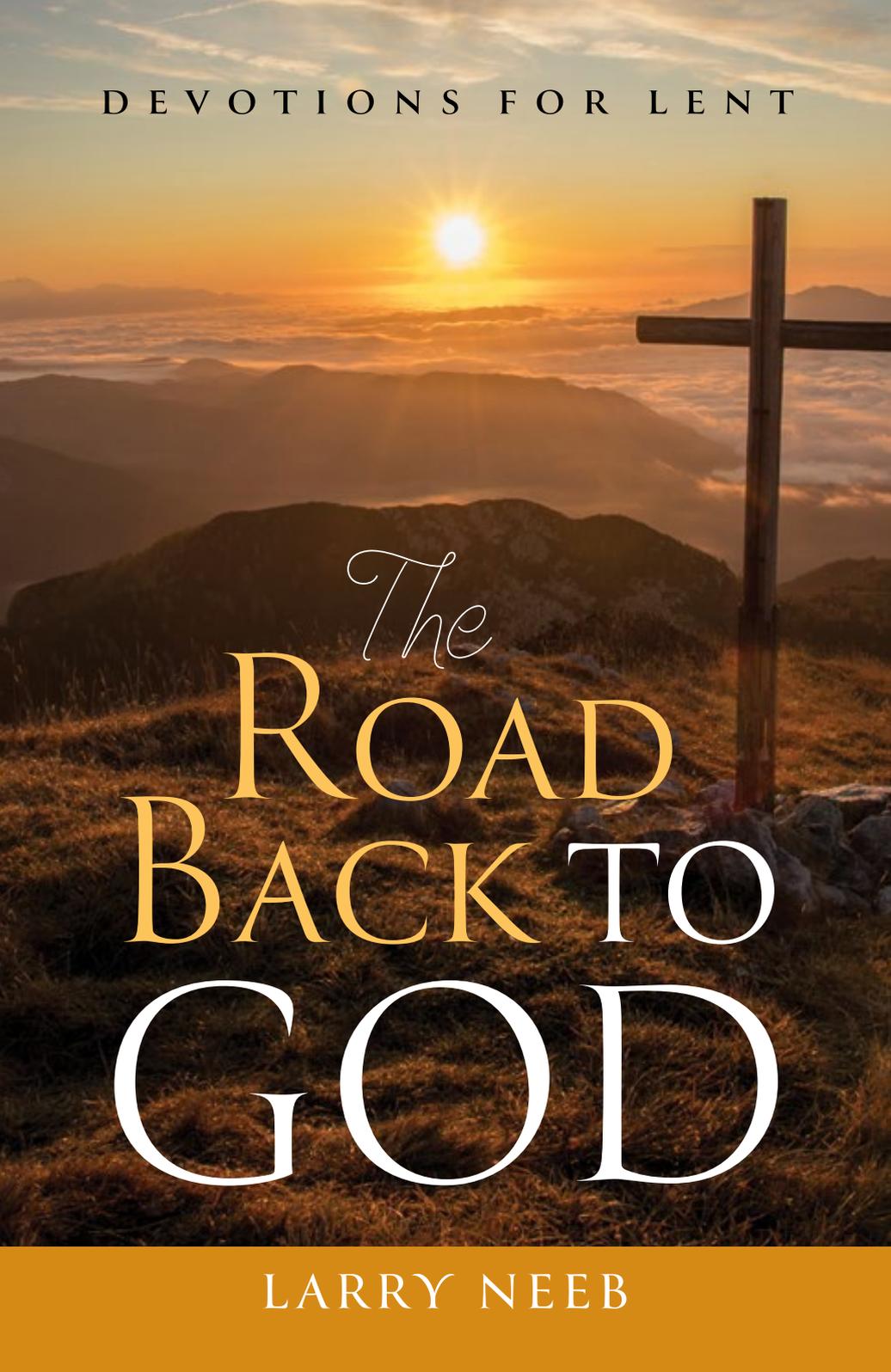


DEVOTIONS FOR LENT



The
ROAD
BACK TO
GOD

LARRY NEEB

The Light Burden of Ashes

Today many Christians throughout the world will penitently approach their church altar and receive on their foreheads a cross of ashes. “Dust you are and to dust you will return,” the pastor will say—ominous words that remind us that life has its limits and ultimately ends in death.

But the cross of ashes laid upon your forehead is a *light* burden, expressing our Lord’s desire to take from your shoulders the *heavy* burdens of guilt and fear. This symbolic act marks the beginning of Lent, a season when you can learn anew the extremes to which God goes to reclaim you and to take from you the *heavy* burden of sin in all its forms.

This Lent, remember that in our relationship with God, receiving is better than giving.

Giving or Giving Up

Christians believe that, for some reason, God has claimed them and redeemed them through the suffering of his Son. They believe God is present in the activities of their daily lives in order to draw them to him, and that behind a cold and indifferent universe is a waiting Father who wants to welcome them back with open arms.

The essence of Christian teaching, then, is not a set of rules to live by, for all religions have their commandments. What distinguishes the Christian faith is that it focuses on God and his grace which is given freely, without cost, to those who will accept it.

Before this day is over, I will spend time thinking about what I need to do to come closer to God ... to make room in my heart for him.

Growing Toward God

What St. Augustine said is really true, “Our hearts will find no rest until they find their rest in God.”

So this Lent, try not to focus on yourself and something you do. Rather, let it be a time of turning around toward God ... a time of re-discovering the great and marvelous things that he has done in your life since he called you by name in baptism to be his own, despite your poverty and littleness. Let this Lent be a time in which you recognize in his face, not the countenance of an angry judge, a maker of rules, but One who was willing to take chances in history to show the extent of his caring for you.

Today I will spend some time thinking about the special opportunities for growth that I have this Lent.

Love—the Strongest Force on Earth

When someone loves you, you have great power over that person—power to make that person happy or power to make that person sad. That’s always the way it is with lovers. One little word, a smile, the smallest of gifts can bring incredible joy. Indifference can bring misery.

Perhaps you can remember when you were a little child how easy it was for you to bring joy (or happy tears) to your parents with a small gift. And so it is with the love God has for us. He has made himself defenseless. He handed himself over to us, entering human history in order that he might become vulnerable to our acceptance. That is why there is so much joy in heaven over one sinner who repents!

This week I’ve taken the first steps along the road back to God. It is a long road, but with God’s help I will stay on it.

You Count in God's Eyes

As children, most of us were taught that to love God, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, was at the heart of Christianity. And this is true! But most of us aren't very good at loving ourselves; some are even afraid of loving themselves. We need to discover and affirm the proper love of self. The secret is this: The kind of self-love that frees us comes from knowing that, even in our sinfulness, God loves and accepts us. We are the recipients of an alien righteousness that makes us precious in God's sight. We count in God's eyes. Think on that this week.

MONDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

1 PETER 1:17-19

Worth More Than Gold

What is your "net worth"? *Money* magazine suggests that each family calculate this annually. But there is an even more serious accounting that must take place in the life of each of us—and it affects the way we feel about ourselves and the way we treat others. In our hearts, we all know that our real net worth isn't determined by what we own. In the important areas of life, financial holdings are really beside the point.

When all is said and done, what does count is what God was willing to do for you. God was willing to give up his only Son so that you might be forgiven and have eternal life, finding joy in a relationship with him and in sharing with others. That's really what the story of Lent is all about. He gave his only Son for you! You must really be worth a lot to him ... and, come to think of it, you must have quite a net worth.

Lord, let this realization sink in for me this Lent: "Anything that can be bought has no real value. Nothing of real value can ever be bought." Amen.

Must We Always Be at War?

Rivalries and the subtle hatreds they spawn are all around us and at the root of gossip, pettiness and our inability to get along with each other.

It takes a radical turnaround to get out of the habit of struggling to be number one. That turnaround can begin when we are able to see the true value in our neighbor—not just the value he or she has in measurable areas of competition—but the value that clings to every human being because God cares about each of them. When that true value is seen, that person will no longer be seen just as a competitor, but as a partner, sharing equally the grace and forgiveness of God.

Lord, today I name in my heart one person I compete with and think of that person as an equal sharer with me in your love. Amen.

Why Is It Hard to Love My Neighbor?

To overcome hate—including self-hatred—we need to begin to understand just how “worthy” we are in God’s eyes. How is that possible? It takes work.

But look at the history of all the years that have gone before. Are they not a record of God at work on a plan that has resulted in bringing you close to him today ... and forever? The Old Testament is really a record of God pursuing people who were rebellious, who expressed self-hatred and hatred of others, even hatred of God, in many different ways. God didn’t give up. He pursued ... and finally even sent his Son, an only Son, to demonstrate just how seriously he took the task of loving them. That story, of course, does not end with the Biblical records. It continued when God came to you and called you by name in baptism ... and it continues when he offers forgiveness in the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

We cannot rid ourselves of feelings of unworthiness as easily as we toss off old clothes. We cannot disguise these feelings for long, either. But they need no longer be a source of despair or hatred when we begin to realize the mercy of God. That is what the story of Lent is all about.

THURSDAY, THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

ROMANS 12:9-21

Faith Active in Love

One cannot be truly satisfied with a faith that does not become active in works of love, for works of love are the witness, the evidence, that faith is really alive.

Faith is not the belief that certain propositions about God are correct or sufficient. Faith is acceptance that God is both forgiving and reliable. This acceptance opens up a new understanding about life, one that affirms that it is better to give than to receive.

True good works stem not from the profit motive but from the realization that we are the undeserved recipients of the good work of God. Because we are first cared for and forgiven, we want to care for others.

Only those who truly realize their own poverty and spiritual weakness are capable of genuine love. It has always been that way with the saints. One theologian put it this way: “The saints are those who made it a little bit easier to believe in God.” Instead of asking, “What’s in it for me?” they discovered a freedom to give freely to others ... and in that way they became windows through which we could see God.

Today I will thank God for his special gifts to me—gifts that open my heart to receive his love, gifts like the Eucharist and worship with other Christians, gifts which help to free me to love others.

Give Thanks for Who You Are

“It is by grace that you are saved. It is a gift of God, not of works,” St. Paul said many years ago (Ephesians 2:8-9). That’s really worth shouting about! Imagine, you are saved, you are thought to be worth something by God! You are God’s work of art and the expression of his care for the world through the things you do.

Imagine that! God gets his work done through your smile, your concern for the disenfranchised, your sharing with those who need help in every describable way. You are the one who cares for them because God cares for them. Your eyes are his eyes. Your hands are his hands.

With little or no value in and of ourselves, we are worth God’s all. He does not love us because we are good, but we become good when and because he loves us. If we open our hearts to that love, our love of others will, with God’s help, take care of itself. We can’t help but respond to his love by imitation.

If we recognize the gift of God’s love and that we are worth something to him, then we are free to discover who we really are.

Bad Successes and Good Failures

Thomas Merton said, “The person who fails well is often better off than the one who succeeds badly.”

One episode of the old TV show *Candid Camera* depicted a street-side fruit stand of cantaloupes. Over the stand was a sign, “Free—Help Yourself.” One person after another eagerly plucked the melons from the stand, piling them up in their arms ... always reaching for just one more ... until all the melons spilled from their arms and broke on the sidewalk. Here was a real case of “less is more.”

Those who recognize their own limitations and set their sights on realistic goals have a chance of succeeding in using their abilities to the fullest. And though they may fail to achieve the success of some others, they will learn some of the more important and profound lessons in life—and in the quiet of their own souls they will hear the voice of the Spirit saying, “You do count for something; blessed are the poor in spirit.”

Encourage me, Lord, to continue along the path that brings me closer to you. Help me to guard against that certain sin in my life that threatens my relationship with you. Amen.

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

The Meaning of Grace in Our Lives

A gift is something valuable voluntarily transferred to another without compensation. In reality, gifting is contrary to human nature. Most people would rather get than give. Humankind’s deep-seated suspicion about gifts was long ago described in the Greek myth of Prometheus, the god who was tortured for stealing fire and giving it to human beings. Today, we also are suspicious of anything “free” because there is usually a gimmick. “There is no such thing as a free lunch,” the saying goes.

Yet giving and receiving are at the heart of Christianity. God’s giving and our receiving. Our giving and God’s receiving. But who could seriously think of giving God anything?

In praying with *The Road Back to God*, we seek this week to enhance our appreciation of the meaning of God’s grace in our lives, an insight that will free us to give to God as well as to others.

Christ, a Man for Others

What was the personality of Jesus Christ really like? What type of a guy was he really? He might have been just like someone you know today.

As you read what the Bible says about Jesus, one thing you notice about him is that his whole life was driven by a sense of mission. He was truly a man in a hurry. He had so many things to do and sensed there was too little time.

The Scripture also tells us that Jesus could be confrontational, yet without being competitive. He spoke the truth, unvarnished by public relations skills. You may also know someone like that today. But notice with Jesus there was a difference. He was never confrontational in his own interest but always in the service of speaking the truth and helping others. His passion was not for himself but for spending himself in the service of others.

The central message of Lent is that God cared enough to send the very best—his Son! What a gift that was! This week, seek to share that good news with someone else.

Happiness Is Free

There are many different ways of being happy and many different ways of achieving happiness.

It's probably fair to say that, for most people, "achieving happiness" is one of the central goals in life. Oh, they may not want it *all*, but they do want their *share* of happiness.

Actually happiness always comes as an afterthought—alongside of whatever you might be doing and whatever you might have. It comes as one of God's free gifts, given only in the quiet of your heart. Happiness is never very far from peace. True happiness doesn't conform to the



The season of Lent is often described as a spiritual journey. This classic set of devotions by *Creative Communications* founder Larry Neeb (1939-2019) is designed to help us discover a deeper and richer relationship with God. The truth, of course, is that we can never find God unless he first finds us. God's forgiving and renewing power is what animates us in our Christian walk of active love and service, these pages reveal, as we draw near to Christ's cross.



LARRY NEEB was an ordained minister who served as a pastor, seminary administrator and teacher before starting *Creative Communications for the Parish* from his front porch in St. Louis, MO, in 1977. What began with a small catalog of a handful of products for the church grew into a thriving publishing house that now produces

a wide range of devotional, worship and educational resources for adults, children and families in parishes worldwide. Lovingly providing the works of such renowned writers as Henri Nouwen, Frederick Buechner, Martin Marty and Walter Wangerin to many thousands through *Creative's* publications over the years, Larry penned his own devotional thoughts that touched the hearts of many. His words are printed here in honor of his passing in 2019 and as a tribute to his remarkable legacy as our founder and friend.

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