



# Everyday *Skeptics*

DEVOTIONS FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Edited by Alydia Smith

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UNITED CHURCH  
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Devotions for Spiritual Growth  
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# Preface

“So what? Why does it matter? What impact does it have on your life and the lives of others? Why should you care? Why should I care?”

As a former learning specialist, I often asked my students these questions. I was testing their comprehension and, more importantly, their motivation to learn. If they didn't care about the information I was sharing and couldn't name its relevance in their lives—beyond passing the course—the chances of their retaining or using it successfully was very limited. If they weren't willing to be a little skeptical and wrestle with the “so what” of it all, our time together would be rough.

Over the years I have learned that the same is true for ministry. I can invest time, energy, and resources in making scripture accessible and worship engaging, but if the people I am in ministry with are not wrestling with the “so what” of it all, the teachings and engaging worship experiences won't stick when the storms of life are raging—which is exactly when our stories of faith are most needed.

The team that prepared this collection of devotions wanted to create a book that, like our scripture, helped people keep the faith in times of challenge. Nobody proclaims, “Keep the faith!” more than the prophets, who are human translators of God's message to the people. Prophets usually show up proclaiming an implausible message: Keep the faith because there is cause for hope when doubt about the relevance of faith and the uncertainty of hope is growing in the people.

Being skeptical is not about being unfaithful. It is about being a good student who wants the stories of our faith to stick—a student who wants to be able to internalize and learn the stories fully so that they matter to them and continually make a profound impact on their everyday lives.

We hope that you will pick up this book every day, encounter a story of our faith, reflect on the devotions, and question what all of this has to do with your life, your ministry, and your faith—and the life and faith of others. May you ask yourself, and maybe one another, every day, “So what?”

Sincerely,  
*Alydia Smith*

*Week One*

What Jesus Does

*The crowds were saying,  
"This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."*

Matthew 21:11

## DAY 1: ASH WEDNESDAY

# Wilderness Time

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

Matthew 4:1–2

### Reflect

Before he began his ministry, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. We are told only that the same Spirit that was present at his baptism led him into the wilderness, where he spent this time with beasts and angels.

Now there are so many great things to talk about with this whole desert experience, but let's focus on what it was that Jesus gave up while there. I am not talking about food, water, companionship, shelter, a warm bed, and the like—I mean what Jesus gave up of himself during that time.

Wilderness time is what Jesus needed: to be alone with God, to think about what was important and where his strength came from, and to really get in touch with who he was and what his mission was to be.

In the wilderness Jesus learned to listen to Spirit, to lean on the community of God in and around him. He learned that what was important was not power and influence, but the sacredness and interconnectedness of life. In his vulnerability, he experienced the constant companionship and faithfulness of God, and saw God provide, accompany, listen, and respond.

These 40 days of Lent *can* be a time to set aside and truly focus on the Spirit that leads us into new places for specific purposes. It *can* be a time of preparation for a great work ahead of us. These 40 days, as we strip away all that is unimportant, may be a time to really connect with God and experience God's faithfulness afresh.

We fill our days with busyness. We never have enough time to do what we know we should. Yet God calls us all to be hope, love, and peace in this world. We may not have the luxury of taking 40 days out of our routine to spend with God so we can learn what Jesus learned. But surely we can take 10 minutes a day to sit quietly with God and just listen. Just learn to trust again. Just lean on God fully. Just be quiet, and know that God is here and with us each day.

In our “giving up” for Lent, could we also “take back” some time and spend it with God?

### **Ponder**

- What can I take back in my life in these 40 days to deepen my relationship with Jesus?
- Scripture tells us that we are part of the ministry of all believers. What ministry are you called to?
- What temptations can you imagine will lie ahead as you discern your ministry in the church and the world (e.g., need for recognition, relying on your own strength)?
- As you spend time in prayer and contemplation these next 40 days, what will be the biggest obstacles to sticking with it? Be honest! How will you make it through the wilderness of Lent this year?

### **Pray**

God of wilderness places, you have led me to this place. I am terrified. I am unsure. I am confident. I am ambivalent. I am hopeful. Whatever I am, I know you have led me here. I need this time to understand who I am as your child, to gain a deeper appreciation of what ministry you are calling me to. I need this intimate time with you. Strengthen my resolve. Forgive the times I can't seem to recognize the possibilities ahead of me. Guide me through the dry times and through the abundant times. Give me a grateful heart and a willing spirit to see where you will lead me next. Amen.

### **Sing**

*Voices United* 105, “Dust and Ashes Touch Our Face”

*Voices United* 113, “To the Desert Jesus Came”

*Voices United* 115, “Jesus, Tempted in the Desert”

*Jennifer Garbin*

DAY 2: THURSDAY

## Accepting Risk

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Mark 8:31-33

### Reflect

Working as a human rights defender in the countryside in Colombia—or anywhere in Latin America—has become a high-risk activity. But when most people in Colombia listen to the news, their first reaction is “Given the risk, who would be so stupid as to continue defending women, small landowners, and Indigenous people?”

Sometimes I wonder myself.

Someone goes into a village, shoots another person, walks away, and nothing ever happens. Crimes are not investigated, and people will not testify out of fear of losing their own lives. You can hear people asking, “Quien los manda a buscar lo que no se les ha perdido?” (“Who is sending you to look for something you haven’t lost?”), which is infuriating.

It’s infuriating because most human rights defenders are advocating for people who have definitely lost something—who have lost their land and been displaced by armed illegal forces, and who are trying to get their land back. Still, the fear of something bad happening to us is stronger than the idea of justice or reparation.

It is a given that if you are Colombian, poor, and advocating for justice, you will be murdered or will die under suspicious circumstances. I bet Jesus felt just like that. Peter, on the other hand, could stand in for people who are afraid; there is no reason to die—you can just hide.

Commemorating Jesus' inevitable death is also a commemoration of those who die fighting the establishment and the forces of evil to bring abundant life to the oppressed—a commemoration that has to be, as well, a search for protection for those who advocate for life and hope and who are in positions of disadvantage.

### **Ponder**

- What types of support can we provide for people working in dangerous places?
- Whose lives are at risk for the work that they do?
- How can we help to protect voices that speak at great risk to themselves and to others?

### **Pray**

Mother, father, and parent,  
help us to not be like Peter.  
Help us to recognize the amazing work people do  
to protect and support the little ones of your kingdom.  
Help us to find ways to support their work.  
Amen.

### **Sing**

*Voices United* 561, "Take Up Your Cross"  
*More Voices* 213, "Take Up His Song"

*Paola Márquez*

DAY 3: FRIDAY

## *Journey in Your Truth*

He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Mark 6:1-6

### **Reflect**

As Jesus' ministry grew he was followed by multitudes. Large crowds of people pressed into him, watching as he healed the sick, fed the poor, and taught in the synagogue with the religious leaders. In spite of all he accomplished and the transformation evident in the lives of those he encountered, Mark records Jesus' rejection in his hometown.

There is something to be said for hometown pride and those we believe will support us in our lives, especially when we are doing well. The opportunities to be of service to the world present themselves, and we are motivated to give beyond ourselves to ensure that others are treated justly. We lay our lives on the line to bring about change not only for those we know and love but also for the stranger. So, when we are confronted with criticism and rejection, we bear the weight of being unsupported by those who are closest to us.

“Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” Why should we have to make the case for ourselves with those who love and know us? Though facing rejection from the people of Nazareth, Jesus still performs miracles among them, curing a few sick people. He is indeed Mary’s son and the brother of the siblings who are named. Who Jesus is and where he comes from does not diminish the presence of God at work in his life. Where we come from does not diminish whom we are called to be.

Jesus’ wisdom—his gifts for ministry and life—are from God. This knowledge allows him to transcend the criticism of his hometown. The gifts and graces we are given for ministry are for us to use regardless of how we are treated.

### **Ponder**

- Reflect on a time when you have felt firm in your convictions and yet unsupported by the people closest to you. How did you respond?
- What are your gifts for ministry? When have you doubted your gifts, and why? When have you affirmed your gifts, and how?
- Whom do you tend to judge and critique harshly? Why do you think you do this?

### **Pray**

Jesus,  
you know what it is like to be in ministry:  
You know the pain and rejection of failure and the joy and hope of success.

Journey with me as I navigate my ministry as a disciple.  
Provide opportunities for growth and new relationships when I have been rejected by those closest to me.  
Provide opportunities for forgiveness and grace when I have wrongly diminished the gifts of my kinfolk.  
Firmly place me on the right path, so that I may travel in your truth.  
Amen.

### **Sing**

*Voices United* 537, “Your Work, O God, Needs Many Hands”  
*More Voices* 8, “And on This Path”

*Karen Georgia A. Thompson*

DAY 4: SATURDAY

## *Reacting in Crisis*

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you.”

Luke 13:31–35a

### **Reflect**

“See, your house is left to you.” Imagine with me this house left in disarray. Imagine the phone ringing, a baby refusing to eat, a honking horn from a waiting car with kids running around, half clothed and shrieking. You try to offer a helpful suggestion to the parent standing amidst the chaos. They turn to you, look you in the eye, deliver clear and specific instructions in a voice that brooks no disobedience or discussion, and then turn to the next task, sighing at the chaotic household.

Like this parent’s, Jesus’ response shows a mix of competence and frustration; he understands all too clearly what is going on and is conscious of the limits of time. When he rebuts the inept attempt to scare him away (whether you understand the Pharisees to be rivals or friends), it is clear that Jesus knows exactly what he is doing, anticipates the same outcomes that others fear, and has set his face toward Jerusalem.

All around him, Jesus sees wounded and dispirited people and works diligently at their healing and liberation, all the while aware that his time is

limited and the larger work looms on the horizon. No wonder he identifies with the mothering hen who tries to gather up her brood and protect them from danger. Yet Jerusalem is the house of the fox, who eats hens for breakfast.

Jesus' sense of his prophetic ministry includes the urgency of his task as well as the conviction that it will mean his own bodily death. With determination he goes onward. But he still feels the emotions that come when he sees the sacred, profaned city, the centre of the worship of God and, throughout Israel's history, the place that kills the prophets of God.

What does Jesus feel when he sees all the work left to do? Seemingly endless need surrounds him, even as the Pharisees tell him that he should flee, that he is stirring up trouble. Their words name only the danger, not the need. So Jesus commissions them as his own messengers to tell Herod—and to tell us—that fear does not rule the roost. Jesus is coming for his appointment with destiny. The hen is in the fox-house.

### **Ponder**

- When you are overwhelmed by the needs of life around you, what personal convictions help to ground you?
- What emotions do you see in Luke's account of Jesus' lament over Jerusalem? Do you have healthy places to feel and express lamentation that the world is not the way it should be?

### **Pray**

Jesus, who lamented over Jerusalem, forgive our own lamentable behaviours and our participation in systems of oppression and injustice.

Take us under your wing, and keep us from evil.

Jesus, who answered the Pharisees, you counted the cost.

You fed and healed, ministering to the needs of those around you.

Give us your determination to seek justice for all our relations.

Jesus, who comes in the name of the Lord, be blessed.

May we honour your story in our own lives as we seek your kingdom, here, as it is in heaven. AMEN.

### **Sing**

*Voices United* 356, "Seek Ye First"

*More Voices* 171, "Christ Has No Body Now but Yours"

*Peter Haresnape*

“Being skeptical is not about being unfaithful  
It is about being a good student who wants the  
stories of our faith to stick.”

How do the words of past prophets continue to live today? How do they inform our faith formation and our actions as a church? Wrestle with these questions through daily scripture, reflections, and prayers for individual devotions or group study written by a wide variety of contributors. Study guide included.

*Everyday Skeptics* makes for a great Lenten guidebook, with diverse voices wrestling with the “So what?!” question, cracking open faith stories, ancient and modern, prophetic and personal. These guides know this journey is important—and their excitement is catching.

—Very Rev. Gary Paterson, former Moderator,  
The United Church of Canada

*Everyday Skeptics* takes seriously the way many of us wrestle with the hard questions. It provides pathways of thinking that are not denials of what we see and feel. I appreciate the diversity of thinkers and thought that went into this, and the permission to continue a faith that won't discount doubt.

—Rev. Dr. John C. Dorhauer, General Minister and  
President of the United Church of Christ

We must allow for reflection that honours our deepest fears, and yes, even skepticism, as we make our way on our own Christian journeys. I believe that God can handle our inquiry, our fear, our skepticism, and that we will emerge stronger for having raised questions, for allowing the light of scripture to illuminate our path, and for allowing ourselves communion with the spirit of God.

—Rev. Teresa “Terri” Hord Owens, General Minister and President,  
The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the US and Canada

Here's to you, everyday skeptics!



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