

LENT *and*
EASTER
WISDOM
— *from* —

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

Daily Scripture and Prayers Together
With Nouwen's Own Words

Compiled by Judy Bauer



Liguori

Imprimi Potest:

Richard Thibodeau, CSsR
Provincial, Denver Province
The Redemptorists

Published by Liguori Publications
Liguori, Missouri

To order, call 800-325-9521
www.liguori.org

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nouwen, Henri J. M.

Lent and Easter wisdom from Henri J. M. Nouwen : daily scriptures and prayers together with Nouwen's own words / compiled by Judy Bauer.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-7648-1286-6

1. Lent—Prayer-books and devotions—English. 2. Easter—Prayer-books and devotions—English. 3. Catholic Church—Prayer-books and devotions—English. I. Bauer, Judy, 1941– II. Title.

BX2170.L4N67 2005
242'34—dc22

2004061639

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Acknowledgments of sources of quotations from Henri J. M. Nouwen are listed on pages 113–118.

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Printed in the United States of America
20 19 18 17 16 / 12 11 10 9 8

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I PRAY THAT WE MAY be found worthy to be cursed, censured, and ground down, and even put to death in the name of Jesus Christ, so long as Christ himself is not put to death in us.

PAULINUS OF NOLA

Introduction

MOST CATHOLICS seem to be aware that the forty-day period before the feast of Easter, Lent—which comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, meaning “spring”—is a time marked by particular rituals, such as the reception of ashes on Ash Wednesday or the decision to “give up French fries.” Is Lent broader than just these practices that seem to be left over from another era?

A BRIEF HISTORY OF LENT

In the first three centuries of Christian experience, preparation for the Easter feast usually covered a period of one or two days, perhaps a week at the most. Saint Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. AD 140–202) even speaks of a *forty-hour* preparation for Easter.

The first reference to Lent as a period of forty days’ preparation occurs in the teachings of the First Council of Nicaea in AD 325. By the end of the fourth century, a Lenten period of forty days was established and accepted.

In its early development, Lent quickly became associated with the sacrament of baptism, since Easter was the great baptismal feast. Those who were preparing to be baptized participated in the season of Lent in preparation for the reception of the sacrament of baptism. Eventually, those who were already baptized considered it important to join these candidates preparing for baptism in their preparations for Easter. The customs and practices of Lent as we know them today soon took hold.



LENT AS A JOURNEY

Lent is often portrayed as a journey, from one point in time to another point in time. The concept of journey is obvious for those experiencing the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), the program of baptismal preparation conducted in most parishes during the season of Lent.

But Lenten preparation is not limited to those who are preparing to be baptized and join the Church. For many Catholics, Lent is a journey that is measured from Ash Wednesday through Easter Sunday, but, more accurately, Lent is measured from Ash Wednesday to the beginning of the period known as the Triduum.

Triduum begins with the evening Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday, reaches its high point in the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday, and closes with the proclamation of the *Exsultet*, "Rejoice, O Heavenly Powers," during the Mass of Holy Saturday.

By whatever yardstick the journey is measured, it is not only the time that is important but the essential experiences of the journey that are necessary for a full appreciation of what is being celebrated.

The Lenten journey is also a process of spiritual growth and, as such, presumes movement from one state of being to another state. For example, some people may find themselves troubled and anxious at the beginning of Lent as a result of a life choice or an unanswered question, and, at the end of Lent, they may fully expect a sense of conversion, a sense of peace, or perhaps simply understanding and acceptance. Therefore, Lent is a movement from one point of view to another or, perhaps, from one interpretation of life to a different interpretation.

Scripture, psalms, prayers, rituals, practices, and penance are the components of the Lenten journey. Each component, tried and tested by years of tradition, is one of the "engines" that drives

the season and which brings the weary spiritual traveler to the joys of Easter.

PENITENTIAL NATURE OF LENT

A popular understanding of Lent is that it is a penitential period of time during which people attempt to become more sensitive to the role of sin in their lives. Lenten sermons will speak of personal sin, coming to an awareness of the sins of others and the effect such sin might have, and, finally, the sin that can be found within our larger society and culture. Awareness of sin, however, is balanced by an emphasis on the love and acceptance that God still has for humanity, despite the sinful condition in which we still find ourselves.

The practice of meditation of the Passion of the Lord, his suffering, and his death is also seen as part of the penitential experience of Lent. There is also a traditional concern for the reception of the sacrament of reconciliation during Lent. Originally, the sacrament of reconciliation was celebrated before Lent began, the penance was imposed on Ash Wednesday, and performed during the entire forty-day period.

SUMMONS TO PENITENTIAL LIVING

“Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’” (Mark 1:14–15). This call to conversion announces the solemn opening of Lent. Participants are marked with ashes, and the words, “Repent, and believe in the good news,” are prayed. This blessing is understood as a personal acceptance of the desire to take on the life of penance for the sake of the gospel.

The example of Jesus in the desert for forty days—a time

during which he fasted and prayed—is imitated. It is time to center attention on conversion. During Lent, the expectation is to examine our lives and, through the practice of prayer, fasting, and works of charity, seek to conform our lives to Christ's. For some, this conversion will be a turning from sin to grace. For others, it will be a gracious turning toward the mystery of God in Christ. Whatever the pattern chosen by a particular pilgrim for an observance of Lent, it is hoped that this book will provide a useful support in the effort.



PART I



READINGS *for*
LENT



DAY 1

Ash Wednesday

A PROMISE FOR LENT

I have slowly become aware of what my Lenten practice might be. It might be the development of some type of “holy indifference” toward the many small rejections I am subject to, and a growing attachment to the Lord and his passion.

I am constantly surprised at how hard it is for me to deal with the little rejections people inflict on each other day by day.... This atmosphere often leaves me with a feeling of being rejected and left alone. When I swallow these rejections, I get quickly depressed and lonely; then I am in danger of becoming resentful....

But maybe all of this is the other side of a deep mystery, the mystery that we have no lasting dwelling place on this earth and that only God loves us the way we desire to be loved. Maybe all these small rejections are reminders that I am a traveler on the way to a sacred place where God holds me in the palm of his hand.

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN, *¡GRACIAS! A LATIN AMERICAN JOURNAL*

A PLAN FOR LIFE

“Revere the Lord all your days...and refuse to sin or to transgress his commandments. Live uprightly all the days of your life, and do not walk in the ways of wrongdoing; for those who act in accordance with truth will prosper in all their activities. To all those who practice righteousness give alms from your possessions, and do not let your eye begrudge the gift when you make it. Do not turn your face away from anyone who is poor, and the face of God will not be turned away from you. If you have many possessions, make your gift from them in proportion; if few, do not be afraid to give according to the little you have. So you will be laying up a good treasure for yourself against the day of necessity. For almsgiving delivers from death and keeps you from going into the Darkness.”

TOBIT 4:5–11

PRAYER

Lord, our Savior, let me heed the example of total giving that you demonstrated when you died on the cross for my sins. I pray that my pale imitation of your sacrifice during this Lent may be counted on my behalf “against the day of necessity.”

LENTEN ACTION

Just for today, lay up a “good treasure” for yourself by ignoring your selfish wants and needs and choosing instead to seek and do our Lord’s will, both at home and at work. Let your rule of thumb be placing the good of others above your own.





DAY 2

Thursday After Ash Wednesday

DISCIPLINE: PREPARING A PLACE FOR GOD

*D*iscipline in the spiritual life is the concentrated effort to create the space and time where God can become our master and where we can respond freely to God's guidance. Thus, discipline is the creation of boundaries that keep time and space open for God—a time and a place where God's gracious presence can be acknowledged and responded to.

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN, *BREAD FOR THE JOURNEY:
A DAYBOOK OF WISDOM AND FAITH*

THE FRUITS OF DISCIPLINE

*The one who sees God will accept his discipline,
and those who rise early to seek him will find favor.
The one who seeks the law will be filled with it,
but the hypocrite will stumble at it.*

*Those who fear the Lord will form true judgments,
and they will kindle righteous deeds like a light.
The sinner will shun reproof,
and will find a decision according to his liking....*

*Do not go on a path full of hazards,
and do not stumble at an obstacle twice.
Do not be overconfident on a smooth road,
and give good heed to your paths.
Guard yourself in every act,
for this is the keeping of the commandments.*

SIRACH 32:14–17, 20–23

PRAYER

Holy God, give me the discipline it takes to keep my heart open to your word. Do not let the anger of resentment sidetrack me from the priority of seeking my true home with you. Please give me what it takes to recognize that any personal rejections, real or imagined, are only reminders of an imperfect world. Bestow your grace on me so that life's disappointments will bring out the best in me and not the worst. Amen.

LENTEN ACTION

Make it a point to retreat from life's fast lane for the duration of this Lenten observance in order to nurture and grow an attachment to the Lord's incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection. Select and set aside a prayer time to meditate and respond to God's gracious presence.





DAY 3

Friday After Ash Wednesday

PREOCCUPATIONS

We modern Westerners are so busy with ourselves, so preoccupied with the question of whether we do justice to our own selves, that the experience of the “transcendent” becomes practically impossible....In this way of thinking there is scarcely room for Him who speaks whenever we are silent and who comes in whenever we have emptied ourselves. Instead of making ourselves susceptible to the experience of the transcendent God, we, busy with many things, begin to seek after the small flighty sensations brought about by the artificial stimulation of the senses.

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN,
THOMAS MERTON: CONTEMPLATIVE CRITIC

WISDOM AND JOY

My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing....

Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.

JAMES 1:2–4, 9–11

PRAYER

Almighty God, help me joyfully to put “first things first” today. Forgive me when I have allowed the artificial concerns of this whirlwind life to overwhelm the space in my heart that should be prepared for your presence. When I become preoccupied with self, put me back on the track of commitment to you. Amen.

LENTEN ACTION

Give your energy today to holding yourself accountable for your actions. Promise yourself to give up just one self-indulgence for the day; for example, a morning cup of caffeine, the daily newspaper, dessert after dinner, or so on.

