

Friend of Sinners

LENT
DEVOTIONS
ON FOLLOWING
THE CRUCIFIED
KING

Elyse
Fitzpatrick

“We don’t like to think of death. In fact, we’re enslaved by the fear of it. In these devotions, Elyse Fitzpatrick teaches us how to remember death without fear—by remembering the one who tasted death so that we never will. *Friend of Sinners* is a lavish feast for your Lenten fast.”

ERIC SCHUMACHER, Author, *The Good Gift of Weakness*

“Endorsements must be brief, which means I cannot share all the ways this devotional impacted me, but let me just say there were many moments when it was impossible to read Elyse’s depiction of Jesus with a dry eye. You will be impacted again and again in unforgettable ways as the season of Lent takes on deeper meaning with each page. I will be sharing this with many.”

ELIZA HUIE, Author; Counselor; Speaker

“I love how Elyse kindles our imaginations enough to enable us to step into the sandals of those we’ve perhaps glossed over during our Bible readings. As you read this book, I’d wager you might find yourself pausing to pray, repent, and sometimes just say, ‘Wow!’ I know I did.”

QUINA ARAGON, Author, *Love Has a Story*

“In a time of immense loneliness, Elyse’s devotional is a welcome return to a season that connects us to Christ and each other. *Friend of Sinners* gently invites us to the rhythms of our faith. I look forward to sharing it with others during this Lenten season.”

CHRIS MOLES, Founder, PeaceWorks

“Elyse masterfully guides us through the somber, reflective season of Lent while always reminding us that Easter Sunday is coming. Each devotion holds the tension of the now and the not-yet as we march together to the agony of the cross and the jubilation of the resurrection.”

TABITHA WESTBROOK, Author; Counselor

“I loved these Lent devotions. Elyse writes beautifully about our beautiful Saviour, and her words helped me see more of his humility, grace, and unspeakably great love for undeserving sinners. At times, I was moved to tears. She also helped me see myself more clearly, in a way that drove me back to my Lord with an increased awareness of my need and his mercy. What a wonderful gift!”

CAROLYN LACEY, Bible Teacher; Author, *Extraordinary Hospitality (for Ordinary People)* and *Say the Right Thing*

“This wonderful companion for the Lenten season will demand your attention, affection, contemplation, and hope. Elyse writes with warmth, humor, vulnerability, and faithfulness, and she tells the stories of Jesus’ life with curiosity and passion.”

RACHEL JOY WELCHER, Author; Poet

“Elyse Fitzpatrick combines faithful biblical reflection, compassion, and profound gospel clarity. With her characteristic warmth, she invites readers into the Lenten season as a fresh encounter with the crucified and risen Christ, who befriends sinners, bears shame, and gives himself fully for us. Deeply comforting and theologically rich.”

JUSTIN S. HOLCOMB, Bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Central Florida; Author, *God with Us* and *Rid of My Disgrace*; Seminary Professor

“A beautiful invitation to encounter the Jesus who welcomes the weary, the wounded, and the wandering. With her signature blend of gospel depth and pastoral warmth, Elyse Fitzpatrick lifts our eyes from shame and striving to the Savior who calls us friends. These daily reflections are soaked in grace and grounded in Scripture—an encouraging companion for anyone who needs a reminder of his relentless kindness.”

COLLEEN RAMSER, Speaker; Author; Podcaster; Trauma Therapist

“Holy days and seasons can become boring and bland. If you would like to change that this Lent, this is your book. *Friend of Sinners* captures the pathos, the tears, the laughter, and the reality of Lent. You will go on a journey that just might change your life.”

STEVE BROWN, Author; Broadcaster

“Elyse helps us look at interactions Jesus has on his journey to the cross and draws our attention to the love and emotions Jesus has all along the way. Elyse asks us, ‘Can you hear the Savior as he pleads for mercy for us all?’ What a grace. I loved how this book helped me to again delight in all Jesus came to do for the world.”

DR. PAMELA MACRAE, Professor of Ministry to Women,
Moody Bible Institute

“Not only are these Lent devotions grounded in the beauty of the gospel; they are also clever, witty, and incredibly moving. I promise you won’t put this book down without being changed. It’s gospel-rich from start to finish—vintage Elyse Fitzpatrick.”

J.D. GREEAR, Pastor, The Summit Church, Raleigh-Durham, NC;
Author, *Everyday Revolutionary* and *Just Ask*

“I loved this book, which helped me slow down and reflect and meditate on what it really means for Jesus to be the friend of sinners—to be *my* friend. Elyse has a wonderful way of taking us by the hand and leading us beyond what is happening on the surface so that we can truly see and identify with the hearts of the real, ordinary people who encounter Jesus in the Gospels. I was deeply moved and humbled, and left marvelling afresh at both how incredibly costly and incredibly precious Jesus’ love for needy sinners like me is.”

ANDREA TREVENNA, Women’s Minister, St Nicholas Church,
Sevenoaks, Kent, UK

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*To all the women and men who have loved the One who dared
to speak truth to power and who follow in his footsteps at the
cost of their comfort, status, and even their own lives.
Keep speaking, friends. He is with you.*

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Introduction

Christians are weird. I am allowed to say that because I am one, and have been for over 50 years. Think about it. Christians observe two major holy days. One celebrates the virgin birth of a King, whimpering amid the filth of a livestock pen. The other retells the story of dawn visitors to an empty grave, peering into a tomb meant to hold that King's silent, decomposing body. Weird? Absolutely. And, depending on your familiarity with those unpleasant smells, even disgusting. But... holy? How could a holy King associate himself with the refuse permeating a barn or a grave? And why would we celebrate it? Surely there are other moments in this King's life that would make more sense to remember?

Of course, the baby who was also a holy King was wrapped as cleanly as possible. Decades later, spices would have been placed in the death shroud to try to disguise his body's stench. Yet what we are looking at is not tidy or pleasant, let alone regal. Honestly, if we had not already been inoculated against the strangeness of Christianity's story, it would be difficult not to guffaw or turn away in disgust, or possibly even tremble in dread. The life at the center of Christianity begins and ends in shame, disgrace, and frankly, bad smells. Nothing

neat or outwardly praiseworthy here: barn and grave, refuse and decomposition. Maybe all this earthiness is meant to reveal something to us. And we'll spend the next seven weeks thinking about what that something might be.

In the pages that follow, we will join up with a whole range of people, many of them just like us: ordinary laborers, worried parents, sick children, confused and careworn people. We'll meet political pawns, bitter revolutionaries, destitute widows, heartbroken mourners, the religious elite, and even the recently dead. We will meet those who have been with King Jesus from the earliest days of his public ministry and have heard a teaching that is unlike anything they had heard before (Luke 4:32), and others who appear fleetingly but are healed or changed by his touch or his word. Some will believe. Some will resist. Jesus will make both friends and enemies everywhere he goes.

Among those original believers, you will meet men and women who were blinded to his true identity by their personal desire to befriend a victorious King. They had mistaken expectations and so were ultimately heartbroken by his death. Even among his closest friends, few foresaw the tomb that was his destination, and none believed in the resurrection. The women who were some of his most loyal friends carried spices to do the awful work death demands because they expected to find their friend cold and decaying. But then, years later, many of those same friends walked with eyes wide open into their own martyrdom because they had learned that that tomb was not an ending; it was the door into eternal life and their best friend's presence.

We live at a time during which many people admit that they feel alone. Yes, loneliness is epidemic, and whether we blame screens or political polarization or the disintegration of the family unit, people feel unmoored from true friendships. Deaths of despair have skyrocketed. And while limiting screen

time and making community a priority are definitely good steps to take, not even our best friends can relieve the deep isolation that we feel. We all need relationship with someone who really knows us and really loves us, and I'm contending that this person came to earth and walked to his death 2,000 years ago because he wants to befriend and assure you too. Yes, I know this story is ancient. For sure, it is weird. But I also know that millions of people, including myself, have found soul-satisfying friendship with him. He was accused by his opponents of being a friend of sinners (Luke 7:34), and his followers, through the millennia, have enjoyed experiencing the truth of that charge.

So, here's my invitation: let's spend the next 40+ days together seeking Jesus, the friend who laid down his life so that you could know you are loved and welcomed. Let's see what it means to call this crucified King our dear friend. Maybe you've heard and believed this story your whole life. Perhaps not. Maybe you are thinking it is time to glance at it again. Wherever your starting point, here, today, at the beginning of our journey, know this: you are welcomed in this company of those befriended by a crucified and risen King.

The Beginning of Lent

Ash Wednesday

Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust

*“Teach us to number our days carefully so that we
may develop wisdom in our hearts.”*

(Psalm 90:12)

Read James 4:13-16

The phrase “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust” is weird. The words feel anachronistic, as if they do not belong in our 21st-century Western world. Honestly, aside from Ash Wednesday, the only time I hear them is when I am watching a British crime drama and the vicar solemnly recites them at a graveside while the murderer lurks in the background.

Why would anyone think it would be a good idea to say them in any other context, including while they smudge ashes on my forehead?

Yet on this day in many churches, the remains of last year’s Palm Sunday branches are smeared on skin in the form of a cross. The branches that were once waved while hosannas were sung have been burned to ash. Words are spoken that I need to hear, even though they are jarring: “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. Or this Latin phrase, *Memento mori*: remember your death.

All day, every day, I pretty much live as though I am not made of dust. Is it like that for you? Sure, I recognize that I am made of earthy elements like water, muscle, and bone, but though I admit to feeling my age now, I still assume I will just go on like this forever. Well, of course, maybe not forever, but for a good while longer. Surely it is not necessary to be so gloomy, is it? I mean, why would I need to remember my death? Why would you need to?

And while we are talking about those ashes, I confess to being concerned about how that cross will look on my forehead. Will it be pretty? Or will people think I failed to wash my face properly? Yes, even there in the recognition of my ultimate death, I remain concerned about my life, how I look. I do like appearing pious. I do not like looking dirty.

But that just underlines how much I need to hear it: *Elyse, remember your death.*

God's word says we are dust. However many technological breakthroughs the human race makes, however many medical advances we achieve, that will not change. We are not here forever. Life will end. To use another biblical metaphor, "You don't know the first thing about tomorrow. You're nothing but a wisp of fog, catching a brief bit of sun before disappearing" (James 4:14, MSG). A wisp of fog? Dust that blows away? Last year's ashes? That's me. And that feels weird to think about.

As we start our journey through Lent together, then, here is an encouragement: Remember who you are, and remember who he is. Remember that your life is short and that living in line with reality means living in a way that shows you are aware that you too are walking toward a tomb, just as the Lord Jesus did. If you forget—if you let your skewed expectations take up all the space in your heart—you will fail to see him, and you will struggle to grasp what he has done and is doing and will do for you. But when you

forget, remember that he still sees you, and that he died for your forgetfulness.

In this devotional, we are on our way to a joyous celebration—Resurrection Sunday. But we are not there yet. First comes Ash Wednesday. It is only as you remember your death that you will learn to glory in his.

Reflect

How will you remember your death, and the death of Christ, today?

Thursday

Finding Him in the Wilderness

“And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope.”

(Romans 5:3-4)

Read Matthew 4:1-11

We are at the start of a seven-week journey to Easter. In these days of instantaneous everything, it may be a little daunting to commit to this. *Seven weeks?*¹ To get an idea of the length of this journey, scroll through your calendar to Easter Sunday. Does that seem like a long time? Of course seven weeks, or 40 days (without the Sundays), is not a *really* long time, but it is also not nothing.

And that not-nothingness is meant to remind you of something important. Lent lasts for 40 days for a reason.

These 40 days are meant to remind us of the time when...

¹ Actually, it is a 7 week span of time and more than 40 days since Sundays are excluded.

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him... (Matthew 4:1-3, NIV)

It is not only our frenetic culture that needs Lent. The ancient church began this practice very early—it is first mentioned at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. Like us, they needed reminding that Jesus went 40 days without food or comfort, and that then, at the end of his time of starvation, isolation, and frailty, he fought temptation. Look again at your calendar and ask, “What would it be like to be completely cut off from all friends and food until Easter Sunday?”

Do not think that Jesus’ deity meant he did not suffer like we would. He was “starving” (Matthew 4:2, CEB), but he did not access any super-powers to make his time of trial easier. He faced it as a flesh-and-blood human being. Sure, he had the Spirit’s anointing and his Father’s declaration of loving approval (Matthew 3:16-17), but still he suffered. And at the very end, when he was at his weakest physically, he fought intense temptation.

This wilderness trial strengthened Jesus’ character. “Although he was the Son, he learned obedience from what he suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). Surely it was this experience he drew upon as he “determined to journey to Jerusalem” to die (Luke 9:51). He knew what was going to happen: “The Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men” (Luke 9:44). He was remembering his death: *memento mori*. He knew what he was about to face, and he drew on his habit of obedient suffering to steel himself to accept the Father’s will.

Jesus’ 40-day stay in the wilderness sets the length of our Lenten period. He sets us an example of resisting temptation by holding to the truth of God’s word even when we are at our weakest, our tireddest, our loneliest (because isn’t it when we feel these things that sin becomes so much more, well,

tempting, and so much easier to excuse?). But those 40 days mean something more for us. Christ's victory over Satan, in the wilderness in weakness and then on the cross in ultimate weakness, is our victory too. Through faith in him, we already have his record of perfect obedience given to us—even when we fail to obey our Father, even when we forget him.

So, don't be afraid. Remember that even in the ways you fail, and even when you fail to remember, Jesus succeeded in your place. He is your leader and your example—he is also your Savior. It is with that freedom of knowing that our standing before God is secure in his victory that we can pray that these Lenten days will change us.

Reflect

How might setting apart the next 40 days teach you something about resisting temptation and the work of Christ?

Friday

Joining in His Suffering

“I am completing in my flesh what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for his body, that is, the church.”

(Colossians 1:24)

Read Colossians 2:16-23

Much of the evangelical church today is allergic to any message of self-inflicted suffering such as what we might hear during Lent. Sometimes this is because people are rightly militating against a pietism that suggests that punishing ourselves will overcome sin or earn merit from God. No—the apostle Paul asserted that harsh treatment of the body has no value in “curbing self-indulgence” (Colossians 2:23). He knew that outward voluntary deprivation does not change our inward bent toward sin. In fact, it may worsen it through religious pride. I understand that allergic reaction against self-inflicted suffering. I feel it too.

And yet...

Personally, I did not observe Ash Wednesday until 2020, and I rarely gave the season of Lent much thought. But during the first year of the pandemic, my daughter invited me to go with her to an outdoor service. I was marked that day by more than ashes. I was reminded of what I had forgotten: voluntary

suffering for the sake of Christ has significance. My voluntary suffering affects more than my individual life.

For years, I have focused my ministry upon the completed work of Jesus Christ and so have resisted any religious practices that might smack of merit-earning. Christianity is not a meritocracy. I believe that to the core of my being, “It is by grace you are saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9, NIV). How well you remember Lent, or how determined you are to fast in some way, will not, cannot, change God’s disposition toward you in any way at all. If you trust him, you are already righteous in Christ, an infinitely beloved child of God, even if you put this book down and never get any farther on this Lenten journey. And fasting for Lent will not change your bent toward sin, nor will it earn anything from God.

So, why am I encouraging you to choose to fast?!

Let us consider Colossians 1:24, where Paul writes...

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you, and I am completing in my flesh what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for his body, that is, the church.

What is Paul talking about? If Jesus’ life and death are already completely sufficient for our salvation (and they are), what made Paul say he needed to complete something that was lacking? Here is how I understand it: Jesus’ afflictions have no deficiency when it comes to our salvation. But the church needed Paul’s example, testimony, and work.

Today, as in Paul’s day, a church needs its members to follow in the unlikely footsteps of their King and lay down their lives for others. Yes, it is true that God does not need our good deeds, but it is also true that our neighbor does. A willingness to suffer for others, to love our neighbors, has been the impulse of millions of Christians through millennia and

should be ours today. Why were they able to do this? Because they were imitating their King. They were remembering their deaths and remembering his. Here's Paul again:

*I am ready not only to be bound but also to die in
Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 21:13)*

A Lenten fast is a period of voluntary, small-scale suffering—a choice to go without, to teach yourself that Jesus is enough, and to prepare yourself to choose suffering for his people and his world rather than to run from it. Perhaps you could also use Lent as a period of service to your church or community in some particular way. Whatever way you choose to observe this season of Lent, I pray it will aid you in laying down this fleeting life in service of others, in service of his people, filling up Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church.

Reflect

If you are thinking of choosing to fast, what could you go without in order to experience how Jesus is enough?

Saturday

The Glory Is Not Yet

“Wasn’t it necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and enter into his glory?”

(Luke 24:26)

Read Luke 18:31-34

When Jesus foretold his death, the disciples thought the Lord was being needlessly pessimistic. They assumed that his successes meant the Romans would soon be overthrown and glory was close. So when he would say something like *I am on my way to die*, they simply could not hear it. I do not mean they were physically deaf. Rather, they were spiritually deaf. They could not hear his words because the story of “Humanity’s Greatest Hits” was blaring on autoplay in their earbuds. They were consumed with thoughts like *Who gets to sit nearest your throne when we come into our... we mean your... kingdom?* The first time Jesus explained that he, the Messiah, had come to die, Peter even dared to try to set the Lord straight. “This will never happen to you!” *Don’t be such a downer!* he chided (Matthew 16:22). In responding “Get behind me, Satan!” (v 23), Jesus sought to silence Peter’s playlist. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns,” he

challenged him (NIV). But still Peter could not hear. The song was just too loud.

And Peter was not alone in his error.

After Jesus' death, two of his followers walked home from Jerusalem to Emmaus. All their plans for victory—"We were hoping that he was the one who was about to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21)—had been crushed on a Roman cross. Yet it was not their hope for redemption that had been mistaken but their assumptions about what this redemption was and how it would happen. They had assumed there would be glory without suffering.

Not surprisingly, therefore, they failed to recognize the risen Jesus walking alongside them. All they could see was their ruined plans. Because they had stopped their ears whenever Jesus had said he was about to die, they had not heard what he had always said next—that he would rise again.

Jesus had always known that glory would come through and after suffering. So he asked them, "Wasn't it necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:26).

Necessary? Suffer? The juxtaposition of those two words troubles me. Everything in me screams that suffering cannot, should not, be "necessary." Sure, sometimes accidents happen, and plans often go awry. But *necessary*?

Jesus understood necessary suffering. He was "a man of suffering" (Isaiah 53:3). He learned its necessity throughout his life of deprivation and his 40-day fast followed by his battle with Satan. He learned it when his friends misunderstood his mission and clamored for power and position. He tasted it when he writhed in agony "on the night when he was betrayed" (1 Corinthians 11:23). He felt it when the crown of thorns was thrust upon his head and the lash tore open his back. And then... oh, my friends... he felt it when suffering tore him open to the depth of his soul at the loss of

his Father's approving smile. And he cried, *Why?* (Matthew 27:46). Why indeed?

Underneath Jesus' tears was an understanding that the only thing that would reverse the curse and our complicity in it would be his suffering. Beneath Jesus' weeping eyes was a breaking heart of love, and of faith. He knew suffering was the first step toward his ultimate glory... and ours. He knew that after the suffering, his people would finally be able to see him and hear the truth. So it was that before he left them, those disciples in Emmaus had seen Jesus for who he is—the King who suffered and rose and now reigns in glory.

We want to jump ahead. We want to get past the suffering to the party. We want to sing “Christ the Lord is risen today! Hallelujah!” And that is not wrong. But we will not be able to understand his glorious message until our personal-ambition playlists have been silenced. And often they are silenced through suffering.² The Lenten season is a reminder that suffering comes before glory, and that in this life for us, as for our Lord, glory is secure but glory is not yet.

Reflect

What might choosing to go without teach you about suffering and glory?

2 Of course, this does not answer the whole “why?” question about suffering. But it was certainly the answer to the disciples' unbelief, shock, and discouragement at Jesus' crucifixion.

Sunday

A Sabbath Note

On Sundays you are encouraged to rest from your fast and rejoice in your King's grace, so there will not be any Sunday readings until Easter Sunday.