



# *The PLOW*

LENT 2018 *A Devotional Resource for Prayer, Reflection and Remembrance*



## GETTING STARTED

Those of us who grew up in Evangelical and Pentecostal backgrounds may struggle a bit when it comes to the rhythms of mainline or Catholic traditions because of its unfamiliarity. For those who grew up following the church calendar, we might struggle with Lent because it is associated with legalism, or dead religion. But we believe that Lent can only be correctly viewed through the lens of Jesus.

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, which launches 40 days of prayer and fasting—representing Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness. The last week of Lent is called Holy Week, during which we remember Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday), the Last Supper with His disciples (Maundy Thursday) and His death on the cross (Good Friday). The season officially ends on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter.

As a plow cutting through the wilderness precedes a fruitful field, these weeks preceding Easter remind us that the path of the cross precedes the path to resurrection. It’s a period where the Church follows Christ into the wilderness for fasting and self-denial so that we can remove impediments to fruitfulness, growing in gospel fruitfulness.

*“There are two kinds of ground: fallow ground and ground that has been broken up by the plow.*

*The fallow field is smug, contented, protected from the shock of the plow and the agitation of the harrow. Such a field, as it lies year after year, becomes a familiar landmark to the crow and the blue jay. Had it intelligence, it might take a lot of satisfaction in its reputation: it has stability; nature has adopted it; it can be counted upon*

*to remain always the same, while the fields around it change from brown to green and back to brown again. Safe and undisturbed, it sprawls lazily in the sunshine, the picture of sleepy contentment.*

*But it is paying a terrible price for its tranquility; never does it feel the motions of mounting life, nor see the wonders of bursting seed, nor the beauty of ripening grain. Fruit it can never know, because it is afraid of the plow and the harrow.”* —AW Tozer, “The Plow”

Let’s enter into this season of Lent, not smugly, but humbly. Let’s enter this season with tears so that we may emerge with shouts of joy!

### THE PLAN

WEDNESDAY	2/14	<b>The Ashes</b>
SUNDAY	2/18	<b>The Clearing</b>
SUNDAY	2/25	<b>The Soil</b>
SUNDAY	3/4	<b>The Plow</b>
SUNDAY	3/11	<b>The Harrow</b>
SUNDAY	3/18	<b>The Rain</b>
SUNDAY	3/25	<b>The Seed</b>
FRIDAY	3/30	<b>The Planting</b>
SUNDAY	4/1	<b>Life Breaks Out</b>

## THE ASHES | Read Isaiah 58:6-12

Ash Wednesday is the beginning of a journey that will culminate in joyful resurrection, but we start with ashes. Ashes are the remnants of former fires which farmers use to prepare the fields for future harvest. For us, the ashes represent former seasons that have run their course and remind us that we are in need of renewal. Each season has its importance and this season of Lent is a reminder that renewal often comes dressed in work clothes. When you work with ashes, you realize you're entering into a humble, grimy, but life-giving work of preparation for future harvest.

This passage ends with a massive promise from God: a promise of satisfaction, strength, refreshing, rebuilding, repairing and restoring us. It's tempting to put those last few verses on a coffee mug or refrigerator magnet and just be happy to think these things are unrelated to the need for satisfaction, strength, refreshing, rebuilding, repairing and restoring.

They are promises of something future, not necessarily our current experience. Those promises seem like a warm fire on a cold day, but our situations may seem more like cold, burnt ashes.

What do we do about the ashes of life? How do we deal with the remains of dissatisfaction, frailty, drought, brokenness and burnt relationships that seem like dirt and ashes?

Ashes have been a way to communicate sorrow, grief and humility since nearly the beginning of time. It's appropri-

ate then that Lent starts with Ash Wednesday. We mark the beginning of our journey with Christ with humility.

Isaiah points out that there are symbols of humility: bending, burlap, ashes and fasting, but like any symbol, they can lack substance. One is focused on self at the expense of people; the genuine fast is for others at a cost to self.

This passage helps us understand the gospel in a couple of ways. The first is that it reveals how self-centered we are. Let's face it, we have burned through relationships in our lives and have been burned by others. What we thought would fulfill us just leaves us feeling hungry, homeless and alone: ashes. But that's only half of the gospel. We are worse off than we imagined, but God is much better than our wildest dreams. He actually came into the ash heap with us, went below us and lifted us out.

WED  
2/14

## THE ASHES (continued)

As we enter Lent with fasting and self-denial, let's do so with Jesus who humbled himself for us to secure our redemption. Let's remember that we live in a broken world as we await our final salvation.

### REFLECT

*What is something in your life that just seems like ashes: it keeps burning you or others in your life? Ask God to show you how He can redeem it.*

*What's one thing that is keeping you from enjoying Jesus? Repent and ask Him to set you free from it.*

### NEXT STEPS

*Engage in fasting this week.  
Here are some suggestions:*

*Fast through lunch. Use the time you would normally eat for prayer and Bible reading*

*Fast one day from dawn to dusk. Use the time you would normally eat to be in God's presence.*

*Ashes have been a way to communicate sorrow, grief and humility since nearly the beginning of time. It's appropriate then that Lent starts with Ash Wednesday. We mark the beginning of our journey with Christ with humility.*

## THE CLEARING | Read Isaiah 40:3-5

God placed man—male and female, the crown of creation—in a garden to enjoy it, work it and fruitfully spread it throughout the earth. Rather than trusting God and following His loving leadership, we chose to be our own leaders. Instead of spreading God’s lush garden, we created a lonesome and desolate wilderness.

The wilderness can have a certain draw to it. The wild beauty of wastelands can draw us in and we can drink of even this broken beauty and find God being wondrously glorified. But true wilderness is called “no man’s land” for a reason. Yes, this wilderness can be beautiful, but in order for it to be truly life-giving, sustaining and fruitful, it requires the work of clearing the soil.

The call of God to us is to clear out the rubbish and debris from our lives, to level the ground and straighten what is crooked. He wants us to have a lush, fruitful and productive life that makes His glory visible to all.

The problem is that our lives are full of thorns, thistles, weeds and dense underbrush as a result of sin: both the things that we have done and the things that have been done to us. The natural propensity of our lives is to revert back to wilderness. We give attention to one area of life and neglect another and before we know it, our lush garden is a wilderness again.

The good news is that Jesus entered the wilderness. He entered the wilderness still dripping with the waters of his baptism, the words of the Father ringing in his ears, and the anointing oil of the Spirit still resting upon him. He was empowered to experience the wilderness with us.

He knows what it is to be tempted because he was tempted. He understands what it means to be rejected because he was rejected. He understands what it is to be betrayed by close friends because his closest friend betrayed him.

During Lent we come to realize that he experienced the wasteland of sins against him.

But he didn’t stop there. At the cross, he didn’t just experience the wasteland of sins against him, he cleared away the roots of what keeps us from being a beautiful garden of his glory. We get to experience the garden of his love in the wasteland of this world.

## REFLECT

***What are the roots and debris in your life that are keeping you from being a fruitful garden of glory to God?***

***What are some ways you have been content with a fruitless wasteland? What needs to be cleared away?***

## NEXT STEPS

***Unplug your televisions or devices and spend that time soaking in the Lord’s presence.***

***If your family typically watches a show or movie together, consider exchanging that hour or two each day to opening God’s Word. Pray and discuss the reality of sin in our hearts and our world.***

## THE SOIL | Read Matthew 13:4-9

The condition of the soil determines the condition of the crop. When we don't see good things growing in our garden we might begin to think that someone sowed us bad seed. However, a wise farmer knows that seed is seed, but all not soil is alike.

Over time there is a lot of foot traffic in our lives. Spats with our spouses, unruly kids, a dead-end job, an overbearing boss, or the unreal expectations of parents and teachers can cause our hearts to become hard and unreceptive to truth. Relational breakdowns, financial stress, unfulfilled promises make us mistrusting and unyielding to the potential of new growth.

The allurements of popularity, power, and prominence can cause our relationships to be shallow. Rather than offering unconditional love we satisfy ourselves with the expectations of consumerism—I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine. There's always a little catch, always an angle that we're trying to work to get to the next promotion, the next raise or the more appealing relationship.

Even when these factors aren't a current problem that we face, the unrelenting pressure to have more and perform better, coupled with rising costs of living and changing definitions of need are like weeds that choke out the seeds of truth. The endless litany of activities for our kids, meetings, budgets, and entertainments put a stranglehold on us and keep the gospel from taking deep root in our lives.

The condition of your heart determines the fruitfulness of the gospel in your life. James tells us that God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. A humble, receptive heart is ready to receive the gospel and be powerfully transformed.

***The condition of your heart determines the fruitfulness of the gospel in your life.***

## REFLECT

***What is the condition of your heart: hardened, shallow, weedy, or good and receptive?***

***Where do you see areas of pride, bitterness, or unforgiveness that are hardening your heart to the Gospel?***

## NEXT STEPS

***Think about exchanging the time you would normally scroll through social media or browse the internet for a time of intentional prayer, Bible reading or worship.***

***Consider staying off certain platforms at certain points of each day or for the entire week, deleting the apps off your device or blocking those websites as you fast.***

## THE PLOW | Read Hosea 10:12

The gospel comes to us with good news, but it also comes to us with good warnings. Hosea is bringing good news: God wants to come to us and He wants to shower righteousness upon us. He wants us to have a fruitful life. Things like love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, patience, and self-control are not just a wish list of human virtues. They are the result of the seeds of righteousness being sown into a heart that is humble, softened by the plow of repentance and the rain of the Spirit.

There is a huge warning here as well. Our hearts have become hardened and in need of plowing. But how do our hearts get hardened? Hebrews 3:12-13 points out that we simply don't believe the gospel, we don't listen to others, but we do listen to our sinful impulses which are really dishonest self-interest. The result is a hard heart toward God.

Hosea doesn't leave us wondering what in the world it means to plow up our hearts: *"for now is the time to seek the Lord."* The illustration should not miss us: just as farm work requires hard and humble effort; seeking God requires the same. Humble repentance is like a plow softening the field of our hearts to receive righteous seed and righteous rain producing a harvest of righteousness. (Hebrews 12:11)

*The plowed life is the life that has, in the act of repentance, thrown down the protecting fences and sent the plow of confession into the soul. The urge of the Spirit, the pressure of circumstances and the distress of fruitless living have combined thoroughly to humble the heart. Such a life has put away defense, and has forsaken the safety of death for the peril of life. —A.W. Tozer*

Jesus had no need of repentance, but he did the hard, humble work that makes repentance possible for us. Although he is God, he humbled himself to become a

man, even lower to be a servant, and lower yet to die the death of a criminal. The whip made deep furrows on his back like a plow through the soil, so that you and I might return to him.

## REFLECT

***Where are the hard areas of your heart: places where you have believed sin's deceit rather than the Savior's truth?***

***What are some areas in your life that you protect or get defensive when someone makes comments or observations about them?***

## NEXT STEPS

***Make a plan to invest an hour in silence, solitude and reflection. Write down areas that you believe you need to repent. Focus areas where you get defensive when someone talks to you about them.***

***Deputize a trusted friend, or two to hear your confessions and to speak truth to you.***

## THE HARROW | Read Isaiah 28:23-26

The plow begins the process of busting up hardened soil but the harrow breaks down the lumps and smooths out the ridges. It is more of a refining tool. Our lives are changed by big sweeping changes, but also by small daily disciplines.

I have a very talented friend who when he hears a master musician play will quip, "I'd give anything to play the piano like that...Except what it takes!" He's talented, he has a big desire to gain skill, but he is unwilling to put in the effort.

The Bible points out how sad such an attitude is:

*The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.*  
Proverbs 13:4

We all say that we want change. Big events may change the general landscape of our lives, but the lasting fruitfulness of our lives is linked to our daily decisions. Habits and rituals are how we intentionally engage life for maximum joy.

Isaiah 28 is an invitation from God, a cry from His heart to prepare, not just our hearts but also our minds for fruitfulness. He calls us to listen and pay attention to Him; He teaches us about the best practices of prioritization, organization and boundary-setting because He wants us to trust Him and experience His delight to the fullest.

Jesus put boundaries around his time. He got up early. He organized his schedule so that he could have solitude. He prioritized times of prayer over time with the clamoring crowds so that he could be with His Father. He established the rhythms of listening, learning and delighting in obedience to His Father's will all the way through the cross.

Through the daily disciplines of delighting in God we learn to turn from the smaller, insignificant pleasures that life offers and turn to the life-giving showers of righteousness so that we bear good fruit to God's glory.

## REFLECT

***What are some spiritual disciplines (Bible reading, prayer, solitude, fasting, sharing the gospel...) that you have been resistant to?***

***Why do you think you are resistant to spiritual disciplines?***

## NEXT STEPS

***Look over your daily schedule and see if there are routines that need to be shortened or removed so that new spiritual disciplines can replace them.***

***If you don't have a set schedule, sit down with a trusted friend and consider how you can make room for spiritual disciplines.***

***Choose a day this week to fast and pray about a spiritual discipline that you want to start, or one that you want to focus on more diligently.***

THE RAIN | [Read Isaiah 55:10-11](#)

The work done in our souls through Lent can perhaps feel counterproductive. When we started, there was at least some vegetation in our wilderness. But over the weeks we have experienced repentance by clearing the ground, examining the soil, plowing and harrowing the field of our hearts. As things have been uprooted, the landscape that is left may seem barren.

We can feel dried out, thirsty and weary from the work of repentance. The fruitfulness that we long for isn't always immediate.

Isaiah's words are so refreshing: images of rain and snow watering the earth preceding a season of fresh growth, new seed and eventually nourishment.

What a relief and yet, while the rain and snow refresh, they are also doing a continued work of softening our hearts and breaking down hard spots in our hearts.

Future fruitfulness depends on the timely work of watering the broken and dry ground.

We cannot survive and become fruitful without the Word of God being poured into the broken, softened and thirsty fields of our hearts. These aren't just any words. This isn't just nice sentiments and empty platitudes. God is speaking. These are words that come from His mouth. They are words that are sent to us that will fulfill His purpose.

Lent reminds us that we are absolutely dependent on the Word of God. Our lives cannot be sustained, and we cannot be fruitful without it. Jesus was dependent on the Scriptures. He was nourished and strengthened in resisting temptation by knowing the Bible.

*The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'" Luke 4:3-4*

## REFLECT

***How is your appetite for the Scriptures?***

***What in your life competes, or interferes with your appetite for God's Word?***

***When was the last time you enjoyed reading the Bible and let it feed your soul?***

## NEXT STEPS

***Consider fasting from shopping for anything that is not absolutely necessary this week.***

***Reflect on the ways that God has provided for your every need.***

***You could choose to start a list of God's provision in your life. Spend time praying for God to help you remember that He is your ultimate sustainer and giver of life, or find small ways to be generous toward others in gratitude for what the Lord has given to you.***

## THE SEED | Read 2 Corinthians 9:6-10

Today is Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday was a day of celebration. Historically, people were making their way to Jerusalem for the annual Passover celebration. Crowds were gathering, excitement was in the air, and preparations were being made so that Israel could mark the anniversary of the day when God redeemed Israel from Egypt.

No expense would be spared for this event. Only the very best would do.

There aren't very many opportunities in life that we stop everything, pull out all the stops and have a big party: the birth of our first child, our daughter's wedding, or maybe a 50th anniversary. In moments like this, our hearts are full, and though we may have some financial constraints, we share as freely as we are able.

Why? It's not because our bank accounts are more flush with cash, it's because our hearts are more filled with joy! Generosity is a natural expression of a joyful heart.

It is in these moments of great joy that we stop operating from a poverty mindset, and begin living with the reality that generosity is not a condition of the wallet; it's a condition of the heart.

Jesus is about to be part of the most lavish act of generosity in history. God the Father has been preparing for this day from before the beginning of time. He will spare no expense to provide something for us that we could never provide for ourselves: redemption.

When we start to believe that God is joyful and recklessly generous, we can give with confidence. He is the one who provides everything that we need for life and for godly living. He spared no expense and we can live generously.

## REFLECT

***How does your life demonstrate that God is a generous provider?***

***In what ways do you sow liberally?***

***How have you seen God provide? How has He increased the harvest of generosity in your life?***

## NEXT STEPS

***Look over your spending plan. What are some ways you can maximize your joy by making room for generous giving?***

***We often reveal joyless giving by paying our obligations, then if we have anything left over, we will give. Why not try giving first? Make giving your joy-filled priority rather than obligatory leftover.***

***Prayerfully consider who to invite to the Easter Service.***

## GOOD FRIDAY

### THE PLANTING | Read John 12:23-26

When a seed is planted in the earth it is descending into darkness and disintegration. It goes through a process of being unmade so that new life will result.

Most of us don't know real physical darkness. Maybe if we have visited a cave we might get an idea of complete darkness. The tour guide might ask you to stand completely still while they turn out the lights for just a few seconds. It's shocking. You can't see where you are. You can't see where anyone else is and if someone were to hold a mirror up in front of you, you couldn't see yourself. It's very disorienting.

Humanity is in Spiritual darkness. We have turned from God as our true light and have put other things at the center of life. We are completely disoriented from the source of life and we experience the chaos of disintegration.

That trajectory will not change at the end of our lives. We will enter utter darkness and eternal disintegration unless someone intervenes.

At the cross Jesus entered into our darkness. He died the death we should have died. He took the judgment we deserved so that we could have the light of life in the presence of God.

In the last moments on the cross he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He experienced utter darkness as the Father turned His face away.

*"Jesus, the maker of the world was being unmade...For you, for me, for us. Jesus was forsaken by God so that we would never have to be. The judgment that should have fallen on us fell instead on Jesus."*

—Tim Keller, "King's Cross"

His death has produced many "new kernels—a plentiful harvest of new lives." When we see His love demonstrated on the cross our hearts are melted. We realize that we can live for nothing less than His glory. Our lives are not our own and we willingly follow Him.

## REFLECT

***Have you experienced complete physical darkness? How is it similar to spiritual darkness?***

***What are some things you have centered your life on that have come up empty?***

***How is your life different now that it is centered on Jesus?***

## NEXT STEPS

***Attend Jubilee's Good Friday service***

***Spend an hour on Saturday in solitude and silence. Use that time to consider how your life is renewed by Christ's death.***

SUN  
4/01

## EASTER SUNDAY

LIFE BREAKS OUT | Read Luke 24:38-40

1 Corinthians 15:35-44, says, “But someone may ask, “How will the dead be raised? What kind of bodies will they have?” What a foolish question! When you put a seed into the ground, it doesn’t grow into a plant unless it dies first. And what you put in the ground is not the plant that will grow, but only a bare seed of wheat or whatever you are planting. Then God gives it the new body He wants it to have. A different plant grows from each kind of seed.

It is the same way with the resurrection of the dead. Our earthly bodies are planted in the ground when we die, but they will be raised to live forever. Our bodies are buried in brokenness, but they will be raised in glory. They are buried in weakness, but they will be raised in strength. They are buried as natural human bodies, but they will be raised as spiritual bodies. For just as there are natural bodies, there are also spiritual bodies.

Jesus died and was buried in the ground. But He rose again, triumphing over the grave!

If you find this a shock to your system, you are in good company. For three and a half years, Jesus invested His life into men and women. On multiple occasions He taught them that He would die and rise again. But they were frightened and doubted their senses when He appeared to them on that first Resurrection Sunday.

He wasn’t a ghost, ghoul or zombie; He was really alive!

What that means for you and me is equally astounding: we will also be raised from the dead. We won’t be disembodied spirits; we will have real, glorious bodies! Bodies that are able to handle the glory of God!

Joni Eareckson Tada was paralyzed from the neck down as a result of a diving accident when she was 17 years old over 50 years ago. Here is how she expresses her hope in the resurrection:

On one occasion she was in a church service and the minister asked everyone to kneel. She was unable to kneel and she began to weep, not from self-pity but from the beauty of the sight of hundreds of people kneeling before God.

*“Sitting there, I was reminded that in heaven I will be free to jump up, dance, kick and do aerobics. And...sometime before the guests are called to the banquet table at the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, the first thing I plan to do on resurrected legs is to drop on grateful, glorified knees. I will quietly kneel at the feet of Jesus.” –Joni Eareckson Tada, “Heaven: Your Real Home”*

### REFLECT

***How do you imagine you would have responded if Jesus appeared to you after the Resurrection?***

***What weakness or disability do you experience now? How does the Resurrection help you to worship God in the midst of it?***

### NEXT STEPS

***Tell a friend about the hope you have because of the Resurrection.***

***Attend Jubilee’s Easter Service.***

