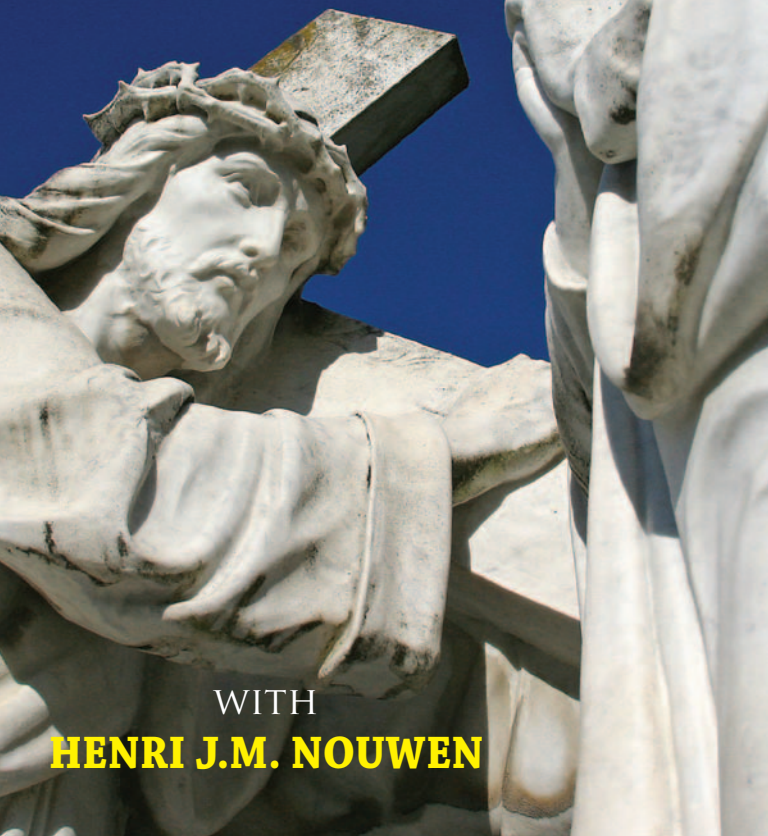


PRAYING

THE WAY OF THE
CROSS



WITH

HENRI J.M. NOUWEN

PILATE CONDEMNNS JESUS TO DEATH

Immediately after Jesus is handed over, he becomes the one to whom things are being done. He's being arrested; he's being led to the high priest; he's being taken before Pilate; he's being crowned with thorns; he's being nailed on a cross. Things are being done to him over which he has no control. That is the meaning of passion—being the recipient of other people's actions. Jesus does not fulfill his vocation



in action only, but also in passion. He doesn't fulfill his vocation just by doing the things the Father sent him to do, but also by letting things be done to him.

*How much of my life do I really control?
How can I accept and grow because of the things
that others do to me?*

JESUS TAKES UP HIS CROSS

Jesus' unconditional "yes" to his Father had empowered him to drink his cup, not in passive resignation but with the full knowledge that the hour of his death would also be the hour of his glory. His "yes" made his surrender a creative act, an act that could bear much fruit. His "yes" took away the fatality of the interruption of his ministry. Instead of a final irrevocable end, his death became the beginning of a new life. Indeed, his "yes" enabled him to trust fully in the rich harvest the dying grain would yield.



How does my "yes" to God allow me to surrender my life to God so that it might help bring new life to those around me?

JESUS FALLS THE FIRST TIME

When God saw how humanity's sin made the world an unbearable burden, God showed us infinite mercy in sending Jesus, not to take our burden away but to transform it. Jesus' mission was not to wipe out all human sorrow and take away all human pain, but to enter so fully into our world of sorrow and pain that nothing human would remain alien. He gathered up the human suffering of all times and places. He destroyed its fatal power by offering it

to God through his voluntary death on the cross. Thus Jesus made an unbearable burden bearable.



How can I enter more deeply into the pain and suffering of others and thus help them bear this burden?

JESUS MEETS HIS MOTHER

Do not hesitate to love and to love deeply. You might be afraid of the pain that deep love can cause. When those you love deeply reject you, leave you, or die, your heart will be broken. But that should not hold you back from loving deeply. The pain that comes from deep love makes your love ever more fruitful. Every time you experience the pain of rejection, absence, or death, you are faced with a choice. You can become bitter and decide not to love again, or you can stand straight in your pain and let the soil on which you stand become richer and more able to give life to new seeds.



How can I continue to love deeply in the face of my death and that of my loved ones?

SIMON OF CYRENE HELPS JESUS CARRY THE CROSS

Just as God cares for us, it's very important that we care for God in the world. God is saying, "I want to be weak so you can love me. What better way to help you respond to my love than becoming weak so you can care for me?" God becomes a stumbling God who falls at the cross, who dies for us, and who is totally in need of love. God does this so that we can get close. The God who loves us is a God who



becomes vulnerable, dependent on the cross, a God who basically is saying, "Are you there for me?"

When needs arise, how can I be there for others in whom Jesus has desired to hide himself?

VERONICA WIPES THE FACE OF JESUS

As I look into your eyes, they frighten me because they pierce like flames of fire my innermost being, but they console me as well, because these flames are purifying and healing. Your eyes are so severe yet so loving, so unmasking yet so protecting, so penetrating yet so caressing, so profound yet so intimate, so distant yet so inviting. I gradually realize that I want to be seen by you, to dwell under your caring gaze, and to grow strong and gentle in your sight. Lord, let me see what you see—the love of God and the suffering of people—so that my eyes may become more and more like yours, eyes that can heal wounded hearts.



How can I my eyes become like those of Jesus to notice suffering and heal those in need?

JESUS FALLS THE SECOND TIME

The way of God is the way of weakness. The great news of the Gospel is precisely that God became small and vulnerable, and hence bore fruit among us. The most fruitful life ever lived is the life of Jesus, who did not cling to his divine power but became as we are (see Philippians 2:6-7). Jesus brought us new life in ultimate vulnerability. He came to us as a small child, dependent on the care and protection of others. He lived for us as a poor preacher, without



any political, economic, or military power. He died for us nailed on a cross as a useless criminal. It is in this extreme vulnerability that our salvation was won.

How can I accept my weakness and let Christ's saving power work through me?

JESUS MEETS THE WOMEN OF JERUSALEM

Our weakness calls people to surround us and support us. By not resisting weakness and by gratefully receiving another's care we call forth community and provide our caregivers an opportunity to give their own gifts of compassion, care, love, and service. As we are given into their hands, others are blessed and enriched by caring for us. Our weakness bears fruit in their lives. And dying is our ultimate vulnerability. Instead of looking at the weakness of old age as simply the experience of loss after loss, we can choose it as a passage to emptiness where our hearts have room to be filled with the Spirit of Love overflowing.



How can I be more willing to accept my own weakness and let others help me?

JESUS FALLS THE THIRD TIME

Following Jesus is the way to enter into the struggle and find true freedom. The way is the way of the cross, and true freedom is the freedom found in the victory over death. Jesus' total obedience to his Father led him to the cross, and through the cross to a life no longer subject to the competitive games of this world. Jesus held on to nothing, not even to satisfying religious experiences. His words "My God,



my God, why have you forsaken me?" give us a glimpse of the complete surrender of Jesus to his Father. Nothing was left for him to cling to. In this complete surrender he found total unity and total freedom.

How can I freely surrender myself to Jesus' ways and change my life?

JESUS IS STRIPPED OF HIS GARMENTS

The truth is that things are bad, even worse than they seem. This painful stripping away of the old self, this falling away from all our old support systems enables us to cry out for God's unconditional mercy. When we do not run away in fear, but patiently stay with our struggles, the outer space of solitude gradually becomes an inner space, a space in our heart where we come to know the presence of the Spirit who has already been given to us. We realize that God's heart embraces all the sufferings of the world and we see that through Jesus Christ these burdens have become a light burden which we are invited to carry.



What must I give up in order to follow Jesus more completely in my life today?

JESUS IS NAILED TO THE CROSS

I think that we have hardly thought through the immense implications of the mystery of the incarnation. Where is God? God is where we are weak, vulnerable, small, and dependent. God is where the poor are, the hungry, the handicapped, the mentally ill, the elderly, the powerless. How can we come to know God when our focus is elsewhere, on success, influence, and power? I increasingly believe that our faithfulness will depend on our willingness to



go where there is brokenness, loneliness, and human need. If the church has a future it is a future with the poor in whatever form.

How can I be more ready to meet the surprising God who would not stay in the Temple but choose to be present in the weak and crucified Jesus?

JESUS DIES ON THE CROSS

When he was dying on the cross, Jesus was ultimately vulnerable. He had nothing left. Everything had been taken from him, including his dignity, and in the eyes of his culture he was a failure. But in all truth the moment of his death on the cross was his life's greatest moment, because there his life became the most fruitful one in all history.

On the cross, Jesus has shown us how far God's love goes. It's a love which embraces even those who crucified him. When Jesus is hanging nailed to the cross, totally broken and stripped of everything, he still prays for his executioners. Jesus' love for his enemies knows no bounds. He prays even for those who are putting him to death.



How can I imitate Jesus' enemy-loving love in my relations with those around me?

JESUS IS TAKEN DOWN FROM THE CROSS

Let me just stand and look at you. Your body is broken, your head wounded, your hands and feet are split open by nails, your side is pierced. Your dead body now rests in the arms of your Mother. It is all over now. It is finished. It is fulfilled. It is accomplished. Sweet Lord, gracious Lord, generous Lord, forgiving Lord, I adore you, I praise you, I thank you. You have made all things new through your passion and death. Your cross has been planted in



this world as the new sign of hope. Let me always live under your cross, O Lord, and proclaim the hope of your cross unceasingly. *Amen.*

What can I say to thank Jesus for his total gift of himself in love and faithfulness to God's ways?

JESUS IS LAID IN THE TOMB

Looking at the horrors that plague our world, we ask, “How can there be a loving God when all this is happening? It must be a cruel, spiteful God who allows human beings to suffer so much!” Jesus, however, took upon himself all this suffering and lifted it up on the cross, not as a curse but as a blessing. He made the cup of God’s wrath into a cup of blessings. That’s the mystery of the Eucharist. Jesus died for us so that we may live. He poured out his blood for us so that we may find new life. He gave himself away for us, so that we can live in community. He became for us food and drink so that we can be fed for everlasting life.



How can I take some of the suffering of others on myself and become a source of new life for them?

PRAYER OF HENRI NOUWEN

Jesus, I pray that
your invitation to enter more fully
into the mystery of your passion
will bring me a greater desire
to follow you on the way
that you create for me and
to accept the cross that you give to me.
Let me die to the desire
to choose my own way
and select my own cross.
You do not want to make me a hero
but a servant who loves you.
Be with me in the days to come,
and let me experience
your gentle presence. *Amen.*

Books from which excerpts were taken: *Finding My Way Home* (NY: Crossroad, 2001). *Can You Drink the Cup? The Challenge of the Spiritual Life* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 1996). *The Road to Peace* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998). *The Inner Voice of Love* (NY: Doubleday, 1996). *The Road to Daybreak* (NY: Doubleday, 1981). *Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity, and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective* (NY: Doubleday, 1986). *The Selfless Way of Christ: Downward Mobility and the Spiritual Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007). *Sabbatical Journey* (NY: Crossroad, 1988). *Letters to Marc about Jesus* (NY: HarperCollins, 1998). *A Cry for Mercy* (NY: Doubleday, 1981).

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