

towards jerusalem:  
developing the spiritual discipline of  
discomfort



by jenny lee

## Towards Jerusalem

It's human nature, this instinct to shy away from the things that make us uncomfortable. Awkward feels sticky. Change is threatening. So we get still. We become metaphorical (and literal) couch potatoes because it is easier than doing the real work of following Christ. We only want eternal life, not an eternal calling.

Wait.

That isn't actually good enough. I don't actually want that life, no matter how easy it is. It is not the Jesus way and I don't want it to be my way. As we move through this Lenten season, we are going to explore the spiritual discipline of Discomfort<sup>1</sup>.

This season is about moving towards Jerusalem, going to the cross of Golgotha. This is not a walk we want to take. It's hard and uncomfortable, but it is necessary. Jesus says that if we don't pick up our crosses, if we don't lose our life, then we aren't worthy of being in a relationship with him. And now, like the disciples and Jesus himself, we pick up and go to Jerusalem.

### A Word of Explanation

Imagine the first year after Jesus' death and resurrection. How must the early Christ-followers have felt as they watched the anniversary of the life-changing weekend roll around again? It is humbling that this season comes and goes each year, reminding us of who we are and who God is, reminding us to embrace the reality.

Lent is a time for us to remove something from our daily lives in order to make more space for focusing on God. What you decide to remove could be some kind of food, a habit of some kind, or something that you spend time doing (video games, TV, shopping, etc.) The point is to sacrifice something that is important to you and instead fill that time engaging with God. Consider what you might give up for the next 40 days. What would make you *uncomfortable*? If you choose to cut something out of your life, it must be personal and meaningful to *you*. Many people select certain days throughout the season to spend in fasting and prayer. Fasting is an important and holy spiritual discipline that is not to be entered into lightly. This is not an excuse to simply not eat. While fasting, one must be careful to drink **lots of fluids** like water or sports drinks

---

<sup>1</sup> I originally read about the spiritual discipline of Discomfort in "The Power of Proximity" by Kirsten Penner Krymusa in *The Burnside Writers Collective*. Accessible at [http://www.burnsidewriterscollective.com/social/2008/12/the\\_power\\_of\\_proximity.php](http://www.burnsidewriterscollective.com/social/2008/12/the_power_of_proximity.php).

and get a bit of extra sleep. A Lenten fast, be it a single meal or for the entire 40 days, is about learning from where true sustenance comes.

I would also like to make it very clear that *anything* you choose to sacrifice throughout this season is enough. Do not feel pressured to change your entire way of living in this one short period. You've probably heard the saying that "It is not the prayers you don't pray that matter, it's the prayers you do pray." In the same way, Lent is not about what you do not give up, it is about the things you do and your sacrificial attitude.

As you look at a calendar, you might realize that Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday is more than 40 days. Here's why- Sundays do not count. The six Sundays of the Lenten season are to be spent celebrating the Resurrection. On these days you may break your fast and enjoy these "feast days." It is important that you actually celebrate on Sundays. New life is always worth a feast. The last official day of Lent is the Saturday before Easter, April 11.

You might also be wondering why the season is 40 days long. Forty is an extremely significant and symbolic number throughout the Bible. In this season though, we use 40 days to remember Christ's 40 day fast in the desert before he began his ministry (see Luke 4:1-13). Just as Jesus used the 40 days for preparation, we will also use them to prepare us for Easter.

As we journey through the dry desert to come into Jerusalem, remember that Christ knew what was before him. He walked willingly for us and now we shall walk with him. Today we accompany Christ to Jerusalem. Blessings.

Jenny Lee

\*Cover art can be found at  
<<http://wesvanderlugt.wordpress.com/2008/03/>>

## week 1

I, like most of you, am not comfortable talking about or confronting my own sin. My sin makes me feel guilty, dirty, and like a failure. So I sweep everything under the rug. I justify whatever I've done; I put a shiny name on an ugly truth.

"I lied to save her feelings."

"I deserve this."

"I earned this."

"This isn't really gossip..."

"Oh, I didn't mean to."

Yes, I did mean to. I do sin and I don't want to face it. And so do you. Lent is about coming to terms with all the things we've done wrong, knowingly or unknowingly.

**Below are listed a few of the sins of which I need to repent. Add some of yours. Be honest and fill up this page.**

Wasting the earth's resources

Violence

Hatred

Injustice

Taking what is not mine

Wastefulness

Wasted anger/energy

Idolatry

Reliance on technology

Condescension

Hoarding

Lust

Not using gifts

Over-Indulging

Stealing

Pressuring

Judging

Pride (of name, possession)

Greed

Apathy

Selfishness

Passive Aggressiveness

Laziness

Love of Mammon

Fear and anxiety

Self absorption

Talking

Gossiping

Unencouraging

Cruelty

Attention Seeking

Ignorance

Busyness

...and the list goes on. This week we're going to explore what it means to be a sinful creature. We're going to come to terms with our pain, shame, and our wrongs. Get uncomfortable.

## day 1

Have you ever laid in bed at night and thought, 'Well God, I'm sure I sinned today but I can't really think of anything to confess,'? I have, plenty of times. Truthfully, when we do that, we are liars and too proud to admit who we really are. Look at the list you just made. It's shameful that we refuse to admit to ourselves that we mess up.

Read **Romans 1:18-2:1**.

This passage explains that minds become darkened (1:21) when they turn from the truth of God. In what ways have you turned away from God's wisdom and goodness?

Verses 24, 26, and 28 say that God gave these people up to their sin. Under what circumstances did God do this? What do you think it means for people now?

Verse 1:32-2:1 throws a curve ball to those of us who think we are better than the people God gave up. "Those who practice such things deserve to die...Therefore you have no excuse." Now is the time to admit our sins. We have no excuse for trading God's truth for a lie. We deserve to die.

## day 2

In truth, we all have this sin nature that is just part of the human package. Paul quotes all these verses from the Old Testament to describe what our sin nature looks like. Look at **Romans 3:10-18** for his verbal picture. Pretty grim, huh? But that's us, like it or not. We're broken.

How do you feel about the fact that there is something inside of you that is bent towards sin?

## day 3

This conversation so far has been bleak but everything turns around right here, in this place. Confession changes everything. Read **Psalm 51**. This psalm is the confession of David after he had an affair, impregnated the woman, and then had her husband killed. He sinned majorly and he confessed majorly.

What do you need to confess?

Take some time and write your version of Psalm 51. Be honest with God, describing what you've done wrong and asking God to make whatever changes you need.

## day 4

If you ever needed confirmation that God really loves you, here it is. Read **Joel 2:12-13**. Look back over the past three days. Read all the ways that you have failed God, the ways that you willfully turned away, the ways that you hurt God.

**Yet even now...**

Those first three words of Joel 2:12 make my heart swell. With all of our junk, our messy brokenness, even now God wants us to come back. "Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing." With broken hearts in hand and tearful eyes, we find mercy and love.

## day 5

As we reach the end of this week, when we have vomited up all of our foulness, when we have truly sought and received mercy and forgiveness, we are changed. Read **Psalm 32**. The psalmist recounts his or her own story of

forgiveness and it is beautiful. Notice how the psalmist describes the before (32:3-4) and after (32:1-2, 5-11).

Can you be comfortable living with your sin as described in 32:3-4?

How has forgiveness and salvation changed you?

## week 2

Somewhere along the line, we all allowed ourselves to be convinced that we need more. Nothing is ever enough for most of us. Whether it is cake, clothes, money, friends, popularity, or songs on iTunes, there is always more to be had. Our waste is staggering and it's time that we get uncomfortable with our disposable lives.

Take a moment and think about the food that you've left on your plate or thrown away today. Or how full is your closet? Do you wear everything in there? The thing is we don't just waste money; we waste things that have far more value than a vintage-looking t-shirt. We're wasting our energy, our anger, our time, opportunities, and our gifts.

## day 1

It seems odd to say it, but we waste our anger on some of the most ridiculous things. We are angry about someone cutting us off in traffic, but not about forced prostitution. We are angry about the grocery store not stocking our favorite cereal, but not about ignored domestic abuse. Read **John 2:13-19** and see what Jesus did with his anger. Jesus was angry for a valid reason and he acted on it. He used his anger as fuel to do what needed to be done.

When we're angry we typically don't do anything productive with it. We find someone to whom we can vent or maybe we yell and scream. But when was the last time that you were really angry about something deserving of your energy? What did you choose to do about it?

Are you angry about injustice?

If you are angry about something that is worth your attention, what are you going to do about it?

## day 2

I am a big fan of napping and resting and laziness in general. I can waste a whole day doing absolutely nothing. But as much as I love this, and think time alone is important, I quickly grow uncomfortable. I am guilty of wasting all of my spare time on silly, inconsequential things when I could be doing something that would make a difference to someone.

Someone in this world, *in this area*, needs us to get off the couch and do something to change his life.

Count up how many hours do you waste in a week.

What are some valuable ways that you could be spending your extra time?

Do you believe that your few minutes of service can further the Kingdom of God?

Read **Colossians 3:23-24**. How would it change your perspective on life if you did everything in a way to honor God?

## day 3

Closets full of clothes we never wear. Pantries stocked with water chestnuts and other foods we'll never use. A quick trip to Wal-Mart. An extra pair of tennis shoes.

We are audaciously wasteful with our financial resources.

Here's an uncomfortable story: check out **Acts 5:1-11**. The early church shared everything they had and when Ananias and Sapphira tried to trick the disciples, they were punished. This exact scenario may not play out in your life, but when we hoard our money or when we react with stinginess rather than generosity, the damage is real. What are you willing to pay for your selfishness?



Consider cleaning out your house this week and donating your old clothes and toys to a local ministry.

## day 4

How often do you dwell on the “should haves” in your life? When you realize that an opportunity has passed you by, do you lament it? Sometimes we blow through the opportunities in our life as if there is an unlimited number that will come to us. We especially miss our chances to talk to other people about Christ. This particular brand of wastefulness should make us very uncomfortable. Read **Acts 8:26-40**. In this story, Philip listens to the call of the Holy Spirit and pursues an opportunity to share his faith. Could you do that?

When was the last time you had an opportunity to talk to someone about Jesus? How did you respond?

What opportunities have you let slip away? How do you feel about that?

## day 5

We’ve all heard that when we become Christians, the Holy Spirit gives us specific gifts for us to use to help develop the Kingdom of God. But what happens if we choose not to use those gifts? Read **Romans 12:4-8**.

What does Paul say regarding the connection of individuals in the body (4:4-5)?

Verse five states that “individually we are members of one another.” God made us to fit together. Our relationships create us. When we choose to not participate in this Kingdom Body, we lose something that makes us human. How are the people around you part of you?

Do you consider it important to use the gifts God has given you?

The Kingdom of God needs you to not waste your gifts. You are part of us.

## week 3

I did a bit of research on the sweater I'm wearing today. It was made in China and it is 100% acrylic. Acrylic is a synthetic material that uses a solvent in the production that can cause impaired liver function and possibly effect human reproduction.<sup>2</sup> I wonder about the person who created my sweater in China. Did she have proper protection, gloves, ventilation, etc.? Did she get paid fairly for the work? Was she old enough to be working in a factory? Did she get to go to school?

Look at your labels.

We should be a bit uncomfortable with the way the world works. The rich people in the world (us) use far more of the world's resources than is fair. We trade the broken realities of the world for reality television and fast food.

## day 1

Injustice is all around us, even in America, but injustice isn't a new thing. Read **Psalms 123**. I love the wording in the New Revised Standard Version, "Our soul has had more than its fill of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud" (Ps. 123:4).

The collective soul of the people is weary.

Are you at ease? Are you proud? Have you been part of the trampling of the marginalized and poor?

Martin Luther King, Jr. said that "the universe bends toward justice."<sup>3</sup> Are you?

## day 2

We live in a great country. I am thankful everyday that I was born here and have reaped the benefits of my American opportunities. However, sometimes I think that we American Christians get confused about where our first citizenship is. Derek Webb explains it beautifully in his song, "A King and a Kingdom." He

---

<sup>2</sup> According to the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/ipcsneng/neng0457.html>. Accessed 2/11/09.

<sup>3</sup> qtd. in Glen Stassen and David Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 167.

says, "My first allegiance is not to a flag, a country, or a man. My first allegiance is not to democracy or blood. It's to a King and a Kingdom."<sup>4</sup>

Are you more defined by your American citizenship or your citizenship in the Kingdom of God? If so, it should make you uncomfortable.

Read **Matthew 22:17-22**. The coins of the Pharisees bore the image of Caesar. It was right to give to the nation what was the nation's. You bear the image of the Almighty Creator. Give yourself to God.

## day 3

Do you ever feel like there are rules that you are required to follow to live in this world? Like everyone is pressing you to be someone you aren't? What pressures do you feel?

The early Christians felt a lot of pressure to follow the Jewish laws. Paul tried to convince them that it was unnecessary to do these empty rituals. Read **Colossians 2:20-23**. This isn't the exact same situation, but the truths remain. Why do we still pretend that we're playing the same game as the rest of the world? We aren't. We're not playing any game. We don't have to go into the boxes in which the world tries to cram us. God didn't make us for box-dwelling.

## day 4

Something deep inside us chafes at the structure of the world. We can detect that there is, in fact, something far better. Today we're going to look at a very traditional Lenten passage, **Ezekiel 37:1-14**. There is a hollow deadness in this world but there is also redemption, fresh air, and second chances. Your grave has been opened. Step out.

## day 5

There's this weird truth that none of us can quite understand. **We were not meant for this broken world.** We all know that; we even say it, but we don't live it. Instead we try to figure out how we can look exactly like everyone else in the world but still follow Christ. It's absurd. The author of Colossians writes to the church, warning them to not accept the half-truths of a lost world. Read **Colossians 2:6-19**.

---

<sup>4</sup> Derek Webb, "A King and A Kingdom" from *Mockingbird*, Sony Records, 2005.

How has the world tried to get you to buy into lies? How have you reacted?

## week 4

For so many of us, we are ghost-walking through this life. We traipse through school, church, relationships, and family life without investing anything in anyone. It's terribly sad.

1 Timothy 6:17-19 warns rich people about not becoming proud or comfortable with their money but instead, to do good things. It explains that they are to do this, "so that they may take hold of the life that really is life."

Jesus explains to the Pharisees that his purpose in coming to earth was to give us abundant life.

There is more than this blasé emptiness. We sell ourselves short when we accept a life that is anything less than abundant. We were not saved for watered down drudgery. We were saved for vibrant, inspired holiness. Even if it makes us a bit uncomfortable.

## day 1

Perhaps we are most guilty of living empty days. In our blind toil, we accomplish very little of any importance. We rarely have the right heart-attitude when we work. Read **Colossians 3:17, 23-24**.

What is your attitude towards your work now?

How would your attitude change if you believed you were working for God?

## day 2

Worship is the most beautiful and meaningful act a human can commit. In those moments of true worship, whatever the form, our soul connects to God. However, far too often we reduce worship to singing hymns. It's empty.

God takes worship really seriously though. Read **Isaiah 58** to see how God responded to the Jews not worshipping in truth.

When was the last time you truly worshipped God?

What is holding you back now?

### **day 3**

It's easy to fall into the trap of empty religion. We've probably all been there at some point. We just go through the motions without investing our hearts. The Pharisees in the New Testament struggled with this situation a lot. Read **Matthew 15:1-9** to see how Jesus responds to them.

When we get the religion stuff right, but the relationship stuff wrong, the religion stuff evaporates. If our hearts aren't right, it is all just empty.

Do you practice empty religion? Or have you fully invested?

### **day 4**

In our society it is so easy to meet people and never get to know them. We have hundreds of Facebook friends but few intimate relationships. Our busy pace and our electronic communications make it difficult to really get to know people. I love the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. In a matter of a few sentences, Jesus created a profound relationship with this woman. Read **John 4:7-42**.

What does Jesus do in this conversation that we fail to do in ours?

Jesus is honest and asks the woman direct questions. She is receptive and honest in return. What a tremendous example!

In what relationships do you need to work harder?

### **day 5**

One of the great tragedies in many of our lives is that we are hanging on to an empty faith. As Christians, we are to have tremendous hope. Yet for many of us, we are lost in our day to day life and we haven't claimed these promises. It is as if we live at the bottom of a deep well and we don't care if help is coming.

Turn to **Hebrews 6:17-20**. These verses are beautiful promises of safety, and home, and hope. We have taken refuge in the Lord and he gives us this hope that anchors our very souls.

The lyrics of "Surprise" by Jars of Clay read, "Love is wild for reasons, and hope, though short in sight, might be the only thing that wakes you by surprise."<sup>5</sup> When everything is broken, we can still have hope. It isn't over.

What do you feel hopeless about right now?

## week 5

If we're being honest we would all admit that taking God seriously makes us more than a little bit uncomfortable.

I was working through a devotional book, *A Call to Die* by David Nasser, with a friend last summer. She was flying up north to visit a friend, and she laughingly explained that she was afraid to carry her copy of the book on the plane. She didn't want the security guards to see it and think she was some extremist who was going to blow up the airplane.

I think we would all rather put our radical, Jesus notions in our checked luggage than be people that are different from everyone else. We avoid God like the plague, and more than anything, this should make us uncomfortable.

## day 1

I think the biggest reason we avoid God is because we're scared of what might be asked of us. Consider Abraham. Maybe somebody should have warned the old guy that intimacy with God requires some serious sacrifice. Read **Genesis 12: 1** and **Genesis 22:1-14**. First, seventy-five year old Abraham is asked to leave his home and *just go* until God says to stop. Later he's asked to kill his beloved son as a sacrifice to the Lord. That's some scary junk. Sometimes this relationship is frightening.

What are you afraid God might ask of you?

---

<sup>5</sup> Jars of Clay, "Surprise" from *Good Monsters*, Essential Records, 2006.

If God were to ask that very thing, would you be strong enough to follow?

## day 2

Our society highlights the rich, beautiful, and young. We are taken with the lives of celebrities and we all dream of get-rich-quick schemes. Unfortunately we aren't too keen on the gritty reality that God has put before us. I think about Jonah. After the people of Nineveh repent of their sins, and God forgives them, Jonah gets angry because he thinks they deserve to die. Read **Jonah 4:1-11**. Even after God consoles Jonah and explains why he saved the Ninevites, Jonah is still whiny.

We're a lot like that. When we don't like a certain reality, we complain and grumble and question God. I always assume that I know what is best. I want God to do what I want.

Sometimes running away or pouting is easier than dealing with the challenges God has put before us. Do you ever avoid reality because you just don't like what is going on in your life?

## day 3

As Jesus walked towards Golgotha, the place where he was to be crucified, another man was forced to carry his cross. See **Luke 23:26**. There's a certain danger in getting too close to Jesus. You have to start carrying crosses. Read **Matthew 16:24**. We run from our crosses because we think they are too heavy to bear. You avoid your cross because it is work, but discipleship is picking up your cross and dragging it towards Golgotha. That is what is being asked of us.

What cross do you carry?

## day 4

Sometimes in worship I am overcome. I am free as I let go and worship fully, giving myself to God. And then I am suddenly plagued with fear. Am I singing too loudly? Am I making a spectacle of myself? Do people think I'm weird?

We fear appearing too Christian, too holy, too zealous. We don't want people to feel uncomfortable so we stifle ourselves. It is poison.

Read **John 12:1-3**. What if we let go like Mary did? What if we worshipped with only God in mind?

Are you ever afraid to be passionate about God? What holds you back from serving God fully?

Can you let it go?

## day 5

Perhaps more than anything, we avoid Jesus' crucifixion. Sure we know the story, maybe we've even watched Mel Gibson's version. But we are terrified to journey to the cross ourselves. We close ourselves off to the horrific reality of Jesus' death. It makes us uncomfortable.

Read **Matthew 27:27-51**. The crucifixion was real, and we played a major part in it. As Stuart Townend's lyrics in "How Deep the Father's Love for Us" describe, "Behold, the man upon a cross, my sin upon his shoulders. Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice call out among the scoffers. It was my sin that held him there until it was accomplished. His dying breath has brought me life; I know that it is finished."<sup>6</sup>

We cannot approach Jerusalem and Holy Week if we are unwilling to travel to the cross. Experience the reality of Jesus' sufferings.

---

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Townend, "How Deep the Father's Love for Us," Kingsway's Thankyou Music, 1995.



## week 6- holy week

For many of us, we want the salvation without the gore. We want God's love but not God's story. We avoid Jerusalem because it is scary and bloody. It hurts. The purpose of this study is to get uncomfortable.

We've come to most uncomfortable place of all. Jerusalem.

### palm sunday

The approach to Jerusalem is beautiful and joyous. Jesus is recognized as a king, the Son of David, a prophet. Music of celebration fills the air. Read **Matthew 21:5-11**.

A funny tension exists in these verses. The people celebrate the prophet they have come to know, yet soon they will forget.

Have you ever forgotten who the Jesus is you have come to know?

### holy monday

According to tradition, Jesus cleanses the temple on Monday. Read **Matthew 21:12-17**. In this moment, Jesus presents a departure from the safe, soft Jesus about whom we like to think. This Jesus, the *real* Jesus, represents righteous anger and courage to do what is right.

Have you ever allowed Jesus to use you to stand up for what is right?

### holy tuesday

Read **John 12:20-36**. Jesus talks explicitly about his death in this passage. He explains that his "soul is troubled" (v. 27) and that he understands the purpose of his death. How do you feel about these verses? How do you think Jesus felt as he faced his death?

How do you feel about your responsibility in his death?

## spy wednesday

Today has been referred to as "Spy Wednesday," the day Judas Iscariot sells Jesus' life to the chief priests. Read **Matthew 26:3-5, 14-25**. It frightens me how much I am like Judas.

Derek Webb sings, "I am so easily satisfied by the call of lovers so less wild, that I would take a little cash over your very flesh and blood."<sup>7</sup>

We accept payment over a relationship with Christ every day. What does that look like in your life?

## maundy thursday

On this night the disciples share the Last Supper and Jesus washes the disciples' feet. Read **John 13:1-15**. I am always caught up in the question of verse 12, "Do you know what I have done to you?"

I fear we will never understand what Jesus has done to us, yet we are irrevocably changed.

Pray: God of all power and mercy, as your son prepared to suffer, he knelt to wash my feet. I do not understand, but I embrace the mystery even as I embrace the call to wash my neighbor's feet. Grant me your peace and humility. In all my actions, help me to follow you in your servant leadership.

## good friday

Meditate on **John 19:16-37**. There simply are no words. Today we mourn for the slaughtered lamb. Read also **Isaiah 53**.

Check out some of the lyrics from "Were you There?," a traditional African American Spiritual.

"Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble! Where you there when they crucified my Lord?"

Were you there when they nailed Him to a tree? Were you there when they nailed Him to a tree? Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble! Were you there when they nailed Him to a tree?"

---

<sup>7</sup> Derek Webb, "Wedding Dress," on *She Must and Shall Go Free*, INO Records, 2003.

Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb? Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb? Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble! Were you there when they laid Him in the tomb?"<sup>8</sup>

## **saturday, easter eve**

Today is a day for contemplation and reflection, waiting and weeping. Read **John 19:38-42**. The world stumbles in anticipation. Look at **Psalms 30:4-5**. In the midst of despair, we are never without hope.

We have the luxury of knowing how the story ends. How do you imagine Jesus' friends and family felt as they watched the stone roll to cover the opening of the tomb?

## **easter sunday**

Jesus is risen. Celebrate, friend, as you revel in the joy of the resurrection that sealed forever our salvation. Enjoy **Matthew 28** and the promises of restoration found in **Ezekiel 36:24-28**.

What have you learned over the course of this season?

How have you developed the spiritual discipline of discomfort?

What are you going to do about it?

---

<sup>8</sup> Traditional Spiritual, "Were You There?" in *The Celebration Hymnal*, Word/Integrity Music, 1997.