

INTRODUCTION

Just when everything lines up in life exactly as we want it, we experience an unanticipated disaster that spoils everything. Our health declines, someone dies, a spouse leaves, bills pile up, friends reject us, our child makes a bad decision....

Such setbacks can sometimes be overwhelming. We can lose hope that life will ever get better. But wait. We are literally wasting our lives if we live with this kind of despair. If we always complain about how bad life is or how hopeless the situation seems, we're going to be miserable. Such an attitude keeps us from moving forward in our lives. Instead, when setbacks show up, call on Jesus. He offers hope. He reaches out to lift us up when our world feels like it's falling apart. So when things go wrong in your life, stop searching for an escape route and instead invite the problem in, knowing that Jesus is less than a heartbeat away. He's coaching us to use our inner strength, perseverance, and determination to bounce back and get on our feet again, stronger and better.

I'm glad you picked up this book. I wrote it with you in mind. Take your time with it. Walk slowly, every day, through each reflection. The "Simple to do" suggestions following each reflection will help you take positive steps toward change, and the "Follow it through" prayers will help you renew your commitment to Jesus. Above all, welcome Jesus into your life during these weeks of Lent, and let him be the anchor of your soul.

TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS A division of Bayard, Inc | Bayard CEO: Hugues de Foucauld
One Montauk Avenue, Suite 200; New London, CT 06320 | (860) 437-3012 or (800) 321-0411
www.twentythirdpublications.com

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ISBN: 978-1-62785-667-6 | Cover image: ©Shutterstock.com / Pavel Klasek | Printed in the U.S.A.

We're All Banged Up

“And your Father, who sees what is hidden, will repay you.”

» MATTHEW 6:18

I was watching the movie *Seabiscuit* when the actor's words slammed into my soul: “You don't throw a whole life away just because it's banged up a little.”

We are all “banged up a little.” We have scars, wounds, and broken places. We also have new challenges. Someone we work with may be difficult to talk to, a significant other may have moved on, there may be a misunderstanding or sudden change in a delicate relationship, a routine checkup may reveal a serious problem....

Even though we are bruised by these events, we are blessed to be able to pick up the pieces and recover with greater clarity and determination. In every circumstance, God gives us a warehouse of treasures to help us bounce back. Lent is the perfect season to uncover those treasures, find strength, and change direction. We only need to explore these lessons, give of ourselves, and pray to discover the wealth of treasures inside. Open yourself up to new ideas, and let go of old habits and behaviors!

SIMPLE TO DO ▶ Choose one habit or behavior that you want to change. Turn it over to Jesus and ask him to help you kick the habit or stop the behavior.

FOLLOW IT THROUGH ▶ *Jesus, with you all things are possible. Help me to anchor myself to you and believe that you will heal my broken places. Amen.*

This Is Who I Am!

“What profit is there for one to gain the whole world yet lose or forfeit himself?” » LUKE 9:25

Imagine a life where we can let the world see us—and we can see ourselves—as we truly are: vulnerable, valuable, hurting, hoping, dreaming, believing, yearning for love and acceptance. To do this, we need to develop a sense of worth and a capacity for positive self-regard that comes deep from inside ourselves. To sustain this, we must avoid those who drag us down and be present to those people who build us up.

Negative people criticize and compare us. It may come as a direct hit (“you’re stupid”) or be more subtle (“your sister always makes me proud”). When we’re attacked like this, we start thinking “I’m not good enough” and “I can’t.” Positive people encourage us to be real and genuine. They remind us of our strengths, recognize our greatness, and encourage us to strive for what is best for us.

As you begin this lenten season, claim your power. Say: “This is who I am. If you cannot accept me, leave me alone and move on.”

SIMPLE TO DO ► Get clear about what you want to do and make it a priority. Write out the script of your life. Then, take at least one action step each day this Lent to make it happen.

FOLLOW IT THROUGH ► *Jesus, my friend, help me to be my own person and to stand up for myself. Help me resist those who drag me down. Amen.*

Laughter Heals

“Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them?” » MATTHEW 9:15

I was invited to speak at a program for cancer survivors and their families called “Hysterical living for the humor-impaired.” After my talk, a woman shared that her doctors were amazed at how well she was doing. They had been skeptical about her chances for survival, but she was planning for an active and vibrant future. Her secret? Laughter therapy! In addition to her good medical care, she attributed her recovery to her sense of humor and her ability to find the lighter side of things, even on the toughest days.

Laughter as therapy can be experienced by anyone. Some of the happiest people I know seem to have no particular reason to be joyful. It’s all about attitude and expectation.

Soul-saving laughter that springs freely from our very core can help us reduce stress, elevate mood, boost our immune system, and foster instant relaxation. This Lent, we have every reason to rejoice. The “bridegroom” is still with us.

SIMPLE TO DO ▶ Arrange a joke-exchange evening with family and friends. Or rent a humorous movie and watch it alone or with others. Start a humor collection of cartoons, books, and anything else that helps you laugh.

FOLLOW IT THROUGH ▶ *Jesus, my friend, help me find laughter during life’s tense moments. Amen.*

We Are All Cheerleaders

And he said to him, "Follow me." » LUKE 5:27

Have you ever said something and then immediately wished you hadn't? If so, you know the power of thoughtless words. They can crush, demean, and intimidate in seconds. Disparaging remarks, accusations, and complaints get attention but often at a price.

Positive words, on the other hand, can affirm, encourage, and motivate. People who have good relationships know the power of their words. They realize that those around them can never receive too much encouragement.

People around us are starving for encouragement. If we want good relationships, we need to learn how to be a genuine encourager. It doesn't take much to encourage someone. It can be a short note that says, "I prayed for you today" or a card in the mail or voice message that says, "I was thinking of you." It only takes a minute, and it has a ripple effect, helping the person to feel appreciated and valued.

SIMPLE TO DO ▶ Write genuine notes of encouragement to your family or friends. Share special quotes, poems, or verses. The best thing about notes is that there is no cost involved. You can leave them on pillows, bulletin boards, in lunch boxes, or on car windows. Gentle encouragement builds confidence and is much appreciated.

FOLLOW IT THROUGH ▶ *Jesus, my friend, when life is overwhelming, help me remember to lighten someone else's day with an encouraging word. Amen.*

It's Time to Wake Up!

When the devil had finished all the tempting, he left him, to await another opportunity. » LUKE 4:13

On their twentieth wedding anniversary, Jack was stunned to learn that his wife wanted a divorce. He told me, “I was suddenly jolted out of a secure reality, confronted with circumstances, issues, and challenges that I hoped I would never have to face.”

Wake-up calls shock and surprise us. One moment we're going about our business, and the next moment, everything has changed.

We can learn a lot from these wake-up calls. They may be painful and frightening, but after we get through the initial trauma, we can often find opportunities to grow and improve.

Losses, illnesses, accidents, and tragedies are never expected. When they show up, we can welcome them and discover the message they give us. They can motivate us to analyze our values, define what's precious, realign our priorities, and focus on what needs our attention. No matter how difficult a wake-up call is to accept, consider it a gift to be unwrapped and embraced with enthusiasm and gratitude.

SIMPLE TO DO ▶ During troublesome times, write down your wake-up calls in a journal. What truths are they telling you about yourself? How are they renewing and reviving your spirit?

FOLLOW IT THROUGH ▶ *Jesus, my friend, help me be aware and alert to all that's happening in my life so I can grow from each experience. Amen.*

Little Acts of Kindness

“Whatever you did for one of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” » MATTHEW 25:40

One of the most memorable Christmas cards I ever received was from my dear friend, Mary Lou. It was a single piece of heavy white paper with the word “others” written diagonally across the card in red ink.

Isn't that what Christianity is all about? Others? From time to time, it's good to measure how much we affect others and touch their lives.

How do we relate to others—our family, friends, neighbors, strangers, and yes, even our enemies? Many of us would like to have a big impact on other people's lives. But we must never take for granted the importance of the little things we do: a pat on the back, a kiss on the cheek, a nod of the head. These actions have the power to heal wounds, build bridges, and encourage and comfort others.

Doing little things for others is contagious too. Our goodness toward one person will often prompt that person to do something good for someone else.

SIMPLE TO DO ▶ Recall someone who has had a significant impact on your life and contact him or her this week. Share how much his or her actions mean to you.

FOLLOW IT THROUGH ▶ *Jesus, my friend, it's often the little acts of kindness that bring growth and gladness to others. Help me share many such acts this Lent. Amen.*

Forgive and Move On!

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

» MATTHEW 6:12

Betsy was devastated when her husband left her. She was angry, resentful, and bitter.

I suggested to Betsy that she forgive her husband for his actions and forgive herself for any part she may have played in their break-up. She was stunned: “Forgive him! Are you crazy? I’d die first! I want him to hurt like I hurt!” She was consumed with revenge. She kept reliving the hurt and telling the story over and over again.

Betsy’s behavior is typical of many of us. When we’re overwhelmed with rage, it’s a challenge to realize our value, regain our power, let go of the pain, and then move on. Forgiveness is not about approving the hurtful behavior of another. It’s about giving up the rage and resentment that we feel entitled to and offering acceptance of and detachment from the situation and the person involved.

Resentment and revenge are heavy loads to carry. If we hope to be forgiven for our own shortcomings, we might start by forgiving others for theirs.

SIMPLE TO DO ▶ Plan a “two thumbs-up” night with your family and friends. Select a movie with a forgiveness theme. Watch it and share the challenges of forgiveness.

FOLLOW IT THROUGH ▶ *Jesus, my friend, help me forgive, release resentment, and get on with my life. Amen.*