: Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem. Today we might say he made up his mind to go to Jerusalem. It reveals an unyielding determination. So, if our hand stays in his, we will end up in Jerusalem too.

Each of us has reasons for delaying taking his hand. It sounds a little odd to imagine our hand in the hand of someone who lived two thousand years ago. And besides, we expect this Lent to be “same ole same ole.” Other daily obligations demand our attention. A devotional is a good discipline, but most of us don’t really expect Lent to be life changing. However, the truth is, if we decide to get serious about taking a Lenten journey, we should expect to end up somewhere else. Since we are not boarding a plane for Palestine, our journey will be spiritual. Our time in Bible reading and prayer during Lent might actually take us someplace new in our faith.

In your journal, chronicle some religious change you have gone through: a conversion, a renewed commitment to worship attendance, when you let God help you love your in-laws, or when you became a tither, for instance. Then consider, since God guided you through changes before, that you can grow, mature, change in some way again, if you want to. After you’ve written your memory, you might copy the prayer below. Then take time to pray it.

Prayer: *Inviting Companion, I have no idea where this journey may take us, but I will try to trust that once I put my hand in yours, you will never let me go. Lead me where you will. Amen.*

***“So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty.”***

Different seasons of the year serve different purposes. The glorious colors and fragrances of early flowers exploding in many areas right now last just a brief time, but the season is crucial for plants to bear the fruit and seeds that lead to reproduction. The days of rain many of us experience in spring are crucial for replenishing the land. God’s plans for Earth follow God’s guidance, to make sure there is abundant life, season after season.

God’s scriptural word also bears fruit, season after season, in our lives. Sometimes we need to hear basic tenets of the faith, so we read Acts 2. Other times we might need to push ourselves deeper toward spiritual maturity, so we read the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7. Or we might need comfort, so we read John 14. No matter what part of God’s word we listen to, we are assured it will not return empty. We are always fed and watered by scripture and by sharing with others how we believe God is working among us, so scripture helps us stay close to Jesus on our journey to Jerusalem.

In your journal, can you record a time you were nourished by scripture or by someone’s sharing words from God with you? It would be a good idea to commit yourself to reading the proposed scripture each day. Can you write how God’s purposes are being carried out as you receive God’s word? Is there someone you might share a word with today?

Prayer: *God of every season, thank you for feeding my soul, season after season, my whole life long. Amen.*

3^d Day of Lent (Friday)

Romans 12:1–2

“Present your bodies as a living sacrifice.”

Did you ever notice how some people are just sure their trip is going to be a disaster and others are just as sure their trip is going to be a magnificent experience? You can hear them in line at the airport or as you pay for gas at the station on the highway. “I’m so afraid that...” or “I’m so excited that...” And most of the time, each of them is correct. Someone once said, “In life, you get what you expect.” Of course, this isn’t always true, but especially on a spiritual journey, preparing for an important experience sets the stage for it. So, what will you do to prepare? Remember the image of placing your hand in the hand of Jesus as the journey of Lent began? Romans 12 invites us to put our whole selves into Jesus’ hands. Can you imagine it? Of course, God doesn’t have body parts, but you can sense the experience nonetheless. Holy outstretched hands, ready to receive everything you are. All of your weaknesses, all of your frustrations, all of your good intentions, even your physical weaknesses and strengths—you are invited to turn them over to God. And when you pour everything into God’s care, all that you are becomes holy and acceptable to God. You are a holy sacrifice and this is your spiritual worship.

In your journal, note how it feels to rest in God’s holy presence. Your comfort and your joy in God’s acceptance are worship, pleasing to God.

Prayer: *With the confidence of a child, I rest in your supportive arms, heavenly Parent. Amen.*

4th Day of Lent (Saturday)

Psalm 73:21–26

“You hold my right hand.”

If we get honest, none of us faithfully follows Jesus Christ every minute of every day, no matter how hard we try. Even Sunday school teachers and church prayer warriors falter at times. Everyone gets distracted; we get careless. However, we have chosen to take this journey with Jesus, imperfect as we are, ready to end up in a new place. So what does it mean to go with Jesus? First, it means being open to God’s lead. The journey is spiritual, so we must trust God’s guidance. This psalm reminds us of one thing that will help us, flawed humans that we are: desire. We need to desire God. So, we check ourselves. As we commit to this journey, can we again place our hand in Jesus’ outstretched hand because we trust his counsel? Can we believe that whenever we falter, the Holy Spirit is always ready to help us regain our balance and guide us back onto the path? Do we desire closeness with God?

In your journal, consider your own level of trust in God’s ability to accompany you on the journey. Do you trust Jesus, even if the path is taking you someplace unknown? Can you stir up your own desire for God’s presence in your life? If so, write a thanksgiving to God. But if you feel spiritually dry or even empty right now, write about those feelings, confident that your willingness to keep reaching out to God will result in eventually sensing God’s strengthening presence. You are not abandoned.

Prayer: *Merciful Savior, you are my heart’s desire. When I wander away from you, please draw me back into your care. Thank you. Amen.*

Week 1: Doing What We Know Is Needed

5th Day of Lent (Sunday)

Mark 1:9–15

“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John.”

This week we investigate what is needed on our Lenten journey. Why should we start with the baptism of Jesus? Baptism is for repentance and forgiveness of sin. Why would Jesus need baptism? The truth is Jesus doesn't need baptism; he chooses to be baptized. If Jesus is the word of God incarnate, he exists physically. He is flesh and blood, a real person. His body needs food, rest, companionship. As Jesus participates in life activities, he isn't God pretending to be human. He is God incarnate as a fully human person. He enters the water of baptism for the same reason he entered the world: to be with us. To be one of us.

At Jesus' baptism, the barrier between earth and heaven is divinely ripped open. God claims the beloved sonship of the one baptized. A new era begins for Jesus, who is then driven into the wilderness, the place of spiritual contemplation, temptation, and struggle. These experiences of water and wilderness mark the beginning of his true ministry of upside-down teachings, flouting social restrictions, and declaring unconditional grace.

Can you make a list of what Jesus' life was like before his baptism? What rules did he follow and what did he learn? And then can you list changes? Note the people he now touches, the new teachings he begins to claim, the spiritual power at his disposal. In thinking about the changes in his life, consider—how did baptism change your life?

Prayer: *Like each of us, blessed Jesus of Nazareth, someone taught you to walk and talk, taught you the faith. Help me understand the dramatic changes you went through as you were baptized and took time preparing for your future. Amen.*