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First Things:

What is Lent?

Lent is a season we set aside to consider our human condition and recognize our need for a savior. Throughout the rigors of life we can often forget to confess and repent of specific sins, relying on general confessions without much self-examination. This selection of reflections written by the family members of Connection Church is designed to take you on a journey through the liturgical readings for the season of Lent and invite you to receive the grace that is offered for all who place their faith in Jesus.

Am I Supposed to Give Something Up?

We invite you to commit to give up something you regularly enjoy and use the time you would normally spend to be in prayer or service of others. Consider praying for your neighbors by name, the peace of your city, a neighboring church, or your enemies or difficult co-workers.

This collection of devotionals was written by the family members of Connection Church in Astoria, Queens, NYC.
For more information, visit: www.ConnectionNYC.com

Scriptures from the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A. Lent: 2017

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Wednesday, March 1 - Larry

SCRIPTURE

*Blow a trumpet in Zion;
sound an alarm on my holy mountain!
Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble,
for the day of the Lord is coming; it is near,
2 a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and thick darkness!
Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains
a great and powerful people;
their like has never been before,
nor will be again after them
through the years of all generations.*

*"Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
13 and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. 14 Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a
blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God? 15 Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast;
call a solemn assembly; 16 gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even
nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber. 17 Between the vestibule and the altar let the
priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep and say, "Spare your people, O Lord, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword
among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples,
'Where is their God?"*

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17 ESV

Reflection

I lower my brow, widen my eyes, and breathe in deeply through my nose as I fix my gaze on my oldest son, who is 7. He knows what that means before I sternly and slowly say, "Have patience with your little brothers - stop raising your voice at them in anger!" It's halfway through that sentence that I realize, with each passing word, how applicable all of that is to me as well. A few minutes earlier, I had grown impatient with my wife and fell quickly into anger during an argument. It's easy for me, as a father, to see my children's faults while missing my own. When it comes to God's judgement, it's often easy for me to pick out who needs to receive his wrath.

The day of the LORD described in Joel is both scary and comforting. Scary because it includes the destruction of everything that has been scorned by the fall. Nothing escapes this widespread army of justice that leaves a desolate wilderness in its path. At the same time, this day is comforting because it destroys everything we fear now. Cancer, racial injustice, poverty, socio-economic injustice, police brutality, wars, political deceptiveness, natural disasters, etc. The army of God's justice does not only destroy injustices done to me; it also includes me and the injustices I have done. In verse 2, there is no escape.

It is later in the chapter that we discover how God has made a way for his people to be spared. God's grace and mercy are extended to those who rend (tear open) their hearts and return to him with fasting - through which our physical desires are given to God, weeping - our emotional desires given to God, and mourning - we are expressing grief over the damage our sin has done to God and his creation.

Today we fast, weep, and mourn with the hope of Jesus. We know of his coming and have faith in his protection. He bore the destruction our injustices earned and walks us safely into new, abundant life.

Prayer

Father, thank you for the hope we have in Christ. Remind us of our sin and its damaging effects and then comfort us with the rest of the Holy Spirit given to us by Jesus.

Thursday, March 2 - Katie

SCRIPTURE

1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!
3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
4 Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.
5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.
6 Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.
7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.
9 Hide your face from my sins,

and blot out all my iniquities.
10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
11 Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.
13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.
15 O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
16 For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Psalm 51:1-17 ESV

Reflection

It is important to come to God humbly, with a contrite spirit after acknowledging sin. He is fully capable of washing away all iniquity, but we often hold on to it like a safety blanket. The truth is that our sin is always before our eyes; we cannot escape it. What the Lord delights in is for us to walk in TRUTH. What unfortunately happens is that we mess up and must be redeemed – made clean – renewed and given a clean heart. Verse 12 says to “restore to me the joy of your salvation.” This is a heart cry to be made right with God in order to have His joy that comes through right relationship. For David, there was no assurance of salvation; his rest came from fellowship with God Himself. The mighty king recognized that he was broken and had fallen. Contrary to the time in which he lived where sacrificing an animal would restore relationship with God, David recognized that the Almighty King did not truly desire the flesh of animals at His feet, but the “broken and contrite heart” to be laid bare before the throne of grace. God is good and gracious, looking to lavish much on those who seek him. The deep truth is that we so often get swallowed in our own brokenness or ways of fixing things that we forget to come before him. When we boldly proclaim our brokenness hand in hand with his praises, it is a reflection of where our heart truly is. I am incapable of praising him when I am mired in my own sin – yet when I am renewed and have my joy founded in my Father, my lips proclaim his praises.

Today, as we look to the cross of Jesus that has washed us clean and is the source of the joy in our salvation, may we examine our own hearts. Am I coming to him with a humble heart and asking him to make me clean? May our joy in HIM be full today!

Prayer

Father, thank you for delighting in the sacrifice of Jesus. I confess my sin to you today and am grateful for forgiveness and grace. Fill me with the joy of the Holy Spirit so that I may fill others! Amen.

Friday, March 3 - Renata

SCRIPTURE

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

As God's co-workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says,

"In the time of my favor I heard you,

and in the day of salvation I helped you."

I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.

We put no stumbling block in anyone's path, so that our ministry will not be discredited. Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10 NIV

Reflection

A couple months ago I met a young man named Vic. Born and raised in Beijing, he knew very little about Christians, but seemed very interested in our culture and practices. As I did my best to answer his questions, I was surprised by his astonishment at basic tenets of Christianity. How could we give 10% of our income to charity and the church? Why would anyone pray for their enemies? Why do we act against our own self interest?

What a potent reminder that we are set apart, chosen as God's "ambassadors" and "coworkers" to represent him to the people of the world. It's incredibly empowering to think that we have been given the grace and power from God to "commend ourselves in every way." But as always, with great power comes great responsibility. Our work is hard. It can feel contradictory. We've got to be in the world but not of it, sorrowful and joyful, known and yet unknown.

In our current political climate, these contradictions feel more prominent than ever. How can we represent Christ--be his ambassador, be heard--when the public discourse is a shouting match? Thankfully this verse gives us instructions. Whether the world understands us or not, our job is to dwell "in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God."

It's a tall order, but God's already promised to listen and help. All we have to do is ask.

Prayer

Father, thank you for the hope we have in Christ. Remind us of our sin and its damaging effects and then comfort us with the rest of the Holy Spirit given to us by Jesus.

Saturday, March 4 - Manu

SCRIPTURE

"Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

2 "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

5 "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. 6 But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Matthew 6:1-6 NIV

Reflection

Jesus is warning his disciples here not to be like people in his day who would go out of their way to perform good deeds in front of others. This wasn't because they wanted to be good examples, but because they liked to be appreciated and praised by others for what they were doing and who they (thought) they were. But Jesus pierces their hypocritical veil and tells us not to do the same. But one chapter earlier in Matthew 5, Jesus seems to tell his disciples the opposite and "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works." So should we let people see our good works or shouldn't we?

If we make it a habit to only do good works when others are looking so that we can get the credit, people will have a hard time seeing God, the actual source of the good that was performed. Our aim as disciples of Jesus is not to get the praise, but to make sure that he gets it, because he's the only one that deserves it. Other people are not drawn to God if they are busy praising us! So the command here to practice our righteousness in secret is so that we do not take people's attention away from God and put it toward us. In fact, the point of Jesus' remarks in Matthew 5 was for others to "give glory to [our] Father" when they do see our good works. So when we are practicing our giving and praying in secret, or when we are letting our light shine before others, our aim is to stir others into praising God. Let's not be like the hypocrites who say through their actions "Look at me! Look at how good I am!" Rather, through all our actions let us be crying out "Look at Jesus! Look at how amazing and good and beautiful and worthy he is!"

Prayer

Father, we pray that your Spirit would guide us into practicing our righteousness before you and that all our actions before others would show them how marvelous your Son Jesus is and how happy he makes us. Amen.

Sunday, March 5 - Paula

SCRIPTURE

15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Genesis 2:15-17 ESV

Reflection

God assigned Adam three tasks: to work the garden, to keep it and to eat its fruit.

Passion in work

Being a gardener was the first job ever assigned to man on Earth. Imagine how spectacular and enjoyable it must've been working the Garden of Eden. Adam's jobs entailed planting trees and watching the infinitesimal fluctuations from seed to tree bearing fruit. Life as a gardener in the divine sanctuary was incredibly freeing. God allowed Adam to enjoy the fruit of his labor and eat fruits of his liking.

Protection in waiting

God also gave Adam a single prohibition: do not eat from a specific tree. This commandment was not intended to rob Adam of his freedom, but it was intended to make sure he did not become enslaved. And more than that, the commandment was there to protect Adam from death. This death would be more than just a separation of the soul from the body, but also a separation of the soul from God himself. The same is true for his commandments for us today. They give us freedom and bring us to God.

Prudence in enjoyment

Finding joy in working was always a part of God's plan. But when we disregard his commandments, it disconnects us from God and makes our duties distressing. That is when we feel overwhelmed by our tasks and responsibilities. Because, instead of using God's commands as an organic system with which to thrive, we rely on our own ineffective irrigation plans that disregard what God called us to do and as a result we become irresponsible workers. Being responsive to God's commands makes us responsible to what he is asking of us. Whether God has entrusted us with tending little hearts or with being leaders in our community, today's challenge for us is to prayerfully and joyfully fulfill our daily responsibilities in the presence of God, which enables us to flourish.

Prayer

God please help me be in tune with what you daily ask of me so that I can follow you and flourish morally, emotionally and spiritually. Amen.

Monday, March 6 - Chris

SCRIPTURE

3 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" 2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, 3 but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

4 "You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. 5 "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6 When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. 7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Genesis 3:1-7 NIV

Reflection

When I was in high school, I picked up a bad habit. I started smoking at the age of 16 because the other kids in my high school were into smoking. Just like in Gen 3:1 where the serpent tempted Eve in the Garden, the temptation was all around me. I took one puff from a classmate and the next thing I knew I was smoking two packs of cigarettes a day. Eventually I was smoking three packs a day, that's when I knew I was really hooked. It got to the point that I was chain smoking; I would wake up in the middle of the night craving a cigarette. There were times when I ran out of packs of cigarettes and would rush to the corner gas station in the middle of the night to buy a pack. I knew I was in sin, for scripture says "...ye are not your own" 1 Cor 6:19. This was a continual sin. I felt bound to the addiction and the cravings to smoke.

Have you ever been bound by addiction?

Thankfully, after some time, God showed up in my life. I went to church with my mother and brother one Sunday. There was an altar call and I raced down the altar and just poured out my heart and cried. I asked Jesus to take away these cravings, just take away the addiction that had me bound. I received his unfailing love, mercy, and grace. It was there at the altar that I actually repented of this sin, this iniquity.

Miraculously, the next day my cravings were gone. I was totally delivered from the bondage of cigarettes! I haven't smoked a cigarette since 2002. Is there a burden, a desire deep within your heart to be made free from whatever sin that have you bound?

When Adam and Eve sinned their eyes were opened to their shame. If your sin has been revealed to you, confess it to Jesus and receive his forgiveness and grace today.

Prayer

I pray Jesus that you would reveal your unfailing love to me today. Let your love flow through my heart so that I would be willing to turn away from my sin. Thank you for providing deliverance in Jesus.

In Jesus name I pray, Amen.

Tuesday, March 7 - Daniel

SCRIPTURE

*Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
2 Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
3 For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah
5 I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah*

Psalm 32:1-5 ESV

Reflection

David's sin was unconfessed. He thought he was getting away with it and maybe nobody knew what he had done, but his body was taking on negative consequences because of his guilt. He was wasting away and groaning all day long. He felt conviction from God's hand being heavy on him, and his strength was drained away. But then he did something that seemed counterintuitive to his conscience; he confessed his sin to the Lord and found immediate relief from his suffering.

What kept David from confessing his sin sooner? Why did he try to hide it from the Lord? While I cannot speak for David, I can tell you some reasons why I want to hide my sin. I don't want to acknowledge that I've sinned and need forgiveness because I still struggle against pride. Sometimes I feel justified in committing sin. If someone cuts me off in traffic, or one of my children disrespects me then I feel like raising my voice and speaking in anger is justified. It's easier to move forward and just try and forget about it. I have a hard time trusting people and project that distrust onto God.

Sin hinders our relationship with the the Lord, and he is the one who gives us life and loves us more than anyone else. Instead of feeling close the Lord, unconfessed sin causes us to feel far from him and avoid him because deep down we know what we've done is wrong. Today we can listen to David's heart and remember that God is waiting with anticipation to forgive us and restore our relationship with him through Jesus. Because the Lord Jesus took our shame for us, through faith in him we can be freed from all shame and guilt if we simply confess our sin to God.

Prayer

Lord, today I come to you and confess my pride, my anger, my laziness, and my distrust of you. Forgive me of my wayward heart. I receive your forgiveness and praise you for removing every ounce of my shame and guilt.

Wednesday, March 8 - Lindsey M.

SCRIPTURE

6 Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him. 7 You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance. Selah

Psalm 32:6-7 ESV

Reflection

Pray. Talk to God. Turn from your stubbornness and hand over your deceit. Allow God to forgive you, and be “preserved from trouble” any longer. Seems simple right?

Have you ever seen a child play hide and seek? When my son was younger, he would play with me and his older brothers, and while the big guys counted, he would be cowered down in a corner with his face in his hands, trying hard not to laugh. I would giggle and say, “Ezra, just because you can’t see us doesn’t mean we can’t see you!”

It was the simplest form of hide and seek but he didn’t quite get the “hiding” part. Don’t I do this to the Lord? I know I’m struggling, walking in disobedience, and running around trying to accomplish tasks and check off my life boxes. In the meantime, I’m playing my own little game of hide and seek. I think that if I just put my hands over my eyes and distract myself enough with my phone or Netflix or cleaning the house or hanging with friends, eventually God won’t be able to find me, and I won’t have to face that dark cloud of sin that’s over my head. Better yet, I won’t have to TALK to him and face my rebellion.

In previous scriptures, King David has come out from underneath that cloud. He’s reminding himself and you and me to repent and stop digging our heels in. He starts in verse 6 by simply reminding us to stop being silent! Pray! Turn your music or your tv or your actions off, talk to God, and he will be FOUND! We can’t hide from our loving father. No matter how much we try to do life with our hands over our eyes, he is there. And when we understand this, how great is it that in verse 7 David says that God then becomes our new “hiding place.” Rather than hiding *from* him, we are now safely found *in* him, our safe place. When we are found, we are preserved from trouble and surrounded with shouts of deliverance, like those of a child’s laugh when he’s found in hide and seek.

Prayer

Lord, thank you that you are a good Father. You desire us. Give us your strength to continually be hidden in you, without running or hiding. Preserve us from trouble, and when those troubles do come, help us to remember to run to you even more.

Thursday, March 9 - John

SCRIPTURE

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men[a] because all sinned—

13 for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law.

Romans 5:12-13 ESV

Reflection

Most people believe that Spider-Man 3 was one of the worst films in the history of superhero cinema. For a number of reasons, I am not one of those people. While I am particularly biased towards anything involving Spider-Man, I also love stories about his arch-nemesis, one of my favorite villains of all time. Venom is a terrifying, slimy, shape-shifting alien that invades a human host and controls his or her every move. Venom is evil by himself, but he is also known for drawing out the hidden thoughts and intentions of anyone unlucky enough to become his prey. For example, when Venom took control of Spider-Man's body, he abandoned his friendly neighborhood heroics and became selfish, arrogant, and violent.

In today's passage, the author speaks of sin as being something deep within us, a darkness imbedded in the human heart long ago. When we are honest with ourselves, we can pretty easily see those selfish, greedy desires lurking beneath the surface of our lives. Those hidden thoughts and motivations often become visible in our anger, lust, divisiveness, or arrogance. Check the news or social media for just a moment and you will see the desperate needs of the world as we collectively struggle with the results of self-serving brokenness.

Read alone, verses 12-13 leave us longing for a solution. The next verses present a God ready to rescue anyone who wants to be saved, but pause for a moment and consider how these verses speak to the severity and desperation of sin. Know today that God sees the fullness of your and my sinfulness - and yet loves us deeply. Verse 13 says that God's law helps us see how sinful we truly are within. God does not shy away from these realities, but thank God the story doesn't stop there! Today you may have many things to be repentant of... consider those things. Take them seriously and do not hide them beneath the surface. Instead, trust God with them. Turn yourself over to the God who sees you fully, knows you completely, and yet loves you beyond your imagination.

Prayer

God, thank you for being ready to forgive when I confess. I turn myself over to you knowing that you are trustworthy to see who I really am, deep inside, and still love me beyond imagination. Amen.

Friday, March 10 - Jonny

SCRIPTURE

14 Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

15 But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. 16 And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. 17 For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

18 Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.

19 For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Romans 5:14-19 ESV

Reflection

If you have ever taught children or watched over them, you have probably had a run-in or two with disobedience. Growing up with brothers, we had our fair share of disobedience. Often enough, we felt like the disobedience of one of us would lead to punishment for all of us, but looking back now, I can see that this was hardly ever the case. We were all guilty in one way or another. The passage even reflects this. After referring to the "transgression of Adam" in verse 14, the rest of the passage only refers to the "one man" for the rest of the text. This is because any one of us would have failed if we were in his place. The only one capable of dying on the cross for us and giving us the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness is Jesus Christ.

If Adam is the example of man, and through him we can see human nature, then Jesus is the example of righteousness, and through him we can see God's divinity. Even though Jesus became man, he did not fall to the temptations of man. This passage constantly flips between the transgressions of Adam and the free gift of Jesus. This shows us how Jesus mirrored Adam in so many ways. If you were to read only verse 14, you would surely feel as though there can be no hope. "Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses." Without the free gift, we are surely doomed to the same death as all others who came before us.

Thankfully, we do not need to suffer the same consequences. The righteousness of Jesus frees us from all of that. In verse 18, "one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men." What a comforting thought to have! God's gift of life is free for me and for you.

Prayer

God, we thank You for Your grace that pours out for us daily. We thank You for the gift of righteousness given to us through Your son, Jesus Christ. We thank You that You loved us, even though we have transgressed against you. Please forgive us our sins and help us to realize that it is only by your grace that we can have eternal life.

Saturday, March 11 - Melanie

SCRIPTURE

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4 But he answered, "It is written,

"Man shall not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple 6 and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,

"He will command his angels concerning you, '

and

"On their hands they will bear you up,

lest you strike your foot against a stone."

7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. 9 And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10 Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written,

"You shall worship the Lord your God

and him only shall you serve."

11 Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him

Matthew 4:1-11 ESV

Reflection

I used to have a major soda habit. I was working in restaurants, and to stay caffeinated and energetic, I'd avail myself of the unlimited supply of Diet Coke. It was a problem; so I gave up soda for Lent. Now, I like the concept of a dietary fast- it's an opportunity to reset myself to neutral if I've become too dependent on something. It's a good mental challenge.

However, that's an incomplete understanding of the purpose of fasting. The reason we remove an earthly pleasure is to challenge us to refocus on God. As Jesus quotes in Matthew 4:4, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

We do not require the trappings of our world to sustain us, we need to hope that can only be found in the love of God.

We are strengthened once we focus on God rather than our own desires. The devil tempts Christ after he fasted for 40 days and nights, thinking that because he was physically weak and tired he would be more easily swayed. Instead, Jesus was stronger. He had spent the preceding weeks fortifying himself for battle by meditating in the word of God. Because of this, He was able to counter the Devil's offer of worldly splendor in verse 10 with, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" In the same way, when you strip away the things that distance you from God, you will grow closer and stronger through Him.

Prayer

God, thank you for the reminder that you fulfill like nothing else. Thank you for sustaining me with the hope I find in you, challenge me today to give that hope to others. Amen.

Sunday, March 12 - Larry

SCRIPTURE

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 2 And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." 4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him.

Genesis 12:1-4a ESV

Reflection

I've never heard a word from the LORD the way that Abram does in our passage. I'm not sure very many people have. He gives such a clear instruction and promise, and we don't even have any record of whether or not Abram actually prayed and asked for this direction. Why is it, then, that I ask constantly for wisdom and discernment and don't receive anything this explicit from God?

Any time I start to think like this I am reminded that Abram lived in a different reality than I do now. God doesn't need to call unto me with instructions and promises because he has adopted me into his family and given me all of the rights and privileges of an heir. He has filled me with the wisdom and discernment of the Holy Spirit. He has freed me to know my role in each relationship through the sacrificial love of Jesus and has given me the instruction and promise throughout scripture - something Abram didn't have access to. Why does it seem like God doesn't give me a calling like he gave Abram? Because I'm not listening to what he has already said.

If you're looking for your calling, hear this: God created you in his image, and when you made yourself an enemy he adopted you as his child by sheer grace through your faith in Christ; you are now free to love those who hate you, seek the good of your neighbor - even if she is your enemy (or your co worker). GO and make disciples, and God promises he will be with you in ways Abram never experienced. Your calling is clear, and you have a vast amount of freedom to live out that calling in creative and exciting ways. Allow this good news to define who you are, and stop wondering what you are called to do and live an exceptional life full of adventuring in his grace.

Prayer

Father, you have given me so much direction through your written word and your Holy Spirit, and I have complained that you haven't clearly spoken to me. Forgive me, and give me a deep thirst to seek you through your Bible and in the Holy Spirit.

Monday, March 13 - Emily

SCRIPTURE

*I lift up my eyes to the hills.
From where does my help come?
2 My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.
3 He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
4 Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
5 The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade on your right hand.
6 The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
7 The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
8 The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time forth and forevermore.*

Psalms 121 ESV

Reflection

Commentary suggests that Psalms 120 - 134 are thought to be recited by pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem for holy festivals and worship. The travel to Jerusalem was an extremely difficult journey with dangerous roads and paths leading to the city on a hill. Throughout the pilgrimage, the voyagers set their gaze upon the Creator of heaven and earth- the God of the hills and of Jerusalem. The travelers do not let fear stop them from making the treacherous trip to the holy city, rather, they declare amidst their terrifying journey that they trust in the Lord to watch over them, protect them from harm, and deliver them safely.

Re-read the Psalm with this context in mind. Most of us have very pleasant walks, drives, or train rides to our churches. Imagine risking your life to gather with believers in worship.

Can you think of a time when you were in a difficult season and you declared the confidence that you have in the Lord amidst fear to remain hopeful throughout that challenge? I love that the Psalmist is acknowledging God's provision over their lives throughout the scary journey, not just after they arrived safely.

Although I know in my head that God is in control, I often find it difficult to trust God despite anxiety in my life. It is sometimes a constant battle for me to live without fear, but it can be as simple as speaking God's truth over my life to put my fear into perspective with God's faithfulness and provision. He watches over those that walk with him and cares for us so deeply. I pray that we all learn from the Psalmist and would be believers that acknowledge God as our physical protector and keeper, and our faithful shield from evil.

Prayer

Our protective and powerful Father, you alone have the power to give and take life. In this moment I trust you to take care of me, and I pray this moment of trust turns into a lifetime of trusting in your protective love. In Jesus' name, amen.

Tuesday, March 14 - Lindsay C.

SCRIPTURE

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? 2 If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. 3 What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”[a]

4 Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. 5 However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.

Romans 4:1-5 NIV

Reflection

Doing good works to earn God’s grace, love, and acceptance is not what God wants. Paul is telling us in this letter that we already have these things through Jesus Christ, and there is nothing we can do to earn it. Even the worst of sinners are saved and have God’s grace as long as they accept Jesus.

I was always raised to believe that good people go to heaven and sinners go to hell. So naturally, because I was a sinner and always knew it, I knew I was going to hell.

One would think this is the thinking of a child, and it was but unfortunately I carried this fear of never being good enough to truly be forgiven until very recently, and I am nearly forty. I was a lost cause, or so I thought. I had done so many terrible things throughout my life, and I thought there was no hope for me. I tried to convince myself otherwise when I was baptized last year, and Pastor Daniel kept telling me I already had God’s grace and there was no such thing as a lost cause. I wanted to believe him, but I just couldn’t.

This past year proved to be one of the most awaking and painful years of my life at the same time. I fell into a deep, shameful spiral and felt so far away from God. I had disappointed him and once again convinced myself what a sinner I was. I started really reading the Bible and praying on the words trying to understand them. Pastor Daniel was relentless in his quest for me to see how loved I am and what grace really means.

After months of prayer, study, and the unwavering love and support of my church family, I know now that my love for Jesus Christ and my strong faith in him is what he desires above all else. I will continue to struggle against sin here on earth because I am human, but by God’s grace I know I will return to my Heavenly Father.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for proving me wrong and loving me in spite of my sins against you. I trust you, and since I have given my life to you I receive your words of grace that say I am no longer a sinner, but I am a child of God thanks to the faithfulness of my Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Wednesday, March 15 - Anca

SCRIPTURE

13 For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. 14 For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15 For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

Romans 4:13-15 ESV

Reflection

If you have kids (or not!), you might be the kind of person who thrives on a routine/structure, and if your kids take after you, you're going to stick to it as much as you can - you know, for sanity purposes because at the end of the day, everyone is happier, calmer, and more at peace. Structure gives us a better sense of what is expected of us, and predictability gives us a sense of security.

Structure and "rules" in our family kind of go hand in hand. I am making a statement about certain behaviors that are not acceptable such as hitting or running too far away from mom as we are walking down the sidewalk.

The gospel is a lot like this in that sense. Galatians 4:5-7 talks about how we were all slaves under the law but God sent forth his son so that we may be adopted as sons and no longer slaves to that law. By becoming his children, we also become heirs worthy of what God has promised to us in Romans 4:13-15.

Structure, or the law, is good in that it shows me what my sins are. Without the law, I'd have no regard or knowledge of my sins (Romans 4:15). My Father won't make me an heir just because I follow a list of rules, but he will make me an heir because I have a relationship with him the way my children have a relationship with me.

Let's take a moment to meditate on the grace our Father has lavishly poured out on us for we are no longer bound by the law.

Prayer

Father, thank you for this beautiful promise. Thank you for the grace that frees us from the condemnation of the law but does not lack the simple truth that you also want to know us more. Lord, we know true obedience is one that is done in love, and so we just ask that you fill our hearts with a deep desire and willingness to love you more and more just as you first loved us. Amen.

Thursday, March 16 - Kari

SCRIPTURE

16 That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, 17 as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

Romans 4:16-17

Reflection

“If any of you feel called to serve at a church in Upstate NY, come talk to me after report hour.” These were the words that Daniel heard spoken by the President of the Seminary the day after the two of us had prayed in faith telling God our desire to serve him in ministry in the Northeast. We didn’t know anyone in the Northeast, and this made our desire feel far-fetched and unrealistic. Nevertheless, we decided to take the matter to the Lord in prayer. We were trusting, as Psalm 37:4 states, that God was the giver of this new desire in our hearts. Three short months later, we were leaving Mississippi to drive across the country with all our belongings to our new home and church family in Whitehall, New York, where Daniel was called to be their pastor.

No matter the circumstances around you, when you have a promise from God written in his word, then the promise is as strong and faithful as the guarantor of the promise. Abraham knew this and that is why his faith was “credited to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6).

God told Abraham he would have as many descendants as there were stars in the night sky, and Abraham believed him. It didn’t matter that he was nearly a hundred years old. It didn’t matter that his wife Sarah was ninety years old. It didn’t matter that she was barren. Abraham believed God before he believed his circumstances. He knew when God spoke a promise he would deliver it, even when in the physical world it seemed impossible. Abraham saw part of this promise fulfilled in the birth of his son Isaac. It was through the righteousness that comes by faith that the promise became reality.

We, too, must follow the example of our faith father Abraham. No matter what our circumstances, we must trust his word and the promises within. He is the only one who “gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not”. When we believe him in such a way, then, like Abraham, we will operate in unwavering faith. We will see the promises of God called into existence in our lives, even those that seem impossible.

Prayer

Father, Abraham’s faith has blessed us. We praise you for bringing into existence things that are not when we stand on the promises of your Word and walk by faith rather than sight.

Friday, March 17 - Larry

SCRIPTURE

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." 3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

John 3:1-17

Reflection

When I was in the early years of being a Christian, I would often pray to God asking him to "come back" into my life after I'd sinned. I was so fearful that I had done something to cause him to revoke my salvation or that maybe since I was sinning so much I was never a real Christian in the first place. If I had more fully understood this interaction between Jesus and Nicodemus I would've had a much easier time confessing my sin and looking to Jesus for grace instead of worrying about my standing with him.

In Numbers 21 the people of Israel complained about God sending them into the wilderness and God sends venomous snakes among them and many were bitten and died. After they confessed their sin and asked for the snakes to be removed God did something surprising. Instead of removing them he told Moses to make a bronze replica and put it on a pole saying, "anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." Jesus tells Nicodemus in John 3 that just as Moses had lifted the snake, so too would he be lifted and just as whoever looked upon the snake would live, anyone who looks on Jesus and believes will live.

It is God's plan that you have life, not condemnation. You have been given a savior who stands ready to give life where your sin has resulted in death, just as the snakes killed many Israelites. However, you don't find that life in a magical prayer or through a game of cat and mouse with your creator like I practiced as a young Christian. Life is found by looking to Jesus in the midst of your sin - he stands, ready to save. Along your journey, as someone who has been born of the Spirit, fix your eyes on the one who gives life.

Prayer

Father, help me to remember that your grace and my standing before you are not based on my works or my ability to match up to your perfection. Thank you for rescuing me - and for giving me a place to rest. I need you today to fight against my own selfishness and sin. Help me to trust you and look to you in every moment. In Jesus' name, amen.

Saturday, March 18 - Daniel

SCRIPTURE

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. 3 And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." 5 He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." 8 And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

9 And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead."

Matthew 17:1-9 ESV

Reflection

Wow! If you read through this Scripture and didn't sense the magnitude of what happened, I hope you will pause right now and read it again. Outside of the resurrection of Jesus, this is one of the most powerful displays of the glory of Jesus in the entire Bible. Jesus goes up the mountain with the three men closest to him; Peter, James, and John. They go up the mountain and something spectacular happens in their presence. It appears that heaven and earth collide.

Jesus, who is shining brightly, is seen with Moses and Elijah. Interestingly, we don't have evidence of either Elijah or Moses dying in the Bible. Elijah was taken away to heaven, and Moses is hinted to have been taken to heaven in Jude 9, so neither of these prophets of God died in the normal way. They were both seen as great prophets with Moses likely being the greatest. When Peter saw them, he thought he should build a tabernacle for them, but the Lord was being revealed as someone greater than a prophet. He was revealed as the beloved Son of God (v5).

Peter didn't understand what was going on, and I often feel that way in my relationship with the Lord. I think, "Why can't God just give me clear directions, so I don't have to make a fool of myself like Peter?" I believe the reason is this: the Lord wants me to trust him more than he wants me to perfectly follow him. I take comfort from Peter. He was courageous and he loved Jesus. Even though he made mistakes and even denied the Lord, he tried his best to follow Jesus. Today I am reminded that God doesn't expect me to be perfect, but he simply wants me to delight in him and listen to him.

Prayer

Lord, I frequently don't understand what you're doing and where you're leading me, but I bow before you today and worship you. You alone are worthy of worship and praise. You are greater than a prophet. You are the Son of God. Amen.

Sunday, March 19 - John

SCRIPTURE

All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the Lord, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. 2 Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" 3 But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" 4 So Moses cried to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." 5 And the Lord said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. 6 Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink." And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. 7 And he called the name of the place Massah[a] and Meribah,[b] because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the Lord by saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?"

Exodus 17:1-7 ESV

Reflection

Everyone doubts. For many Christians, 'doubt' is a scary word. We are tempted to fear our own unbelief, thinking that somehow our confusion or disbelief will make us unlovable to God. I know intellectually that I am supposed to 'have faith,' but I am often filled with doubt nonetheless. So what does this mean about my relationship with God? Too many of us take our doubts and bury them deep down hoping that we will forget they are there or that somehow they will magically disappear. This is not usually the case. If we avoid our doubts and cover them up, they often fester and grow. In today's passage, Moses does the opposite. Rather than grumbling about his situation (like the people around him), or burying worries in the back of his mind, he confesses them. He faces them. He brings them to God. Verse 4 says, "Moses cried to the Lord." When he did, God came through in a mighty way and provided in the most unexpected of places. He provided water from a rock.

One time of great doubt in my life was in 2010 when my dad passed away. It was completely unexpected and I was so sad and discouraged. I knew that my family would never be the same again. Many doubts raced to the top of my mind and it felt that my faith in God was being challenged every moment of every day. I despaired. I grieved. And it often seemed I had more questions than answers. Yet God continued to speak to me. It was also during this time that I could sense God's presence more forcefully than I ever had. I prayed and tried to turn my doubting heart over to God. He listened and, over time, he has continued to heal me from this crushing loss. He gives me hope that I will see my dad again. He reminds me that he has purposes for my life and for my family and that he loves us - even when I can't understand my circumstances fully.

Think of the ways you've been hurt. Remember the doubts that sometimes threaten your faith in God. Spend time confessing them. We do not have to shy away from our doubts. God is REAL and is patient with us in our disbelief. He often gives us answers, but, even better, he always gives us himself. He is present now with you. You have his full attention. Cry out to God.

Prayer

"God, thank you for hearing me. I often struggle with doubts of my own, yet I know that you are real and true. Thank you for being there, even when I cannot sense you. Help me to see beyond my temporary circumstances to the deeper, eternal circumstances that I am in. Help me to see you throughout the day and to notice how you are working in my life - even in the smallest things. In Jesus' name, Amen."

Monday, March 20 - Larry

SCRIPTURE

*Oh come, let us sing to the Lord;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
2 Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
3 For the Lord is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
4 In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
5 The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.*

Psalm 95

Reflection

When I have made the decision to give in to the impulse to sin, whether it's being quick to anger with my children, resenting someone else's business success, glorying in their defeat, or diving into an indulgence, I am not positioned well to "sing to the Lord." Certainly giving in to temptation is my biggest distraction from praising God. What distracts you from singing God's praises? Maybe it's the stress from your job or a co-worker, grief and/or confusion caused by the loss of a loved one, reliance on material wealth and possessions, apathy or resentment because of what has seemed like God not using his control and power over creation the way you would. Think about it for a minute.

The time most of us have the most difficulty singing praise to God is when things on earth have captivated our worry, emotion, or time and energy. The beauty of Psalm 95 is that God is a great God and King, owner of the depths and heights, seas and land regardless of your current circumstances.

Reread verses 1-2 and follow its instructions. Take a moment and sing to the Lord because of Jesus, the King who died so his enemies (you and I) could rule with him for eternity.

Prayer

"Father, remind me today of your gentle kindness and compelling goodness in my times of temptation. I know that you love me and am thankful that you pursue me even when I have failed you. Draw my heart to you and help me to flee temptation. Strengthen me with the Holy Spirit as I face the day you've set before me. Amen."

Tuesday, March 21 - Katie

SCRIPTURE

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3 Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Romans 5:1-5 ESV

Reflection

There are days when I am arrested by an overwhelming anxiety: Am I where I should be and doing what I am supposed to do? It can be easy to live life in fear of making a mistake; the things of this life are often fraught with desperation and struggle. On an almost daily basis, as I walk to the train station in the early morning hours, I find myself beseeching the Lord to be my joy and strength that day. This stems from my daily realization that, in my own strength, I can never make it through the day – this will only be possible with his spirit living through me.

Paul wrote to the Roman church and encouraged them to live a life of peace not because their life would have zero troubles, but because of the hope that springs from knowing Jesus as Savior. In these verses, Paul lays out for us a natural cycle for our lives: suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame. So often we are afraid of suffering or hard times because it seems shameful, as if we did not measure up enough to get a good life. Believing and living in that shame would be a buying into a lie from the evil one. In the midst of suffering, we are developing character and ultimately a reliance on Him.

What a radical thought it is that the Holy Spirit has put HIS love into my heart; like my daily prayer, it is no longer about me at all, but all about Him. Because we have the Holy Spirit living inside us, we should walk in peace and it should stir us to rejoice no matter our circumstances. By living in truth and not our emotions [letting the Spirit control us] we can know that HOPE is the end result of any suffering.

Our good and gracious Father calls us to live a life of freedom and hope. As we walk into today and the turmoil of the broken world we currently call home, may the focus be on peace that leads to rejoicing.

Prayer

Father, help me to walk in this hope and freedom. Remind me of the peace I have been provided in you. Still my heart. Calm me. Free me from my anxiety. Help me now and today to breathe in your grace. Help me see through suffering to the hope and beauty that you are creating in me through your spirit. Help me to walk in peace today, even when things get difficult. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Wednesday, March 22 - Renata

SCRIPTURE

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Romans 5:6-11 NIV

Reflection

As a kid, I daydreamed constantly about being a hero. Not just a superhero, but any old hero. I was electrified by the words of Patrick Henry "Give me liberty or give me death!", by Aragorn's oath to live or die to help Frodo get the ring to Mordor. Every hero needs a cause worth dying for. But think of that word--'worth'--what is 'worth' dying for? Who is 'worth' dying for? For me, I think of family and friends. Maybe innocent strangers. But who among us wants to die for a group of rapists? Maybe a pack of vicious murderers?

Romans 5:7 reminds us that Christ never questioned if we were worth it. Objectively, we probably weren't. He didn't lay down his life for a group of innocents or dear friends. He offered himself up as a sacrifice for the cruel, the unapologetic, the tainted, the self-righteous--his father's enemies. Verses 6-8 tell us how unprecedented and undeserved this sacrifice is. Christ became our hero even when we didn't seem like a cause worth dying for. But the heroism didn't end there. It continues because we are justified, saved, and reconciled each day through him. We're not just worth dying for, we're worth living for.

Prayer

Father, thank you for being the hero I need. Help me, in my daily desires to do what is right and help others, to trust only in you and not in my own abilities. Thank you for seeing me in my many imperfections and choosing me. Help me to remember that you are pursuing my heart even today. I turn my eyes to you and trust in you.

Amen.

Thursday, March 23 - Manu

SCRIPTURE

1 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John 2 (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), 3 he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. 4 And he had to pass through Samaria. 5 So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

John 4:1-6 NIV

Reflection

It may be hard to understand what Jesus was doing at Jacob's well, weary, at noon, in the heat of the day, after he had sent his disciples into the nearby town. Wouldn't it have been better to also go into town and get refreshments from there, considering his weariness? But Jesus knew he had an appointment with someone who wasn't expecting anyone else at the well. A woman who, judging by the time she went to get water, was doing her best to avoid other people. She was ostracized and marginalized because of her past and present. But Jesus wasn't like other people. He cared about the least of these.

These verses indicate that Jesus "had" to go through Samaria. Why? He could've avoided the entire region of Samaria and just gone around it on his way to Galilee, like all the other self-respecting Jews of the day. But he needed to pass through Samaria and meet this woman. And also meet the Samaritan townspeople who would believe in him. Jesus did not ignore the marginalized. He sought them out, waited patiently for them in the heat of the day and gave them eternal satisfaction. This is what he did for us. He waited patiently for us and met and gave us a never ending fountain of living water. How could we not go out and do the same for others? Our challenge today is to realize that we also "have" to make time for the homeless, to give our money to the needy, to build relationships with the marginalized that will show them the love of Jesus and his eternal living water.

Prayer

*Father, give me the same heart for the marginalized, for the hurt and for the least of these that Your Son has.
Amen.*

Friday, March 24 - Paula

SCRIPTURE

7 A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." 8 (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." 11 The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." 13 Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." 15 The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

16 Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." 17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true." 19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. 20 Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." 21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 22 You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." 25 The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." 26 Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

John 4:7-26 ESV

Reflection

Throughout the Gospel of John a recurring theme is seen through the repetition of the verb "to give" (John 3:16 – gave His only Son; John 6:31 – give bread from heaven; John 8:12 – give light of life). At the well, Jesus asks the woman from Samaria to "give [him] a drink". This request surprises the woman as she immediately points out that a Jew should not share things with Samaritans, who were considered unclean. Yet, Jesus not only asks to be given a drink but He offers to give the woman "living water". Jesus takes a bold initiative in approaching the unsaved that breaks any social construct related to culture or tradition.

Today I'm reminded that Jesus approaches the lost with a love that sees beyond cultural and moral constructs. We learn from this passage that the woman was also currently living with a man that she was not married to and that she's been married five times. In the public eye, she was unclean morally and culturally she was seen unfit to hang out with a man like Jesus. However, Jesus is interested in knowing her. He does not let immoral past predict her potential, neither is her different culture upbringing stopping Him to offer her water that satisfies her thirst forever. Jesus is kind and bold in His compassion for this woman. Such a great reminder that God sees me and you as special and worth of giving His most astonishing gifts that last forever! God sees you and me at our greatest potential. He looks past the fissures in our broken vessels. He is capable of taking our brokenness and filling the void in our lives with satisfying eternal life. In God's presence we have the potential to be forever abundant.

Prayer

God today I want to give You myself, a broken vessel. I am thirsty for your presence. Fill the emptiness in my life and satiate my longing for You! Amen.

Saturday, March 25 - John

SCRIPTURE

27 Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you seek?" or, "Why are you talking with her?" 28 So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, 29 "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" 30 They went out of the town and were coming to him. 31 Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, "Rabbi, eat." 32 But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." 33 So the disciples said to one another, "Has anyone brought him something to eat?" 34 Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work. 35 Do you not say, 'There are yet four months, then comes the harvest'? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. 36 Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. 41 And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."

John 24:27-42 ESV

Reflection

This passage reveals God's heart for people. He loves us. He loves you. It is tempting and often easy to forget these seemingly basic truths - and that's why we must return to stories like this one over and over again. The author writes that Jesus was speaking to a Samaritan woman. The idea of a man and woman speaking in public was already scandalous at this time in history, but this particular person was a Samaritan. There was deep hostility between the Jewish people and Samaritan people. Many would have seen her and considered her unworthy of conversation. This is not the heart of Jesus.

On the contrary, Jesus disregards the racism of his people, crosses social boundaries, looks at someone completely different than himself, and speaks life into her situation. In so doing, he communicates the deepest love imaginable. The woman's testimony is incredible. She says about Jesus, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did." This one man, God in the flesh, can see through us. He knows our heart, our past, our future, our deepest thoughts, our wishes, and even the undisclosed motives of our hearts. And yet he loves us still.

The response from the Samaritan community is overwhelming. "We know that this is indeed the Savior of the world." Consider for a moment a group of people that you are supposed to hate. What type of ethnicity, socioeconomic class, religious group, or political party are you supposed to consider your enemy? How do you treat people from this group? Remember that how you treat those different than you may just shape the story of your life - and theirs. How you treat people, especially those unlike you, will show the unbelieving world what your God is like. Remember Jesus today.. the God-man who came for you! As a sinner who should have been his enemy, I am astonished that Jesus pursues me. This is the kind of God we serve, a missionary God who crosses every boundary to pursue his people. Spend some time praying now. Thank God that he wants you and has paid the highest price to bring you peace, joy, love, forgiveness, and freedom.

Prayer

God, help me to live in the grace that you have given me and pass on to others the kindness that you have toward me on a daily basis. I do not deserve your love. Help me to love my enemy, my friends, my neighbors, and anyone you put in my path. Amen.

Sunday, March 26 - Daniel

SCRIPTURE

10 Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz: 11 "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." 12 But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test." 13 And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Isaiah 7:10-14 ESV

Reflection

You have probably heard the scripture in James 4:2, "You do not have, because you do not ask." Well this is a story of "You did not ask like God said, but God's going to do it anyway." The Lord told Ahaz to ask for a sign from God, but Ahaz did not want to test the Lord. Then Isaiah, the prophet of God, said, "God is going to give you a sign and a virgin will conceive, have a son, and name him, "Immanuel."

This is supposed to sound familiar as it is a Messianic text. This is a prophecy of the Lord Jesus coming to be born to a virgin, and the name "Immanuel" means "God with us." God was going to come to rescue his people through sending his Son to be the perfect sacrifice for us. Instead of having to work our way to God, God was coming down from heaven to bring us up to him.

It's frustrating as a parent to tell your kids something that is good for them and then have them defiantly say, "No, I won't do that." You tell them to put on their coat because it's minus 12 degrees outside, but they try to go out anyway in just a long sleeve shirt. At this point, you pull the parent card and say, "No. You're going to put on your coat whether you like it or not." We do that because we love our children and know what is best for them. In a much greater way, the Lord loves us and always knows what is best for us. I'm so thankful he sent his Son to rescue us from sin and death, even when we didn't understand his plan or obey him. The Lord is good.

Prayer

Lord, today I will do my best to remember that you know better than I do. When you ask me to do something, I ask that you give me faith to trust you. Thank you for coming to the earth to be with us and rescue us.

Amen.

Monday, March 27 - Lindsey M.

SCRIPTURE

*My heart overflows with a pleasing theme;
I address my verses to the king;
my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe.*
2 *You are the most handsome of the sons of men;
grace is poured upon your lips;
therefore God has blessed you forever.*
3 *Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one,
in your splendor and majesty!*
4 *In your majesty ride out victoriously
for the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness;
let your right hand teach you awesome deeds!*

Pslam 45:1-4 ESV

Reflection

I am currently reading *The Magician's Nephew* to my boys. Most recently, Polly and Digory have entered a new world, hear a beautiful voice singing, and as the voice gets closer and closer, the evil witch becomes powerless. Digory and Polly see the voice in all it's glory, a Lion, with a majestic mane and power beyond anything they have seen. He is obviously righteous and kingly and it's a beautiful sight. In these verses, David is writing a maskil, or musical poem, about God's supreme beauty. He is in awe of the power of the Father and ready to worship!

If you have read any of the Narnia books, you know there is a battle to eventually be fought against the evil Witch. David recognizes that there is a battle in life and he is encouraging through poetry to ride victoriously - through truth and meekness. In my mind, meekness and victorious fighting don't go hand in hand. However, in our everyday lives, we can "fight" with meekness, or strength under control.

We may not be standing up against the wicked Witch, but there is a darkness and a power in this world that must be fought through the swords of righteousness held fast by the people of God. When we stand with the true King, we can fight against our own sin, for those around us that are caught in sin or despair, and for truth. Verse 5 promises that when arrows of righteousness are shot, they will cause evil to fall under us. We are victorious when we fight for justice with the King by our side. And it will be a beautiful sight!

Prayer

Father, you are our KING! We praise you, and we are as ready warriors, ready to fight darkness in our world with you by our side. Help us to be truth seekers, strong and under control, armed with the fruit of the spirit. We know that in the end, Jesus will be victorious! Amen.

Tuesday, March 28 - John

SCRIPTURE

5 Your arrows are sharp
in the heart of the king's enemies;
the peoples fall under you.

6 Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.
The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness;
7 you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness.
Therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions;

8 your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia.
From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad;

9 daughters of kings are among your ladies of honor;
at your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir.

10 Hear, O daughter, and consider, and incline your ear:
forget your people and your father's house,
11 and the king will desire your beauty.
Since he is your lord, bow to him.

Psalm 45:5-11 ESV

Reflection

In this passage, the Psalmist describes a few ways that God had blessed the reigning King of his day. God is a good father who loves to empower and care for those who follow him. Every verse represents another way that God had touched the life of this King. I have seen evidence of this kind of blessing many times in my own life. Even when I don't deserve it, God has taken care of me in both ordinary and extraordinary ways! Think quietly to yourself about a few ways that God has blessed you. Spend some time thanking God for the gifts he provides.

This passage makes me think back to when I first moved to New York. As I prepared to move, I was deeply concerned about where I would live. Being from the Midwest, I was accustomed to spacious apartments costing less than \$700/month. However, as I looked through page after page of NYC apartment listings, I found few options in Astoria for less than \$1,200 - and most were far more than that. In those days I would spend a lot of time stressing and looking at one place only to discover that it had already been sold, was far away from the train, or had a major bug problem. Finding a place to live from so far away felt impossible.

Thankfully, God provided through Connection Church. Kari and Daniel McGhee and a few others combed the ads, made calls, and paid visits to different locations. They worked hard to help me find a place and, in the end, I settled into a cozy apartment on 27th street. God provided for me - and he does this relentlessly in the lives of those who follow him. In fact, the greatest blessing we receive from following God is not just the peripheral things he provides - but a relationship with God himself. Spend a few minutes thinking of where you were before God showed up in your life. Then think about what it means to have a personal relationship with him. This is an incredible gift we can not forget in our daily lives. Thank God for his presence with you today.

Prayer

Father, thank you for loving me, for pursuing me, for adopting me, and for providing for me. Help me to trust you today. Help me to rest in the work that you have done on my behalf. I love you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Wednesday, March 29 - Jonny

SCRIPTURE

12 The people of Tyre will seek your favor with gifts,
the richest of the people.
13 All glorious is the princess in her chamber,
with robes interwoven with gold.
14 In many-colored robes she is led to the king,
with her virgin companions following behind her.
15 With joy and gladness they are led along
as they enter the palace of the king.
16 In place of your fathers shall be your sons;
you will make them princes in all the earth.
17 I will cause your name to be remembered in all generations;
therefore nations will praise you forever and ever.

Psalm 45:12-17 ESV

Reflection

With a smile on my face and butterflies in my stomach, I waited. I waited at the altar for those doors to open so that I could catch a glimpse of my bride. I waited for her to walk down that aisle, and join me in the front. If you have been to a wedding before, you know that there are only two people on display. No one in that room is happier, more beautiful, or more glowing than the bride and the groom. What better way to illustrate our relationship with God than the most beautiful, extravagant wedding you have ever seen?

This passage shows us exactly how we, the church, ought to react to God's glory and God's beauty. We should be as the princess, in many-colored robes interwoven with gold, just waiting in anticipation to be called into His presence. We are to enter with joy and gladness to the palace of the King. We should not show up empty-handed either. God has no need of anything we can offer, yet we are called to set aside everything and come to Him with the best gift we can. The city of Tyre was a rich and splendid city, so just as the passage states, we too are to seek His favor with our gifts. We will be the princes of the earth, so naturally we should strive to make God's name the name above all other names, remembered through all generations.

Never let a day go by without the praise of the Father on your lips.

As we continue our fast, remember that we have hope through Jesus Christ. We, too, can be clothed in robes woven with gold; all we need to do is set aside our earthly wants and desires, and instead start to desire God as our Savior and King.

Prayer

God, we thank you for allowing us to be your bride. We thank you for the blessings you continually pour out upon us, and we pray that we never let a day go by without your praise on our lips. Remind us that we are come to you with reverence, and with joy and gladness. Let your name be praised forever and ever. Amen.

Thursday, March 30 - Larry

SCRIPTURE

4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

5 Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,

“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,

but a body have you prepared for me;

6 in burnt offerings and sin offerings

you have taken no pleasure.

7 Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God,

as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’ ”

8 When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin

offerings” (these are offered according to the law), 9 then he added, “Behold, I have come to do your will.” He does away with the

first in order to establish the second. 10 And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once

for all.

Hebrews 10:4-10 ESV

Reflection

When I asked Lindsey to marry me and she said, “yes,” she was set apart to be my wife. Then 7 months later, as we stood at the altar and agreed to a lifelong covenant, we became husband and wife. Now, every day, both of us are bound by that covenant to set ourselves apart for the good of the other, to love and cherish, pray for and serve, honor and listen...the list goes on. We were once dedicated to become husband and wife and now we are dedicated each day to that continuing reality, growing closer with each turn in our journey.

The writer of Hebrews is teaching about a similar reality in our passage today. God does not and never has longed for our sacrifices to appease his wrath. In fact, his will all along has been for his Son to become the acceptable offering to restore a healthy relationship with humanity. All previous sacrifices were simply a shadow of this sacrifice, as the law was just a shadow of the Gospel.

Christ laid down his life and set the church apart as his bride-to-be. He is the perfect friend - always giving, never taking. You have been sanctified, which means you are dedicated to become holy. You are also *being* sanctified, which means you are being made holy by his Spirit. I love and serve him just as I strive to honor my wife in all things, not in order to earn her love but to display my own. Remember today that when you trust Christ you are sanctified and this is the will of God - that you will grow closer in each turn in your journey, not so he will love you, but because he loves you.

Prayer

Thank you, Jesus for initiating this covenant with me. I trust you with my life. Pull me closer to you today. Amen.

Friday, March 31 - Daniel

SCRIPTURE

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" 29 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. 30 And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Luke 1:26-33 ESV

Reflection

Sometimes the message God gives to us does not bring us comfort. Sometimes it troubles us deeply. Mary was told by the angel Gabriel to "Rejoice!" and that she was highly favored by God. Then the angel dropped a bombshell on her; she was going to have a baby that was not her husband's because she didn't have a husband. In fact, she was a virgin. How was she going to explain this to her fiancé, Joseph, and to her family?

The angel went on to tell her how special this baby would be, but can you imagine receiving that news in such a miraculous way and having to explain it to other people? She must have been terrified for many reasons. She was going to have to tell her fiancé she was pregnant by God and that the baby was going to be the Son of God; the Messiah. Would you believe her? If you were Mary, would you feel "highly favored" by God?

Sometimes the Lord asks us to do things that do not make sense or fit into our plans. I'm sure Mary had other ideas for how to start her marriage and family with Joseph. We have the benefit of seeing how favored she was to carry the Lord Jesus and be the mother of God's Son, but she had to endure the hours, days, weeks, months, and years of living a life that others most certainly judged and looked down on in negative ways. It must have been very hard for her to sacrifice so much.

When the Lord troubles you with a word that brings discomfort and fear, remember Mary's faith and trust of God. Even though it didn't make sense to her, she stayed faithful and followed God's leading with strength and integrity. She was greatly blessed, above all women, for her obedience, too. Trust the Lord. He knows what he's doing.

Prayer

Lord, it isn't always easy to hear what you have planned for our lives. Thank you for giving Mary the strength and faith to follow you, and today I ask for that same courageous faith to obey you as she did. Amen.

Saturday, April 1 - Shannon

SCRIPTURE

34 And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

35 And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. 36 And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Luke 1:34-38 ESV

Reflection

"I don't understand what you're doing."

"How much longer do I have to wait?"

"I want to trust you, but it's really hard right now."

"How could this possibly be part of a 'good' plan?"

These are all things that, if I'm being honest, I've asked God this past year. I don't know why I repeatedly expect to understand and be able to somewhat predict what an all-powerful, holy God has planned. However, this made reading Mary's interaction in these verses both relatable and challenging. In verse 34 she also questions what God is speaking to her through the angel, Gabriel. "How will this be since I am a virgin?" Honestly, that's probably what I would ask in that moment, too. How merciful for God to include this question. How comforting that God knows we will also have questions, and he will allow us to bring them to him. However, by verse 38 Mary is not still questioning. "Behold I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." What an example of trust in the midst of God doing something unbelievable and confusing. And yet, we know that it ultimately was the beginning of God's greatest act of love towards each of us.

Prayer

Lord, thank you for being a God that can handle our questions. Thank you for giving us examples, like Mary, of how to be honest with you. I pray that in our questions we won't lose our trust in you and we won't stay permanently in a place of doubt. Teach our hearts to say, "Behold I am a servant of the Lord; let it be done according to your word," even during the most confusing times.

Sunday, April 2 - Emily

SCRIPTURE

"The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley;[a] it was full of bones. 2 And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. 3 And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord God, you know." 4 Then he said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5 Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath[b] to enter you, and you shall live. 6 And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord." 7 So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling,[c] and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8 And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. 9 Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." 10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.

Ezekiel 37:1-10 ESV

Reflection

In the previous chapter, God promises the people of Israel that put their faith in him that he will give them a new heart and a new spirit. In chapter 37, Ezekiel, a prophet, describes a vision that he received from the Lord in which God told him to speak life over dry bones and he would give them life and breath. Ezekiel's vision is an illustration of the death to life transformation that a person experiences when they become a Christian. The scripture says that the bones were very dry, showing us that nothing is too far gone for Jesus to bring to life.

God calls Ezekiel out to speak life over the dry bones in the Spirit of the Lord. God does not ask us to study and declare his word and truth alone. Rather, he invites us to do so by the power of his Holy Spirit living inside of us. God could have given life to the dry bones on his own. He did not NEED Ezekiel to do so. Similarly, he does not NEED us to bring life to our neighbors, however, it is a privilege that he chooses to invite us to do so.

I used to have a very religious and 'dry' view of God. I thought being a Christian meant going to church on Sundays 'one day' when you had a family. Through the power of God's Holy Spirit and by reading his living word, God transformed my heart to know and trust Jesus on a personal level. He turned a dry view into a living and active relationship.

Can you identify dry places in your life? Areas where you say, "I've always been this way," or, "it's a lost cause." I challenge you to speak life into those places. The word of God is living and active. God calls us to speak his word, the gospel of life, into dead places. I pray we would accept God's invitation to bring life to the dry places in our lives, and to bring life to our neighbors by the power of his Holy Spirit, and by speaking his living word.

Prayer

God, thank you for being a life-giver. Remind me of the life you have given me in the Spirit and challenge me to share that life with all I encounter today. Amen.

Monday, April 3 - Anca

SCRIPTURE

11 Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.' 12 Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. 13 And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. 14 And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord."

Ezekiel 37:11-14 ESV

Reflection

"We are completely cut off." (v. 11) That sentence puts it all into perspective for me. I can be a total drama queen sometimes and begin to think God isn't listening to me anymore. In verse 11, the Israelites tell us they actually felt like the Lord's presence was no longer with them. Can you imagine that? Really, now. Close your eyes and try to remember a time when you've felt like nothing could possibly fix your situation: you had no more hope. You tried to see a light at the end of the tunnel but even that seemed so impossible, not even God could do anything about it. He had deserted you, and it was too late for any sort of mending.

When I become lost in my own anxieties, I can easily forget God is in control. I begin to manipulate my circumstances and do more "good things" that would cause God to love me enough. How backwards is that?! He's promised me he will never leave me or forsake me. So, why do I forget that truth? Why do I diminish his work on the cross, his power, his love for me? Why do I humanize him, thinking I've strayed away too much, or so often that I am not deserving of any mercy? Because at the end of the day, my heart is as rebellious and sinful as that of the Israelites.

The truth is, even though it's difficult for us to see it sometimes, his promises hold true. He ends by declaring, "When I dig up graves and bring you out as my people, you'll realize that I am God. I'll breathe life into you and you'll live. Then I'll lead you straight back to your land, and you'll realize that I am God. I've said it, and I'll do it." (v. 13 & 14, The Message)

Prayer

Lord, you have said you will never leave us or forsake us. I pray you let that truth run into our hearts and minds even in the darkest of times. Help us not to doubt any longer and return to you. Amen.

Tuesday, April 4 - Kari

SCRIPTURE

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!

2 *O Lord, hear my voice!*

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my pleas for mercy!

3 *If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,*

O Lord, who could stand?

4 *But with you there is forgiveness,*

that you may be feared.

5 *I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,*

and in his word I hope;

6 *my soul waits for the Lord*

more than watchmen for the morning,

more than watchmen for the morning.

7 *O Israel, hope in the Lord!*

For with the Lord there is steadfast love,

and with him is plentiful redemption.

8 *And he will redeem Israel*

from all his iniquities.

Psalm 130 ESV

Reflection

Psalm 130 is part of a group of psalms (120-134) called the Psalms of Ascents. The pilgrims, on their way to Jewish festivals, would sing these songs as they journeyed to Jerusalem. The songs were sung as a way to prepare their hearts for worship before arriving at the temple. The words of today's psalm would remind them of their lowly standing in the presence of the Holy One.

I get an uncomfortable feeling when I read these words of Charles Spurgeon, "Too many think lightly of sin, and therefore think lightly of the Savior." To cry out for mercy, you must feel something of the depths of your guilt. If Isaiah, a godly man and prophet, cried out, "Woe to me! I am ruined!" (Isaiah 6:5) upon seeing God on his throne in a vision, how much more am I in the depths?

I'm comforted by the psalmist's example of fervently crying out to God. It reflects his awareness that although God is on high while he is in the depths of sin and guilt, the huge chasm can be crossed by God's forgiveness. His declaration, "But there is forgiveness with you" in verse 4 floods my fear-stricken soul with relief. By my own merit, I am indeed doomed, but God is merciful. Today, as the psalmist proclaimed, so will I, "in his word I put my hope" "for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption."

Prayer

Father, thank you for the great mercy we receive through the sacrifice of Jesus. Today, we place our hope in your unfailing love. Amen.

Wednesday, April 5 - Larry

SCRIPTURE

6 For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. 8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

9 You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10 But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

Romans 8:6-11 ESV

Reflection

Today you will see and hear many things that will fight for the attention of your mind. Begin the day by setting your mind on these things - things, not of the flesh, but of the Spirit. Say these sentences out loud, or whisper them under your breath if you're in public:

I am a child of God.

I am a friend of Jesus.

I have been justified and redeemed.

I am not and will not be condemned by God.

I have been set free from the law of sin and death.

I have been accepted in Christ.

In Christ Jesus I have wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.

My body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who dwells in me.

God leads me in the triumph and knowledge of Christ.

I am a new creature in Christ.

I am no longer a slave but a child and an heir.

I am chosen, holy, and blameless before God.

I am redeemed and forgiven by the grace of Christ.

I am God's workmanship created to produce good works.

I am a citizen of heaven.

I have been made complete in Christ.

In Christ, you are made whole. Fill yourself with these things. Set your mind on them and give good things to the world around you.

Prayer

Father, thank you for the hope we have in Christ. Remind us of our sin and its damaging effects and then comfort us with the rest of the Holy Spirit given to us by Jesus.

Thursday, April 6 - John

SCRIPTURE

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. 3 So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." 4 But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. 7 Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." 8 The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" 9 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." 11 After saying these things, he said to them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him." 12 The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." 13 Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. 14 Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died, 15 and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." 16 So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

John 11:1-16 ESV

Reflection

In today's passage, the author reveals something incredible and scandalous about Jesus. Read verse 8 again: "The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?'" Jesus had recently been threatened and chased out of town. People were angry and wanted to kill him, because he preached a Gospel contrary to the religion of the day. After escaping the stoning, he heard that his friend Lazarus was sick and going to die. What would Jesus do? His followers made it clear what they thought. They believed the logical decision was to flee.

However, consider Jesus' revolutionary reaction. It is absolutely astounding that he responded not with indifference, apathy, or self-seeking avoidance. In that same scenario, one could easily justify not returning. "I shouldn't go back... what if they kill me?" Thankfully, this was not - and is never - Jesus' mindset. Unlike the comfortable, self-serving religion of his time, Jesus went to dangerous places and often put his own safety on the line for others. He ended up risking his life by going back into potentially deadly territory to heal his friend. Jesus has done and continues to do the same for us. He went to the cross for us. And in our darkest moments, God reaches into our mess, our problems, our sin... and he brings light. Hope. Salvation. Forgiveness. Freedom.

Think back to the darkest time of your life and remember the following lines from a well-known Christian song *Never Once* by Matt Redman: "Scars and struggles on the way, but with joy our hearts can say... Yes, our hearts can say, 'Never once did we ever walk alone. Never once did you leave us on our own. You are faithful, God, you are faithful.'" If today you feel like Lazarus, if your sin or mistakes or current life circumstances are threatening to bury you, remember that God himself will pay any price to rescue you. He will never leave you alone. He has sacrificed all that he has to bring you back to him and he will never let you go. Never.

Prayer

Father, thank you for your sacrifice. I exalt you because you have brought salvation! Teach me to sacrifice for others the way you have sacrificed for me. Amen.

Friday, April 7 - Manu

SCRIPTURE

17 Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. 20 So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. 21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." 23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world."

John 11:17-27 ESV

Reflection

Is anything too hard for Jesus? Ostensibly, we already know the answer to this question. Yet at times, it may appear that Jesus arrived too late or that he let things get too out of hand. Mary and Martha certainly knew that Jesus was capable of healing any illness. After all, he was over to their home so many times that Lazarus was known as "he whom [Jesus] loves." So when he fell sick, they knew they had to reach out to Jesus. But then Jesus doesn't show up. He doesn't show up when Lazarus was sick. He doesn't show up when Lazarus dies. But maybe he'll catch them on the way to the cemetery and perform a last minute, emergency miracle, like he did in Nain for that widow's son. But no, Jesus missed the funeral and burial. Four whole days after Lazarus, beloved by Jesus, passes away, Jesus finally arrives at Bethany. Four days too late. By now, decomposition was taking its toll on the corpse, and the sisters' only hope was to see Lazarus again "on the last day."

Mary and Martha figured that it was too late for Jesus to do anything. And isn't this a feeling that we have a lot of times? We can think of a situation that's gotten so bad now, that there's nothing that can happen. That mean old neighbor of ours is too far gone for God to reach. Or our fits of anger are just something that we have to live with. But we, like Mary and Martha, are guilty of underestimating the One who is the "resurrection and the life." When Jesus gives us life, he gives us himself. And there's nothing he can't do. So let us fix our eyes on him and trust that the same One who raised four-day-old, smelly, decomposed Lazarus from the dead, who was raised by the Father and has been entrusted with all authority on heaven and earth, will do wonderful and powerful miracles in and through us, to show the world his glory for people's eternal happiness and joy.

Prayer

Jesus, you are worthy of my faith, and I place it in you today; expectantly waiting for you to perform the miracles needed in my life to see and know you more. Amen.

Saturday, April 8 - Melanie

SCRIPTURE

28 When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." 29 And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. 34 And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." 35 Jesus wept. 36 So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" 37 But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

38 Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. 39 Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." 40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" 41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me." 43 When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." 44 The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

45 Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him

John 11:28-45 ESV

Reflection

Everyone has gone through a time that was a struggle. When you fall into despair and are heartbroken. 2016 was one of those times for me- and I know it was for some of you. 2016 was difficult and at times I needed God's strength to make it through; to know that Jesus saw the pain and walked through it as well. Luckily, we can look to the scripture to see that Jesus is with people in their struggles and feels their pain.

As this passage notes, when Jesus comes to visit Mary and Martha after Lazarus' death, he cries with them. Jesus wept. Even Jesus, who knows that he will soon restore Lazarus from death, still grieves his death alongside his friends Mary and Martha. Our God isn't a distant being high above us; instead he will come and cry beside us in our sadness. Our pain is his pain.

Jesus could have blown past Martha and Mary and gone directly to Lazarus and immediately raised him from the dead. That would have still been a miracle. Instead, he pauses, and first cries for the death of his friend Lazarus and grieves the pain of his sisters before going on to call Lazarus out of his tomb and back to life. It reminds me that it is okay to be sad for a time. While we know there is eternal life in Jesus Christ, it is okay to feel pain at times in this life. Even Christ had to break down and weep before moving on to Lazarus' tomb. Sadness is not weakness; for everything there is a season, and sometimes the most urgent thing we can do is cry.

Prayer

Lord, thank you that you give us a safe shoulder to cry on. When we face loss and grief, we know you are there with us and that you will pause and allow us to feel the weight of our loss. We trust at the right time, you will restore to us with the joy of eternal life. Amen.

Sunday, April 9 - Lindsey M.

SCRIPTURE

4 The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary. Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. 5 The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I turned not backward. 6 I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting. 7 But the Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame. 8 He who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who is my adversary? Let him come near to me. 9 Behold, the Lord God helps me; who will declare me guilty? Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

Isaiah 50:4-9a ESV

Reflection

There is so much great encouragement that we as believers can gain from these verses by Isaiah. We are reminded to “have a tongue as those who are taught,” meaning to be a disciple. We are reminded to be humble and to encourage others along the way. These attributes grow as fruit from followers of Jesus. But what is interesting about these verses is that Isaiah is pointing to Jesus.

Jesus was the ultimate disciple. He humbled himself to be taught, to be available to the Father when the Father called Him to serve and obey, even until death. He did not “turn back,” though he could have denied the weight of the cross. He was disgraced and spat upon and the Lord helped him. Isaiah’s writings foretold the outcome of the future servant Jesus. I am reminded by these verses that because of Jesus and all that he endured on the cross, all that he humbly submitted to the Father, we too can follow his lead and submit our lives to our Father in Heaven. But we don’t have to be perfect. Jesus took all that upon himself. Today, Christian, rest in knowing that in our moments of weakness and shame, we can look to the one that was the perfect disciple. He was the perfect example of humility, strength, and endurance. “The Lord God helps me; who will declare me guilty?”

Prayer

Lord, thank you for taking away our shame. We thank you that we can sit at your feet, learn from you, and take that knowledge to others. You are our defender and with you we don’t need fear those things that strike or pull at us. Amen.

Monday, April 10 - Larry

SCRIPTURE

9 Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;
my eye is wasted from grief;
my soul and my body also.

10 For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my iniquity,
and my bones waste away.

11 Because of all my adversaries I have become a
reproach,
especially to my neighbors,
and an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.

12 I have been forgotten like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.

13 For I hear the whispering of many—
terror on every side!—
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.

14 But I trust in you, O Lord;
I say, "You are my God."

15 My times are in your hand;

*rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my
persecutors!*

16 *Make your face shine on your servant;
save me in your steadfast love!*

Psalms 31:9-16 ESV

Reflection

I never feel as alone and hopeless as I do the moment I am made aware of my own sin. Guilt is a powerful force that can drive anyone deep into shame, depression, self-loathing, self-harm, self-pity, and sheer despair.

David had some guilt here and felt attacked and alone. He was hopeless, not only because of his own iniquity, but also because of his enemies closing in around him. He, very poetically, made his case to the Lord in prayer. The beauty of his inner thought process is how it leads him straight into some pretty faithful, hopeful longings directed to God. "I trust in you, O Lord... 'You are my God,'" he proclaims. He gives over his ideas about when and how he should be saved by outlining his faith in God to take care of it; even reminding the Lord of his steadfast love and rescuing heart.

On this side of history, after the work of Jesus the Messiah, we can learn a lot from David's example in prayer. We have been filled with God's Holy Spirit and can quickly turn, as he did, from guilt into freedom. Guilt may be a powerful force, but when it tears us away from the love of God his grace guides us back to his love and forgiveness. God has rescued you from the hand of your enemies, his face shines upon you, and in his steadfast love he has saved you. Believer, linger no longer in the effects of your enemy's attacks or your own guilt, but stand firm in the freedom you have been given.

Prayer

Faithful Father, when I am reminded of my sin, show me forgiveness. When I am overwhelmed by my enemy or the cares of this world, show me the freedom I have in you. Amen.

Tuesday, April 11 - Lindsay C.

SCRIPTURE

- 1 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.
- 2 Let Israel say:
"His love endures forever."

Psalm 118:1-2 NIV

Reflection

This passage is used to herald Easter and the excitement it elicits in me is palpable. Jesus Christ is risen. And in Christ, we too shall rise. God's steadfast love endures forever! FOREVER!

When I was a little kid my family would go to the Easter Pageant every year at the Mormon Temple in Arizona. It was a huge production out on the great lawn, which was covered in lights and decorations. I knew we were going to celebrate that Christ had risen, but I also knew we would get peanut butter parfaits from Dairy Queen which we ate in the bright green, freshly cut grass in the warm Arizona sun with our friends and family, and I secretly looked forward to that so much more.

I knew when to feel sad during the production as the music boomed doom all around us, and I knew when to rise up to my feet and celebrate as Jesus appeared from behind the stone wearing a bright white robe with his hands reaching out to us, but most of the time I was relishing in the silky soft serve and the little girl chatter going on between my friends.

The thing is, I loved this production it was such a sweet memory for me, but I never really understood the true sacrifice that Jesus had made for us... for me... until I read the words "His love endures forever". This was not a one-time experience, but Jesus' love, grace, and forgiveness will endure forever. This is not merely a theatrical event, but this is a heavenly blessing. Now, as a baptized Christian, I can look back on the pageant and the fun times we had, even if I wasn't really paying attention, and know in the moments I was really caught up in myself, his love has been and will always be there for me.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for loving me more than I loved peanut butter parfaits as a little girl. Your love for us goes far beyond our lifetimes and endures forever. We thank in you in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Wednesday, April 12 - Daniel

SCRIPTURE

19 Open for me the gates of the righteous;
I will enter and give thanks to the Lord.
20 This is the gate of the Lord
through which the righteous may enter.
21 I will give you thanks, for you answered me;
you have become my salvation.
22 The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
23 the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes.
24 The Lord has done it this very day;
let us rejoice today and be glad.
25 Lord, save us!
Lord, grant us success!
26 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
From the house of the Lord we bless you.
27 The Lord is God,
and he has made his light shine on us.
With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession
up to the horns of the altar.
28 You are my God, and I will praise you;

*you are my God, and I will exalt you.
29 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.*

Psalm 118:19-29 ESV

Reflection

This Psalm is a thanksgiving to God for victory! "The day the Lord made" (v24) is the day the Lord granted victory over powerful enemies or brought deliverance from the oppression of the nations. In the New Testament fulfillment, it is the day of God's new creation, the resurrection of Jesus, with its promise of deliverance from "the last enemy," death. 1 Corinthians 15:26 says, "The last enemy to be abolished is death." This will be the ultimate day the Lord has made!

It's easy to forget we have victory, because we live in a world with so much defeat. However, when we remind ourselves often of the victory we have in Jesus, and one day that we will experience it to the fullest extent in the resurrection, it is much easier to spend time worshiping and thanking the Lord.

This section of the Psalm says "thanks" to the Lord four times. Obviously there is much to be grateful to the Lord for in our lives. The Lord has opened the gates of righteousness for us (19). The Lord is our salvation (v21). The Lord is our God (28), and he is good (29). We also see a wonderful insight to Jesus in verse 22. "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." Jesus was rejected, but God exalted him to the cornerstone at the resurrection. Our faith is built on Jesus as the foundation.

It's easy for me to find things to complain about, but today I am going to thank the Lord that he has given me righteousness and life through faith in Jesus. The Lord has saved us and secured victory for all who trust in him. Today is a great opportunity to spend time worshiping and thanking Jesus for being our salvation!

Prayer

Lord, I am slowing down and bowing down before you as my God and my salvation. Without you I would be lost and wandering aimlessly in the world. Thanks to you I am found and have been given victory! Amen.

Thursday, April 13 - Shannon

SCRIPTURE

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

4 This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

5 "Say to Daughter Zion,

'See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. 7 They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

10 When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"

11 The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

Matthew 21:1-11 ESV

Reflection

I have a co-worker who is an equal at work but is less experienced. I often jump in and correct her when she does something wrong or simply does something different than the way I would have done it. Occasionally, this is good because it means our work is done at a higher level. However, most days when I find myself frustrated and wanting to correct her over and over again, I have to look at my heart and wonder if I'm really motivated by wanting to make sure our work is done well or if deep down I just want to be "right."

When I read these verses about Jesus, the perfect human who really was not only right about everything but a sovereign, all powerful King, I see someone so different from me. I don't see Jesus jumping at the chance to show others he is right and that he knows more about the scriptures than everyone in the crowd. He simply fulfills the scriptures in these verses and lives out his entire earthly life in the most humble way possible. I am thankful for this example and pray the Lord draws it to mind next time I have the desire to be right at the cost of being respectful and servant-like towards those around me.

Prayer

God, I confess to you that sometimes I act in a prideful way that looks nothing like Jesus. Teach me to be so connected and focused on you that my heart becomes humble and my desires become more like Jesus'. Thank you for coming to the earth and living a life that is the perfect example for me. Amen.

Friday, April 14 - Chris

SCRIPTURE

32 As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. 33 They came to a place called Golgotha (which means "the place of the skull"). 34 There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. 35 When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots. 36 And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. 37 Above his head they placed the written charge against him: this is Jesus, the king of the Jews.

38 Two rebels were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left.

Matthew 27:32-38 NIV (see also v. 11-54)

Reflection

There was a time in my life when I didn't know what sacrifice really was, until I actually made it. Jesus showed me how to sacrifice my life by sacrificing his at the cross. At that time, I was attending another church and my brother had backslidden (turned away from his faith). He was dating my sister-in-law at the time, she wasn't saved (didn't believe in Jesus) then either. Is there anyone in your life that isn't saved or has backslidden?

I had fasted two meals a day for three weeks, and prayed my brother would come back to church and that his girlfriend would be saved. I had prayed to God about this before, but I chose to make this sacrifice for my brother because I believed that prayer and fasting was going to work. Was there a moment in your life when you felt the need to fast and pray for another person's salvation? Unlike the sacrifice that Jesus made, in Matthew 27:32-38, where he died on a cross for the sins of humanity, I fasted, prayed, and denied myself in hopes it would be used by God to save the person I love and care about so deeply.

One day my brother called me out of the blue and asked for the location of Pillars of Faith Tabernacle which I was attending at the time. It appeared to me that God had answered my prayers. My brother was going back to church. I had also found out that his girlfriend at the time was saved two months before. They are serving the Lord at their home church Pillars of Faith Tabernacle to this day.

Prayer

Father I pray that whoever is reading this, that the people in their lives will receive your precious Son, Jesus in their lives. Father, I ask that you would speak your word to them and draw them near to your heart. You said in your word that "God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son that they may have everlasting life" (John 3:16). In Jesus name I pray, amen.

Saturday, April 15 - Emily

SCRIPTURE

5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:5-11 ESV

Reflection

We serve a God who humbled himself to be born as a man, leaving behind his heavenly privileges. He was obedient in dying a humiliating death by crucifixion, so that we may confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and have the ultimate privilege- eternal life. Just as Jesus gave up his life for ours, we are called to, and GET TO, follow his lead and give our lives up for others.

How often do we feel entitled to our privileges; to our status at work, to our money, to our power and authority? We must recognize that all of these things are not our own, but we are to humble ourselves and give them up to the glory of god. We might be willing to serve on a mission trip and temporarily give up our comfortable lives, but do we actually live sacrificial lives loving and serving our neighbors daily?

This chapter paints a beautiful picture of every knee bowing and every tongue confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord. This should give us a confidence that everything we have is worth giving up in order to share the hope we have in Jesus with others. Ask God what you are holding on to that He is calling you to give up, so that you may be humbled to serve others sacrificially.

Prayer

Father, I pray that you would make us humble like Jesus. Reveal to us how we can be obedient to you and give of ourselves to others in order to glorify you. Thank you for Jesus' sacrifice for us, so that we may live freely by your grace. Amen.

Sunday, April 16 - Larry

SCRIPTURE

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2 And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4 And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. 5 But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. See, I have told you." 8 So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

Matthew 28:1-10 ESV

Reflection

There is something special about working hard and receiving a paycheck at the end of each period. As a husband and father I never think twice about sharing what I have earned with my children and wife. As a church member I never think twice about sharing what I have earned with my church family. However, sharing those hard-earned dollars does not always come as easily when it comes to people I don't like, appreciate, or think deserve it. Have you ever wondered if Jesus feels the same way about giving the benefits of the resurrection to us, unworthy sinners?

Easter, like most holidays, comes at us every year and, if we're not thoughtful, can come and go without any real celebration. I invite you to take a moment and think about what you just read. Jesus was dead.

The crucifixion had done exactly what his disciples feared and exactly what his enemies wanted. He said it himself in his dying breath, "it is finished." The surprise came on this morning we just read about when we learn the true meaning of his final words. Following this encounter with the angels, these women and Jesus' disciples would soon learn that what was finished was the enemy, and the movement that was just beginning would change their lives and the lives of millions of others. This Easter celebrate the new, abundant life you have in Christ. He has defeated death, not just for himself, but for you also!

Jesus told his followers that he came for those in need of a physician. He made his healing power available to the poor, marginalized, broken, sick, rich, arrogant, demon possessed, and even his own executioners. He does not hesitate, like I do, to give the rewards of his labor to those who don't deserve it. In fact, he does just the opposite. Jesus put in the hard work, because all are lost and fall short. You are not alone this Easter - celebrate that Christ's work is accomplished for you and everyone around you.

Jesus is risen. He has risen indeed!

Prayer

Jesus, thank you for not withholding your resurrection power because of my sin. Today, I celebrate the new life you have given me because of the resurrection! Amen.