

WITH JESUS TO THE CROSS

A Lenten Guide on the Sunday Mass Readings:
Year C

A Catholic Guide for Small Groups

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Introduction

“Even now,” **says the LORD,**
“return to me with **all your heart.**”

Joel 2:12

(from Ash Wednesday readings)

When we care about something or someone with our whole hearts, we never find it difficult to engage. We throw ourselves into what we care about passionately.

The athlete dedicates himself to daily rigorous training to compete at his peak. The music student spends untold hours practicing her instrument to perform exquisitely at the concert. Parents care for their children with devotion because they love nothing in the world more than these small precious people. We see this kind of wholehearted dedication every day of our lives.

Sometimes we see it toward God.

That is how we hope you will approach this study: with the dedication that comes only from becoming wholehearted about your relationship with God.

This takes a special kind of commitment. God can seem remote, and faith, a matter for the far-off future, insufficiently immediate to demand our attention. It is easy to think we cannot possibly bring the intensity of interest and engagement to God that we bring to our relationships, our studies, our passions, our goals, and aspirations. Only saints and fanatics do that.

But God doesn't say, “I want only holy people to return to me.” He calls every one of us to come to him with our whole hearts.

If you were to be seriously injured in a car wreck this very night, what do you think would matter more—God or your goals and aspirations? Through Lent, the Church says, “Don’t wait until the catastrophe. Realize *now* that your hope is in a God who has ‘come to deliver’ us” (see Week 3; Exodus 3:8).

God doesn’t want a relationship with you only when you’re in crisis. God loves us just as parents love their children. God wants that relationship *right now*, every day, because that is the way God loves and tends us.

God will not force his way into our hearts. We must invite God. When we realize we want more than anything else for God to make each of us a “new creation” (see Week 4; 2 Corinthians 5:17)—not at some unforeseen future time but right now—we will accept his invitation into a deeper relationship through Jesus. If you give an inch, God will take a mile. God is so in love with you that he can’t resist rushing in to heal your heart and make you new.

Inviting God into our lives to transform us through the Lenten readings is what this guide is all about.

Transformation from a mediocre sports player to a true athlete or from a dabbling dilettante to a concert performer only happens if we commit wholeheartedly to the process that it requires. If we want God to transform our lives, then we must give him the time and opportunity to bring us more deeply into the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus.

The big difference is that God doesn’t care about our “performance” in prayer; he just wants to be with us! Making time for that takes commitment on our part.

We know what a halfhearted commitment means: that diet we are “sort of” doing, those books on our nightstand we might read someday, the project we sporadically work on. The gain is

minimal—if we gain anything at all—because we haven't committed to it with our whole hearts.

Don't let that happen to you this Lent.

How to Use This Small Group Guide

Welcome to *With Jesus to the Cross: Year C*, a small group guide designed to help people know Jesus of Nazareth more deeply and understand more fully the implications of his death and resurrection.

Timing of Sessions

This guide is designed so that you, or your small group if you're in one, can reflect during the preceding week on the Scripture passages that will be read at Mass on the upcoming Sunday. This will allow God to speak to you much more than if you were to hear these passages for the first time during Mass.

Because the first session of *With Jesus to the Cross* discusses the readings for the First Sunday of Lent, your small group will need to meet during the week of Ash Wednesday.

If you aren't in a group, study the Scripture passages and answer the questions for yourself. While a group discussion always broadens our understanding and provides the Christian community we all need, you can still benefit from encountering the Scriptures in advance of Mass and allowing God to guide your thoughts.

Six studies take you through Passion Sunday. Because Holy Week includes liturgical prayers for the three highest holy days of the Church, no additional materials are provided for that week. Attend as many Holy Week services as you can—it will complete your Lenten experience.

Meet again to discuss the Easter Sunday session (Week 7) during the Octave of Easter. (This is the traditional designation of the eight days of the Easter feast, from Easter Sunday to the following Sunday.)

If you faithfully attend this Lenten group and practice the spiritual exercises provided in the “Connection to the Cross This Week” section of each session, God will transform your life in some way. All you need to do is to bring your whole heart. You won’t regret it.

Weekly Sessions

The weekly sessions use the Sunday Mass readings for Lent to help you more deeply enter into the mystery of Christ’s life and suffering, and our redemption. Each session includes written opening and closing prayer suggestions, the Scripture passages to be discussed that week, questions for discussion, ideas for action, and prayer prompts to carry you through the week.

The sessions in this guide are self-contained. If you or a friend attends for the first time on Week 3, there won’t be a need to “catch up,” because 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—*recommended!*), 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 anything else, 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 using the “Connection to the Cross This Week” section. Think of it as a launching pad to meet Jesus every day. The exercises will allow Jesus to enlighten your heart and mind on both the suffering 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 will talk about the recommendations for the upcoming week during each session.

Each weekly session includes the daily Mass readings for the coming week. You can look these up in your Bible or use several popular free apps that feature the daily readings, such as *Laudate* and *iMissal*. In addition, the daily readings are available at the US Conference of Catholic Bishops' website, usccb.org, which also features an audio version (<http://bible.usccb.org/podcasts/audio>).

You could consider attending daily Mass sometime during Lent, or even weekly, if that's not something you already do. Many spiritual riches come from more frequent reception of the Eucharist.

Appendices

Helpful appendices for both participants and facilitators supplement the weekly materials. Appendices A through E are for participants, and Appendices F through H are for group facilitators.

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 give you helpful tidbits for being a supportive and involved member of the group.

Appendix B is a resource to enhance and deepen your relationship with Jesus. In it you will find a step-by-step guide for reading Scripture on your own. It shows you how to meditate and apply what you find there. Appendix B also offers help in finding other spiritual reading that can enhance and deepen your appreciation for the teachings and person of Jesus.

Appendix C supplements the session for the Second Sunday of Lent, “Listening to God.” It provides direction on ways both to hear and talk to God, and includes thoughts from one of the Church’s greatest teachers on prayer, St. Teresa of Avila.

Appendix D provides a way to move toward forgiving deep hurts. It supplements the Fourth Sunday of Lent, “Embracing Forgiveness.” Forgiveness takes time, and often assistance and guidance as well. This appendix shares the wisdom of a Catholic scholar who has researched the process of forgiveness and how it unfolds.

In Appendix E, you will find a guide to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Commonly known as “Confession,” the Sacrament of Reconciliation bridges the distance between us and God that can be caused by a variety of reasons, including unrepented sin. The Church teaches Catholics to receive this sacrament each Lent, but it is tremendously helpful to practice it more frequently. If you want to grow closer to Jesus and experience great peace, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is an indispensable way to do so. This appendix leads you through the steps of preparing for and going to Confession in order to lessen any anxiety you might feel.

While Appendices A–E are important for small group participants and facilitators alike, Appendices F–H support the facilitator in their role.

A facilitator is not a teacher. Their role is to buoy the conversation, encourage fruitful group discussion, and tend to the group dynamics.

In Appendix F, the group facilitator will find guidance and best practices for facilitating a small group successfully. We've put together recommendations for some possible pesky group dynamics. You will find guidelines on what makes a great group work: building genuine friendships, calling for the Holy Spirit to be the group's true facilitator, and seeking joy together.

Appendix G takes the facilitator from the general to the specific, providing detailed leader notes for each session of *With Jesus to the Cross*. Use this appendix as you prepare for the group meetings on those weeks. The notes give you a "heads up" on the content and issues that pertain to discussion that the facilitator should address.

Appendix H helps the facilitator in leading prayer and encouraging participation in prayer by group members. While the material in each session includes a suggested prayer, Appendix H guides the facilitator in how to pray aloud extemporaneously and help others in the group to do so as well.

Learning this skill is important. It will model for the group members how to talk to Jesus in their own words. Closing with extemporaneous prayers is an extremely valuable way to honor the time you have spent together by offering up the discoveries, questions, and joys of your conversation. Appendix H will help you guide your group from awkward beginnings to a deepening experience of talking to God.

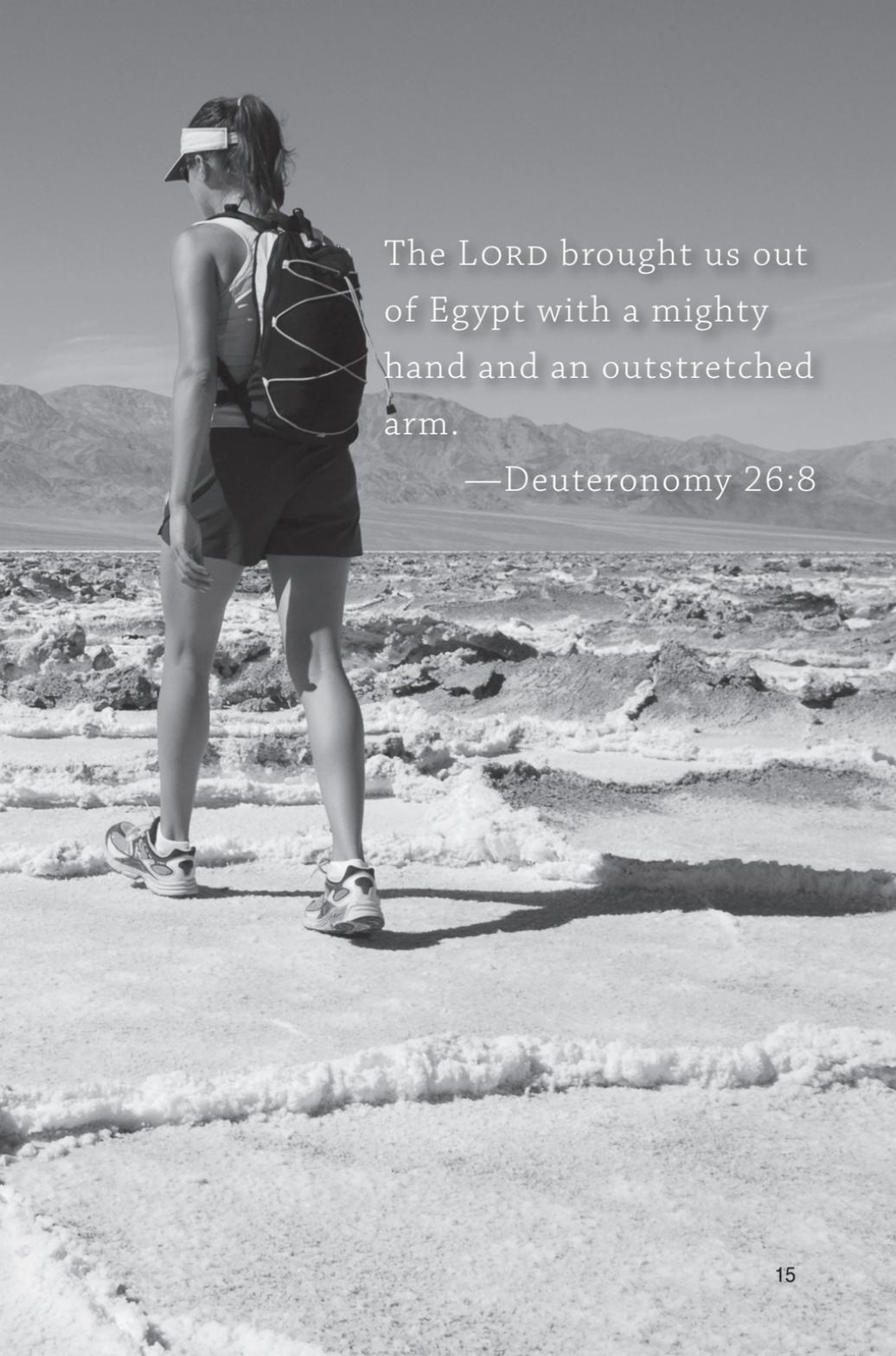
Appendix H also gives the facilitator more information about how to use the "Connection to the Cross This Week" sections in each session. Facilitators should encourage and support group members in their personal engagement with the topics discussed as they deepen their commitment to allow Jesus to become more and more a part of their lives.

Enjoy the adventure!



1st

Sunday of Lent
Hope in the Desert



The LORD brought us out
of Egypt with a mighty
hand and an outstretched
arm.

—Deuteronomy 26:8

Opening Prayer

First Sunday of Lent



Ask one person to pray the following prayer aloud slowly.

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

Father, you see us always, and listen to us whenever we pray, even if it is in secret. Hear our prayers now.

Jesus, you said that when two or three gather in your name, you are here among us (see Matthew 18:20). We gather now to understand you better and to follow you more closely. Be here among us.

Holy Spirit, you intercede and pray within us when we ourselves do not know how to pray. Let us hear your voice speaking to our hearts through the Scriptures. Guide our discussion and unite us with bonds of love.

Lord God, we trust in your promises. We pause before you now to recollect ourselves, to take a deep breath, and to acknowledge your presence with us.

(Pause)

We thank you for this time we have to spend with you meditating on your word. Please give us the hope we need to trust in your promises.

We ask this through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Ask one person to read the following paragraph aloud.

In this First Sunday of Lent, the readings show us God's faithfulness to his promises. We look back to the Israelites' salvation from Egypt and look ahead with hope to the resurrection, God's ultimate promise of salvation. As we begin our own journey into the desert this Lent, the Church reminds us of God's promise to lead us to true freedom.

1. Has a friend or family member ever promised to do something for you? Did they follow through? How did their faithfulness to the promise affect your future relationship with this person?
2. Why do you think it is so difficult to trust God when we say that we believe God is all-powerful?

Ask one person to read the Scripture passage aloud.

Deuteronomy 26:4-10

⁴Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand, and set it down before the altar of the LORD your God. ⁵“And you shall make response before the LORD your God, ‘A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. ⁶And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. ⁷Then we cried to the LORD the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; ⁸and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; ⁹and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O LORD, hast given me.’ And you shall set it down before the LORD your God, and worship before the LORD your God.”

1. What trials does the author recount in the history of the Israelite people?
2. What characterizes the life of a slave? How might you view God if you were enslaved like the Israelites?
3. What triumphs does the author list?
4. What role did God play in the Israelites' history?

5. When you look back at your life, what trials and triumphs do you see? Can you see God working in those events of your life?
6. The Lord promised his people that he would bring them to the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. What promises has God made to us in the Scriptures? Do you have hope that God will follow through on these promises?

Ask one person to read the Scripture passage aloud.

Luke 4:1-13

¹And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit ²for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing in those days; and when they were ended, he was hungry. ³The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." ⁴And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'" ⁵And the devil took him up, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, ⁶and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours." ⁸And Jesus answered him, "It is written,

'You shall worship the LORD your God,
and him only shall you serve.'"

⁹And he took him to Jerusalem, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here; ¹⁰for it is written,

‘He will give his angels charge of you, to guard you,’

¹¹and

‘On their hands they will bear you up,

lest you strike your foot against a stone.’”

¹²And Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God.’” ¹³And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.

1. What is Jesus’ condition when he encounters the devil?
2. What symbolic significance would the desert have for the Jewish people of Jesus’ time? What does the desert call to mind for you?
3. In what three ways does the devil tempt Jesus?
4. How does Jesus resist? What do you think it was like for Jesus to be tempted?
5. What does this interaction show us about Jesus?
6. How are our temptations the same as Jesus’ in the desert? How are they different? What hopes must we hold to resist?
7. In what ways can we imitate Jesus’ response to the devil?

Connection to the Cross This Week

First Sunday of Lent

Jesus was able to resist the devil with the help of Scripture passages he knew so well that they were written on his heart. In his apostolic exhortation *Catechesis in Our Time*, St. John Paul II wrote, “A certain memorization of the words of Jesus, of important Bible passages. . . . is a real need” (55).

Memorizing Scripture is one of the most helpful spiritual disciplines you can ever undertake. By prayerfully memorizing a verse, you will spend time with God. The verse written on your heart will help you resist temptation and inform your whole life. What better time to begin memorizing than Lent?

Suggested passages for memorization appear below, but feel free to choose any verse or passage that appeals to you or challenges you. Whatever Scripture passage you choose, make it your own by inserting “I” or “me” in place of “you” or “us.” For example, “For sin will have no dominion over [me], since [I am] not under the law” (Romans 6:14).

With memorization, less is more. Pick one or two passages that really speak to you, and work on them every day. As with learning a language, it is repetition that implants the words in your head and heart. A daily time commitment is the only way to memorize anything long term. What is rapidly memorized rapidly disappears! As part of your prayer time each day, repeat your chosen verse until you have it down perfectly. Continue repeating the old one to yourself every day even after you have moved on to a new verse.

Against temptation:

- For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. (Romans 6:14)
- God is our refuge and strength, / a very present help in trouble. (Psalm 46:1)
- Wait for the LORD; / be strong, and let your heart take courage; / yea, wait for the LORD! (Psalm 27:14)

God's promises:

- For I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you, says the LORD. (Jeremiah 29:11-14)
- For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, / but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, / and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, / says the LORD, who has compassion on you. (Isaiah 54:10)

This Week's 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, 7-8
- Matthew 5:43-48

Ask one person to pray the following prayer aloud slowly.

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

Jesus, Lord, you were tempted as we are.

Everything we experience, you
experienced.

You know our trials and temptations,
our fears and hopes.

Please be close to us this week as we seek
to know you
and love you more.

Holy Spirit, guide our words and thoughts.

Prompt us when we need it.

Inspire us with the fire of God's love.

Comfort our fears and anxieties.

We pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.