



2023
Lenten Devotional Guide

*Meadow Brook
Baptist Church*

*Lent 2023
Devotional Guide*

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Introduction

Lent is the forty-day period prior to Easter Sunday, a time where we take measures to prepare our hearts, souls, and minds for the celebration of Christ's resurrection from the dead. The term, "lent" is actually a shortened form of an old English word for the Spring season and properly has no religious connotations, which is why some Eastern Christian traditions use a form of words for "forty" to refer to Lent. Nevertheless, while there are differences in terminology and while there are variances among Christian traditions in how the forty days are calculated, there is unanimity that a forty-day preparation prior to Easter is important. In most Protestant traditions (including Baptists that observe Lent), Lent begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Maundy Thursday, which (if you do the math) is 46 days with six of those being Sundays. Sundays are not counted because they are all days that we celebrate Christ's victory over death.

It is common for Christians to fast during Lent, as a sign of repentance, seriousness of faith, and humility before God. As noted elsewhere in this guide, fasting can also make us more sensitive to the voice of God, to the leading of the Spirit, and even to the spiritual forces at work around us; it can aid in our spiritual warfare. As the Apostle Paul notes, our battle is not primarily in the physical realm, but the spiritual (Ephesians 6:12-18). It is also a time in which we should devote ourselves to earnest prayer in order to focus our attention upon the LORD, in order to listen to His voice, in order to be led by His Spirit, in short, in order to commune with Him. There is clear evidence that the earliest Christians observed a special time of fasting and prayer leading up to Easter. Athanasius, a prominent early church theologian, stated that such fasting was the practice of all Christians everywhere, and Augustine (another prominent early church theologian) even said that to refrain from fasting is to sin! While we may see this as something of an overstatement, we would still encourage all to view this time as a special season of spiritual preparation and development.

In this devotional guide, we have tried to do several things. First, we have provided a Scriptural passage and a prayer guide for each day, from Ash Wednesday through Easter Sunday. You will notice that on Sundays and special holy days (i.e., Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday) we do not have a devotional, but only Scripture. This is due to the fact that on many of those days, we will have a special time of corporate worship as a church family. The readings for those days have been selected to reflect their significance, with the readings on Sundays during Lent focusing on Christ. Second, we have provided daily devotionals to aid in your Lenten preparations for Easter. The devotionals have weekly foci, including some relating to the various references to 40-days periods in the Bible, some speaking of God's power of death/resurrection, some related to fasting and repentance, and some speaking to redemption and hope in the LORD. These emphases are meant to enrich your Lenten observance, moving between postures of humility/contrition, awe/wonder and praise/thanksgiving. Each of these postures are indispensable to a vital life of worship. It is our prayer that this little guide will be of value in your spiritual preparations for meeting with God here at Meadow Brook Baptist Church in the coming weeks.

Psalm 51 (KJV)

51 Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. ² Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. ³ For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. ⁴ Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest. ⁵ Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me. ⁶ Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom. ⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ⁸ Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice. ⁹ Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. ¹¹ Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me. ¹² Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. ¹³ Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee. ¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation: and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness. ¹⁵ O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise. ¹⁶ For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. ¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. ¹⁸ Do good in thy good pleasure unto Zion: build thou the walls of Jerusalem. ¹⁹ Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering: then shall they offer bullocks upon thine altar.

Prayer Focus: Spend a few moments reflecting upon how you have changed since becoming a Christian. Express thanksgiving to God for His grace, and think through how to tell your story/testimony to others.

February 23, 2023

Matthew 6:16-18 (HCSB)

¹⁶“Whenever you fast, don’t be sad-faced like the hypocrites. For they make their faces unattractive so their fasting is obvious to people. I assure you: They’ve got their reward! ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head, and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that you don’t show your fasting to people but to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

God’s people practiced fasting in Old Testament times, a spiritual discipline Jesus assumed His followers would continue. Typically, fasting included abstinence from all food in order to pursue a deeper experience of God. The purpose is spiritual growth, learning greater dependence upon God. Jesus tells His followers to make fasting a heart matter before the Lord, guarding against the temptation to desire recognition by others, for outward righteousness for man’s approval displeases God (Matthew 6:1).

In Jesus’ day, believers fasted as a sign of humility and mourning, giving up physical food for spiritual communion with God. Some Pharisees fasted twice each week, (Luke 18:12), wanting others to know it, but God despises showy religion. When it comes to fasting, Jesus calls for personal, quiet faith in our Father, who sees all things.

As we embark on another season of Lent, may we draw near to our Good Father, praying and fasting in order to grow in relationship with Him. Spiritual disciplines are about growing in Christ. As you spend time in this devotional guide, in the Word, in prayer, and in fasting, may the Holy Spirit renew your longing to walk with Jesus Christ. If fasting is new for you, start small. Fast from a meal or for a day, devoting mealtime to Scripture reading, prayer journaling, and other spiritual disciplines that cultivate communion with Christ. As we hunger to know our Father, resting in His love, He will see and reward us with intimacy with Him.

Prayer Focus: Ask our Heavenly Father to grow your hunger for God during this Lenten season. Ask Him to give you courage to fast and that through your fasting, the Holy Spirit may increase your love for Christ.

-Chris Jones

February 24, 2023

Genesis 6:5-7, 17-18; 7:1, 4, 17a, 21-22 (HCSB)

⁵ When the Lord saw that man's wickedness was widespread on the earth and that every scheme his mind thought of was nothing but evil all the time,⁶ the Lord regretted that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.⁷ Then the Lord said, "I will wipe off from the face of the earth mankind, whom I created, together with the animals, creatures that crawl, and birds of the sky—for I regret that I made them." ...¹⁷ "Understand that I am bringing a flood—floodwaters on the earth to destroy every creature under heaven with the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will die.¹⁸ But I will establish My covenant with you, and you will enter the ark with your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives.

⁷ Then the Lord said to Noah, "Enter the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before Me in this generation...⁴ Seven days from now I will make it rain on the earth 40 days and 40 nights, and I will wipe off from the face of the earth every living thing I have made." ...¹⁷ The flood continued for 40 days on the earth; ...²¹ Every creature perished—those that crawl on the earth, birds, livestock, wildlife, and those that swarm on the earth, as well as all mankind.²² Everything with the breath of the spirit of life in its nostrils—everything on dry land died.

The story of the flood is well-known. It tells the story of how far humans can fall from grace, if we entertain sinful thoughts: all of their thoughts were directed at evil. It tells the story of God's judgment upon sin and how He wrought destruction upon the creation: all living things on the Earth were killed. But it also tells the story of God's heart—His love—and His grace and redemption: He was grieved by the sin of humanity, and He spared some (Noah, the faithful) and ensured His purposes in creation would not perish. His judgment was poured out 40 days and nights, but it is interesting to note that 40 days also functions as a demarker for renewal, for redemption. It was after 40 days that Noah first opened the window on the ark to release the raven (Genesis 8:6). One week later (symbolic of re-creation and renewal), a dove is released and returns with an olive branch, indicating that the waters of judgment have subsided (Genesis 8:10-11). Thus, 40 days represents the wrath of God upon sin, but also the grace of God upon humans through faith. Whenever we experience judgment or correction from God, we should always look for His grace, for it is never far behind.

Prayer focus: Confess a hidden sin to God, meditate upon and receive His forgiveness in Christ, and thank His for His grace in your life.

-John D. Laing

February 25, 2023

Daniel 12:2-3 (HCSB)

² Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, and some to shame and eternal contempt. ³ Those who are wise will shine like the bright expanse of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

These verses come at the end of the book of Daniel. The book of Daniel is filled with iconic records of how Daniel and some of his friends lived by faith in the Lord in a time and place where they were persecuted for doing so. Daniel and his friends were thrown into a fiery furnace and a lion's den for living out their faith. We often read these accounts and wonder what gave them the strength to believe and obey the Lord in the face of such opposition. I believe that Daniel 12:2-3 gives us at least part of the answer. In these verses, Daniel is recounting visions from God of what the end will be like. First, these verses remind us that death is not the end for any of us. Death is often referred to as "sleep" in the Bible, and even this metaphor is a reminder that after the "sleep" of death, we will all wake into a new eternal state. And it is good to be reminded that there are only two options for our eternity: there is a resurrection into "everlasting life," and there is a resurrection into "shame and everlasting contempt." Many of us have heard the phrase, "begin with the end in mind." I believe that Daniel and others are able to live out their faith in tough times because they live with the reality of this end in mind. And remembering this reality enables Daniel and others to "turn many to righteousness" in "the midst of a crooked and perverse nation" (Philippians 2:15). Thank God for the good news of John 3:16 that, "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." We can live with the end in mind, like Daniel, and shine the hope of Christ into our dark and broken world.

Prayer Focus: Pray that God would strengthen your faith in Christ even in the face of challenges and opposition. Pray that God would use you to point others to eternal hope.

-Austin Burch

February 26, 2023

1st Sunday of Lent

Psalm 27 (KJV)

27 The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? ² When the wicked, even mine enemies and my foes, came upon me to eat up my flesh, they stumbled and fell. ³ Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear: though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident. ⁴ One thing have I desired of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to enquire in his temple. ⁵ For in the time of trouble he shall hide me in his pavilion: in the secret of his tabernacle shall he hide me; he shall set me up upon a rock. ⁶ And now shall mine head be lifted up above mine enemies round about me: therefore will I offer in his tabernacle sacrifices of joy; I will sing, yea, I will sing praises unto the Lord. ⁷ Hear, O Lord, when I cry with my voice: have mercy also upon me, and answer me. ⁸ When thou saidest, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, Lord, will I seek. ⁹ Hide not thy face far from me; put not thy servant away in anger: thou hast been my help; leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation. ¹⁰ When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up. ¹¹ Teach me thy way, O Lord, and lead me in a plain path, because of mine enemies. ¹² Deliver me not over unto the will of mine enemies: for false witnesses are risen up against me, and such as breathe out cruelty. ¹³ I had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. ¹⁴ Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord.

Prayer Focus: Consider the infinite love of God and how it is ever-present, no matter the circumstances in which you find yourself. Sing a song of praise to God for His faithfulness to His Word and for His grace shown. Ask God to reveal himself to you in new ways this Lenten season.

February 27, 2023

Jonah 2:1-9 (HCSB)

2 Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from inside the fish: ² I called to the Lord in my distress, and He answered me. I cried out for help in the belly of Sheol; You heard my voice. ³ You threw me into the depths, into the heart of the seas, and the current overcame me. All Your breakers and Your billows swept over me. ⁴ But I said: I have been banished from Your sight, yet I will look once more^l toward Your holy temple. ⁵ The waters engulfed me up to the neck; the watery depths overcame me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. ⁶ I sank to the foundations of the mountains; the earth with its prison bars closed behind me forever! But You raised my life from the Pit, Lord my God! ⁷ As my life was fading away, I remembered Yahweh. My prayer came to You, to Your holy temple. ⁸ Those who cling to worthless idols forsake faithful love, ⁹ but as for me, I will sacrifice to You with a voice of thanksgiving. I will fulfill what I have vowed. Salvation is from the Lord!

Because of his flagrant disobedience to God, the prophet Jonah landed himself in a fishy, watery grave. Beginning with his actions in chapter 1, Jonah moves consistently downward. He goes down to Joppa and boards a ship, goes down into its deepest part and falls into a deep sleep, foreshadowing his further descent: into the sea to the base of mountains on the seafloor, into the fish, and even deeper into the realm of death (Sheol). Yet he is never out of God's sight. The phrase "three days and three nights" (Job 1:17) probably indicates a belief about the journey to Sheol, signifying almost certain death (cmpr. Matthew 12:40; John 11:39). Jonah's prayer (2:1-9) is a lyrical psalm of thanksgiving for deliverance. He parallels the "belly of the fish" with the "belly of Sheol," considering the fish a vehicle of both deliverance and destruction, as Jonah is effectively buried in the fish and feels himself on the journey to the underworld. In this extreme and desperate situation, Jonah finally gives God his undivided attention, expressing his desire to worship God again in the Temple. Sheol was conceived to be below the oceans with gates ("bars") that permanently separate the dead from God's sight and presence. *But even from that place, God hears his prayer as it rises up out of the depths.* In his compassion, God spares the undeserving prophet's life. God alone can save from the "pit," and does so out of his great compassion and faithful love. Jonah is grateful to have been spared despite his sin. He promises to do better, pledging sacrifice and vow fulfillment, keeping faith with his covenant God. Too frequently, we are like Jonah: running from God, evading God's will, getting ourselves into a mess, crying out for rescue, and desiring a second chance from God, who is forgiving and compassionate. No matter how deep our desperation, how dark our surroundings, how desperate our circumstance or how distant we feel from rescue, God our Savior sees us and hears us, and by His great power, rescues our life from the "Pit" of death. Death is indeed a formidable foe, but God's power has overcome the grave, and the "sign of Jonah" (Matthew 12:39-40) will one day be our reality too, as Sheol itself will finally be destroyed.

Prayer Focus: Pray repentantly today for God's forgiveness of your sins, and take comfort in knowing He hears your prayer. Thank and praise Him for His great power to finally obliterate the power of sin and death so you may be ever in His life-giving presence.

-Stefana Dan Laing

February 28, 2023

Isaiah 58:6 (HCSB)

⁶ Isn't the fast I choose: To break the chains of wickedness, to untie the ropes of the yoke, to set the oppressed free, and to tear off every yoke?

Fasting is likely the most overlooked of the spiritual disciplines. Fasting is a way for believers to deny and humble themselves and draw near to God. Fasting is also an expected practice for believers. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' teaching on prayer and fasting are tied together. He begins his instruction on each with reference to their engagement in the discipline: "whenever you pray" and "whenever you fast," making it clear that both practices are expected for His followers. Jesus further instructs us to make sure that our fasting is not focused on ourselves but rather on loving God. "Whenever you fast, don't be sad-faced like the hypocrites. For they make their faces unattractive so their fasting is obvious to people. I assure you: They've got their reward! But when you fast, put oil on your head, and wash your face, so that you don't show your fasting to people but to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:16-18)

God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, is pointing us to the same truth but takes us a step further in instructing us how to put this into action. Whenever you fast, your focus should be on drawing near to God, and you put this into action by loving others in His name. Isaiah 58:6 quoted above points to those things that we are to put away as we love others. A true fast does away with wickedness, oppression, and violence. The following verse then points to the things that we are to embrace as we love others for the glory of God. "Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the poor and homeless into your house, to clothe the naked when you see him, and not to ignore your own flesh and blood?" (Isaiah 58:7) A true fast demonstrates love for others, particularly those in need.

Whenever you fast, do so as a spiritual discipline to grow in your love for God, so that you might "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength." As you do, "Love your neighbor as yourself" as an expression of your love for Him.

Prayer focus: Ask God to lead you in how fasting should be practiced in your life. Pray that you will be intentional today to fast from evil and instead embrace love for others as an expression of your love for God.

-David Splawn

March 1, 2023

Galatians 5:5 (HCSB)

⁵ For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.

Paul encourages the Galatians by reminding them of the hope we have in Christ, and of the fact that the Holy Spirit is the assurance of our hope. Later in this chapter, Paul points to the fruit of the Spirit as the evidence and outworking of that hope in the life of the church: “But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law” (Galatians 5:22-23). We change the words to say we are growing in God’s Spirit, Growing in Love, Joy, peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-Control.

This is how we are to be recognized—this is our impact on the watching world. If you’re not known for your love and kindness, then something needs to change. These were characteristics of Jesus Christ, and therefore, we should strive to emulate them in every way. Of course, none of us are perfect. We can’t be loving all the time, though we wish we could. What matters is that we’re actively seeking to grow in these areas. I implore you to read through the list again and notice areas where you could use some growth and spiritual direction. Ask that God may lead you in these areas.

Prayer Focus: Pray that you will grow in God’s Spirit each and every day of your lives. You are loved.

-Lori Holmes

March 2, 2023

Deuteronomy 9:9-11, 18, 25 (HCSB)

⁹ When I went up the mountain to receive the stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant the Lord made with you, I stayed on the mountain 40 days and 40 nights. I did not eat bread or drink water. ¹⁰ On the day of the assembly the Lord gave me the two stone tablets, inscribed by God's finger. The exact words were on them, which the Lord spoke to you from the fire on the mountain. ¹¹ The Lord gave me the two stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant, at the end of the 40 days and 40 nights... ¹⁸ Then I fell down like the first time in the presence of the Lord for 40 days and 40 nights; I did not eat bread or drink water because of all the sin you committed, doing what was evil in the Lord's sight and provoking Him to anger... ²⁵ "I fell down in the presence of the Lord 40 days and 40 nights because the Lord had threatened to destroy you.

You are probably aware that God gave Moses two sets of stone tablets with the Ten Commandments on them: the first, written by God Himself (Exodus 24:12; 31:1), were destroyed by Moses when he found the Israelites worshipping the golden calf upon his return; the second, chiseled by Moses (Exodus 34), were carried by the Israelites in the ark of the covenant. In both cases, Moses received the commandments while meeting with the LORD on Mount Sinai, and in both cases, Moses observed a complete fast for 40 days and nights: he did not eat or drink during that time (Exodus 24:18; 34:28). Such a fast is obviously supernatural in nature, as one could not survive so long without food or (especially) water. These 40-day periods represent a time in which God makes an offer of covenant-relationship with the people of Israel in the form of the commandments and the regulations for proper worship as the people of God. They also represent corporate, public repentance, as in the second case, Moses pleaded with the LORD on behalf of the people (Exodus 32:30-31). Last, they represent healing and restoration, as the grace of God was presented to them in the second set of tablets and specifically noted to Moses (Exodus 34:6-7). For Moses, fasting was a necessary component of his preparation to meet God on the holy ground of Mount Sinai; it was a sign of his dependence upon the LORD for life and sustenance, and it was a means of humbling himself before God in order to intercede on behalf of his flock. Moses had to stand before God with contrition, with sorrow for the sin of the people, with repentance, and with faithful dependence upon God's grace and steadfast love. There are times when we see it is important to renew our faith-relationship with God, when we need to turn from our sin, when we need to be reminded of the grace of God.

Prayer Focus: Think of a time when it seemed that your relationship with God was all you had; offer a prayer of thanksgiving for God's steadfast love.

-John D. Laing

March 3, 2023

Lamentations 3:25 (HCSB)

²⁵ The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him.

Waiting is something many of us are not very good at. I'll admit, I'm the world's worst. I cannot sit around while there is much to be done. It's like I'm a real-life video of the Alabama song, "I'm in a Hurry." So, obviously the prophet Jeremiah doesn't understand the church of 2023; We must be urgent in our ministry as if the fate of those in our community depends on our ability to reach them. Jeremiah is writing a lamentation following the devastation of Judah by the Babylonians, but verses 21-39 (of chapter 3) serve as a break in the lamentation. Jeremiah offers a glimpse of hope for those who have lost everything. As verses 25-27 begin with the Hebrew word for good, we are reminded that anything good in our lives comes from the faith and hope we have in Christ Jesus. What does it mean to wait for God, yet to seek Him? How can one do both? While this oxymoronic relationship between waiting and seeking is found throughout Scripture, I believe no one paints a more vivid picture than the Apostle Paul does in his letter to the Philippians. He tells us in Philippians 1:6 that God is going to complete us (with an understanding of our powerlessness of the situation and hence, the waiting) but then in verse 12 of the next chapter, he urges us to work out our own salvation (this act of seeking God). The parallel of waiting and seeking, while seemingly different ends of the spectrum, gives us an illustration of how our relationship with God should look. We must constantly seek God and His righteousness, but also wait upon His timing. I'm convinced the more we seek God, the better we become at waiting for Him to guide us.

Prayer Focus: The book of Lamentations is just that; a book expressing the deep grief of the nation of Judah desolated by the Babylonians. No doubt, our lives are being destroyed by the sin and destruction we allow into our lives. Pray that God would grant us the passion to earnestly seek Him. Pray that God would also grant us the wisdom to pause in the midst of our hurried lives and to take in the goodness of God, which in turn may fan the flame of passion in our pursuit of the only One who can heal our hearts, our families, our churches and our lands.

–Nick Seamon

March 4, 2023

1 Kings 17:17-24 (HCSB)

¹⁷ After this, the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. His illness became very severe until no breath remained in him. ¹⁸ She said to Elijah, “Man of God, what do we have in common? Have you come to remind me of my guilt and to kill my son?” ¹⁹ But Elijah said to her, “Give me your son.” So he took him from her arms, brought him up to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his own bed. ²⁰ Then he cried out to the Lord and said, “My Lord God, have You also brought tragedy on the widow I am staying with by killing her son?” ²¹ Then he stretched himself out over the boy three times. He cried out to the Lord and said, “My Lord God, please let this boy’s life return to him!” ²² So the Lord listened to Elijah’s voice, and the boy’s life returned to him, and he lived. ²³ Then Elijah took the boy, brought him down from the upper room into the house, and gave him to his mother. Elijah said, “Look, your son is alive.” ²⁴ Then the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know you are a man of God and the Lord’s word from your mouth is true.”

As drought and famine ravaged the land, the Lord directed His prophet Elijah to the home of a desperate widow in Zarephath. Rapping on her door, Elijah was met by the widow holding a bowl in her arms as she mixed her final scoop of flour with her final flask of oil. Her plan was to prepare one last meal for her son and herself as they slowly died together of starvation. Introducing himself as the prophet of Jehovah, Elijah made a riveting offer: “Grant me shelter in your home and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will provide our food until grass sprouts once again for our cattle and wheat flourishes for our bread.” All went well until the widow’s only child contracted an illness and died. Amidst body-shaking sobs, the widow raged, “You sanctimonious, miracle-performing lout! I opened my home to you; prepared your meals; even beat your flea-infested robes on the rocks by the river. What do you do? You rob me of my last best hope! My son is dead! Dead!”

Quietly, Elijah wrested the lifeless child from the arms of his angry mother and carried him to the guest room. Having previously called down fire from heaven, the prophet now prayed, “Omnipotent God, bring life-sustaining breath into this child’s body.” And God did! Elijah brought him to his mother. “Look! Your son lives! The Lord Jehovah who holds life in His hands has given breath to your son!”

The God who filled the seas with life on the fifth day and populated the land with living creatures and humans on the sixth day breathed life into the widow’s deceased child. Rejoicing, the widow—a follower of Baal—turned to Elijah’s God. This same All-Powerful God declared through Mary and the disciples on Resurrection Sunday, “Look! My Son lives! Death is conquered!”

Prayer Focus: Rejoice that God has abolished death! Give thanks that in Christ’s resurrection, we live eternally! Pray for life to come to those who are dead in sin.

-David E Luellen

March 5, 2023

2nd Sunday of Lent

Psalm 25 (KJV)

25 Unto thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul. **2** O my God, I trust in thee: let me not be ashamed, let not mine enemies triumph over me. **3** Yea, let none that wait on thee be ashamed: let them be ashamed which transgress without cause. **4** Shew me thy ways, O Lord; teach me thy paths. **5** Lead me in thy truth, and teach me: for thou art the God of my salvation; on thee do I wait all the day. **6** Remember, O Lord, thy tender mercies and thy lovingkindnesses; for they have been ever of old. **7** Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions: according to thy mercy remember thou me for thy goodness' sake, O Lord. **8** Good and upright is the Lord: therefore will he teach sinners in the way. **9** The meek will he guide in judgment: and the meek will he teach his way. **10** All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth unto such as keep his covenant and his testimonies. **11** For thy name's sake, O Lord, pardon mine iniquity; for it is great. **12** What man is he that feareth the Lord? Him shall he teach in the way that he shall choose. **13** His soul shall dwell at ease; and his seed shall inherit the earth. **14** The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant. **15** Mine eyes are ever toward the Lord; for he shall pluck my feet out of the net. **16** Turn thee unto me, and have mercy upon me; for I am desolate and afflicted. **17** The troubles of my heart are enlarged: O bring thou me out of my distresses. **18** Look upon mine affliction and my pain; and forgive all my sins. **19** Consider mine enemies; for they are many; and they hate me with cruel hatred. **20** O keep my soul, and deliver me: let me not be ashamed; for I put my trust in thee. **21** Let integrity and uprightness preserve me; for I wait on thee. **22** Redeem Israel, O God, out of all his troubles.

Prayer Focus: Praise God for His power, glory, strength, justice, might, wrath, holiness, love and grace. Ask Him to guide you in the way, to show you how to put your faith into practice in your daily life.

March 6, 2023

Job 42:5-6 (HCSB)

⁵ I had heard rumors about You, but now my eyes have seen You. ⁶ Therefore I take back my words and repent in dust and ashes.

At first glance, we read this passage of scripture with quick assumption of repentance from sin. While that assumption is correct, there's actually much more depth to this prayer of Job. For context, we read this scripture in the last chapter of the book of Job and therefore, we need to understand why Job feels the need to repent. Again, our quick assumption is that we (and Job) repent because we've done something wrong and need to be forgiven. While that is true, there is a deeper perspective and understanding that God is teaching here. When we begin the book of Job, we read in the very first sentence that Job was a righteous and blameless man who honors God. Throughout the book, Job is in conversation with four men and ultimately, God, because God allowed Satan to bring great suffering upon his life, suffering that included the loss of Job's family, property/possessions, and his health. The book of Job causes us to ask the age-old question, "Why does God allow suffering?" and while it doesn't directly answer that question, it does answer the related question, "Is God just?" The resounding answer is, "Yes!" As Job comes to the realization that God is indeed just in all that he does, his perspective of God is deepened as he sees his own humanity (coming from dust and ashes; Genesis 3:19) and his desperate need for God. As we journey to the cross of Christ this Lenten season (and always), let's commit to being a repentant people. Yes, because of sin in our lives, but even more so because of who God is. Just as Job alludes to in his prayer, too often our perspective of God is more head than heart. Let's be in awe of who God is and what he has done for us.

Prayer Focus: Pray that your perspective of God will deepen and that regardless of the circumstances of life, you will repent, bow, and give praise to the Lord: the Creator of all things including you.

-David Vaughan

March 7, 2023

1 Corinthians 7:5 (HCSB)

⁵Do not deprive one another sexually—except when you agree for a time, to devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again; otherwise, Satan may tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Paul's advice to married couples here speaks to the intimacy and mutuality within marriage, the human relationship most closely analogous to that of Christ and his church. The two belong to one another; they are inextricably connected by God. Both relationships are life-giving and of inestimable value to community. Paul here addresses the value and purpose of fasting. It is a time when we suspend normal practice of life-giving and life-sustaining activities for the purpose of concerted, focused prayer. It enables a greater level of power, a greater level of intimacy with God. It makes us more sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, more likely to hear God's voice. It makes us more sensitive to the spiritual warfare all around us, more likely to be aware of demonic activity. Consequently, it can—by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit within us—empower us to resist the devil (James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:9) and to flee temptation (1 Corinthians 6:18; 1 Timothy 2:22).

Prayer Focus: Practice fasting today. Ask God to open you up to the work of the Spirit in you. Ask Him to illumine your mind to His will for your life and to the forces that seek to distract you from staying in that will. Then ask the Holy Spirit to strengthen you in the faith and to help you turn from sin and walk in His ways.

-John D. Laing

March 8, 2023

Jeremiah 29:10-14 (HCSB)

¹⁰ For this is what the Lord says: “When 70 years for Babylon are complete, I will attend to you and will confirm My promise concerning you to restore you to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you”—this is the Lord’s declaration—“plans for your welfare, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. ¹² You will call to Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you”—this is the Lord’s declaration—“and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and places where I banished you”—this is the Lord’s declaration. “I will restore you to the place I deported you from.”

Jeremiah, known as “The Weeping Prophet” has the grim purpose of warning the people of Judah of the destruction awaiting them at the hands of the Babylonians. Yet, in this passage, Jeremiah offers a glimpse of hope for the exiles. He starts off with the bad news: 70 years of exile in a foreign land surrounded by foreign gods. He then offers the good news: God’s desire to bless His people. This is a well-known verse; in fact, verse 11 is our life verse we chose for Lily Kate when she was born. However, many of us want to focus on the good part of this passage. God is in control and He wants good things to happen to us. Unfortunately, if we have spent any time on this earth, we know “good things” don’t always happen to us. We all know God loves us and has the best in mind for us, right? Of course, that’s easy, but how many of us live as though we really believe this? When the doctor tells us we have stage 4 cancer; when the company we’ve devoted our lives to decides to downsize; when our son or daughter rebels or the debt mounts; how many of us can still say God has the best in mind for us? Jeremiah paints a beautiful picture of what is going on spiritually. God has not left; He hasn’t changed His mind. Rather, we slowly move away from Him as we seek the desires of the flesh. God’s promise in this passage is clear: Return to me with all your heart (repent) and I will restore you. I have a saying I use to preach from the pulpit on a regular basis: “We all want revival, but none of us want to put forth the effort to see revival.” The fact of the matter is that revival can’t happen unless there is repentance. Paraphrasing the Casting Crowns song, “Start Right Here,” we want our church on Sunday to meet our needs and then live like the devil the rest of the week. May it not be said of us! May we be the people of God, who gather together to refresh, encourage and restore one another under the leadership of the Holy Spirit so that we may live like Christ throughout the week.

Prayer Focus: Pray for the Holy Spirit to search your heart and know your thoughts and reveal areas of sin in your life. Pray for courage to be restored – this may mean open confession to a brother or sister in Christ, asking for help, etc. Pray for the pain of repentance to sweep across our hearts, our families, our church and our land so that we may see revival.

–Nick Seamon

March 9, 2023

Numbers 13:25 (HCSB)

²⁵ At the end of 40 days they returned from scouting out the land.

When the Israelites reached the Promised Land from Egypt, they sent a team of 12 men, one from each tribe, across the Jordan River to scout out the land. The team was in the land for forty days and nights, observing the people and evaluating the prospects of taking the land in the military action. When they returned, ten of the scouts gave unfavorable reports, claiming that the people of the land were too powerful and the fortifications of the cities were too strong. Although the other two encouraged the Israelites to take the land, the people sided with the majority and complained against God. They even tried to displace Moses as their leader in order to return to Egypt and they thus incurred the wrath of God.

What is interesting about this story is that God commanded Moses to send the scouts into the land (Numbers 13:1-2). We are not told why, though it seems clear that God's intention was to show them that the land was productive for farming, that it had houses they would not have to build, cisterns and wells they would not have to dig, and vineyards they would not have to plant (Deuteronomy 6:10-11). They clearly saw that the land was fruitful (Numbers 13:23). Thus, the 40 days of reconnaissance was meant to be a time of covenant renewal, an opportunity for the Israelites to see that the LORD is faithful to His covenant promises. He is giving them the lush land promised to Abraham; He had led them out of slavery in Egypt, He had protected them from Pharaoh's army, He had led them across the Red Sea, He had guided them through the wilderness, and now He was giving them the land He had promised, and it was a land that was ready-to-move-in/turn-key. The 40 days here should have inspired worship in the people of God, as it was a time of revelation of God's faithfulness. We are often given glimpses into God's work in our lives or God's working behind the scenes for our good. When we see His hand at work, how do we respond? Do we respond with praise and thanksgiving, or do we see some negative in the provision? Can you receive blessing without complaining?

Prayer Focus: Reflect for a few moments upon something someone did for you, either something God did for you, or something someone else did for you. Were you thankful? Were you able to receive it with joy? Ask God to illumine your mind to His work in your life, and then ask Him to help you to be thankful for the blessings He has given you.

-John D. Laing

March 10, 2023

1 Peter 5:6 (HCSB)

⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt you at the proper time,

We all love to be recognized for doing a good job. It does not matter if it is because we caught the biggest fish of the day, if we just created a five-star dinner, or if we landed that big account the company we work for has been after for months, it feels good to be in the spotlight sometimes. This verse is unique because it is telling us to wait on the compliments and pat on the back. Humble yourself and wait. C.S. Lewis said, “Humility isn’t thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.” What an incredible statement. Humility is not a sign of weakness, but rather a sign of a healthy relationship with God. As we mature, we realize we do not have to be the center of the universe. We can put the needs of others before our own. In other words, we stop thinking of ourselves and start thinking of others. We quit worrying about hopping on the glory train that sings the songs of our praise and all we have done for others. We become focused on bringing the spotlight on the who give us the talents and abilities to serve others. We realize God is the only one who deserves all the praise and glory. It is so freeing to let go of the control of our talents and abilities and give them back to the one who designed them for us. We cause ourselves so much stress by trying to control our lives. We want to achieve our goals in our timing all the while we forget the perfect plan that our Father has designed for each one of us. Instead of casting our cares on God we are playing Tetris with our own life. We need to come to God with a humble spirit and allow him to exalt us in His timing. Quit rushing, pushing, and clawing through each day, just be still and allow God to do His job.

Prayer Focus: Heavenly Father, oh how I want to be more like you every day. Forgive me for the times when I put my path before your perfect one. Give me a spirit of humility and graciousness. I thank you for your perfect timing and your love for me. Amen

-Kelley Young

March 11, 2023

Psalm 16:10 (HCSB)

¹⁰ For You will not abandon me to Sheol; You will not allow Your Faithful One to see decay.

One thing I love about the psalms is that they reflect every emotion and thereby give worshippers a permissive voice regardless of anyone's current life circumstance. As a whole, Psalm 16 gives us a voice of confidence in the LORD and even when we do not feel particularly confident, the psalmist encourages and reminds us of why we should be confident in the Lord. Verses 1-4 show us God's protection, verses 5-8 tell us that God always provides, and verses 9-11 remind us that God will never ever abandon us, not even to death. As we journey through the season of Lent (and always), we must take the example of the psalmist, who demonstrates exceptional faith and trust in the Lord for all of life and beyond. We serve a risen Savior who promises the same resurrection he promised when he said, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in Me, even if he dies, will live. Everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die—ever. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26 HCSB). Regardless of your past, present, or anticipated future, if you are a believer and follower of Jesus Christ, be confident in this: the Creator of heaven and earth, the God who made covenant with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, has made an unbreakable covenant with you! He will not abandon you here on earth or to death. "When this corruptible is clothed with incorruptibility, and this mortal is clothed with immortality, then the saying that is written will take place: Death has been swallowed up in victory. Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting? Now the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! Therefore, my dear brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the Lord's work, knowing that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:54-58 HCSB).

Prayer Focus: Pray a confident prayer of thanksgiving using Romans 8:38-39: "For I am persuaded that not even death or life, angels or rulers, things present or things to come, hostile powers, height or depth, or any other created thing will have the power to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord!" Amen.

-David Vaughan

March 12, 2023

3rd Sunday of Lent

Psalm 33 (KJV)

33 Rejoice in the Lord, O ye righteous: for praise is comely for the upright. ² Praise the Lord with harp: sing unto him with the psaltery and an instrument of ten strings. ³ Sing unto him a new song; play skillfully with a loud noise. ⁴ For the word of the Lord is right; and all his works are done in truth. ⁵ He loveth righteousness and judgment: the earth is full of the goodness of the Lord. ⁶ By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth. ⁷ He gathereth the waters of the sea together as an heap: he layeth up the depth in storehouses. ⁸ Let all the earth fear the Lord: let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. ⁹ For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast. ¹⁰ The Lord bringeth the counsel of the heathen to nought: he maketh the devices of the people of none effect. ¹¹ The counsel of the Lord standeth forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations. ¹² Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord; and the people whom he hath chosen for his own inheritance. ¹³ The Lord looketh from heaven; he beholdeth all the sons of men. ¹⁴ From the place of his habitation he looketh upon all the inhabitants of the earth. ¹⁵ He fashioneth their hearts alike; he considereth all their works. ¹⁶ There is no king saved by the multitude of an host: a mighty man is not delivered by much strength. ¹⁷ An horse is a vain thing for safety: neither shall he deliver any by his great strength. ¹⁸ Behold, the eye of the Lord is upon them that fear him, upon them that hope in his mercy; ¹⁹ To deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. ²⁰ Our soul waiteth for the Lord: he is our help and our shield. ²¹ For our heart shall rejoice in him, because we have trusted in his holy name. ²² Let thy mercy, O Lord, be upon us, according as we hope in thee.

Prayer Focus: Take a few moments to meditate on the glory of God. Meditate upon His omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, omnibenevolence, and His holiness. Allow a sense of awe and humility to encompass you. Ask God to give you strength to wait upon Him for whatever you are facing.

March 13, 2023

Genesis 2:7; 3:19 (HCSB)

⁷ Then the Lord God formed the man out of the dust from the ground and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, and the man became a living being.

¹⁹ You will eat bread by the sweat of your brow until you return to the ground, since you were taken from it. For you are dust, and you will return to dust.”

God created all things. In the beginning, the universe was beautiful and peaceful and flawless. But God had a bigger purpose for the world and that included making people. He formed a man out of the “dust of the ground”, a common, lowly material, not from the clouds or the stars that God had also created. Then God did something extraordinary, something very different from the way He created other living creatures. With His own breath, God gave life to the lifeless dusty figure. As a result, man rose out of the dust to be the crown of God’s creation, the only creature that could live and talk with God, the only creature to whom God gave commands and responsibilities.

The relationship between God and man was personal and intimate. They spoke directly to one another frequently and the man was given the responsibility of caring for the natural creation. Then God made woman, and the man and woman became partners in serving God and caring for His world. Into this peaceful relationship came a Destroyer. The man and the woman listened to the Destroyer and chose to flagrantly disobey their loving Creator’s commands. The man and woman failed in their relationship with God. They doubted that their Creator loved them and had their best interests in mind. They thought that the Creator was withholding something good from them. They sinned and the relationship with God was destroyed. They failed to love and trust their Creator. They disregarded His great love for them.

God is perfectly good. And this great evil was something He would not tolerate. God is perfectly just. That meant judgment and punishment had to be rendered on the man and woman. But God is also love. Despite the failure of the man and woman, His great love for them was never diminished. That love would one day culminate in God repairing the relationship with people by sending a Savior to take the penalty for the sin and failure of all people.

Prayer Focus: I am God’s failed child. You are God’s failed child. We disregard the guidance of our loving Heavenly Father, focus on ourselves, and listen to the Destroyer. Recognize that failure and ask for forgiveness. Thank God for His forgiveness and a way back into fellowship with Him through the gift of the Savior, Jesus Christ.

-Jack Cox

March 14, 2023

Matthew 4:4 (HCSB)

⁴ But He answered, “It is written: Man must not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

The Scriptures teach that God does not tempt us, but He does allow us to experience temptation. In fact, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to face the Devil’s temptation (Matthew 4:1). Jesus knew He was being tested, but such knowledge did not eliminate the pain of Satan’s spiritual attacks. Jesus fasted, focusing on communion with the Father, preparation for His ministry. Jesus was hungry. He withdrew from family and friends, leaving Him lonely. Our Savior’s 40-day wilderness experience echoes Israel’s 40 years in the wilderness. Whereas the Israelites repeatedly failed the test, Jesus fully obeyed. When the Devil appealed to Jesus’ human weaknesses, our Lord feasted on God’s Word, remaining faithful to the Father. Jesus was tested and tempted, yet never sinned (Hebrews 4:15). Since Jesus never sinned, He could take our sin. Because He was innocent, He could take our guilt and pay our sin debt. Praise God for the faithfulness of Jesus! Praise God Satan could not thwart God’s redemptive plan! Jesus’ wilderness journey reminds us that there is a spiritual battle underway, and we can only resist the enemy’s attacks through spiritual resources, by knowing and depending upon God. Do you know the Lord God? Are you depending on Him? Continue leaning into His Word during this special season. Consider fasting one day this week, committing mealtime to reading the Bible with the aim of knowing God—seeing His character, tracing His plans, hearing His promises, and marveling at His love. Knowing Him remains our greatest need, and through Jesus, we can know God.

Prayer Focus: Express praise to the Father for sending the Son. Praise the Son for His perfect obedience, even in the face of suffering and temptation. Praise the Spirit for testifying to God’s truth, helping us hear His voice and follow Him.

-Chris Jones

March 15, 2023

Isaiah 30:18 (HCSB)

¹⁸ Therefore the Lord is waiting to show you mercy, and is rising up to show you compassion, for the Lord is a just God. All who wait patiently for Him are happy.

Whenever you read the phrase “*Therefore the Lord...*” pay close attention and know that this is the turning point of the story. It also means that we need to know what was going on before this moment in order to better understand what follows. Israel (*we are Israel*) was being attacked and they were afraid. Instead of waiting on the Lord to deliver them, they chose to spend all of their treasures in an attempt to bribe Egypt into to being their rescuers. Don’t miss this... instead of trusting the love and protection of their Father, they chose to pay for their own bondage and destruction. They were afraid and they had to “*do something!*” Waiting was not an option because waiting would require faith in something outside of their control. As a result, their actions led to even greater troubles and more importantly a greater insult to their Father. They were in what we immature folks call, “deep doodoo.” Therefore, the Lord would be perfectly within His rights to clobber Israel... to smite them and to let them dwell in their destruction, but the amazing grace of the Gospel shines through in this Old Testament passage. Instead of judgment, the Lord waits to show mercy. The God of all creation chooses to stay His hand of wrath a little longer so that we may see our sin and return and rest in Him. This act of waiting by God is astounding; it causes angels to scratch their heads in wonder. We—the creatures who cannot wait—are loved by the one who shouldn’t wait, and yet He does so in hopes that we—the faithless rebels—will return home. It is the prodigal son story writ large... we run away to other lands and lovers and yet the Father is searching the horizon waiting to run to us and re-clothe us in His glory.

Are you afraid? Is the world and its pressures demanding that you “do something?” Don’t run... wait... lean into your Father’s arms. Just a few passages before this one the Lord says “In returning and rest you will be saved.” One of the hardest things we will do in this life is to trust and wait on the Lord, but He is a trustworthy Father who waits to be merciful to us. Let’s not waste our treasures on Egypt.

Prayer Focus: Pray that the God would calm your heart and allow you to rest in Him and His plans. Pray that you will be more aware of God’s mercy in your life and that His peace would replace your need to do something. Pray that as you understand how often you run to Egypt, your heart would soften for those around you also caught on the all too familiar path to bondage.

-Pete Collins

March 16, 2023

Numbers 14:33-34 (HCSB)

³³ Your children will be shepherds in the wilderness for 40 years and bear the penalty for your acts of unfaithfulness until all your corpses lie scattered in the wilderness. ³⁴ You will bear the consequences of your sins 40 years based on the number of the 40 days that you scouted the land, a year for each day. You will know My displeasure.

Earlier, we saw that the 40 days of scouting in the Promised Land was supposed to have been a sign of God's covenant blessings to the Israelites; they were supposed to respond to seeing the land with thanksgiving to God for His gracious gifts and His calling upon their lives; they were supposed to respond in faith. Instead, they responded in fear and disobedience to His charge to take the land; they neither trusted nor obeyed Him. The 40 days were supposed to be representative of God's blessing. Now, in response to their refusal of His offer of covenant relationship, God will place them under judgment. They will spend one year in the desert wilderness for each day they spent observing the fruit of God's covenant realization. The number 40 now represents divine judgment for covenant refusal rather than divine blessing for covenant acceptance. Interestingly, the 40 days of warning against judgment and offer of blessing and the 40 years of judgment is seen elsewhere in the biblical narrative: Egypt experiences 40 years of judgment (Ezekiel 29:11-13), and Nineveh had 40 days of warning before the judgment of God would be poured out if the people did not repent (Jonah 3:4). Yet, even in the midst of their 40 years of punishment, Israel experienced the love and grace of God. He watched over her (Deuteronomy 2:7), tested her (Deuteronomy 8:2), and of course, provided for her (Deuteronomy 8:4; 29:5; Nehemiah 9:21). Even when we experience punishment from God, grace is present. The writer of Hebrews notes that God's punishment is for our good, if we will faithfully respond to it with contrition and with openness to what God is teaching us, how He is molding us into the likeness of Christ.

Prayer Focus: Ask God to grant you spiritual insight and strength to learn from the difficulties you face. Ask the Holy Spirit to illumine your mind—to help you see—how the challenges you face can be used for your good, and then to give you the humility and grace to thank Him for those difficulties/challenges.

-John D. Laing

March 17, 2023

1 Timothy 4:10 (HCSB)

¹⁰ In fact, we labor and strive for this, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of everyone, especially of those who believe.

Timothy knew what it meant to live a life based on hope in God. Serving alongside Paul and having experienced the saving grace of Jesus personally, he clearly communicated the gospel to those he met. Hope in our day has been confused with wishful thinking; we say I hope you have a good day, or I hope it doesn't rain. But these are just wishes. Hope is something more than just wishing things into existence. Was it wishful thinking on the part of blind Bartimaeus when he asked Jesus to "have mercy on me" and "let me see"? Was it just wishful thinking when the disciples took the little boy's fish and bread and after Jesus blessed it, believed they could feed 5000 people? No, their hope was more than wishful thinking because it was based on the power of God in their lives. They had walked with Jesus, witnessed His miracles, and believed. Blind and deaf, Helen Keller wrote "Hope sees the invisible, feels the intangible, and achieves the impossible." She knew the difference between hope and wishful thinking. She lived knowing hope is believing the impossible is possible and then pursued it with a vengeance.

Paul wrote in Romans 15:4, "For whatever was written before was written for our instruction, so that through our endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we may have hope." Later in verse 13 we read, "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (HCSB). Hope is more than wishful thinking. It is built on the firm foundation that the God of hope who saved us will also guide our steps towards a future that only He can accomplish.

Prayer Guide: Ask God to fill your heart with hope as you face whatever comes today. Ask Him to help you demonstrate what living a hope-filled life grounded in faith looks like for those who live without hope.

-Wanda S. Lee

March 18, 2023

2 Kings 4:32-37 (HCSB)

³² When Elisha got to the house, he discovered the boy lying dead on his bed. ³³ So he went in, closed the door behind the two of them, and prayed to the Lord. ³⁴ Then he went up and lay on the boy: he put mouth to mouth, eye to eye, hand to hand. While he bent down over him, the boy's flesh became warm. ³⁵ Elisha got up, went into the house, and paced back and forth. Then he went up and bent down over him again. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes. ³⁶ Elisha called Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite woman." He called her and she came. Then Elisha said, "Pick up your son." ³⁷ She came, fell at his feet, and bowed to the ground; she picked up her son and left.

The story of the Elisha's raising of the Sunammite woman's son parallels the story (noted in the devotional for March 4) of Elijah's raising of the Zarephathite woman's son (1 Kings 17). There are obvious similarities, from the hospitality shown to the two prophets by the women, to the way they raised the boys (the prophets stretched themselves overtop of the deceased boys' bodies). The parallels are meant to show that the mantle of Elijah was passed on to Elisha, how the Spirit of God that empowered Elijah was at work in Elisha, just as promised in Elisha's commissioning and at Elijah's departure (2 Kings 2:9-12). There are some differences in the accounts, though, most obviously in the two women: the woman from Zarephath was poor, while the woman from Shunem was wealthy; the woman from Zarephath was a Gentile (Zarephath was a Phoenician town), while the woman from Shunem was an Israelite (Shunem was near the Jezreel Valley, where Elijah had to prophets of Baal and Ashtoreth executed after the confrontation at Carmel; 1 Kings 18); the woman from Zarephath already had a son when Elijah met her, while the woman from Shunem was barren when she met Elisha; and most importantly, the woman from Zarephath was a pagan (most likely a follower of Baal, Melqart, or Eshmun), while the woman from Shunem was a follower of the LORD. The work of Elijah with the woman from Zarephath was probably to reveal the power of the LORD to give life, as the woman seems to have come to faith after Elijah raised her son from the dead, though at the time of his death, she seemed not only distraught, but without hope in any god or in the true God (1 Kings 17:18). By contrast, the Shunammite woman seems to have believed from the start, with the pregnancy and birth of her son—in accordance with Elisha's prophecy—strengthening her faith to the point that his death did not cause her to falter. When Elisha's servant, Gehazi, asked her how she was, she replied that she was fine, despite the fact that her son had died of some kind of brain aneurism (2 Kings 4:26). She believed things would be fine because she knew that God gave her son to her and that God's prophet was coming to visit. She trusted that God's will would be met, even in the midst of her personal pain.

God has provided for us as well; He gave us life and every good things we have. He loves us and has a plan for us, the most important part of which is a plan for our salvation. He provided for that salvation in Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection, and because of this, we can trust that, no matter what we face, He is with us and working for our good.

Prayer Focus: Pray that God would strengthen your faith such that, no matter what you face, no matter what pain you encounter, you can have the peace of knowing that He is working and in control.

-John D. Laing

March 19, 2023

4th Sunday of Lent

Psalm 130 (KJV)

130 Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord. ² Lord, hear my voice: let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. ³ If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? ⁴ But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared. ⁵ I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope. ⁶ My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning: I say, more than they that watch for the morning. ⁷ Let Israel hope in the Lord: for with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption. ⁸ And he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

Prayer Focus: Ask God to strengthen your faith; ask the Holy Spirit to help you to trust God and to place your future completely in His hands. Ask for patience as you wait for Him to reveal that future in His perfect timing, and ask that He grant you the grace to not only have patience for His timing, but to desire His perfect timing.

March 20, 2023

Ecclesiastes 3:16-20 (HCSB)

¹⁶ I also observed under the sun: there is wickedness at the place of judgment and there is wickedness at the place of righteousness. ¹⁷ I said to myself, “God will judge the righteous and the wicked, since there is a time for every activity and every work.” ¹⁸ I said to myself, “This happens concerning people, so that God may test them and they may see for themselves that they are like animals.” ¹⁹ For the fate of people and the fate of animals is the same. As one dies, so dies the other; they all have the same breath. People have no advantage over animals since everything is futile. ²⁰ All are going to the same place; all come from dust, and all return to dust.

The writer of Ecclesiastes calls himself the Teacher, whom most consider to be Solomon. He presents two views of life. One is ‘under the sun’ which is life without a godly worldview. The other is living in the fear of God, seeing God at work in the perceived vanity of life, even in the face of wickedness. Like so many of us, Solomon was troubled by the injustices of his day where wickedness seemed to rule and prosper. But he refers to his words at the beginning of this chapter, noting there is a time and place for everything, and that there will be a time when God will administer judgment and justice. In fact, the wickedness is allowed by God to test people to see what is in their hearts. Those who choose the godly worldview, who know that God has put eternity in the hearts of men, will enjoy life and eternity with God. Under the sun, men and animals die and decay. Without compassion, the lion kills his prey for his own nourishment and survival. Those who choose God will rise above the animal instinct and put compassion first. They will enjoy life and eternity with God. We live in a fallen and wicked world, but there is a righteous Judge who will bestow blessings on the meek and humble who chose Him. The meek will inherit the earth because they will not ignore the needs of others. The humble are given grace because they will bow in repentance for falling short of a Godly standard they know they can’t meet. Take heart that we have a righteous judge.

Prayer Focus: Pray you will be in awe of God today and rejoice and enjoy the good life.

-Jeff Hester

March 21, 2023

Psalm 35:13 (HCSB)

¹³ Yet when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled myself with fasting, and my prayer was genuine.

Famous songwriter and theologian, Garth Brooks, reminds us of the truth that sometimes, “God’s greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.” This can often be tough to hear in the moment when it seems like our prayers are talking to God about all the things we want to happen that aren’t happening. But because of the benefit of hindsight we can all look back, like Garth, and be thankful to God for some of our own “unanswered prayers.” But were they really unanswered? The psalmist here says that his prayers “returned into mine own bosom.” That’s just a fancy way of saying it seems like his prayers aren’t getting higher than the ceiling. This is poetic language. The biblical reality is that even though sometimes it feels like our prayers go unanswered, in Christ, our prayers are always heard by God and responded to in His own wise and sovereign way (Matthew 21:22). Our praying is never in vain. Similarly, expressing our devotion to God through fasting and mourning is never pointless. It is powerful! In Psalm 35:13 the psalmist is mourning, fasting, and praying to God and he honestly states that it seems like nothing is happening. But think about it: God heard this prayer and had it preserved in His divinely inspired Word so that we could learn from it today. Prayer, fasting, and other spiritual disciplines are not primarily about convenience. They are about communion. God is not a vending machine that we can manipulate with religious rituals in order to get our way. God is living, almighty, wise, sovereign, gracious, loving, and infinitely more. Our spiritual disciplines are about communing with our infinitely awesome God and learning to trust Him through all of our fears and failures. As you fast and pray this Lenten season, focus on connecting with our amazing God and learning to trust Him with every part of your life.

Prayer Focus: Pray by thanking God that you get to commune with Him. Thank Him for always hearing and responding to your prayers in Christ. Ask Him to help you trust Him more.

-Austin Burch

March 22, 2023

Hebrews 4:14-16 (HCSB)

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens—Jesus the Son of God—let us hold fast to the confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tested in every way as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Therefore let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us at the proper time.

Though I've read stories in the newspaper and seen stories on TV about it, it's never happened to me. Have you ever approached the pay window after waiting in a fast food drive thru line only to discover that the person in the vehicle in front of you paid for your meal? Or maybe you're the one who decided to bless the person in the car behind yours by doing this. If you ever happen to be the beneficiary of this act of kindness, I bet the surprise of the generosity of a stranger would fill you with a memorable moment of thankfulness. You are getting what you need—delicious food—based on someone else's payment rather than your own.

You and I are the beneficiaries of a payment that leads to something much better than an extra value meal. It's a payment not from a stranger, but from the One who knows you better than you know yourself—One who has “been in your shoes,” facing your same trials and temptations, but overcoming them and overcoming the world. This One—Jesus, God's Son—paid the price of His life so that you could be rescued from your sin and enjoy a saving relationship with your loving God that leads to experiencing His goodness for eternity. It's a New Covenant that allows us to “approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

Prayer Focus: “Father, thank You for the gift of Your Son's life in place of mine on the cross. Thank You for this payment that ensures I can come to You freely, daily, and find everything I need. Help me to share the Good News of this gift with others.”

-David Eanes

March 23, 2023

Acts 13:21; 1 Kings 2:11 (HCSB)

²¹ Then they asked for a king, so God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for 40 years.

¹¹ The length of time David reigned over Israel was 40 years: he reigned seven years in Hebron and 33 years in Jerusalem.

Several of Israel's kings ruled for 40 years, and these 40-year reigns represent the ebb and flow of Israel's relationship with God. In Acts 13, a 40-year period is mentioned twice, first with respect to the wilderness wanderings, a clear reference to divine judgment and wrath, and then with respect to the reign of Saul. This connects Saul's failed reign to the judgment of God. Recall that God appointed Saul when the Israelites rejected the LORD and asked for a king like the Gentile nations. Recall also that Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin, the tribe almost eradicated due to the affair with the Levite's concubine at Gibeah, Saul's hometown. That affair demonstrated that the level of Israel's sin was on par with that of Sodom and Gomorrah (see Judges 19). David, representing the gracious covenant relationship offer by God (1 Samuel 7), also reigned 40 years (1 Chronicles 29:27), as did Solomon (1 Kings 11:42; 2 Chronicles 9:32), who represents Israel's rejection of that covenant in favor of following the nations, epitomized in Solomon's many treaty marriages to foreign princesses in violation of God's clear command against intermarrying with the pagan peoples (Deuteronomy 7:3; 1 Kings 11:1-13). Joash also reigned 40 years (2 Chronicles 24:1), and his reign represents renewal, forgiveness, and grace, as he sought to revive the worship of the LORD in the Temple. These 40-year periods function as both offer of covenant relationship and blessing, and warning of judgment and wrath for sin and faithlessness. Easter is the ultimate warning of divine judgment and wrath upon sin in the suffering and death of Christ; it is also the ultimate offer of covenant blessing, grace, forgiveness and new life in the substitutionary death of Christ and in his resurrection from the dead. During our time of Lent, may we reflect upon our own sin and rejection of covenant blessings, but also upon our own opportunities for renewal of covenant relationship with God and upon the immense love of God in providing the means for that renewal in Christ Jesus.

Prayer Focus: Reflect upon the interplay of God's wrath and judgment upon sin on the one hand, and His love and grace/forgiveness on the other hand. Meditate upon the cross and resurrection and how they are interrelated (needful of one another). There can be no resurrection without the cross, and the cross only has hopeful meaning because of the resurrection. Pray for someone who is lost; pray that they will come to know God's grace revealed in His holiness, judgment and wrath poured out on sin.

-John D. Laing

March 24, 2023

Micah 7:7 (HCSB)

⁷ But I will look to the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me.

How often do we read God's word, especially the Old Testament, through a special lens of *beyond ancient*? I know that often, I am guilty of reading the Old Testament as pure black and white history leading to the arrival of Jesus and then, we get the good stuff! In doing so, I (we) lose the perspective that God's word—all of it—is alive and vital for us (Hebrews 4:12). The prophets are also often viewed with the idea that they are simply God's mouthpiece saying, "Get right, or else...!", and while there was (and is) plenty for the prophets to warn about, they are also God's voice of hope. They remind their audiences (and us) of God's promises and covenant. The prophet Micah was no different. Micah's purpose was to warn Israel of God's judgment while also offering hope of God's promise to be merciful and restore their land. In chapter 7, Israel is portrayed as a lonely individual sitting in defeat, but who has found resolve to hope in the Lord. For us today, we have both the living word of God and the Holy Spirit to speak on God's behalf and to confront us in whatever our life circumstance might be. And like Israel, we must resolve to put our hope in the Lord. It is true that God must confront and judge evil among his people; His holiness demands it. However, God's covenant of love and promise are always more powerful than human evil: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding; think about Him in all your ways, and He will guide you on the right paths." (Proverbs 3:5-6 HCSB).

Prayer Focus: Pray, asking the Lord to help you to put all of your hope in him. Regardless of your current situation of concern, ask God to help you in seeking him and ask him to give you confidence of your hope in him.

-David Vaughan

March 25, 2023

Hosea 6:1-2 (HCSB)

6 Come, let us return to the Lord. For He has torn us, and He will heal us; He has wounded us, and He will bind up our wounds. ² He will revive us after two days, and on the third day He will raise us up so we can live in His presence.

Midway through the book of Hosea, after several accusatory speeches against Israel for their sins against God, we see hopeful repentance, as Israel expresses good intentions to return to God. Israel recognizes that their sufferings (wounds) are attributable to God, and that the solution (healing) also lies with God, for God's presence is the very source of life (cmpr. Deuteronomy 8:3). The description of Israel's renewed life after two and three days is significant, as the judgment and restoration of Israel model the Gospel. Sin results in exile, a metaphorical death of the nation, while repentance and faith lead to a divinely-empowered return, a figurative resurrection.

The promise of revival (lit. "bring to life") after two days and raising up on the third day points to Jesus' resurrection from the grave. Although the Hebrew word for "raising" (root *qum*) can also be translated as "establish" or "stand"—so that the prophecy might simply mean that God will establish Israel in the land—there are strong reasons to see it as a reference to resurrection. The notions of raising and establishing are not mutually exclusive, as God's re-establishment of Israel in the land after exile pictures resurrection (cf. Ezekiel 37, the vision of dry bones). The word *qum* ("raise") is the only Hebrew word used for resurrection, and Jesus uses similar terms about his own resurrection in John's Gospel (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54). While it would be an overstatement to claim Hosea clearly predicts Jesus' resurrection, we can still see in this formula of Israel's exile and return a type of Christ's death and resurrection. As we see Israel's punishment for sin, their repentance and desire for God's forgiveness and restoration to His life-giving presence, we can be confident in God's forgiveness for our own sins, we can rejoice in restoration to fellowship with God, and we can be excited about the certainty of our own resurrection (John 5:25-29).

Prayer Focus: Take time to prayerfully confess and repent of sins that may be burdening you right now. Release them to the Lord, trusting His love and willingness to forgive you and to renew your spiritual life, so you may once more bask in His life-giving presence.

-Stefana Dan Laing

March 26, 2023

5th Sunday of Lent

Psalm 16 (KJV)

16 Preserve me, O God: for in thee do I put my trust. ² O my soul, thou hast said unto the Lord, Thou art my Lord: my goodness extendeth not to thee; ³ But to the saints that are in the earth, and to the excellent, in whom is all my delight. ⁴ Their sorrows shall be multiplied that hasten after another god: their drink offerings of blood will I not offer, nor take up their names into my lips. ⁵ The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup: thou maintainest my lot. ⁶ The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage. ⁷ I will bless the Lord, who hath given me counsel: my reins also instruct me in the night seasons. ⁸ I have set the Lord always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. ⁹ Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest in hope. ¹⁰ For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. ¹¹ Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore.

Prayer Focus: Ask God to convince you of the truth of His Word regarding His plan, His providence, His salvific work, His incarnation of the Son, His resurrection, and His ascension. Praise God for His promise of eternal life in the Son.

March 27, 2023

Joel 2:12 (HCSB)

¹² Even now—this is the Lord’s declaration—turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning.

The scripture verse from Joel 2:12 speaks of a time of repentance and reconciliation with the Lord. The prophet Joel is calling the people of Israel to return to the Lord with all their hearts, with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Fasting is an important part of the spiritual discipline of repentance, as it is a way of humbling ourselves before God and turning away from our sinful ways. Fasting can be done by abstaining from food completely or by cutting out certain foods (like sweets) for a certain period of time. It is also about cutting out things we are tempted to elevate above God. We can fast from activities such as watching television, social media or engaging in other worldly pursuits. Whatever form fasting takes, it should always be done out of reverence for the Lord.

The spiritual application of Joel 2:12 is that we need to return to the Lord with all our hearts and humble ourselves before Him. We should use fasting to draw closer to the Lord and seek reconciliation with Him. Fasting is a powerful tool for spiritual growth. It helps us to draw near to God and to turn away from our sinful ways. When our boys were preschoolers, Shane and I fasted from all forms of media for two weeks. The process changed our behavior. Even today, we do not watch TV as we did before the fast. During that fast, God revealed the stronghold that TV had on our lives. I was convicted to enjoy bedtime with my kids and to pray for them nightly instead of worrying about what was on TV.

Think about the areas in your life that continually separate you from the presence of God. Take a moment to put your thoughts into writing and pray about what area or areas God would have you fast.

Prayer Focus: Lord, help me to humble myself before you, and turn away from my sinful ways. Convict me of the areas or the things that I need to fast. Help me to use fasting as a way to draw closer to You and to be reconciled to You. Lord, help me to have a deeper relationship with You. Help me to seek after You with all my heart.

-Mitzi J. Eaker

March 28, 2023

Psalm 42:2 (HCSB)

² I thirst for God, the living God. When can I come and appear before God?

Have you ever run in an organized race? If you're like me, once you finish the race, you can't get to the table of bottled water or Gatorade fast enough. If you're lucky, a member of the race staff hands you a bottle upon crossing the finish line! If it's a particularly long race, a significant thirst builds up over the course of the morning. Thankfully, that great thirst is matched in intensity by the great joy that comes from your first post-race bottle of hydration. Often, it's the thought of that refreshment waiting at the finish line that gives you hope and keeps you going!

The Psalmist in Psalm 42:2, like each of us, is in the middle of this "race" called life. And while life is like a roller coaster with highs, lows, and everything in between, our focal verse finds its writer at a low point. In this moment, he realizes his deep need for God. He even ponders when might be the next opportunity he can spend time with God. Reflecting back to the running race, there comes that time when you're exhausted and realize your deep thirst. You need a drink, and wonder privately or out loud, "When will I reach the finish line so I can have that bottle of water or Gatorade?" Fortunately for the Psalmist, and for us, you don't have to wait until the end of life's "race" to quench your soul's thirst with the goodness of God. Certainly, when this life ends, a Christian will have his/her need for God met in an unparalleled, eternal way. But, until then, let's find our hope in God by meeting with Him now, and often.

Prayer Focus: "Father, help me meet with you every day by spending time in Your Word and in prayer."

-David Eanes

March 29, 2023

1 Kings 19:8 (HCSB)

⁸ So he got up, ate, and drank. Then on the strength from that food, he walked 40 days and 40 nights to Horeb, the mountain of God.

After his confrontation with the prophets of Baal and Ashtoreth at Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), Elijah fled a day's journey into the wilderness because Queen Jezebel vowed to kill him. He was distraught, exhausted, and hungry. In fact, he was so spent and fearful that he prayed for death to take him, and then he went to sleep (1 Kings 19:4). It was at this point that an angel came and provided him with food and water (twice). It is unclear if the angel (identified as the angel of the LORD) is God or a created being, but it does appear that the bread and water was supernaturally provided and not readily available through natural means. It is at this point that Elijah went into the desert for 40 days and nights, fasting and meeting with God at Mount Horeb, the same place that Moses received the Law (Ten Commandments) from God. The parallels between Elijah's and Moses' experiences are interesting: both fasted 40 days and nights, both met with God at Horeb, both received a revelation of God's power and might and His tenderness and grace, both were encouraged in their callings and ministries, and both were given insight into God's plan for His people. In the case of Elijah, the fasting prepared him to receive God's word in the soft, blowing wind/voice. The word given to him was one of encouragement, but it was also one without a clear outcome for Elijah: he was told to, among other things, anoint Elisha as prophet in his place. Elijah was already concerned because many of God's prophets had been executed by Jezebel, and now he was being told that his ministry was coming to an end. He must have been apprehensive and perhaps even a little scared. Who wouldn't?! But Elijah had resolve because he knew the word was from God, that God was in control, that God loved him, and that God had plans for him. At this time, Elijah did not know God would take him to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:1-18), but he trusted the LORD and was faithful to His commands. We can likewise have resolve to be faithful, we can likewise have confidence in the leading of God in our lives and we can likewise find hope and strength in His word. If you are having difficulty discerning God's leading, try fasting and prayer.

Prayer Focus: Pray to God for confidence in His Word, His love, and His plan. Ask God to reveal that plan to you so that you can be faithful in staying on the path He has for you.

-John D. Laing

March 30, 2023

Romans 12:12 (HCSB)

¹² Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; be persistent in prayer.

Paul really made us think when he wrote this verse. Be joyful in hope? Be patient in affliction? Be faithful in prayer? Man, that gives us a whole lot of work to do when we may not feel like being patient, when we have lost all hope, when our afflictions seem too big for us to overcome, or when we just do not know how to pray for our circumstances. Is it always easy to be happy? No, it isn't but when we put spending time with our Father in true worship then the joy comes. The same thing applies to being patient and faithful. I will be honest patience is not my strongest character point, but God has shown me through difficult times patience is not an obstacle but another form of abiding in His presence. Allowing His love wash all over us as we read His word or as we come to Him in prayer is the level of connection Paul is telling us to have with God. Paul is telling us that these three words are the key to the emotional and spiritual wellness of every one of us. As we reread the verse again, we can see that it is not another "to-do list" but it is showing us the glory of God that is available to each one of us.

Prayer Focus: Father, as we come to you today, we thank you for your Word and how we can use the instructions in every moment of our lives. Help us to be aware of those around us who are struggling. Let us point them to you who brings comfort to all those who seek Him. Amen.

-Kelley Young

March 31, 2023

Hosea 12:6 (HCSB)

⁶But you must return to your God. Maintain love and justice, and always put your hope in God.

“But I don’t want to return to the Lord... I am broken, rebellious, tired, faithless and bitter. I would prefer to do things my way and not have to put up with God.” -Israel

This passage finds God calling Israel to return to Him once again. They are reaping the whirlwind of idol worship and rebellion as they seek out Egypt and Assyria for rescue. They have put their hope in the arms of two false saviors instead of the One who has proven Himself over and over again as worthy of their hope.

How often have we been in that very same place? If we are honest with the depth of our sinfulness, we find ourselves regularly choosing ourselves and our plans over God and His ways. We would rather reap the whirlwind of our own making as long as we can maintain our own autonomy and control. So, when we read this passage telling us to *return to God*, often our heart says, “I don’t want to.” I think one of the key reasons why returning to God is so hard is that we mistakenly think He will treat us like we would treat our enemies... smite them all like Zeus armed with a quiver full of lightning bolts! I know I deserve His wrath, so why should I be in a hurry to receive my punishment? However, God is not man: “Yahweh is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in faithful love and truth” (Exodus 34:6). When God spoke about Himself to Moses, this is what He wanted to communicate; not His power and rightness, but rather His compassion and grace. That is a big deal! He is not waiting to blast you with lightning to pay you back for your leaving Him. Rather, He is your father who longs for you to come home where love and justice live.

Yes, your rebellion deserves justice, but Jesus took the lightning bolts. The wrath that both you and I deserve has been poured out, so that returning to God is no longer the cause for fear but rather the greatest joy imaginable. We can now wholeheartedly put our hope in God because He shown His true heart and nature through the cross. We put our hope in so many things that have and will fail us. Let us hope in the one who went to the cross to show us that His love never fails.

Prayer Guide:

Pray you would experience the gracious love of the Father and that would allow you to rest in Him. Pray that His love would so touch your heart that you would love others out of a sense of joy rather than duty. Pray that your heart would become accustomed to returning home to the arms of the Father quickly every time you once again find yourself a rebel in a strange land.

-Pete Collins

April 1, 2023

1 Corinthians 15:1-4 (HCSB)

15 Now brothers, I want to clarify for you the gospel I proclaimed to you; you received it and have taken your stand on it. ²You are also saved by it, if you hold to the message I proclaimed to you—unless you believed for no purpose. ³For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,

Luke records for us in the book of Acts that Paul first visited Corinth on his second journey in Acts 18 and stayed with them for at least *eighteen* months teaching among them the word of God. Luke says Paul was committed to teaching the word, and as a result, many Corinthians believed and were baptized, including Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, and his household. Paul reminds his readers here in the first few verses of chapter 15, the Gospel—which is *the most important* or *of first importance* in verse 3—focuses on Christ’s death for our sins, His burial, and His resurrection on the third day. Scripture says Paul disputed with the Jews in Corinth that the Christ was Jesus (Acts 18:5), and many opposed and insulted him. However, because he remained steadfast, Paul says many Corinthians received the Gospel, they are standing on the gospel, and many have believed and are being saved—if they have not believed in vain (vs. 1-2)! Praise the Lord for this type of response among the Corinthians. But, as you continue to read and study through 1 and 2 Corinthians, Paul attempts to correct many issues among the believers—false prophets, divisions in the church, sexual immorality, church discipline, defiling the Lord’s Supper, among many others. But, he reminded them, of first importance, the Good News that he, himself, received and faithfully delivered to them. He points them to a clear description of what the Gospel is—Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection. What an inspiring example for us today to reflect on the biblical pattern we see for proclaiming the Good News and making disciples in Scripture, specifically Paul’s commitment to proclaim the Gospel everywhere he went! May we, like Paul, have this same type of commitment to the Gospel, faithfully and intentionally proclaiming it to those around us who need to hear about His death, burial and resurrection this Easter season, believing that it’s the power of the Gospel that can transform people’s lives (Romans 1:16-17) and bring hope. And last, may you and I also be committed, like Paul, to invest deeply into the lives of every person with whom we share the Good News, encouraging and equipping them to reflect the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ every single day.

Prayer Focus: Pray that God would open a door for you to share the Good News with a friend, co-worker, or neighbor this week. Pray that the Holy Spirit will fill you as you go, and grant you the right words at the right time as you seek to evangelize this Easter season.

-Kevin Bolin

Psalm 22 (KJV)

22 My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? **2** O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent. **3** But thou art holy, O thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel. **4** Our fathers trusted in thee: they trusted, and thou didst deliver them. **5** They cried unto thee, and were delivered: they trusted in thee, and were not confounded. **6** But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people. **7** All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, **8** He trusted on the Lord that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him. **9** But thou art he that took me out of the womb: thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother's breasts. **10** I was cast upon thee from the womb: thou art my God from my mother's belly. **11** Be not far from me; for trouble is near; for there is none to help. **12** Many bulls have compassed me: strong bulls of Bashan have beset me round. **13** They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening and a roaring lion. **14** I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels. **15** My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death. **16** For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet. **17** I may tell all my bones: they look and stare upon me. **18** They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture. **19** But be not thou far from me, O Lord: O my strength, haste thee to help me. **20** Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog. **21** Save me from the lion's mouth: for thou hast heard me from the horns of the unicorns. **22** I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee. **23** Ye that fear the Lord, praise him; all ye the seed of Jacob, glorify him; and fear him, all ye the seed of Israel. **24** For he hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither hath he hid his face from him; but when he cried unto him, he heard. **25** My praise shall be of thee in the great congregation: I will pay my vows before them that fear him. **26** The meek shall eat and be satisfied: they shall praise the Lord that seek him: your heart shall live for ever. **27** All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the Lord: and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before thee. **28** For the kingdom is the Lord's: and he is the governor among the nations. **29** All they that be fat upon earth shall eat and worship: all they that go down to the dust shall bow before him: and none can keep alive his own soul. **30** A seed shall serve him; it shall be accounted to the Lord for a generation. **31** They shall come, and shall declare his righteousness unto a people that shall be born, that he hath done this.

Prayer Focus: Thank God for His deliverance and faithfulness, even in times of suffering, difficulty, or hardship.

April 3, 2023

Jeremiah 31:31, 33-34 (HCSB)

³¹“Look, the days are coming”—this is the Lord’s declaration—“when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah...

³³“Instead, this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days”—the Lord’s declaration. “I will put My teaching within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be My people. ³⁴No longer will one teach his neighbor or his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know Me, from the least to the greatest of them”—this is the Lord’s declaration. “For I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sin.”

In Jeremiah 31:31-34 we find the only reference to a new covenant in the Old Testament. It has been observed by many scholars that this is one of the most important passages in Jeremiah and contains one of the deepest insights in the whole Old Testament. This passage finds its fulfillment only in the true believer in Jesus Christ and His covenant with sinful people. The new covenant is a covenant of sovereign grace. It cannot be broken and it will last throughout eternity. It is based upon the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a covenant in which His blood covers all of our sins. It is the communion and walking in the Holy Spirit as a result of regeneration of the depraved sinner. It depicts the incredible change of the sinner and his new relationship to Jesus Christ.

Why do we still seek laws and regulations by which to live as Christians? The law made nothing perfect and it still doesn't. Only the Holy Spirit can do that by applying the living presence of Christ within us. This is the covenant in which we are to live!

Prayer Focus: Most precious Father You are our God and we are your people. Thank you for giving us breath in our lungs to love You and all the peoples of the world. May we draw near to you at all times. Help us to quiet ourselves in the midst of our busy lives. May we find great strength and comfort in Your Word and in your presence.

-Kristy Carr

April 4, 2023

Matthew 4:2; Acts 1:3 (HCSB)

² After He had fasted 40 days and 40 nights, He was hungry.

³ After He had suffered, He also presented Himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during 40 days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

Jesus' earthly ministry began with a 40-day period of preparation. He had already begun to identify with humanity's weaknesses in the incarnation; by becoming human, Jesus endured temptation, pain, growth, sickness, etc. He experienced everything we experience as humans. However, it was now that he would face the temptations of the devil and the horror of the cross, including the wrath of God. Jesus' 40-day fast in the Judean wilderness mirrors the miraculous fasts of Moses and Elijah, both of which preceded intimate encounters with God. Yet for Jesus, the fast preceded an encounter with the evil one, the accuser, the adversary, the god of this age, the lord of the flies/dung, the destroyer. It is interesting that Matthew records that Jesus was hungry after his fast. This speaks to Jesus' humanity and to his susceptibility to the devil's temptations, the first of which in Matthew's gospel is to make bread from stones (possibly an allusion to the miraculous provision of heavenly bread—manna—by God for the Israelites in the wilderness). But it also speaks to Jesus' readiness to face temptation. He had denied his flesh and was prepared to reject the various temptations that appealed to the flesh: bodily pleasure and satisfaction, political fame and power, and a worldly form of spiritual authority that seeks to supplant God [the Father]. His fast may have weakened him physically, but it strengthened him spiritually, for it required complete dependence upon God. Such complete surrender makes one more sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, more illumined to the Word of God, just as Jesus leaned on the Spirit and the Word for strength to overcome.

After his resurrection, Jesus completed his earthly ministry with a 40-day period of preparation of his disciples. They were taught by him for 40 days; they were reminded of his teachings and his life-example, and they were shown how the Scriptures point to Christ. They were taught how Jesus is the fulfillment of the covenant promises made to Abraham, to Israel through Moses, to David, and to all humanity through Jeremiah and the prophets. They were shown how the current age would pass away and a new age would begin with the ascension of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit. And they were shown how that age will be completed when Christ returns and makes all things new. All of this was to prepare them for what they were to do and what they were to face: they were to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth, making disciples of all peoples, but they were to face persecution for Christ's sake, most of them dying at the hands of men who were enemies of God.

God wants to prepare each of us to face the temptations of the flesh and of the devil. He wants to prepare us for the mission to which he has called all believers. He wants to prepare us to depend wholly on Him for our sustenance, our emotional well-being and spiritual vitality.

Prayer Focus: Ask God to sustain you through temptation; ask God to give you the strength to resist the devil; ask God to show you the meaning of His Word and its fulfillment in Christ.

-John D. Laing

April 5, 2023

1 Corinthians 15:21-24

²¹ For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ, the firstfruits; afterward, at His coming, those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to God the Father, when He abolishes all rule and all authority and power.

Rarely does a day go by that we do not hear about death. Accidents, drug overdoses, violent crimes as well as deaths from natural causes flood the daily news. COVID-related deaths alone have now topped 1.1 million in the US. Death is a reality. The Corinthians could not grasp the concept of a bodily resurrection after death. Paul stressed the importance of believing in the bodily resurrection in I Corinthians 15:21-22. To deny the bodily resurrection is saying Christ's death and resurrection were in vain. There would be no faith, no hope, no eternal life. Paul contrasts the death of Adam with the death of Christ. Adam sinned and as a direct consequence, sin brought death. Adam's death became a pattern for all people. It included physical and spiritual death. Since all of us are sinners, all must die.

When Christ came, he broke the chains of death. Since Christ was sinless, his mission included conquering death. His death and resurrection set the pattern for all who are forgiven of their sin through faith in him. The new conquers the old. First, there was Adam with sin and death. Now there is Christ with eternal joy and life. Paul wanted the Corinthian church to understand this truth. Just as Christ's resurrection is the firstfruits of those who have died, it becomes the assurance that all who trust Him shall likewise be raised to eternal glory. Adam brought death, but Christ brings eternal life. What hope this is for us living in a world where death is ever present. At the second coming we will be raised with Christ and death, the final enemy, will be destroyed. We will enter eternal joy where pain, illness, suffering, sorrow, grief, and death will no longer be present. We will worship God our Father and His Son Jesus Christ forever.

Prayer Focus: Give thanks for the power of the resurrection of Christ. Pray for open doors to share the message of salvation with those who do not yet personally know Christ. Pray for faith to live and serve daily knowing we serve a resurrected Lord.

-Larry H. Lee

April 6, 2023

Maundy Thursday

Exodus 12:1-15; 1 Cor. 5:7 (HCSB)

12 The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ²“This month is to be the beginning of months for you; it is the first month of your year. ³Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month they must each select an animal of the flock according to their fathers’ households, one animal per household. ⁴If the household is too small for a whole animal, that person and the neighbor nearest his house are to select one based on the combined number of people; you should apportion the animal according to what each person will eat. ⁵You must have an unblemished animal, a year-old male; you may take it from either the sheep or the goats. ⁶You are to keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembly of the community of Israel will slaughter the animals at twilight. ⁷They must take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses where they eat them. ⁸They are to eat the meat that night; they should eat it, roasted over the fire along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹Do not eat any of it raw or cooked in boiling water, but only roasted over fire—its head as well as its legs and inner organs. ¹⁰Do not let any of it remain until morning; you must burn up any part of it that does remain before morning. ¹¹Here is how you must eat it: you must be dressed for travel, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. You are to eat it in a hurry; it is the Lord’s Passover. ¹²“I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night and strike every firstborn male in the land of Egypt, both man and beast. I am Yahweh; I will execute judgments against all the gods of Egypt. ¹³The blood on the houses where you are staying will be a distinguishing mark for you; when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No plague will be among you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt. ¹⁴“This day is to be a memorial for you, and you must celebrate it as a festival to the Lord. You are to celebrate it throughout your generations as a permanent statute. ¹⁵You must eat unleavened bread for seven days. On the first day you must remove yeast from your houses. Whoever eats what is leavened from the first day through the seventh day must be cut off from Israel.

Prayer Focus: Thank God for His deliverance; recommit your life to Christ, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

Isaiah 53 (KJV)

53 Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? ² For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. ³ He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴ Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. ⁸ He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. ⁹ And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth. ¹⁰ Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. ¹¹ He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities. ¹² Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Prayer Focus: Reflect upon the immense humility and suffering of Christ. Thank Jesus for his willingness to suffer and die on behalf of your sins.

Psalm 118 (KJV)

118 O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good: because his mercy endureth forever. ² Let Israel now say, that his mercy endureth for ever. ³ Let the house of Aaron now say, that his mercy endureth forever. ⁴ Let them now that fear the Lord say, that his mercy endureth forever. ⁵ I called upon the Lord in distress: the Lord answered me, and set me in a large place. ⁶ The Lord is on my side; I will not fear: what can man do unto me? ⁷ The Lord taketh my part with them that help me: therefore shall I see my desire upon them that hate me. ⁸ It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man. ⁹ It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in princes. ¹⁰ All nations compassed me about: but in the name of the Lord will I destroy them. ¹¹ They compassed me about; yea, they compassed me about: but in the name of the Lord I will destroy them. ¹² They compassed me about like bees: they are quenched as the fire of thorns: for in the name of the Lord I will destroy them. ¹³ Thou hast thrust sore at me that I might fall: but the Lord helped me. ¹⁴ The Lord is my strength and song, and is become my salvation. ¹⁵ The voice of rejoicing and salvation is in the tabernacles of the righteous: the right hand of the Lord doeth valiantly. ¹⁶ The right hand of the Lord is exalted: the right hand of the Lord doeth valiantly. ¹⁷ I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord. ¹⁸ The Lord hath chastened me sore: but he hath not given me over unto death. ¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness: I will go into them, and I will praise the Lord: ²⁰ This gate of the Lord, into which the righteous shall enter. ²¹ I will praise thee: for thou hast heard me, and art become my salvation. ²² The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner. ²³ This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes. ²⁴ This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it. ²⁵ Save now, I beseech thee, O Lord: O Lord, I beseech thee, send now prosperity. ²⁶ Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the Lord: we have blessed you out of the house of the Lord. ²⁷ God is the Lord, which hath shewed us light: bind the sacrifice with cords, even unto the horns of the altar. ²⁸ Thou art my God, and I will praise thee: thou art my God, I will exalt thee. ²⁹ O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever.

Prayer Focus: Take a few minutes to reflect upon God's provision in your life. Thank Him for specific blessings; make a list of 20 blessings for which you are thankful.

April 9, 2023

Easter Sunday

Psalm 110 (KJV)

110 The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool. ² The Lord shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies. ³ Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning: thou hast the dew of thy youth. ⁴ The Lord hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek. ⁵ The Lord at thy right hand shall strike through kings in the day of his wrath. ⁶ He shall judge among the heathen, he shall fill the places with the dead bodies; he shall wound the heads over many countries. ⁷ He shall drink of the brook in the way: therefore shall he lift up the head.

Prayer Focus: As you celebrate Christ's resurrection and the conquering of the power of death in the creation, give praise to God for His faithfulness to His plan in creating, especially creating humanity in His own image.



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