




# *ASHES TO FIRE*

**DAILY REFLECTIONS FROM ASH WEDNESDAY TO PENTECOST**

EDITED BY  
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# THE APOSTLES' CREED

I believe in God the Father Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth;  
And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord;  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, dead, and buried;  
he descended into hell;  
the third day he rose again from the dead;  
he ascended into heaven,  
and sitteth on the right hand of God,  
the Father Almighty;  
from thence he shall come to judge the living  
and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting.

Amen.



# ASHES TO FIRE PREFACE

## A Journey with Jesus from Ash Wednesday to Pentecost

Faithful followers of Jesus yearn for deep spiritual renewal. They hunger for a more meaningful relationship with God. This desire to draw closer to God inspires them to read Scripture, fast, and pray. But often the excitement about having such a life of devotion is dampened by not knowing where to begin or how to keep going.

*Ashes to Fire* is simply one way to get started in a sustained devotional life. It accomplishes this by following the Christian calendar, a practice that has helped the church for centuries keep its focus on the three great festival days--Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost.

As a gentle but purposeful guide, *Ashes to Fire* invites us into the deeper life by taking us on an intense journey with Jesus: from Ash Wednesday through Holy Week and Easter, and then on to Pentecost--from penitence, to praise, to power. Week by week and day by day our anticipation will rise as we draw closer to the celebration of Easter and then continue on to that of Pentecost. This third great festival of the church captures Easter's exuberance, along with a joy-filled recognition of God's presence and purifying power among us. As with Easter, here is an opportunity for the church to rejoice with inspiring music and to remember with story. It can tell again about the outpouring of the Spirit in fullness and power, the promised gift of Jesus to his people.

Along with the journey to Pentecost, *Ashes to Fire* offers a combination of Bible reading, spiritual reflection, and prayer that could, if followed faithfully, be an avenue to God's transforming, life-renewing power. Prayerfully immersing ourselves in the Sacred Scriptures is one way to satisfy our hunger to know Christ in a deeper, more intimate way. John, in remembering the words of Jesus,

gives us a key insight: “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf” (John 5:39). The best way to deepen our relationship with the Living Word is to spend time in reading and meditating on the Written Word. *Ashes to Fire* provides just such an opportunity.

While there are several companion *Ashes to Fire* resources available for use in the local church ([www.ashestofire.org](http://www.ashestofire.org)), this devotional guide is the heart and soul of the journey. Here are the compass points for those who want to join others on this pilgrimage and rehearse with them the stories of our faith. In addition, participants will find inspirational music written specifically for the biblical theme of each Sunday of the *Ashes to Fire* experience on the CD included with this book, along with the theme song, “*Ashes to Fire*” (CD-Track 15).

## THE LENTEN AND EASTER SEASONS

The season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and continues for 6 weeks. Palm Sunday, the 6th Sunday of Lent, marks the beginning of Holy Week, which concludes on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter Sunday, or Resurrection Day. The first Sunday of Easter marks the beginning of the season of Easter, 50 days that lead up to Pentecost Sunday. In total, these 14 weeks will give shape and substance to our spiritual adventure; and in the spirit of the literary classic *Canterbury Tales*, we have 14 stories from the Gospels to be retold and remembered along the way—historical accounts from the life of the Savior that we will consider in depth as we walk the pilgrim pathway together toward Pentecost.

## Using the *Ashes to Fire* Devotional and Study Guide

### THE LENTEN PRELUDE

Ash Wednesday begins our *Ashes to Fire* experience. We start with a brief explanation of the day’s significance and a devotional reflection on the call to repentance and renewal both from the ancient prophets and from our Lord himself. The next three days follow a pattern of personal daily devotions, as explained below in the section titled Monday through Saturday Personal Devotional Guide.

## SUNDAY DEVOTIONAL REFLECTION FOR GROUP STUDY

Each Sunday, a devotional reflection based on a key Gospel narrative provides a background resource for Sunday school class conversations or small-group study. In addition to reading the Gospel passage and the devotional reflection, you should also read the suggested companion passages, usually one from the Old Testament, one from the Psalms, and one from the New Testament Epistles. Discussion prompts help to prepare you for participation in your group discussions. Use your reflective journaling section to record any other insights that come to you as you read and think about the passages or the devotional reflection. When the 14 weeks are over, you will have a personal diary of your spiritual journey to keep for later reference.

## MONDAY THROUGH SATURDAY PERSONAL DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

Each day of the 14-week period includes a personal devotional guide that begins with a brief prayer, followed by four suggested readings for the day—one from the Old Testament, one from the Psalms, one from the Epistles, and one from the Gospels. If you do not have the time to read these passages in their entirety, each of the first three is briefly summarized for you. It is suggested that you always read the daily Gospel lesson in its entirety (the scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version). Also included in the daily guide are inspirational quotes from men and women of faith who keep us connected with our shared Christian heritage. In the evening, an excerpt from the Psalms and a brief prayer provide preludes to nighttime rest and renewal. Prayers marked with a **JW** icon are based on John Wesley's Forms of Prayer.

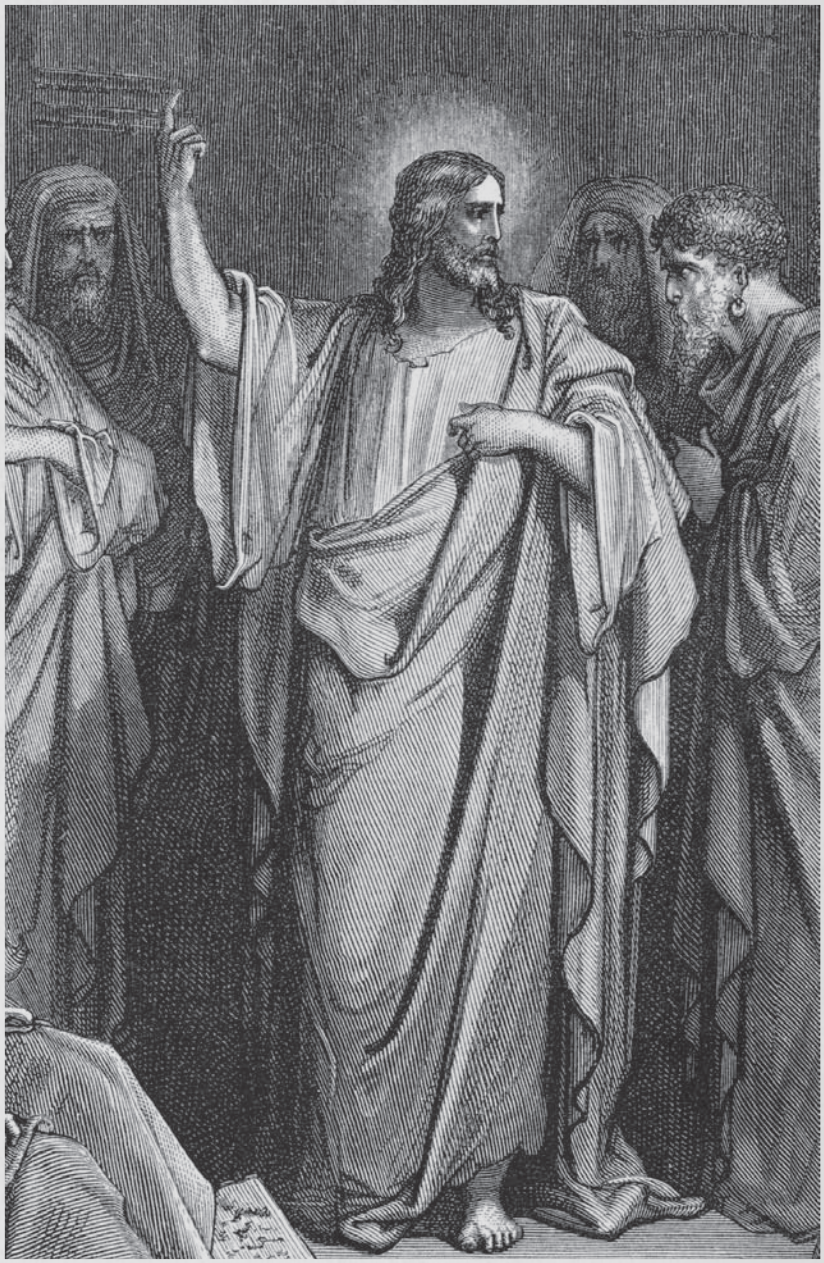
One church leader of the 20th century, Dr. J. B. Chapman, concluded his book *The Terminology of Holiness* with these words:

We know in truth the spiritual meaning of the fire-touched lips of Isaiah. Even the holy apostles who walked with the Master in the days of His flesh were taught to look forward to the fullness of the Spirit's baptism, which is the normal heritage of all God's people . . . to be filled with the love of God; to have His love made perfect in our hearts; there is nothing better than this.

The goal of *Ashes to Fire* is to help every believer know “in truth the spiritual meaning” of such power and purity, of a heart filled to capacity with the burning love of God. Perhaps the book you hold in your hands will provide the answer to your own soul’s longings for a relationship with the Lord that will forever change your life. God be with you, pilgrim. Let’s take the journey together.

For the *Ashes to Fire* Team  
Merritt J. Nielson  
*Curriculum Director*

We acknowledge our debt of gratitude to our primary writers for this personal devotional guide: Shane Ash, John Bowling, Robert Broadbooks, Russell F. Metcalfe Jr., Jeren Rowell, Woodie Stevens, and J. K. Warrick. Please visit [www.ashes-to-fire.org](http://www.ashes-to-fire.org) for other resources, including Sunday school and small-group discussion guides for children, youth, and adults; sermon and worship suggestions; and music for public services and personal listening.



# LENTEN SEASON

## Ash Wednesday: With Jesus at the Place of Repentance

Read the passages from Joel 2 and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21, the introductory reflection, "Dust Thou Art," and then the additional devotional material for the day.

### **THE MUSIC OF ASHES TO FIRE**

Prelude Days: "Burn Away" (Track 1)

## Thursday through Saturday

### **IN THE MORNING:**

A personal daily devotional guide includes prayer, a reading from the Old Testament, the Psalms, the Epistles, and the Gospel for each day of the week.

The Bible readings for the Lenten Prelude are from Deuteronomy, Titus, and the Gospel of John.

Inspirational quotes from men and women of faith keep us in contact with our shared Christian heritage.

### **IN THE EVENING:**

An evening psalm and prayer become preludes to nighttime rest and renewal.



# LENTEN SEASON—THE PRELUDE

## With Jesus at the Place of Repentance

A devotional reflection based on Joel 2:1-2, 12-17;  
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

### Dust Thou Art

“*Dust thou art,*” goes some of the ritual associated with today, “*and to dust thou shalt return!*” That may not be an uplifting thought, but then we are reminded that Ash Wednesday is where the journey begins—again. It is the first day of a pilgrimage that began a long time ago, a journey that believers have been taking for centuries. Together, committed followers of Jesus are invited to walk with him to Jerusalem and the cross.

**Ash Wednesday is a wake-up call that life is transient.** The words the pastor speaks and the scriptures that we read underscore our humanity, our mortality. The solemnity of the journey is good and necessary. There is no bypassing the cross for those who go this way. This is not a time for careless exuberance. Thankfully, we are not making this journey alone. Jesus walks with us. And so do many, many other brothers and sisters in Christ all around the world. We are in the best of company even though at times we may feel alone.

**Ash Wednesday is a challenge to put our lives in perspective.** “Dust thou art” may not be very flattering, but it’s something we need to hear. We really are pretty small items in a very large universe. And we go around talking as if we understand who God really is and what God really thinks, and that our navel is the center of the universe and God exists for us—and then this! “**Hello, speck!**” We are brought up short by the fact that we are infinitesimally small. Yet, we try to grasp the paradox that God knows and cares for each one of us.

**Ash Wednesday, then, becomes a focus on absolute basics.** Our self-indulgent culture would have us believe we cannot live without the things it values. We even think worship is a means to our improvement and well-being. We want what we want and heaven too. Jesus calls us to let him decide what we

need and where we go. So Ash Wednesday is the joy of knowing Jesus wants us to walk with him.

**Jesus calls us to simplicity, to listen.** Don't be too quick to set goals or make arbitrary decisions about giving things up for Lent. Instead, maybe we need to start by giving up explaining what we think we need. More often than not, prayer should be more listening, less talking. Silence is golden, precious and hard to come by.

**Jesus calls us to self-denial.** *Self-denial* ultimately is just that: denying *one-self* in favor of someone (Someone) else's decision. It is giving up my way and agreeing to go God's way. Often we think of self-denial as giving up chocolate or Facebook or some time-consuming pastime so we can be reminded of our purpose and spend more quiet time in prayer and meditation. Probably that is a good start. Whatever the level of self-denial, all of them seek to bring us into harmony with God's purpose. God-inspired self-denial will create confidence in praying.

**Jesus calls us corporately.** Ash Wednesday is a rallying time. The Bible speaks of corporate efforts, of fasting and waiting on God—a corporate longing after God until our times of worship reflect a united willingness to keep going step-by-step to Calvary and beyond.

## Observing Ash Wednesday

**Where is Ash Wednesday in the Bible?** It isn't. But there are plenty of precedents for calling God's people together for repentance, for fresh anointings, and for renewal. The trumpet sound of the prophet Joel, calling for God's people to tremble at the approaching judgments of God (Joel 2:1-2,12-17) resonates with the call of Jesus to times of mourning and calling on God with self-denial and even fasting. Notice Jesus does not say "If you fast" but "Whenever you fast . . ." as if he expects us to keep in step with his own example (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21).

**Why ashes?** Ashes in the Bible are a sign of mourning or humility before the holiness of God (see Daniel 9:3; Job 42:6; Jonah 3:6; Matthew 11:21).

**The Ash Wednesday service** for many denominations involves the reading of Scripture, perhaps a very short message outlining the journey to Good Friday, Easter, and beyond. People are then invited to come forward and the pastor marks a small black cross with ashes on each person's forehead. Traditionally





PSALM 143 ▪ AMOS 5:6-15 ▪ HEBREWS 12:1-14 ▪ LUKE 18:9-14

## MORNING MEDITATIONS

**PRAYER**—Lord God, send your Holy Spirit to be the guide of all my ways and the sanctifier of my soul and body. Give me the light of your presence, your peace from heaven, and the salvation of my soul, through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen. **JW**

**PSALM 143:1, 5-6**—Hear my prayer, O LORD; give ear to my supplications in your faithfulness; answer me in your righteousness . . . I remember the days of old, I think about all your deeds, I meditate on the works of your hands. I stretch out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land.

**AMOS 5:14-15** *Love the Good, Establish Justice*

Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

**HEBREWS 12:1b-2** *Run with Perseverance*

Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

**LUKE 18:9-14** *Today's Gospel Reading*

Let us fix our thoughts on the blood of Christ; and reflect how precious that blood is in God's eyes, inasmuch as its outpouring for our salvation has opened the grace of repentance to all mankind.

AN EXCERPT FROM CLEMENT'S LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

## EVENING REFLECTIONS

**PSALM 102:1-2**—Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my cry come to you. Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress. Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call.

**PRAYER**—Father, grant me forgiveness of what is past, that in the days to come I may with a pure spirit, do your will—walking humbly with you, showing love to all, and keeping body and soul in sanctification and honor, in Jesus' name. Amen.

PSALM 37 ▪ DEUTERONOMY 7:6-11 ▪ TITUS 1:1-16 ▪ JOHN 1:29-34

## MORNING MEDITATIONS

**PRAYER**—Eternal Father, I acknowledge that all I am, all I have is yours. Give me such a sense of your goodness today, that I may return to you all possible love and obedience, in Jesus' name. Amen. **JW**

**PSALM 37:7a, 27-28**—Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him . . . Depart from evil, and do good; so you shall abide forever. For the LORD loves justice; he will not forsake his faithful ones.

**DEUTERONOMY 7:6, 11** *His Treasured Possession*

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession . . . therefore, observe diligently the commandment . . . that I am commanding you today.

**TITUS 1:1b-3** *Grace and Peace*

For the sake of . . . the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness, in the hope of eternal life that God, who never lies, promised before the ages began—in due time he revealed his word through the proclamation with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior.

**JOHN 1:29-34** *Today's Gospel Reading*

Joel speaks of God as “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” . . . But he did not want us to make the thought of God's great mercy a pretext for careless living . . . For my part, Joel says, I beg of you to repent and I assure you that God's mercy surpasses our wildest dreams. AN EXCERPT FROM JEROME'S COMMENTARY ON JOEL

## EVENING REFLECTIONS

**PSALM 37:39-40**—The salvation of the righteous is from the LORD; he is their refuge in the time of trouble. The LORD helps them and rescues them; he rescues them from the wicked, and saves them because they take refuge in him.

**PRAYER**—Lord God, you see my heart, and my desires are not hidden from you. To you, O God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, my Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, I give up myself entirely. May I no longer serve myself, but you alone. Amen.

PSALM 31 ▪ DEUTERONOMY 7:12-16 ▪ TITUS 2:1-15 ▪ JOHN 1:35-42

## MORNING MEDITATIONS

**PRAYER**—Everlasting God, I bless you with my whole heart and thank you for your goodness to me. Watch over me today with eyes of mercy; direct my soul and body according to your will, and fill my heart with your Holy Spirit that I may live this day, and all the rest of my days, to your glory. Amen. **JW**

**PSALM 31:14-15a, 16**—But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, “You are my God.” My times are in your hand; deliver me . . . Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.

**DEUTERONOMY 7:12-13** *God Will Bless You*

If you heed these ordinances, by diligently observing them, the LORD your God will maintain with you the covenant of loyalty that he swore to your ancestors; he will love you, bless you, and multiply you . . . in the land that he swore to your ancestors to give you.

**TITUS 2:11-12** *Live Godly Lives*

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright and godly.

**JOHN 1:35-42** *Today’s Gospel Reading*

Would you honor the body of Christ? Do not honor him here in church clothed in silk vestments and then pass him by unclothed and frozen outside . . . Adorn your house if you will, but do not forget your brother in distress. He is a temple of infinitely greater value.

AN EXCERPT FROM A SERMON BY JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

## EVENING REFLECTIONS

**PSALM 35:10, 22**—O LORD, who is like you? You deliver the weak from those too strong for them, the weak and needy from those who despoil them . . . You have seen, O LORD; do not be silent! O Lord, do not be far from me.

**PRAYER**—O my God, I love you above all things, with my whole heart and soul, because you are worthy of all my love. I forgive all who have injured me, and I ask pardon for all whom I may have injured. Amen.

PSALM 32 ▪ DEUTERONOMY 7:17-26 ▪ TITUS 3:1-15 ▪ JOHN 1:43-51

## MORNING MEDITATIONS

**PRAYER**—O Lord of Life, put your grace into my heart, that I may worthily magnify your great and glorious name. You have made me and sent me into the world to do your work. Assist me to fulfill the purpose of my creation, and to show your praise by giving up myself to your service, today and always. Amen. **JW**

**PSALM 32:1-2, 11**—Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit . . . Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and . . . upright in heart.

**DEUTERONOMY 7:18-19** *Remember What the Lord Did*

Do not be afraid . . . Just remember what the LORD your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt, the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs and wonders, the mighty hand and the outstretched arm by which the LORD your God brought you out.

**TITUS 3:4-5a** *He Saved Us*

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy.

**JOHN 1:43-51** *Today's Gospel Reading*

Happy are we if we put into practice what we hear and sing. For our hearing is a sowing of seed and our actions the fruit of that seed. Having said this, I would warn you against coming into church fruitlessly, hearing such good tidings but not producing good works.

AN EXCERPT FROM A SERMON BY ST. AUGUSTINE

## EVENING REFLECTIONS

**PSALM 43:3-4a**—O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy.

**PRAYER**—O God, you instruct me with your laws, you redeem me by the blood of your Son, and you sanctify me by the grace of your Holy Spirit. Let me rest in peace so that I may rise more fit for service in your kingdom, in Jesus' name. Amen. **JW**



# WEEK ONE

# LENTEN SEASON

## Sunday: With Jesus in the Desert

Read the Gospel passage from Matthew 4:1-11, the devotional reflection titled “No Shortcuts,” and respond to the discussion prompts in the Reflective Journaling section.

### THE MUSIC OF ASHES TO FIRE

Week 1: “Lead Me” (Track 2)

## Monday through Saturday of Week 1

### IN THE MORNING:

A personal daily devotional guide includes prayer, a reading from the Old Testament, the Psalms, the Epistles, and the Gospel for each day of the week.

This week’s readings are from Deuteronomy, Hebrews, and the Gospel of John.

Inspirational quotes from men and women of faith keep us in contact with our shared Christian heritage.

### IN THE EVENING:

An evening psalm and prayer become preludes to nighttime rest and renewal.



# LENTEN SEASON—WEEK ONE

## With Jesus in the Desert

### A devotional reflection based on Matthew 4:1-11

Read the Gospel passage first, then the devotional reflection that follows. The discussion prompts at the end will help prepare you for Sunday school and small-group sessions.

### No Shortcuts

Our first steps with Jesus on our Lenten journey take us to a desert wilderness far from his baptism by John the Baptist. The Spirit has led him away from the crowds and excitement. As we fall into step with him, he has fasted many days. Haggard and drawn, Jesus is confronted with evil offering what appear to be helpful suggestions. But the words have a suspicious ring. The temptation begins innocently enough.

“Make these stones into bread! You’re famished. This is the real world. You’re not going to survive at this rate! A dead Messiah isn’t going to do anyone any good.”

It isn’t that Jesus isn’t hungry. It isn’t that he can’t work a miracle. Later he will feed five thousand people with a little boy’s lunch. Survival isn’t the issue. For Jesus, taking orders solely from the Father is what he is all about, so he surely is not going to take advice from the Evil One.

“Man does not live by bread alone,” he says, “but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

The sympathetic tone continues, as the temptation steps to another level.

“What is this fasting and praying all about? Excitement is what sells! You need publicity! Put on a show! Do miracles! You can be famous!”

But Jesus is not a performer. He doesn’t do things for the effect. It isn’t that he can’t master the forces of nature. Later he will walk on the sea and calm storms. He will even raise the dead. But his greatest miracle is teaching us to

love, to love even the way of the cross. The way to eternal life has no flashy shortcuts. Jesus listens to one Voice only.

“Don’t try to make God do tricks!” is his reply.

The third temptation is maybe the most insidious of all. It is the temptation to compromise. The tempter offers to join forces with Jesus, but on his terms.

“A cross is a terrible way to go! No one will see out here in the desert if you just bow down and kneel before me. What does the Father care? What does he know? You have to take charge of your life! Just worship me and you’ll have no competition! Be powerful: you need to take charge! Assert yourself!”

Here Jesus, at his weakest, uses the defense that is available to us all as we learn to walk with him in the time of temptation. He doesn’t try to reason with the Enemy. He reaches back into the Father’s promises. He flees to the first commandment.

“Away with you, Satan!” he cries, “for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.’”

Satan has to leave. The angels come, there in the wilderness, and Jesus is refreshed. Then he resumes the step-by-step following of the Father’s will that will take him to Calvary, to Olivet, and to the glory beyond. There will be no compromise, no shortcut.

With Jesus in the wilderness of temptation we learn to reject the false sympathy of the tempter and dare to be faithful, as he is faithful.

If you are a student, you want good grades. They open doors. They bring scholarships. The easiest way to good grades is to let someone else do your work for you. But there is no real shortcut to genuine education.

If you are lonely, you want intimacy and the good feelings of love and security. No one has to tell you those are good things. The easiest way to those feelings is the pathway of least resistance. But there are no shortcuts to real friendship. There is never an excuse to *use* people like things, no matter what the goal may be.

If you are ambitious, you want success and influence. Within the boundaries of genuine caring those could be very worthy goals. But in our world, all too often personal goals are reached at whatever the cost. But there is no shortcut to real integrity. Cheating is always wrong; adultery and fornication are always sin; betrayal of confidence is always heartbreaking.

Whatever the reason, remember: there are no shortcuts to finding and doing God’s will. It is a wonderful thing to realize that in God’s will we don’t need

shortcuts! He is with us and will help us to do his will, if we only allow him. So there are no shortcuts in walking with Jesus.

A workman went to his big boss one day and said, "I'm tired. I think I'll take my retirement benefits and hang it up. It's been great working for you."

The big boss looked disappointed and said, "I really hate to see you go. I was hoping you could do at least one more big job for me. Will you, just one more?" Reluctantly the builder agreed to build a house for some important client of the big boss.

It was a big house, a big job, a lot of work. It was on a golf course, with a lot of detail. But the man's heart really wasn't in it. He threw the house together in record time and cut corners on material and labor wherever he could. He saved the boss a lot of money, but it wasn't really his best work and he knew it.

Imagine how he felt when he turned the keys over to the big boss and the boss gave them right back and fished around in his briefcase and gave him the title and deed to the property on the golf course.

"This is my gift for you!" he said. "Thanks for all your good work over the years!"

Then the builder wished he hadn't been in such a hurry. He wished he hadn't cut corners and taken shortcuts just to get the job done.

Life is like that. Exactly like that. We become the product of our own integrity in following after God—or our lack of integrity. Either we become exiles from innocence when we try to take shortcuts to being like God, or with the Holy Spirit's help, we walk with Jesus and use the promises and the commandments of God to resist the tempter's power and share in Christ's very life, living in his righteousness.

This is the first Sunday in Lent. The journey is under way. Today is a good time to ask God to give us grace to be like Jesus as we face temptations to cut corners, to take shortcuts, to compromise in any way with the known will of God. I don't know about you, but I don't want to try to get away with building a shoddy house. I know I'm going to have to live in what I build. —RFM

***After reading the passage from Matthew 4 and the devotional reflection "No Shortcuts," you may also want to read the following related passages:***

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; and Romans 5:12-19

The **discussion prompts** that follow will help prepare you to participate in your Sunday school class or small-group study. Use your **reflective journaling**



**PSALM 41** ▪ **DEUTERONOMY 8:11-20** ▪ **HEBREWS 2:11-18** ▪ **JOHN 2:1-12**

## MORNING MEDITATIONS

**PRAYER**—Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and all secrets exposed; cleanse the thoughts of my heart by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that I may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name, through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

**PSALM 41:1-2**—Happy are those who consider the poor; the LORD delivers them in the day of trouble. The LORD protects them and keeps them alive; they are called happy in the land.

### **DEUTERONOMY 8:11** *Take Care; Don't Forget*

Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today.

### **HEBREWS 2:17-18** *He Is Able to Help*

Therefore [Jesus] had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

### **JOHN 2:1-12** *Today's Gospel Reading*

Happy are we if we put into practice what we hear and sing. For our hearing is a sowing of seed and our actions the fruit of that seed

ST. AUGUSTINE, SERMON 23A, 1-4

## EVENING REFLECTIONS

**PSALM 41:4, 12-13**—As for me, I said, “O LORD, be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against you.” . . . You have upheld me because of my integrity, and set me in your presence forever. Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.

**PRAYER**—Be present, O God, and protect us through the silent hours of this night, so that we who are wearied by the changes of this fleeting world may rest in your eternal changlessness, in the name of Christ, I pray. Amen.

PSALM 45 ▪ DEUTERONOMY 9:4-12 ▪ HEBREWS 3:1-11 ▪ JOHN 2:13-22

## MORNING MEDITATIONS

**PRAYER**—Eternal and merciful Father, I give you humble thanks for all the spiritual and earthly blessings which in your mercy you have poured into my life. Lord, let me live only to love you and glorify your name. Amen. **JW**

**PSALM 45:6-7a**—Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever. Your royal scepter is a scepter of equity; you love righteousness and hate wickedness.

### **DEUTERONOMY 9:5** *God Keeps His Promises*

It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going in to occupy their land; but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is dispossessing them before you, in order to fulfill the promise that the LORD made on oath to your ancestors.

### **HEBREWS 3:6-8a** *Do Not Harden Your Hearts*

Christ . . . was faithful over God's house as a son; and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope. Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."

### **JOHN 2:13-22** *Today's Gospel Reading*

From the Father through his Son, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit flows into us, and through the Holy Spirit . . . faith is given to us, and through faith Christ dwells in our hearts

FROM BONAVENTURE'S BREVILOQUIUM

## EVENING REFLECTIONS

**PSALM 48:9-10; 14**—We ponder your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple. Your name, O God, like your praise, reaches to the ends of the earth . . . our God will be our guide forever.

**PRAYER**—Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people and kindle in us the fire of your love. Bring us rest and renewal through the quiet hours of the night, through Christ our Lord, I pray. Amen.

**PSALM 119:49-72** ▪ **DEUTERONOMY 9:13-21** ▪ **HEBREWS 3:12-19** ▪  
**JOHN 2:22—3:15**

## MORNING MEDITATIONS

**PRAYER**—Lord God, send your Holy Spirit to be the guide of all my ways and the sanctifier of my soul and body. Save, defend, and build me up in your love, through Christ my Lord. Amen. **JW**

**PSALM 119:59-60**—When I think of your ways, I turn my feet to your decrees; I hurry and do not delay to keep your commandments.

### **DEUTERONOMY 9:18** *The Lord Listened to Me*

Then I lay prostrate before the LORD as before, forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all the sin you had committed, provoking the LORD by doing what was evil in his sight.

### **HEBREWS 3:12-14** *Take Care*

Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But exhort one another every day . . . so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end.

### **JOHN 2:22—3:15** *Today's Gospel Reading*

Christ is the Word of God; but the Word was made flesh. . . Therefore Christ is both victim and priest according to the spirit. For he who offers the sacrifice to his Father according to the flesh is himself offered upon the altar of the cross.

FROM ORIGIN'S HOMILIES ON GENESIS

## EVENING REFLECTIONS

**PSALM 49:7-8**—Truly, no ransom avails for one's life, there is no price one can give to God for it. For the ransom of life is costly, and can never suffice.

**PRAYER**—Father, grant me forgiveness of what is past, that in the days to come I may with a pure spirit, do your will—walking humbly with you, showing love to all, and keeping body and soul in sanctification and honor, in Jesus' name. Amen. **JW**

PSALM 50 ▪ DEUTERONOMY 9:23—10:5 ▪ HEBREWS 4:1-11 ▪ JOHN 3:16-21

## MORNING MEDITATIONS

**PRAYER**—O Lord, I thank you for all your daily blessings, for keeping me through the night, and providing for my health, strength and comfort. May I always praise your holy name and love you, my Redeemer, in Jesus' name. Amen.

**PSALM 50:1-2**—The mighty one, God the LORD, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.

**DEUTERONOMY 9:29** *God's Very Own Possession*

[These] are the people of your very own possession, whom you brought out by your great power and by your outstretched arm.

**HEBREWS 4:9-11** *Rest in God*

So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labors as God did from his. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that none may fall through such disobedience.

**JOHN 3:16-21** *Today's Gospel Reading*

Those who by God's gracious gift have become his children, born again from above of his Holy Spirit, possessing Christ within themselves to illuminate and recreate them, are guided in the many and varied ways of the Spirit as grace works in their hearts invisibly and in peace of soul.

FROM AN ANONYMOUS 4TH-CENTURY CHURCH THEOLOGIAN

## EVENING REFLECTIONS

**PSALM 46:4-5a, 10**—There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city . . . Be still, and know that I am God!

**PRAYER**—My Lord and my God, you see my heart; and my desires are not hidden from you. I am encouraged and strengthened by your goodness to me today. I want to be yours and yours alone. O my God, my Savior, my Sanctifier, hear me, help me, and show mercy to me for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen. **JW**

PSALM 95 ▪ DEUTERONOMY 10:12-22 ▪ HEBREWS 4:12-16 ▪ JOHN 3:22-36

## MORNING MEDITATIONS

**PRAYER**—God, come to my assistance; Lord, make haste to help me. Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

**PSALM 95:1, 3a, 7b**—O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving . . . For the LORD is a great God . . . and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.

**DEUTERONOMY 10:12-13a** *The Essence of the Law*

What does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God.

**HEBREWS 4:12** *The Living Word*

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

**JOHN 3:22-36** *Today's Gospel Reading*

The Apostle says that he who by the Spirit puts to death the deeds of the body will live. Small wonder that he should live, since he who has the Spirit of God becomes a child of God.

AN EXCERPT FROM A LETTER OF ST. AMBROSE

## EVENING REFLECTIONS

**PSALM 51:1, 10**—Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

**PRAYER**—Father, accept my imperfect repentance, have compassion on my infirmities, forgive my faults, purify my uncleanness, strengthen my weakness, fix my unstableness, and let your good Spirit watch over me forever, and your love ever rule in my heart, through the merits and sufferings and love of your Son, in whom you are always well pleased. Amen. **JW**

PSALM 55 ▪ DEUTERONOMY 11:18-28 ▪ HEBREWS 5:1-10 ▪ JOHN 4:1-26

## MORNING MEDITATIONS

**PRAYER**—Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and all secrets exposed; cleanse the thoughts of my heart by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that I may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name, through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

**PSALM 55:16-17, 22**—I call upon God, and the LORD will save me. Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint . . . and he will hear my voice . . . Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved.

**DEUTERONOMY 11:18a, 19** *The Lord Listened to Me*

You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul . . . teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away; when you lie down and when you rise.

**HEBREWS 5:7-8** *He Learned Obedience*

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.

**JOHN 4:1-26** *Today's Gospel Reading*

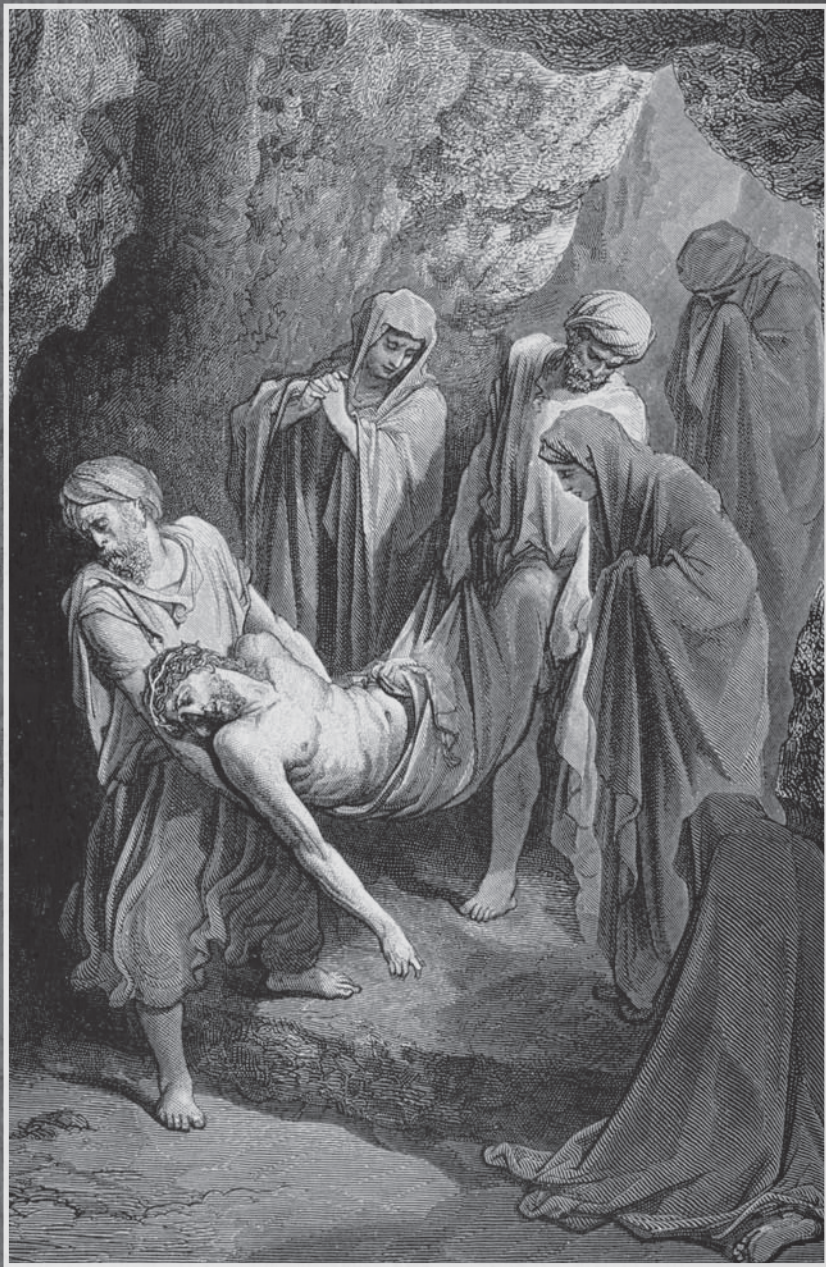
Now Christ is formed in a believer through faith implanted in his inmost soul. Such a one, gentle and lowly of heart, is summoned to the freedom of grace.

AN EXCERPT FROM AUGUSTINE'S EXPLANATION OF THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

## EVENING REFLECTIONS

**PSALM 138:3, 8**—On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul . . . the LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever.

**PRAYER**—Now to God the Father who first loved us, and made us accepted in the Beloved; to God the Son who loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood; to God the Holy Spirit who fills our hearts with the love of God, be all love and all glory for time and for eternity. Amen. **JW**



# WEEK TWO

# LENTEN SEASON

Sunday: With Jesus After Dark

Read the Gospel passage from John 3:1-17, the devotional reflection titled “Wind of the Spirit,” and then respond to the discussion prompts in the Reflective Journaling section.

## THE MUSIC OF ASHES TO FIRE

Week 2: “God Who Saves” (Track 3)

Monday through Saturday of Week 2

### IN THE MORNING:

A personal daily devotional guide includes prayer, a reading from the Old Testament, the Psalms, the Epistles, and the Gospel for each day of the week.

This week’s readings are from Jeremiah, Romans, and the Gospel of John.

Inspirational quotes from men and women of faith keep us in contact with our shared Christian heritage.

### IN THE EVENING:

An evening psalm and prayer become preludes to nighttime rest and renewal.



# LENTEN SEASON—WEEK TWO

## With Jesus After Dark

### A devotional reflection based on John 3:1-17

Read the Gospel passage first, then the devotional reflection that follows. The discussion prompts at the end will help prepare you for Sunday school and small-group sessions.

### Wind of the Spirit

The Pharisee and his servant, shouldering a heavy basket, made their way to the top of the mound of rock known as Skull Hill. Here was where imperial Rome executed criminals, rebels, and other disturbers of the empire. Today was no different, for jutting up from the craggy hill into the evening sky were three crosses, cruel instruments of Rome's iron rule.

As the hill climbers got closer, they could make out the details of the scene ahead. Two of the crosses held sagging, tortured bodies awaiting their removal by the Romans. No one had claimed their remains. The third cross in the middle held a lifeless man, battered beyond recognition. Gray and crusted with blood, he hung limply from the crosspiece. Leaning against the upright beam was a ladder, and already one of the man's good friends, Joseph, and his servants were removing the spikes from the man's hands and feet.

The Pharisee and his servant arrived just in time to help lower the body of the dead Nazarene Rabbi. Opening the basket, Nicodemus lifted out 75 pounds of myrrh and aloe, and he and Joseph of Arimathea, following Jewish custom, wrapped the body with linen, folding in the burial spices as they worked. When they had finished, they lifted the swaddled form onto a stretcher and, together with their servants, carried it to a newly cut tomb, provided by Joseph, in a nearby garden.

As he walked along in silence, holding the body of the dead Prophet, Nicodemus's emotions swirled with disappointment and sadness. Not long ago, as a

member of the Sanhedrin, he had heard the command to the temple officers to arrest Jesus. But they had returned to the Sanhedrin, somehow unable to carry out their duty. When confronted with their failure, they could only respond, “No one ever spoke the way this man does.”

Nicodemus thought about his own response to the charges against Jesus. He was glad now that he had defended him, although it had been risky. He had said, “Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?” The Sanhedrin had rebuked him then, and now they had succeeded in seizing Jesus—this One they accused of being a Messianic pretender. Overnight they had condemned him and the next day executed him. The words of the guards, “No one ever spoke the way this man does,” called up another memory.

As he walked, Nicodemus remembered another night several months earlier. Like so many in Jerusalem, he had heard the rumors about Jesus, the popular Rabbi from Nazareth. Since almost everyone knew where Jesus lodged, Nicodemus had decided to seek him out. Passing through several dark alleyways he finally came to the home where Jesus was staying. After being received by the host, Nicodemus was soon face-to-face with the most confident, serene person he had ever met.

He remembered the first words he said to Jesus: “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

Jesus had replied, “I tell you the truth. No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born from above.”

“How can a man be born when he is old?” He caught himself speaking the words aloud, as though he were conversing again with the One whose body he was now carrying. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born.”

With a gentle smile Jesus then said, “I tell you the truth no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.” Just then a breeze from the west off the Great Sea reached them, bringing relief to the sultry summer night. Jesus noticed. He was always aware of the natural world around him.

“You should not be surprised at my saying you must be born from above. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell

where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

That night, as Nicodemus had asked, “How can this be?” an unpredictable, unexpected breath from God, like a gentle breeze from heaven, began to blow across the landscape of his tired, lean spirit, and something miraculous began to happen deep within him.



Like many people, Nicodemus had wanted his religious life to be predictable, controllable, and clearly regulated with precisely ordered spiritual laws. But that was before everything changed. That was before he met Jesus.

When this Nazarene Rabbi came along with his word pictures about things that are uncontrollable—like wind, which comes and goes and swirls and goes again or like birth from above, from the top down—suddenly something happened. Nicodemus experienced a new everlasting and liberating way of life. Jesus opened the window to the confining, overly regulated life of legality and released Nicodemus to new vistas of living.

This is the freedom Jesus offers all of us when he says, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16).



Nicodemus looked down at the dead Rabbi. He saw death but was experiencing life. Something from above was happening down inside. He mused about where this might lead him. He didn’t know. Perhaps his ancestor Abraham had felt like this when he had set off from Ur for places unknown. Just then a soft wind blew through the garden, bringing with it the warm, hopeful aromas of spring’s first blooms. He looked back and noticed the simple T-shaped cross against the red evening sky. The sight stirred him with life-giving images: “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (vv. 14-15).

Nicodemus savored the moment like a child fascinated with some new discovery. Then together with his friend Joseph, he stooped through the opening of the burial cave, carried the body of Jesus inside to its resting place, and gently laid it on a stone shelf. As he turned to leave, his heart echoed with words that

were changing his life: “Everyone who believes . . . [will] not perish but . . . have eternal life” (v. 16). —MN

***After reading the passage from John 3 and the devotional reflection “Wind of the Spirit,” you may also want to read the following related passages:***

Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; and Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

The **discussion prompts** that follow will help prepare you to participate in your Sunday school class or small-group study. Use your **reflective journaling** section to record any other insights that come to you as you read the Gospel lesson and the devotional reflection.

### **DISCUSSION PROMPT #1: JOHN 3**

In what ways does Nicodemus’ literal understanding of birth keep him from understanding what Jesus is offering? How does Jesus’ understanding of “born from above” differ from physical birth or simply “turning over a new leaf”?

### **DISCUSSION PROMPT #2: JOHN 3**

Read verse 12 again. Does Jesus mean we can never understand this new life? Why? Would the answer change if we added “fully understand” to the question? Why?

### **DISCUSSION PROMPT #3: JOHN 3**

Does eternal life relate only to that period after we die? Why?

### **DISCUSSION PROMPT #4: DEVOTIONAL REFLECTION**

How does the devotional reflection add to your understanding of this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus?

### **REFLECTIVE JOURNALING**

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