



# LENTEN DEVOTIONAL 2024

*WEEK ONE*

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## **A LENTEN JOURNEY WITH JESUS BY PASTOR ROB WILSON**

### **Introduction**

We know the practice of Lent was well established by the 4th century. The word Lent is germanic in origin and means ‘lengthening’ as in days, so often interpreted Springtime.

Let’s assume, as some do, that the genesis of Lent came from early followers of Jesus preparing for 46 days to be baptized on Easter. And let’s assume that this practice was so meaningful that they took up the practice every year thereafter, not only to be refreshed again in their baptismal waters, but to actually mature, grow, and deepen their spiritual life with Jesus and other Jesus followers.

Such assumptions leave us with both an invitation and a challenge as we walk onto the path called Lent. The invitation comes from Jesus who says, “come follow me” to Jerusalem, to the cross, and finally to the world altering reality of an empty tomb. The challenge is to take the ancient practice of Lent and allow it to meet you in our contemporary world, in this season of your life, in the raw reality of what it means to follow the resurrected Jesus on a daily basis.

If I were a person preparing to be baptized into Christ, devote my very being to Him, and put my life on the line by living as He asks me to live, I would want to study that way of life closely. I would want to do more than read it but digest it and perhaps maybe even try it on like a shirt that looks good on the rack although your’e just not sure it will fit. I would want to ask questions of it and let it ask questions of me. So this 46 day journey will utilize Jesus’ longest recorded speech, called the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ to guide us, grow us, and prepare us. In reality, this devotional is only for those who do want exactly those things.

So, let’s assume that our forefathers and foremothers were right and that we won’t be the same person we are today come Easter because Jesus is about to meet us and the Holy Spirit change us. Welcome to A Lenten Journey with Jesus via the Sermon on the Mount.

## Ash Wednesday, February 14

*Matthew 5:1-3*

*1 When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. 2 He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying, 3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

The beginning steps of a journey are often the hardest. Torn from our well worn and comfortable ways, those first steps call us to an awkward discomfort: the new diet, a new teacher, the first steps of a jog. The Lenten path is no different. As Jesus takes his position as our teacher at the Mount, we might come thinking we are settling into our seats for a nice lesson on morality, religion, or abstract philosophy. But as author Annie Dillard reminds us, we more appropriately should be wearing ‘crash helmets and be strapped to our pews’. Jesus is about to take us somewhere on this Lenten path and the first steps will lead us to awkward discomfort. Our spiritual muscles will strain, something inside us screams to turn around, and our cultural norms will buck against even our first step on the Lenten path.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God”. This goes against so much of what we are taught from a very young age in the kingdom of culture: self-sufficiency, confident, pull yourself up from the bootstraps. I could tell you how biblical scholars translate “poor in spirit” but I’d rather have you define it for yourself. Where do you feel “poor” or vulnerable or weak or needy or powerless in your life right now?

Ash Wednesday is a day to acknowledge our total dependence on God. We can only do that when we acknowledge, name, and bring our ‘poverty of spirit’ to Jesus and sit with Him on the Mount where He invites us onto the Lenten path.

**Thursday, February 15**

*Matthew 5:4*

*“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”*

If the first step upon the Lenten path was uncomfortable, the second one is unwelcome. I don't know anyone who welcomes true mourning and yet I don't know anyone who escapes it. We of course have a plethora of ways to cope with loss: ignore it, distract ourselves from it, anesthetize it with alcohol, drugs, or any other useless band-aid our world so endlessly peddles.

Apparently no one told Jesus to start a speech with a joke or something light. Instead he begins with the rawest and most helpless of experiences and one that is universal to everyone: mourning. We can and should expand the definition of mourning from literal death: the loss of innocence with our willful sins; social evils and injustice; the cries of the oppressed; the malevolent nature of the human condition.

As a volunteer hospital chaplain and a pastor of many years, I have walked into many a room filled with mourners. I'm always nervous because I don't know what I'll find and whether I'll be able to meet anyone's needs. The truth is I can't. But Jesus isn't nervous. He leads with it and calls it 'blessed' because He is perhaps the only one who will be able to comfort us. He too will mourn in the years ahead of him. He too will die and know its pain. And we start the Lenten journey by peeking to the end. Perhaps an empty tomb is our only comfort in life and in death.

But let us not get ahead of ourselves. Today let it be enough to take Jesus at His word: acknowledge our losses and let him meet us in that place for He is not afraid to be there with us. He simply sits with us on the Mountain called grief and despair and loneliness as He wraps His arm around us.



**Friday, February 16**

*Matthew 5:5*

*“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”*

The word “meek” has very different meanings in Hebrew (the language of the Old Testament) and Greek (the language of the New Testament). In Hebrew the word is akin to “the oppressed”. In Greek the word is best defined as “humility”. Both can hold meaning for us as we walk the Lenten path with Jesus but since the gospels were written in Greek, let’s focus on the messiness of ‘humility’.

Humility is a riddle of sorts. As soon as you think you have it you discover you’ve lost it. Like a watermelon seed...just when you think you’ve got it between your fingers, it slips away. Pride is humility’s opposite and arrogance a further step. But both pride and arrogance get their reward in the here and now by being elevated above others. Humility holds a future promise but it is also our call to a Jesus centered life in the here and now.

Where are you being called away from pride and onto the path of humility right now?

What areas of your life do you find easy to live into humbly and what areas of your life do you find it more difficult?

## Saturday, February 17

*Matthew 5:6*

*“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”*

One scholar defined ‘righteousness’ as “a desire to see God’s standards established and obeyed in every area of life”\*. Over the years I have come to define ‘righteousness’ as living in a right relationship with God (vertically) and others (horizontally). Both definitions challenge us to examine our personal lives and engage in promoting social righteousness as it accords to God’s standards.

But the word that stretches us beyond that already challenging task is the word “hunger”. I hunger for a lot of things: for food when I’m hungry; for sleep after a long day; for relationship when I’m lonely. Notice that our hunger is triggered by recognizing our need.

On this day of the Lenten journey, spend time reflecting on where and how God is calling you into a right relationship according to God’s standards.

Where are you needy for a right relationship vertically with God and horizontally with another person?

What is one thing God is calling you to do about your hunger for righteousness?

\* Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 100.