



# Returning to the TEXT

A Lenten journey through the Gospels | GREG APPLEQUIST

**I**T ALL STARTED AT THREE IN THE MORNING a number of years ago. I was in seminary and participating in our church's twenty-four-hour prayer vigil. Being young and perhaps a little crazy, I volunteered to pray during the early morning shift, and so this journey began in the dark.

I have been in church all of my life, but that morning I realized that reading Scripture was really a challenge for me. I knew it was supposed to be helpful—people had been telling me that since I was a kid. Yet it was not

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# A Lenten Reading Schedule

To read through the four Gospels this Lent, follow these assignments, beginning with Ash Wednesday and ending with Holy Saturday, the day before Easter.

## MATTHEW

- March 10** ..... Matthew 1-2
- March 11** ..... Matthew 3-4
- March 12** ..... Matthew 5-6
- March 13** ..... Matthew 7-8
- March 14** ..... Matthew 9-10
- March 15** ..... Matthew 11-12
- March 16** ..... Matthew 13-14
- March 17** ..... Matthew 15-16
- March 18** ..... Matthew 17-18
- March 19** ..... Matthew 19-20
- March 20** ..... Matthew 21-22
- March 21** ..... Matthew 23-24
- March 22** ..... Matthew 25-26
- March 23** ..... Matthew 27-28

## MARK

- March 24** ..... Mark 1-2
- March 25** ..... Mark 3-4
- March 26** ..... Mark 5-6
- March 27** ..... Mark 7-8
- March 28** ..... Mark 9-10
- March 29** ..... Mark 11-12
- March 30** ..... Mark 13-14
- March 31** ..... Mark 15-16

## LUKE

- April 1** ..... Luke 1-2
- April 2** ..... Luke 3-4
- April 3** ..... Luke 5-6
- April 4** ..... Luke 7-8
- April 5** ..... Luke 9-10
- April 6** ..... Luke 11-12
- April 7** ..... Luke 13-14
- April 8** ..... Luke 15-16
- April 9** ..... Luke 17-18
- April 10** ..... Luke 19-20
- April 11** ..... Luke 21-22
- April 12** ..... Luke 23-24

## JOHN

- April 13** ..... John 1-2
- April 14** ..... John 3-4
- April 15** ..... John 5-6
- April 16** ..... John 7-8
- April 17** ..... John 9-10
- April 18** ..... John 11-12
- April 19** ..... John 13-14
- April 20** ..... John 15-16
- April 21** ..... John 17-18
- April 22** ..... John 19-20
- April 23** ..... John 21

something I did easily. I would commit to start reading and do great for three or four days. Then life would get in the way, and I would get busy, and I would get tired, and I would stop. This happened over and over again, but for some reason when I was trying to pray at 3 a.m., I had a sense that I needed to try to read Scripture again. And I had a sense that I needed some help.

After my time of prayer, I went to the church office, sat down with my Bible and some paper, and figured out that I could read the New Testament in about four months if I read two chapters every day. In some ways this seemed daunting (four months!), and in some ways it seemed manageable (only two chapters a day, maybe fifteen minutes, piece of cake!). I knew I needed help, so I found three other guys who were willing to read with me. We committed to read two chapters each day, and then meet once a week to talk about what we had read.

Amazingly enough, we all stayed with it and finished Revelation. Knowing there were other people who were reading with me provided the motivation I needed to continue. I might miss a day or two here or there, but I always returned to the text. We asked more questions than we answered, but that seemed to be all right. Our goal was to dig into God's word and that is what we did. It was a good season for me.

Fast-forward a few years. Now I am out of seminary and serving as pastor of Bethany Covenant Church in Lyndhurst, Ohio. We were preparing for Lent and trying to find a way for people to engage Jesus as we journeyed together toward Easter. One afternoon I remembered the experience of reading two chapters a day and I wondered how far we could get in the New Testament if we tried this practice during Lent. I was amazed

to discover that if we started on the Thursday after Ash Wednesday and read two chapters each day, we would finish reading all four Gospels on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter. I don't think this was done intentionally by the people who separated the Scriptures into chapters and verses, but it sure was convenient for us!

The more I thought about it, the more I loved the idea. Instead of fasting from chocolate or fast food, as is common during Lent, we would take on something. More important, in many ways we were taking on Christ's journey, walking with Jesus as he went to the cross. In our two chapters a day we were meeting Jesus more deeply on a daily basis. This, we thought, is what Lent should be about: growing deeper with Christ as we journey with him to his death and resurrection.

We quickly decided this would be not simply an individual challenge, but a communal one. I was convinced that we needed to read these texts together, journeying with one another as a community. Our hope was for everyone in the congregation to read two chapters each day and then meet with a group of people once a week for an hour to discuss what they had read. My hope was that people would agree to the plan, knowing it was only a six-week commitment.

We asked our leadership team and ministry team leaders to be small group leaders, which simply meant they would open the church or their homes at specific times throughout the week. There was no agenda, and nobody was expected to have "the answers." The goal was simply to read the text and talk about it with each other.

People signed up to join a group that was convenient for them. We printed a schedule of the readings, which were consecutive through the

Gospels, so people could follow along each day. Each Sunday I preached from one of the chapters we had read. Our life together as a congregation during Lent was a journey with Christ to Easter.

The response was fantastic. Two-thirds of the congregation read the texts throughout Lent, and probably 30 to 40 percent participated in the small groups. People were transformed by the experience. Many had been church members for more than thirty years and had never encountered Christ this way. They had never read large sections of Scripture like this, and the small groups were a huge success. Our people loved reading the word together. It was everything we could have hoped for.

Two things stood out for me. One woman had been in our church for a few months, and she was very clear about where she was on her spiritual journey: she didn't believe in Christ but she was searching. During Lent she faithfully read the text every day, and every week she went to her small group, which met at 8:30 on Friday nights. Most weeks they were there until midnight or later! The group was amazed because this woman was asking questions they had never thought about before. Reading God's word with someone who had never read it before forced them to answer different questions and to think again about what the text said. This woman has continued to journey with us, and in the fall she gave her life to Christ at a women's retreat at Camp Mission Meadows. Needless to say there has been great rejoicing in our family. We look forward to more of her questions again this Lent.

The second thing that stands out is the story of another parishioner. She had been struggling with understanding who Jesus was and whether he really did love her. She has been a church person all her life, but it was a time of searching for her. Reading books about Jesus was not providing the clarity she needed, and then Lent came, and she chose to read the

Gospels. It was in reading two chapters a day that she again saw who Jesus was, as if for the first time.

One Sunday she came forward for communion, as is our custom. I offered her the bread and the cup, and then I looked into her eyes and said, "He loves you." She had not shared with me her struggle over God's love being extended even to her, and as she heard

me say those three simple words, "He loves you," she broke down in tears. In reading God's word, placing herself in God's story, taking the elements of the Eucharist, and realizing God loves her, my friend had been on the Lenten journey we all should take. She encountered the love of God powerfully and she was changed. She has continued to read two chapters a day, finishing the New Testament and now tackling the prophets. God moves in powerful ways.

It was a simple process that yielded pretty amazing results. Take ten to fifteen minutes each day and read two chapters of the Gospels. Spend an hour or so with a group of people to talk about God's word. Do this for six weeks and journey with each other to the cross and the empty tomb. Make Lent a journey this year and walk with Christ. Meet him again for the first time. ■

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