

WITH JESUS TO THE CROSS

A LENTEN GUIDE ON THE SUNDAY MASS READINGS

————— YEAR B —————

The Evangelical Catholic

SMALL GROUP USER GUIDE



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Introduction

*Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold,
now is the day of salvation.*

—2 Corinthians 6:2

How much of life we put off!

“I’ll organize that closet someday . . . ”

“Tomorrow I’ll start a diet . . . ”

“I’ll quit smoking once I’m past this stressful time . . . ”

“I’ll repair that _____ when work isn’t so busy . . . ”

How many people do you know who never quit smoking, never lose weight, never fix things long broken and unattended?

Isn’t this true of everyone? We all put off what we know we could and should do.

And don’t we do the same thing with God?

“I’ll pray regularly once the kids are in school, once they’re at college, once they’re grown up . . . ”

“I’ll make a confession another time . . . ”

“When I’m not so tired from work, I’ll make time to read the Scriptures . . . ”

Our hearts may be the thing long broken and unattended, but we don’t go to the healer, Jesus, the only one who can help us.

As pressing as the physical parts of life are—health, order, home—how much more important are our supernatural lives! God is love, but how can we experience his love without a relationship with him through Jesus, the one God sent to save us?

God shows us his love within the intimacy that comes through daily time with him, just as it does between people. If we never spend that time, if we have never known the supernatural kindness, generosity, and forgiveness of God, how

can we ever hope to be kind, generous, and forgiving toward ourselves or others? How can God help us to grow beyond arrogance, rudeness, self-seeking, or anger? That's what it takes to bear with one another, overcome pride, and become patient—all the things St. Paul described as love in his letter to the new believers in Corinth. Even hope depends on love, and who can live without hope (1 Corinthians 13:1-13)?

If God really so loved the world that he sent Jesus to save us, don't you want that love, no matter the cost? Doesn't love always need to move from our heads to our hearts to be love at all?

It is this movement of your heart that God wants at Lent, not a sacrifice of chocolate or any mere "demonstration" of faith. "'Rend your hearts and not your garments.' Return to the Lord, your God" (Joel 2:13).

"Behold, *now* is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2)—not someday, now.

The Church proclaims these readings every Ash Wednesday to remind us of what we too often neglect. Because we are human beings, the demands of the physical world will always seem more pressing than those of our souls. We need this season to prompt us to put God and our relationship with Jesus at the top of our "to do" lists. We need Lent to inspire us to "rend our hearts."

With Jesus to the Cross can help you stop thinking, "I ought to do something for Lent; I want to do something," and instead actually do something. Find why the Sunday Readings matter to you *personally*, to the needs and challenges you experience in your own life. God is always trying to say something to you. Reflecting on the Scriptures is the easiest way to hear him. That's why *lectio divina*, prayerful consideration of the Bible, is the time-honored practice for the personal prayer of Christians.

If you're in a small group, praying together and encouraging one another to daily prayer will help you love Jesus more and follow him closely—even to the cross.

Christians believe that the person of Jesus of Nazareth shows us God the Father in a way we can see and understand, because Jesus is God the Son incarnate, living among us as one of us. He is the "light of the world" (John 8:12); without him, we are in darkness about God's love for us and his desire for a relationship with us. Talking to God and prayerfully reading Scripture bring Jesus' light into every part of our lives. It makes us Jesus' disciples, or God's "students," the original meaning of the word "disciple." "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32). Christ, who is the light of the world, shows you things as they really are, revealing the lies that you are not good enough, smart enough, thin enough, strong enough. Jesus shows you the truth: that we are beloved children of God.

Use this guide to reflect on the words and actions of Jesus and his earliest followers, and you can experience the truth he proclaimed: God's kingdom is indeed "at hand" (Mark 1:15). It's so close to you because it comes through Jesus, who is always waiting for us: "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Dive into the Scriptures using this book during Lent, and talk to God through the weekly guides. God can bring forth a great harvest in your life through these practices. Jesus said the word becomes a seed planted in our hearts when we hear it, one that can bring forth a crop thirty, sixty, even one hundredfold (Mark 4:20).

But it's up to you to be the receptive soil where the seed can germinate and take root. Be faithful to a small group or weekly personal reading and to considering the questions. Be-

tween meetings or reading, allow God to water and tend the soil of your soul by following the prayer suggestions. Fasting and almsgiving, the other Lenten practices, will fertilize these seeds as nothing else can. When Holy Week comes, let the field of your heart be drenched in the blood of the Lamb and warmed by the resurrection of the Son on Easter. Your life will be transformed.

Now is the acceptable time. Now is the moment of salvation. Don't miss it!

How to Use This Guide

Welcome to *With Jesus to the Cross: Year B*, a guide to help you know Jesus of Nazareth more deeply and understand more fully what his death and resurrection mean in your life.

Weekly Sessions

The weekly sessions use the Sunday Mass readings for Lent to help you enter into the mystery of Christ's life, suffering, and resurrection, the source of our salvation.

Each session includes written opening and closing prayers, the Scripture passages to be discussed that week, ideas for action, and prayer prompts to carry you through the week. Sometimes excerpts from saints, popes, or other great teachers are included that shed light on the message of the gospel.

The sessions in this guide are self-contained. If you or a friend attends for the first time during the third session, there will be no need to "catch up." Anyone can just dive right in with the rest of the group. As with Lent, instead of building sequentially, the sessions deepen thematically, helping you engage more with Jesus and the cross little by little.

The more you take notes, jot down ideas or questions, underline verses in your Bible (if you bring one to your small group, which we recommend!), and refer back to the sessions of previous weeks, the more God has the opportunity to speak to you through the discussion and the ideas he places in your heart. As with any endeavor, the more you put in, the more you get back.

The best way to take advantage of each week's discussion is to carry the theme into your life by following the suggestions in the "Connection to the Cross This Week" section. These prayer prompts will allow Jesus to enlighten your heart and

mind on both the challenges of Lent and the joy of the resurrection. If you're discussing the readings with a small group, the facilitator will give you the chance to share experiences from the previous week and talk about the recommendations for the upcoming week during each session.

Each weekly session includes Scripture passages for meditation on the theme of the Sunday readings for that week, as well as the daily Mass readings for the coming week. You can find these in your Bible or online (biblegateway.com, usccb.org, the YouVersion Bible App, and others), or you can use any of the popular free apps that feature the daily Mass readings, such as Laudate or iBreviary. The entire New American Bible is available at the US Conference of Catholic Bishops' website, usccb.org, as well as the daily readings, including an audio version (<http://usccb.org/bible/readings-audio.cfm>).

Appendices

Helpful appendices supplement the weekly materials. Prior to your first group meeting, please read appendix A, "Small Group Discussion Guide." These guidelines will help every person in the group set a respectful tone that creates the space for encountering Christ together. This small group will differ from other discussion groups you may have experienced. Is it a lecture? No. A book club? No. Appendix A will help you understand what this small group is and how you can help seek a Spirit-led discussion. Every member is responsible for the quality of the group dynamics. This appendix will help you fulfill your role of being a supportive and involved group member.

Appendix B is a resource to enhance and deepen your relationship with Jesus through praying with Scripture. It introduces *lectio divina*, the ancient art of listening to God's voice in his word, and also includes additional methods and tips for building habits of prayer and Scripture meditation.

Appendix C provides a modified version of an extended meditation by St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order. The "Connection to the Cross This Week" section for the Fourth Sunday of Lent encourages you to use this appendix during the week to explore your connection to Christ.

In Appendix D, you will find a guide to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, commonly known as Confession. This sacrament bridges the distance we might feel from God that can come from a variety of causes, including unrepented sin. The Church encourages Catholics to receive this sacrament each Lent, but it is tremendously helpful to receive it even more frequently. If you want to grow closer to Jesus and experience great peace, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is the fast track to get there. This appendix will help alleviate any anxiety by leading you through the steps of preparing for and going to Confession. It also gives suggestions for online resources that provide a way to look at your interior life, traditionally called an "examination of conscience."

Enjoy the adventure!



1st
SUNDAY
OF LENT

A Time to Change

The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.

—Mark 1:12

Opening Prayer

This is an adaptation of the ancient Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian.¹

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

O Lord and Master of our lives,
keep from us the spirit of indifference and discouragement,
lust for power and idle chatter.

Instead, grant to us, your servants, the spirit of wholeness of being,

¹ Adapted from “Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian,” Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, <https://www.goarch.org/-/lenten-prayer-of-st-ephrem-the-syrian>.

humble-mindedness, patience, and love.

O Lord and King, grant us the grace to be aware of our sins and not to judge our brothers and sisters; for you are blessed now and forever.

Amen.

Scripture & Tradition

Reading

Genesis 9:8-15

⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, ¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹² And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³ I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.”

Reading

Mark 1:12-15

¹² The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³ And he was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him.

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.”

Connection to the Cross This Week

On one day before the First Sunday of Lent, think or pray about this short second reading from 1 Peter. The questions will help you meditate on the passage to find what God has to say to you through it.

Reading

1 Peter 3:18-22

¹⁸ For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; ¹⁹ in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison, ²⁰ who formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. ²¹ Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as

a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.

1. What does verse 18 say that Christ did?

In this passage, St. Peter taught Christians in the still very young Church that the God to whom Jesus wants to bring us, his Father in heaven, is the same God of Noah in the Hebrew Scriptures. St. Peter explains the mysterious power of our baptismal waters to bring newness of life, not just when we received the sacrament, but throughout our entire lives. Though we still fail and struggle, Catholics believe that through the sacramental grace of Baptism, we can seek “a clear conscience,” and that this comes to us “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (verse 21).

2. Do you feel that when you’ve experienced a clear conscience, it came to you in some way through “the resurrection of Jesus Christ”?
3. What does St. Peter’s teaching mean for you, personally? Pray about this. Ask Jesus to show you what your baptism means.

On other days this week, choose one or two of the suggestions on the next page that appeal to you. Plan when you will pray by putting it on your calendar and committing to showing up! This may sound excessive, but scheduling a specific time to do something helps us to accomplish our goals. Can you think of anything you accomplish without first planning for it and then committing time to do it? Prayer is the same, only it’s

even *more* important! Talking to Jesus connects us to God, the source of everything real and good! Scheduling will help you do one or two extra things this week to draw closer to Jesus and begin or build your relationship with him. For help meditating on Scripture, see Appendix B, “A Guide to Seeking God in Prayer and Scripture.”

- Most strongly recommended: Spend time praying with the daily readings this week. The Church chose them for Lent very intentionally to lead you into deeper conversion. Nothing will draw you into the saving mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection as spending time with him by prayerfully reading the Scriptures and talking to God about them. You will find the Mass readings listed on the opposite page and at the end of every chapter. Search “daily Mass readings” on the Internet to have them with you on a device whenever and wherever you need them. (The USCCB website provides the daily readings in a convenient format, and you can listen to them read aloud as well.)
- Appendix B describes *lectio divina*, a Scripture prayer method from the ancient Church helpful for hearing God speak into our hearts. This practice will enrich and challenge you and bring comfort into your life.
- Write St. Ephrem’s prayer, or one or two lines from it, on a note card and tape it to your bathroom mirror or your car dashboard. Let this remind you to pray it every day this week so that the saint’s words can inspire you to be faithful to your spiritual goals for Lent.
- Go to a daily Mass this week. Let it be something of a journey into the wilderness of God and away from the busyness of your day.

This Week's Mass Readings

Monday

- Leviticus 19:1-2, 11-18
- Psalm 19:8-10, 15
- Matthew 25:31-46

Tuesday:

- Isaiah 55:10-11
- Psalm 34:4-7, 16-19
- Matthew 6:7-15

Wednesday

- Jonah 3:1-10
- Psalm 51:3-4, 12-13, 18-19
- Luke 11:29-32

Thursday

- Esther C:12, 14-16, 23-25
- Psalm 138:1-3, 7-8
- Matthew 7:7-12

Friday

- Ezekiel 18:21-28
- Psalm 130:1-8
- Matthew 5:20-26

Saturday

- Deuteronomy 26:16-19
- Psalm 119:1-2, 4-5, 7

Closing Prayer

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

O Christ Jesus, when all is darkness
and we feel our weakness and helplessness,
give us the sense of your presence,
your love, and your strength.
Help us to have perfect trust
in your protecting love
and strengthening power,
so that nothing may frighten or worry us,
for, living close to you,
we shall see your hand,
your purpose,
your will through all things.²

Amen.

² "St. Ignatius of Loyola's Prayer Against Depression," EWTN, <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/devotions/prayer-against-depression-378>