

Days 1-4

**WEEK OF ASH
WEDNESDAY**

THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

Yesterday is gone, tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today. Let us begin.

—St. Teresa of Calcutta¹

Day 1

TIME TO REST

Ash Wednesday

READ

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

—Matthew 11:28

REFLECT

As you begin this Lenten journey, reflect on an offer from Jesus that is too good to pass up. It doesn't matter what is weighing you down or causing you to worry, the promise is the same—rest.

I remember hanging on to this verse during a very difficult time in my life. My wife was pregnant with our twin daughters, and the girls were not expected to live. In fact, they only had a 10 percent chance of being born alive. We had just left the perinatal clinic at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Camden, New Jersey. An ultrasound had revealed that Mary and Elizabeth were still alive—although the prognosis remained grim.

We paid a visit to the hospital chapel and knelt before Jesus in the tabernacle. My eyes drifted to the writing above the sanctuary, and I saw the Bible verse at the top of this reflection. If there was ever a time I felt heavy laden, this was

it. I accepted the Lord's offer and imagined myself running toward him. Immediately, I felt the comfort he promised. I didn't know how things would turn out (miraculously, the girls did survive), but for the moment, I was at peace.

It doesn't matter how many Lents you have wasted in the past. Begin anew today. It is the first day of a brand-new Lent. Are you ready to depart from habitual worrying and follow him? He doesn't promise a problem-free life, and he doesn't guarantee that you won't suffer. What he promises is something only he can give—peace. Not a worldly peace that ebbs and flows with your circumstances but a supernatural peace that can't be taken away by the problems of life.

At this point, let's not focus on how impossible it seems not to worry or how many times peace has eluded you in the past. Instead, concentrate on his words. Don't you desire to accept his offer? It's very attractive, isn't it?

Now, here's the catch. While the Lord's offer is extended to all, you and I are free to reject it. Why would anyone do that? There could be any number of reasons, including that we don't trust him or it seems too good to be true.

How about if you let this Lent be different than those in the past? Read and reread the invitation from Jesus. There are no caveats or qualifications. If you come to him, you will find rest. Period. Are you willing to give it a try?

RESPOND

Make the decision to run to Jesus and accept his invitation. Tell him you are willing to trust him (even if you don't feel

like it) and desperately desire the peace that he offers. Let that be your Lenten goal.

PRAY

Jesus, I am burdened with many worries. Although it seems impossible, I want to experience the rest that you promise. My goal this Lent is to follow you more closely. Instead of trying to stop worrying all by myself, I will focus on following you. Thank you, Lord. I am hopeful. Amen.

Day 2

FOCUS ON THE LORD

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

READ

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

—Colossians 3:2

REFLECT

Today is the second day of Lent, and it's time to look at the first step in eliminating worry from your life. The answer is as simple as what St. Paul tells the people of Colossae in the above verse. You need to think about God more than you think about your problems. If you constantly dwell on your earthly challenges and difficulties, you will never experience peace in your life. If, on the other hand, you keep your focus on the Lord and turn to him each day, you will be at peace.

This does not mean that you should ignore the problems in your life. It means that you should let God help you to handle them. Most of us who are anxious by nature like to be in control. When we face a situation that is beyond our control, we often begin to worry. How can we overcome this? We begin by recognizing that the Lord, who truly is in control, wants to be part of our lives. He doesn't expect us to handle

the challenges of life alone. Rather, he wants us to do what we can and ask for his assistance with the heavy lifting.

Over the course of the next several weeks, we are going to work on doing this one day at a time. For now, let's focus on the fact that there is a bigger picture than just this life and its problems. Lent provides us the opportunity to look upward and remember that we were created to live with God forever in heaven. Before we get there, however, there is suffering to contend with on earth. As Catholics, we believe that this suffering has value and can help us (and those around us) reach our final goal of eternal happiness.

While it's impossible to stop yourself from being afraid, it is possible to turn your thoughts to God. Your brain cannot process two thoughts at the same time. Every minute spent thinking about the Lord (or better yet, conversing with him) is one less minute spent thinking about your problems. There are only twenty-four hours in a day. Your ultimate goal should be more "God time" than "worrying time." It will take work at first, but it will be worth it.

RESPOND

While it sounds easy to spend time thinking about God instead of your problems, it can be difficult without setting concrete goals. Today, read the words of Jesus in John 14:1-3 and spend ten minutes picturing what heaven will be like. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your thoughts.

PRAY

Heavenly Father, thank you for preparing a room in heaven just for me. You created me so that I could enter into a relationship with you. Even though I tend to get sidetracked by dwelling on my problems, I want to change. Please grant me the desire to focus on you instead of my earthly difficulties. Amen.

Day 3

OPEN YOUR DOOR FOR JESUS

Friday after Ash Wednesday

READ

Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.

—Psalm 24:7

REFLECT

One of my favorite paintings is *Christ at Heart's Door* by Warner Sallman. It depicts Jesus knocking on the front door of a house. What makes the image particularly striking is the fact that there is no doorknob on the outside of the door. As a result, it can only be opened from the inside. As unusual as this is, it accurately represents how Jesus approaches us. Instead of forcing his way into our lives, he gently knocks on the door of our hearts and waits for us to open it and invite him inside.

The decision to open the door is one that only you can make. Although he wants to be a part of your life, Jesus will not force open the door. Make no mistake about it, however: he will knock and knock again. Before you wonder why he never seems to knock on your door, let me pass along one other piece of information. It is especially important if you're a worrier. Every time you are afraid, Jesus *is* knocking on your door.

What are the things that are frightening you at this time? Sickness? Job loss? An uncertain future? All of these things (and many more) are ways in which Jesus knocks on your door. When this happens, you have two choices: you can turn inward and worry, or you can open the door and let him in.

Can it really be that simple? Absolutely. But just because it's simple doesn't mean that it's easy. We are so used to worrying about our problems that this thought seems downright unrealistic. That's what I used to think until I tried it. When you invite Jesus Christ to enter your life and help you with your problems, he will not refuse. Are you ready to open the door?

RESPOND

What occupies more time in your life—worrying or praying? It has been my experience that the vast majority of Christians often forget about the Lord when problems arise. Sure, we remember to send up some prayers, but then we lapse into the useless practice of worrying. That will change for you today when you pray the following prayer. It's not a magic formula, a trite expression, or a self-help mantra. Rather, it is a very real invitation to a very real person who will change your life if you let him.

PRAY

Dear Jesus, I hear you knocking on my door and I am ready to let you into my life. Please be patient with me, as this is all very new. I'm not used to trusting you with my problems, but I'm ready to give it a try. I turn my worries over to you and ask you to handle them for me. Thank you. Amen.