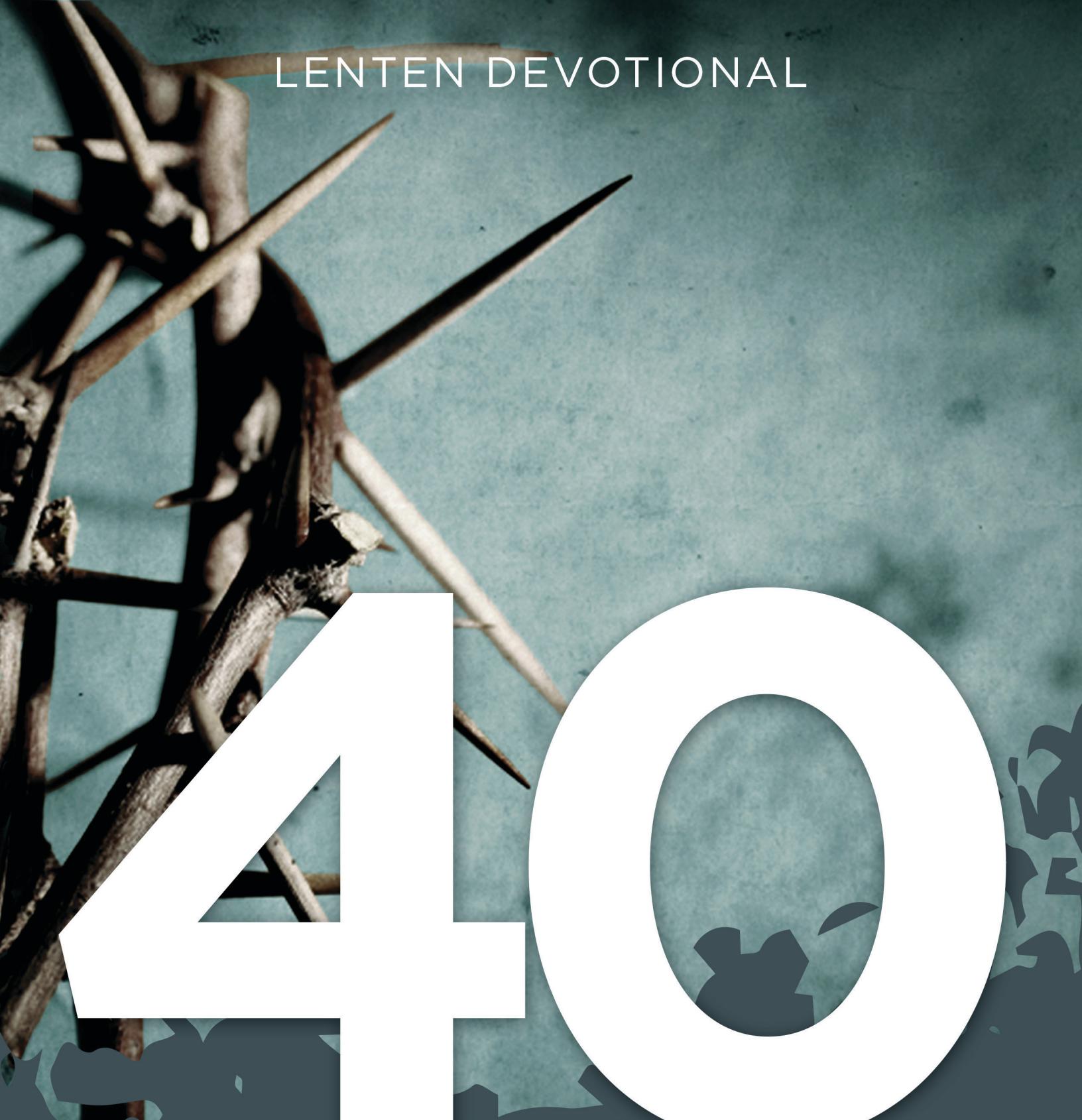


LENTEN DEVOTIONAL



days with jesus

Love Came Down

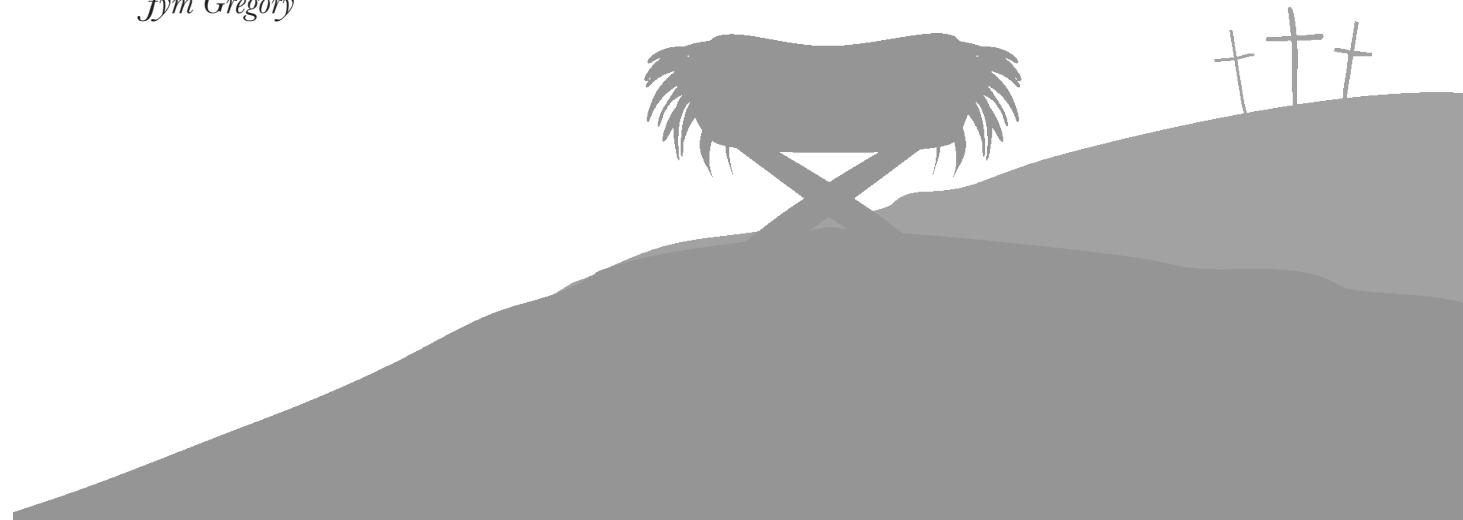
The Savior we seek
came wrapped in love.
A prophet speaking only truth.
A priest offering but one sacrifice.
A king bearing neither scepter nor crown.
Helpless babe, a deadly world awaits.
His kingdom will be established,
but not by our toil.

The desperate find in him a friend:
the proud, a staunch foe.
Into a world of death and hopelessness - a man of peace.

An offering from God Himself;
an offering of God Himself.
A child born in blood,
in the fullness of time arrived.
A man crucified in blood,
at the appointed time will return.
With pierced hands he embraces all who seek him.

Love came down - that many may rise up.

Jym Gregory



What is Lent?

Lent is the season of preparation for the celebration of Jesus' resurrection on Resurrection Sunday. Although Lent is often associated with Roman Catholicism, multiple Christian denominations officially celebrate Lent, and many believers within denominations that do not recognize it officially still choose to observe the practice of Lenten prayer and fasting. **Lent is actually 46 days long, but Sundays are not included for technical reasons related to the “fast days” on the Christian calendar.** Lent begins with Ash Wednesday and ends the day before Resurrection Sunday.

For the past many years our focus Scripture for our 40 days with Jesus has been John 15:4-5: **“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”**

This is a perfect Scripture to focus on during these 40 days with Jesus. For forty days, do your best to put aside, at least for a few moments each day, the worries and pressures of your life and abide in Christ, letting him abide in you as well. I know this isn't easy, so here are some suggestions that may help you remember your goal to be with Jesus each day during the Lenten season.

1. Set your watch to beep every 60 minutes to interrupt your day and remind you that you are abiding in Christ, not living for the world.
2. Put a “mark” on your hand, a reminder every time you see it that you are abiding in Christ today. This was a practice of the ancient Jews (Deut. 6:4-9).
3. Set up a reminder on your computer with a favorite Scripture or devotional thought that will flash at intervals throughout your workday.
4. Be intentional about starting each day in prayer. Put a note by your alarm clock or on your bathroom mirror. Carry the note with you throughout the day as a reminder to stop and contemplate God and his abiding with you that day.
5. Work with an accountability partner. Agree to call each other periodically to check in on your abiding.
6. If you live with others in a family, use this devotional or another to start or end each day with your focus on Christ.
7. Fast as you feel led, and use the time you would have been eating or participating in a certain activity to focus your time on God.

It may be that you have a better way of reminding yourself each day to abide in Christ. Do whatever works for you. The goal is to prepare for Resurrection Sunday by abiding with Christ.

Finally, I have put together this booklet to help you focus your thoughts each day during Lent. This year I offer a devotional thought based on Scripture followed by a suggested “Lenten act” and a prayer. Many of you will be perfectly comfortable offering your own prayer to end your devotion, which is obviously fine.

These devotional thoughts are not intended to be the only way you stay focused and remain in Christ during Lent, but hopefully it will help you start or end your day “tasting and seeing” that the Lord is good!

*“Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!
Blessed is the one who takes refuge in him!”*

-Psalm 34:8

Lenten Acts Index

Ash Wednesday: Examine your life and faith today.

Day 2: Be purposeful about your prayer life today.

Day 3: Set aside time for Scripture reading throughout Lent.

Day 4: Remind yourself today of your standing before God.

Day 5: Be intentional about your good works today.

Day 6: Consider a fast during Lent. Go to bed hungry.

Day 7: Turn away from folly today.

Day 8: Seek forgiveness and reconciliation with God today.

Day 9: Take inventory of your spiritual life today.

Day 10: Call on God today to be your great deliverer.

Day 11: Consider God's love for children today.

Day 12: Make a conscious effort to love God and neighbor today.

Day 13: Remember today that God is a great miracle worker.

Day 14: Ask God to give you a passion for the gospel today.

Day 15: Pray for your leaders today. Give your leaders due honor.

Day 16: Strive for purity in your life today. Be an imitator of God.

Day 17: Make it your ambition to walk in the light today.

Day 18: Pray for the unborn and those without a voice today.

Day 19: Rest in the love of God today. Be a giver today.

Day 20: Use The Lord's Prayer as a model today.

Day 21: Pray for those who cross your path today.

Day 22: Be intentional today about an act of kindness to the poor.

Day 23: Take time today to enjoy and take notice of creation.

Day 24: Share the light of Christ today. Pray for a lost soul.

Day 25: Take stock of your relationship with Christ today.

Day 26: Take time to offer up praise to God today.

Day 27: Consider your friendships today.

Day 28: Take the steps necessary today to offer forgiveness.

Day 29: Ask God for a passion for sharing your faith today.

Day 30: Consider your involvement in missions today.

Day 31: Allow God to work radically in your life today.

Day 32: Rest in God today.

Day 33: Redouble your efforts to remain in Christ today.

Day 34: Put on your spiritual armor today.

Day 35: Consider whether you believe God is good today.

Day 36: Consider death today, and let go of your fear.

Day 37: Confront your fears today, and give them over to God.

Day 38: Live today as an image bearer of God.

Good Friday: Remember what God has done for you in Christ.

Day 40: Make it your ambition to pursue God this year.

Day 1

ash wednesday

“Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

-Matthew 10:36-39

“Our break with the world will be the direct outcome of our changed relation to God. For the world of fallen men does not honor God. Millions call themselves by His Name, it is true, and pay some token respect to Him, but a simple test will show how little He is really honored among them...Let him be forced into making a choice between God and money, between God and men, between God and personal ambition, God and self, God and human love, and God will take second place...However the man may protest, the proof is in the choices he makes day after day throughout his life. Let the seeking man reach a place where life and lips join to say continually ‘Be thou exalted,’ and a thousand minor problems will be solved at once.”

-A.W. Tozer

LENTEN THOUGHT:

Jesus was certainly a man of peace and love who called us to love one another and offered us forgiveness and peace with God. However, we must not forget that the babe from the manger became a man, and that man called his followers to come out of the world, not to make peace with it. He said some very hard things. Many today would protest and say that God does not want us to love him more than our own families. How could we? Certainly he does not want us to lay down our lives for him when we could simply say with our mouths that we are not his followers and save ourselves. Surely he doesn't want us to throw away a gift as precious as life, and common sense tells us that telling a little lie is nothing compared to being killed. But that doesn't seem to be the case. Jesus placed an exacting call on his followers - all or nothing. Halfway will not do; he wants all of our obedience, all of our faith, all of our strength. It's actually a wonderful call that brings with it great joy and peace. But some, when that expectation becomes clear, prefer to walk away disappointed with the God who could ask for so much (John 6:60-66). What does it look like to love Jesus enough to actually make him the

most important part of our lives? To love him so much that not even the threat of death itself could compel us to denounce him? We get a picture of that kind of love in the New Testament (Acts 5:40-42; 7:54-60; Rom. 5:3; 8:18; Phil. 1:29; 2 Tim. 1:8; Heb. 5:7-9; 1 Pet. 2:19; 4:12-13; Rev. 2:10). Friends, God has called us to a life of suffering for his name. He's called us to put aside this world and its wisdom and embrace his truth—a truth that reminds us that he is in control, and that he will lead us to victory over sin and death. A.W. Tozer was right; our break with the world (or lack thereof) is what reveals our relationship to God. Seek to reach the place in life where, whether in health or pain, comfort or poverty, peace or war, we are continually rejoicing in God. In such a life minor problems disappear, for they are no longer problems to us. Be assured, in this world we will have trouble, but be of good cheer. Christ has overcome the world!

LENTEN ACT:

Start Lent by finding a private place to spend time with God. Ask yourself in his presence if you have truly given yourself over to him completely. Is there anything in this world that you treasure above him? If so, that person or thing has become an idol and has relegated God to second place, where he will not remain (Isaiah 42:8). God has called us to give ourselves to him completely. Ask yourself the hard questions as you begin your 40 days with Jesus. Does Christ truly have your heart? Would you give all to him? Do children, or spouse, or career, or boyfriend or girlfriend, or lack of a boyfriend or girlfriend, command so much attention from you so as to dull your devotion to God? Could you give them up? Here's some good news for you. More often than not, when we give things up to God, he gives them back to us, redeemed and more useful for his purposes.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, help me to be honest with you today and throughout Lent. Shine your light into my life, even the hidden places, and let me see who I truly am. Have I given myself to you fully, Lord? Am I harboring idols in my life? I need your strength to be courageous in my walk with you. Fill me with your Holy Spirit and make me a bold follower of Christ. Strengthen my resolve in you. Make these 40 days of Lent purposeful. Father, take away the idols in my life I pray. Amen.

Day 2

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

-Matthew 6:5-8

“Whoever has not begun the practice of prayer, I beg for the love of the Lord not to go without so great a good. There is nothing here to fear but only something to desire.”

-Theresa of Avila

LENTEN THOUGHT:

As you begin your journey into these 40 days with Jesus, there can be no better place to start than to learn how to communicate with God. Prayer is for most people the most difficult Christian discipline to put into regular practice. As finite human beings, we all struggle with the concealed thought, I suppose, that our words may be bouncing off the ceiling. What if there is no God? What if there is a God and I'm not praying correctly? Why doesn't he talk back and confirm, even once, that he's actually listening? If God is in control of all things, what purpose could prayer possibly accomplish? Hasn't he already determined everything? What if everything is determined by human free-will? How will my prayers to God change another human being? Wow, we all have lots of questions running through our minds at times, don't we? Prayer is hard because we don't get immediate feedback, and without that feedback it gets easy to let this discipline wane, at times to the point of extinction. And what about that time when we prayed for Grandpa Bill's healing and he died the next morning? Does that not clearly show that God is either unable or unwilling to intercede? But God promises us in Scripture that he is indeed listening, and he is acting upon our prayers. As hard as it might be for us to understand the nuances of God's providence, our prayers do make a difference. Just because we often have difficulty understanding prayer or even articulating how exactly God responds to it does not negate the power of God. Prayer is not hard for God to figure out, nor does it limit his ability to act in any way. Like all of God's promises in Scripture, we trust that they are true, walking by faith and not

thursday

by sight. The world calls us crazy, and gives us many psychological and pragmatic reasons why prayer is a waste of time, since (in the minds of many) it clearly makes no difference. But we, in faithfulness to God's word and the numerous examples of God's response to prayer in Scripture (and, if we think clearly, in our own lives) keep plugging away. Or we should, at least. Jesus prayed on a regular basis. The apostle Paul requested the prayers of his friends on his behalf. The prophet Daniel prayed and God responded faithfully. Elijah obeyed God in prayer and saw miracles occur. We tend to neglect prayer, but the Scriptures constantly call us back to it. In fact, we are reminded that we have not, because we do not ask God (James 4:2). Do not fear prayer, but desire it. Begin this Lenten season to strengthen your prayer life.

LENTEN ACT:

Prayer is a discipline of the faith, and like all disciplines, it must be practiced in order for you to become purposeful and proficient. As we grow in Christian maturity our prayers should naturally grow with us. Today, make prayer a priority. Take time to talk to God throughout your day. Go to a private room, close the door, and pray. If necessary, confess to him your lack of desire to pray, or your boredom with it. And remember, prayer is not only about talking, it is also about listening. We do not listen for the audible voice but for the inner voice. Often times, prayer leads us back to Scripture, where God has spoken his word to us in a very direct manner. Maybe you already have a dynamic prayer life; if so, would you consider mentoring a fellow believer in the art of prayer? Purpose today to make progress in your prayer life and to imitate Jesus in the process.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, as we enter into this Lenten season, I thank you for being a God who hears. I praise you for your continuing acts of graciousness to your people. You are a great God, and your works are mighty to save. I ask that you would help me in my prayer life. With Jesus as my example, I seek to know you better and trust you more through prayer. Prompt me to pray, Lord, and give me hope in prayer by increasing my faith and by responding to my prayers that are in accordance with your will. Grant me a spirit of wisdom and revelation, that I might know you better. Amen.

Day 3

friday

As the deer pants for flowing streams, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, “Where is your God?” These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival.

-Psalm 42:1-4

“It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird: it would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn how to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.”

-C.S. Lewis

LENTEN THOUGHT:

Lent is about anticipation and preparation. The psalmist longed for God. He longed to be with God, to commune with him and worship him and celebrate with him. When we are young in the faith, it often times takes all our considerable willpower to spend even a few moments in prayer or reading the Scriptures. Although there may be great joy in our newfound salvation, and we may love the fellowship of other believers, the daily grind of learning and growing and maturing does not generally come naturally to us. If you are anything like me, to read the psalmist’s words about desiring intimacy with God and wanting to remain with him throughout the watches of the night (Ps. 63:6; 119:148) seem like the longings of only a great saint or a man or woman who doesn’t have anything better to do with his/her time. The fact of the matter is that spending 40 days with Jesus is just the sort of thing that can help spur us on to a life of love and devotion to the Lord. It is only those who are mature in the Lord, who have lived and longed for him, who can truly say that their soul “pants for God.” It is in knowing God that we long for him. As Lewis said in our quote for today, we are in many ways like eggs when we first come to encounter God in faith, but we must soon “hatch” into a life of growth and communion with him. If we do not, we find ourselves in the same predicament as so many of those who drew our ire when we first came to know Christ. “How can they be so dead?” we asked; “How can they care so little about God?” It’s because they never set into motion the things that naturally draw us to God and fill us with joy and expectation at meeting him. This is accomplished

primarily in prayer, Scripture reading, and Christian fellowship. They grew cold, or they allowed the love of other things to shipwreck their faith. Or maybe, they exchanged the truth of God for the lies of this world, and so ran after another love. It doesn’t have to be this way, and this does not have to describe you. Lent can be practiced by both the novice and the mature. God loves both the same, but some know him better than others. He longs to have a deeper, more abiding relationship with all those who come to know him. He will meet you in your search to know him better, and he will see to it that you find him (Proverbs 8:17; Acts 17:27).

LENTEN ACT:

Today, consider committing yourself to set aside at least fifteen minutes per day for the remainder of Lent to read the Scriptures and grow in your relationship with God. If you are completely new to your Bible, my suggestion is that you start with the gospel of Mark. In ten to fifteen minutes of reading per day you can finish the gospel before Easter. If you already have a disciplined reading plan, I encourage you to add a good devotional book to your reading for Lent (may I suggest “Knowing God” by J.I. Packer, or “Growing Your Faith” by Jerry Bridges). As you add Scripture reading to your blossoming prayer life (day two in this devotional), you will find that you are learning to abide in Christ more and more, and you will certainly find that the joy and longing for God will come soon to you as well. Will there be days when that joy is missing? Certainly. We are in a marathon, friends, not a sprint. The ebb and flow of our walk with God is part of the growing process.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Holy Spirit, please fill me this day and illuminate your word so that I may know and understand the Father better. Draw me to you so that I may desire to seek you and find you. Help me to abide in Jesus, to long for him and to draw near to him. Let me see clearly that there is nothing better than to be in your presence, Lord. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with me in such a way as to make me a mature follower of God, seeking to know you and to be known by you. Amen.

Day 4

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’”

-Jeremiah 23:5-6

“Consider then, O man! whether there can be anything more wretched and poor, more naked and miserable, than man when he dies, if he be not clothed with Christ’s righteousness, and enriched in his God.”

Johann Arndt

LENTEN THOUGHT:

To be clothed in the righteousness of Christ is to be clothed in eternal glory, for the glory that rests on us now, even as a shadow, will become to us the glory that will be revealed in all its splendor in heaven. We clothe ourselves now in Christ’s righteousness; in heaven we will become the righteousness of Christ. Here on earth we find that believers are often filled with guilt and remorse because of who we are, primarily because we cannot see, let alone fathom, our perfection in Jesus Christ. It is true—we are corrupt and sinful (“The heart is deceitful above all things, and beyond cure.”

Jer. 17:9), but it is equally true that God has clothed us, even now, in the righteousness of Christ (Isa. 61:10). Johann Arndt was right: nothing compares to the wretchedness of a human being who has died without coming to peace with God in Christ. It does us no good to say “I am at peace with God” if God is not at peace with us. To say at a funeral “she is at peace now” means very little if God is not at peace with her. It is not our opinion that counts, it is God’s judgment that will stand for all eternity. But if we are at peace with God and he with us, then Arndt’s quote can be rightfully turned on its head. Nothing is more beautiful than a man or woman when he/she dies who is clothed with Christ’s righteousness and enriched in his/her God. And how do we find peace with God? How can we know that he is at peace with us? Thankfully, Scripture gives us that answer: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). Peace with God comes through faith in his Son, Jesus Christ. The Bible assures us that, if we have come to know Christ, then his righteousness is “imputed” to us. That’s a fancy way of saying that

saturday

it has become ours. True, it is an alien righteousness, because it is not ours by our own merit, but ours only because it has been given to us, therefore it is outside or “alien” to us. In heaven, it will be ours by virtue of our glorification. Here it is imputed to us; there it will be imparted to us. The prophet Habakkuk tells us that the righteous live by faith (or faithfulness). When our faith is in Christ, his righteousness becomes our own and we know true peace with God. “For our sake God made him who had no sin [Jesus], to become sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). It will do you no good this Lenten season to try to earn peace with God through a righteousness of your own. You will fail, as did everyone who has ever tried before you. Seek to know Jesus more intimately during these 40 days by faith. As it grows, so will your confidence in God, and his peace will be yours.

LENTEN ACT:

Today, if you are a follower of Jesus, remind yourself continually that you are righteous in God’s eyes. His love has been cast upon you, and even though you continue to struggle against sin, the war has already been won in Christ. Spend one day rejoicing in your position before God. Resist the mental attacks, both yours and Satan’s, that you are wretched, pitiful and poor. Remind yourself and him, “I am clothed in the righteousness of Christ.” If you are a non-believer reading this devotional, I invite you to consider the claims of Jesus, read John chapter 3 from the Bible, and consider whether Jesus is speaking truthfully. If he is, ask yourself what it is that keeps you from believing and finding peace with God. Questions? Feel free to email me at pastorjym@lifepointindy.com.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, I thank you today that I am clothed in the righteousness of your Son, Jesus. Help me to live in that realization, to sense the gratitude that should come naturally to me when I think of such things. I want to live no longer for myself but for you, and for the sake of Christ, who for my sake died and was raised to life. Take away my gloomy thoughts and my words of condemnation, and replace them with thoughts of praise for you and joy at my newfound life. Help me to live at peace with you. I praise you, Lord, for giving me what I could never earn, and making me something I could never be on my own. Amen.

Day 5

monday

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

-Matthew 5:13-16

“Orthodoxy, or right opinion is, at best, a very slender part of religion. Though right tempers cannot subsist without right opinions, yet right opinions may subsist without right tempers. There may be a right opinion of God without either love or one right temper toward him. Satan is proof of this.”

-John Wesley

LENTEN THOUGHT:

The resurrection of Jesus means very little to us if we simply believe it took place intellectually but never do anything about it. C.S. Lewis rightly said, “Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.” Jesus is the light of the world. If that is true, then it is of infinite importance that we listen to his words and obey them. If he truly rose from the dead, his words must be reckoned with. If he did not, then your search must go in another direction, for Jesus has nothing more to offer you than a thousand other self-proclaimed prophets. If you have come to believe that Jesus is truthful, and if you have come to believe that God did raise him from the dead (quite a stretch to our imaginations, I agree), and if you have placed your faith in him and are placing your hope in him as well, you are what the Bible calls “born again.” Now there is work to be done. Now you are the light of the world. You have been set on a hill, so to speak, like a city, as a beacon of hope to a lost world. You do that world no good if you hide your light under a basket. Jesus tells us that “the light” he is speaking of in our passage today is good works. We must be about doing the works that will point to Jesus, who is the light and source of our good deeds. Believing only gets us partway there, we must do something about that belief. “Ah” you say, “so we must meet Jesus halfway, doing good works that merit our salvation.” Not at all, my friend. Your good works, and mine, are filthy rags to God (Isaiah 64:6). John Wesley, who is quoted today, already tried that avenue.

Odds are your good works will not be as good as his, and his did nothing for him, by his own admission. His attempts to earn his way to salvation left him hopeless and desperate. Faith in Christ is what won the day for him, as it does for you. But believing that Jesus existed is not the answer. Demons believe in Jesus, and shudder at the thought of him (James 2:19). Trusting in Jesus, leaning into Jesus, placing your hope in Jesus; this is what leads to salvation, and salvation naturally leads to good works. When you are the light of the world, people tend to look at what you are doing. Salt that has lost its saltiness is no good, it will be tossed to the ground and trampled by men. Don’t let that be you. If you know Christ, be salty, and light your world!

LENTEN ACT:

Today, do something because of your faith. Purposely perform at least one good act directed toward another person. There are a thousand and one possibilities for you to be salt and light today, if you have your mental and physical capabilities and live a typical life. Do not just believe in God, act on that belief today. Your good works will not earn you heaven, they never will, but once you have come to know Jesus, the Light of the world, your good works will disperse that light, and your Father in heaven will be honored and glorified. Don’t allow your faith to be moderately important to you today. Minister to people in the name of Jesus Christ. Do it to glorify your Father in heaven.

LENTEN PRAYER:

“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sorrow, joy. O Divine Master, grant that I might not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved, as to love. For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

-Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

Father, on this fifth day of Lent, remind me throughout my day to live out the prayer that I’ve just prayed. Help me to be salt and light to the world today. Amen.

Day 6

tuesday

“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” **-Matthew 6:16-18**

“Fasting is particularly suited to glorify God. It is fundamentally an offering of emptiness to God in hope. It is a sacrifice of need and hunger. It says by its very nature, “Father I am empty but you are full. I am hungry but You are the Bread of Heaven. I am thirsty but You are the Fountain of Life. I am weak but You are strong. I am poor but You are rich. I am foolish but You are wise. I am broken but You are whole. I am dying but Your steadfast love is better than life.” **-John Piper**

LENTEN THOUGHT:

Jesus did not say “if you fast,” but “when you fast.” Therefore, for the vast majority of us who are healthy and able to do so, fasting should be a part of our devotional life. Not because it is a requirement to get into heaven, or because it has some magical power to make us wise or spiritually strong, but because Jesus and his disciples fasted, because the apostles fasted, and because God has given us these examples and offers to meet us in our fast. The season of Lent is a season in the Christian calendar when fasting is most called for. We pray and fast during Lent, not as some overly pious way of pleasing God, but to prepare our own hearts and minds for the coming Good Friday when we remember Jesus’ Passion and the celebration of Resurrection Sunday. Prayer and fasting have a tendency to focus and sharpen our minds in ways that other disciplines simply cannot match. In days gone by, every feast was preceded by a fast, so as to make that feast (in this case, Easter) that much more meaningful and gratifying because of the fast that proceeded it. Although fasting is most commonly associated with food, we can also fast from things and activities. However, be careful not to make this a trite or legalistic practice. The idea is to focus on God and prepare for Resurrection Sunday in such a way that it will be a day full of anticipation and joy. We do not purchase God’s favor by fasting or by prayer, but he does invite us to demonstrate our need and desire for him by “counting all things as rubbish, in order that we may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:8). One way to set aside the things that we desire in order to desire him more is

to fast. We are by nature creatures of habit, and much of the eating we do in our culture has less to do with hunger and more to do with socializing and obeying an internal clock that says “do not ever be hungry”. As a result, we tend to overeat, and we skirt with the much-overlooked sin of gluttony. But there is value in knowing hunger, especially if that hunger is reached voluntarily, as a reminder that our need for God is greater than our need for food, while we overfill ourselves with one and neglect the other. Fasting teaches us what it feels like to hunger for something, and many of us simply do not know what that feels like, nor do we want to. We do not fast for the praise of men, our passage for today makes that clear. We fast because we hunger for God. We fast because it reminds us that our hope is in God, not in our stomachs. We fast because we long for God more than anything the world has to offer.

LENTEN ACT:

Pick a day during Lent to fast. My suggestion is that you fast for a day if you are healthy, or for a meal if you have physical limitations. If fasting from food is not an option for you, fast from an activity that you have come to enjoy. There are no specific rules; there is only spiritual hunger being emphasized by physical hunger. Use the time you would have spent eating to meditate on Scripture, or spend time in prayer. If you are part of a family with children, I encourage you to set aside a few nights during Lent when, after a small, simple dinner, no snacking is allowed. Go to bed hungry as a family, and use the experience as a springboard to talk about hungering for God, or to remind your children that across the globe, literally millions of children are going to bed starving with little or no hope of food for breakfast. Consider parlaying that into a family collection to be given to Wheeler Mission, Servant’s Heart, The Refuge, or a charity of your choice to alleviate the hunger of others.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, as I look forward to Resurrection Sunday and the celebration of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, help me to prepare my heart and mind through a fast. I want to know you Father, so my prayer is that you will show yourself to me. Speak to me through your Spirit as I put aside the good things I enjoy in life to focus on my relationship with you. Help me to taste and see that you are good in my fasting. Amen.

Day 7

When a man's folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the Lord.

-Proverbs 19:3

“Inch by defiant inch, we build our suicidal ruin by forsaking God. He is not to be blamed when we chase the darkness and catch it.”

-Martha Kilpatrick

LENTEN THOUGHT:

As a teenage boy I was chasing the darkness. I was heading down a dangerous path and I knew it, yet I felt at times unable to control my own decisions that were leading me that way. I found myself angry at God for not fixing things in my favor. While I consistently made bad decisions, my futile thinking had me believing that God was somehow to blame, and I felt a perverse pleasure in teaching God a lesson by demonstrating to him just how wrong things were going for me. Strange the way our minds work sometimes. A well-known atheist once said that he found himself not believing in God's existence while at the same time being angry at God for not existing. We humans are fickle in almost every way. The Scriptures boil down for us into three short sentences the basic way of life that God expects from us. “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). If a man or woman follows this advice, whether a follower of Christ or not, they will find that they have spared themselves many troubles in this life. However, in our arrogance, many, if not most, set this wisdom aside and pursue life by their own rules. The results are often tragic, and then the blaming begins. “Why did God let this happen?” “If God really existed, and if he really loved me, this would never have happened!” And so the story goes. We rarely use the word “folly” in everyday conversation anymore, but it is a good word to know. It denotes ignorance, laziness, stubbornness, and lack of foresight. So many of us are living in it right now. We may even know it, but we find ourselves unwilling or unable to get off the merry-go-round. We sow to the wind, and when we do, we may be assured that we will reap the whirlwind. Of course, it doesn't have to be this way. We are created in God's image as moral agents, able to determine the difference between right and wrong. Those who lack the mental acuity to do so (e.g. the young, the mentally challenged, etc.) are released from this responsibility, but the rest of us are not. We

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know what we should do, many simply choose not to do it. I do not claim to know the reasons behind all of this. Some will, by the grace of God, come to their senses, escape from the trap of the devil, and be brought to repentance. Many will not. Some, it appears, as strange as it is to our ears, were “born only to be caught and destroyed, like unreasoning animals” (2 Peter 2:12). Most, however, can make the change; the only question is, will they? Will you? Will you stop and consider your way of life today? Will you turn from folly to faith? Will you look in the mirror when your world falls apart around you and see the reflection of the one responsible for the repeated failures? Will you repent, turn the other direction, and seek the One who can mend your broken world and lead you to the path of wisdom? Today might be a good day to start in that direction, and it begins by crying out for mercy to a merciful God.

LENTEN ACT:

Take time to stop today and intentionally think about the direction of your life. Is it headed in the right direction you were hoping for? Are you young, with your life ahead of you? Consider how much pain and suffering you might spare yourself and others if you turn yourself completely over to God now. Are you older, with a life of regret behind you? Repent now, and seek to be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. Are you a self-made man or woman? Is everything right in your world? Have you built your empire through your own wisdom? Beware, tonight your life may be required of you, who then will enjoy the things that you have planned for yourself? Consider your way of life today, and ask God to take over as Lord in your world. Delight yourself in God, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, it is better to take refuge in you than to trust in man, even if that man or woman is myself. Save me from myself today. Keep me from the path of folly. Help me to be an example to my children, or to others who look to me for wisdom. Take away my heart of stone and give me a heart of flesh, able to be molded by you into the image of Christ. Teach me humility and instill in me a desire for truthfulness and justice. Give me wisdom, and keep my feet from running to disaster. I invite you to take over my life today. Amen.

Day 8

And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came, and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, “You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus.” But he denied it, saying, “I neither know nor understand what you mean.” And he went out into the gateway and the rooster crowed. And the servant girl saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, “This man is one of them.” But again he denied it. And after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, “Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.” But he began to invoke curses upon himself and to swear, “I do not know this man of whom you speak.” And immediately the rooster crowed a second time, and Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, “Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.” And he broke down and wept.

-Mark 14:66-72

“Lord Jesus, make thyself to me a living bright reality. More present to faith’s vision keen than any outward object seen. More near, more intimately nigh, than even the sweetest earthly tie.”

-Charlotte Elliott

LENTEN THOUGHT:

The apostle Peter was a grown man, one might even assume a very strong and robust grown man. He was married, had a business of his own, and worked hard with his hands. He had spent many nights out on the sea of Galilee, had braved storms, and was the first to draw his sword in defense of Jesus. Yet here he is weeping bitterly like a child in his sorrow. Peter loved Jesus and he was sure early this same evening that, no matter what may come, he would stand by him. He had even boldly boasted that he would die for Jesus before he would ever deny him. But when push came to shove and his own life and comfort were on the line, the bright reality of Jesus’ friendship faded into the darkness of the night. If the story ended here we would assume that Peter did what most of us would do—walk away and never look back, or take the easy way out like Judas and kill himself. Suicide probably looked like an inviting option for him at this moment. Instead, we get reintroduced to Peter on Resurrection morning, when he runs to Jesus’ tomb at the news that his body cannot be found. His first encounter with Jesus after the resurrection must have been heart wrenching for him, and yet he remained steadfast. Jesus invited him back into his life again, and Peter accepted the forgiveness and moved on. The Bible does not tell us everything. Could it be that like so many of us, Peter struggled with that event the rest of his life, wondering not only how he could have been so

thursday

traitorous to Jesus, but how God could ever forgive him for such an act? Could it be that moments of doubt assailed him the rest of his life? It’s possible. Sometimes it is hard to feel forgiven. It is hard because we know just how sinful we truly are. Church history tells us that Peter eventually met a martyr’s death, crucified upside down in Rome at his own request, believing that he was unworthy to die in the same manner as his Lord. Was that a self-enforced “payback” for his treachery? We may never know, but the reality is that Peter did pick up the pieces and take his place at the head of the early church. As hard as it must have been, he accepted the forgiveness God offered and fulfilled God’s call for his life, as all of us must do.

LENTEN ACT:

Today is a new day. Don’t look back at yesterday and assume that there is no use going forward after what you have done. Jesus invites you into his life today and stands ready to forgive the treason you have committed. Weep if you must, but then stand up and go out ready to serve. Forget the past, strive toward what is ahead, and press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God is calling you heavenward in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:13). Do you have reason to seek forgiveness today? Have you reached a point in your life where you think God cannot forgive your habitual sin? Repent, go to God in Christ and seek forgiveness. God is faithful and just to forgive you your sin and to cleanse you from your unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Seek reconciliation with God today and know the forgiveness that is yours in Jesus Christ.

LENTEN PRAYER:

“Search me, Father, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts. See if there be any sin in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23-24). “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my sin. Wash me thoroughly from my transgressions, and cleanse me from my sin. I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so you are justified in your words and blameless in your judgment” (Ps. 51:1-4).

Take me into your life, O Lord, and give me a faithful heart. Amen.

Day 9

friday

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through him who gives me strength.

-Philippians 4:12-13

“My enemies seldom slackened their hateful designs against my life, however calmed or baffled for the moment...A wild chief followed me around for four hours with his loaded musket, and, though often directed towards me, God restrained his hand. I spoke kindly to him, and attended to my work as if he had not been there, fully persuaded that my God had placed me there and would protect me till my allotted task was finished. Looking up in unceasing prayer to our dear Lord Jesus, I left all in his hands, and felt immortal till my work was done.”

John Paton

LENTEN THOUGHT:

Why is it, do you think, that the apostle Paul could do all things in Christ? Why could John Paton, missionary to the New Hebrides islands in the South Pacific inhabited by cannibalistic tribes, suffer through day after day of hard labor among those natives, death always but a moment away, and do so with a gladness in his heart? Because Christ was in their lives, and he was giving them strength and hope. Why can Jesus give us strength, hope and courage like none other? Because he triumphed over death and hell at the cross. Because death no longer has a hold on him or his people, the sting of death having been taken away forever. Jesus endured his own agony and trial, leading to his own death, but death could not hold him in the grave. And now we participate with him not only in his death (through baptism), but in his resurrection as well (Rom. 8:17). You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you if you know him today. Hardships, although real, will not be fatal to your resolve and hope; and plenty, although appreciated, will not cause you to look to yourself as the giver of good things. There is a concreteness to this truth, a reality that actually matters. Paul’s exhortations in our reading for today are not just words, and our passage for today encompasses all of life. It isn’t just a passage to be put on the wall of the weight room, or to shout out at the end of an athletic victory. We are called to live in this truth, to believe it and act upon it. Which is why Paul could joyfully carry on his ministry in rapidly changing and diverse settings. It is why John Paton could continue

on with his day even though a cannibalistic native was threatening his life and carried with him the means to act upon the threat. These are not exceptions to the rule; they are the rule if we can only come to believe it and place our hope and trust in God, who alone is able to strengthen us for the journey.

LENTEN ACT:

Take a moment today and inventory your spiritual house. Is your hope solely in Jesus Christ, or do you have another hope that has eclipsed him? Are you leery of taking a step of faith in your life and doing something in Christ’s name because you do not have a solid hope and foundation in him? It is not God’s goal to make you miserable in life and force you to do all the things you do not want to do. It is, however, his design to call you away from trusting in yourself, or in your riches, or in your own strength, and lead you up to the higher ground of trust in God alone. Have you learned to be content with little or with much, in need or in hunger? If these descriptions describe only others in your world, take some time today to ask God to challenge you and draw you closer to him. Take some time to read a good biography of a man or woman of God,* and use them as a model for your own life. It isn’t only missionaries and super-Christians who place their hope completely in Christ. Regular folk like you and me can and should do so as well.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, you are powerful and you caused your Son to triumph over death and the grave, defeating hell in the process. As you promised your people Israel that they would go from strength to strength, so strengthen me. Give me boldness and a desire to be so filled with your Spirit that I might live my own life like an immortal, knowing that I cannot be stopped until my work in you is done. In need or in plenty, Lord, help me to fix my eyes, my emotions, and my thinking life solely on you. Amen.

***Recommended Biographies:**

A Chance to Die: The Life Story of Amy Carmichael
by Elizabeth Elliott

John G. Paton: Missionary to the New Hebrides
by Banner of Truth Trust

Day 10

“Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, and I will testify against you: I am God, your God. I do not rebuke you for your sacrifices or your burnt offerings, which are ever before me. I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfill your vows to the Most High, and call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will glorify me.”

-Psalm 50:7-15

“In a word, as my life was a life of sorrow, one way, so it was a life of mercy, another; and I wanted nothing to make it a life of comfort, but to be able to make my sense of God’s goodness to me, and care over me in this condition, be my daily consolation; and after I did make a just improvement of these things, I went away and was no more sad.” **-Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe**

LENTEN THOUGHT:

The great preacher Charles Spurgeon once preached a sermon on one of my favorite novels. He called it “Robinson Crusoe’s Text.” He said: “Robinson Crusoe has been wrecked. He is left on the desert island all alone. His case is a very pitiable one. He goes on his bed, and he is smitten with fever. This fever lasts upon him long, and he has no one to wait upon him—none even to bring him a drink of cold water. He is ready to perish. He had been accustomed to sin, and had all the vices of a sailor; but his hard case brought him to think. He opens a Bible which he finds among the debris of the wrecked ship, and he lights upon this passage, ‘Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver you, and you will glorify me.’ That night he prayed for the first time in his life, and ever after there was in him a hope in God, which marked the birth of his Christian life.” Are you feeling weary today? Troubled? Do your part, and God will surely do his. Here’s how Spurgeon went on to explain his text. “God and the praying person take shares...First here is your share: ‘Call upon me in the day of trouble.’ Second, here is God’s share: ‘I will deliver you.’ Now again it is your turn; ‘You will glorify me.’ He says, ‘You shall have the deliverance, but I must have the glory.’” Why must God have the glory? Because he is a megalomaniac? No! Because

saturday

he is God, and he knows every creature on the planet, including you—because he is the maker of all things, from the smallest micro organism to the largest Quazar. They are his to do with as he pleases, and it pleases him to deliver us and be justly glorified. We must never comfort ourselves with the mistaken notion that God needs us. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills. The world is at God’s disposal, and he has no need of us or our sacrifices. That sounds cold and disheartening, but it is not the end of the story. Although he has no need of us, he loves us just the same. His creation story is a story of love. He did not create us, or anything else, because he needed it; he created us because he is a God who lovingly creates. He seeks glory because it is in our best interest to honor our God, and he wants what is best for us. He waits to deliver us because it is for our good and for his glory. Do your part, call upon God today, and wait for him to do his part.

LENTEN ACT:

God is a great deliverer. Call on him in your trouble today. When your deliverance comes, be sure to return to him all the glory that he is due. You will do well to remember that your deliverance may not come in the package you imagined. Praise him just the same. God’s ways are not our ways, nor are his thoughts our thoughts. Often times we forget to thank him for our deliverance because it doesn’t look like deliverance to us, and when we finally come to the point of understanding that we have been helped, the event is too far in the past for us to take notice anymore. Look for your deliverance, it is on the horizon. God will deliver you in your day of trouble.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, I seek you today. Deliver me from that which holds me prisoner. I look to you for my deliverance, and I trust you to bring me peace even in the midst of my strife. As I face the struggles of this day, and when I begin to feel the weariness that is so much a part of life, remind me of your presence and your deliverance. I want to hide in you today, Lord, and know the security of being where you are. I pray too for those who are in the midst of their own struggles today: the single mother, the spouse who has received divorce papers, the parents praying for the life of their child, the single person who desires to share life with another, the childless couple begging for a son or daughter. Deliver us today, Father, and then I will give you the glory.

Day 11

monday

Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him, saying: "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." **-Luke 18:15-17**

"If I could relive my life, I would devote my entire ministry to reaching children for God."

-Dwight L. Moody

LENTEN THOUGHT:

Most of us spend little time contemplating Jesus' interaction with children, partly because the Bible says so little about it. But remember as you celebrate Lent, that Jesus himself was a child once. He went through all the stages of childhood that all children go through. That means he played with other children as he grew up, and he was taught not only about life, but about God by caring adults. God has given us a natural tenderness for innocence and helplessness. That is why it is so monstrous, even to non-believers, when the sick and evil among us deliberately harm children, the elderly, or the mentally or physically challenged. It creates a particular disdain for us, as it should. Not only did Jesus love children and want to care for them even when he was busy and exhausted, but he used them as an example of the type of trust, faith, and innocence that we must all possess if we are to truly grasp the kingdom of God and enter therein. The disciples felt that Jesus should be spending his valuable time with adults, not children. We repeat this error today when we assume that children should be sent away on Sunday mornings to play so we can worship. We relegate teaching and caring for children to a lesser status. We tend to honor adult teachers but ignore or diminish children's teachers. We love to see adults get baptized, so when we see that the lineup of baptisms include only young children on a particular Sunday, we sneer and question why we are not reaching the lost. After all, it's easy to save kids. How foolish we are at times. Should we not rejoice in the salvation of any child who has a lifetime in front of them, who is spared by God's grace the miseries that so many of those saved in adulthood wish they could forget? Ministry to children is biblical and praiseworthy. Mothers who choose to stay home and raise their children in a godly environment should be celebrated, not looked upon

as being simple-minded and unable to contribute to our economy. Those who devote their gifts and talents to teach children the ways of the Lord are vital to the church and society. We are in great danger these days of missing a glaring truth. Jesus loved and taught the little children. They were worth both his time and energy, so they must be worth ours as well.

LENTEN ACT:

Today, take time to care for children. Take notice of them; do not dismiss them. Take a moment to watch them and talk with them if you get the opportunity. Ask yourself, what is it about children that made Jesus take special notice? Why must we be like them in order to enter the kingdom of God? If you know a child well, ask them about their thoughts on God. Who is he? What is he like? Maybe you will want to take a bigger step and consider supporting a child in need through a Christian supporting agency. Maybe God is gently tugging at you to consider adoption or fostering and providing a Christian home for a child in need. Maybe you know someone who would like to adopt, but is having a hard time coming up with the substantial costs associated with it. Could you help? Jesus said, "Do not hinder them." Is there anything about you or your life that directly or indirectly hinders children or other "innocents" from knowing Christ? If so, root that out of your life today.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, you are good and kind, caring and compassionate to all of us. You do not make distinctions; male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and freeman are equal in your sight, and for that I thank you. You did, however, show a special care for children, and you have called on us to care for them as well: to teach them, to nourish them, and to protect them. Help me to be the kind of man/woman who cares for the little ones. Also help me to approach you like a child with a faith that believes, with a heart that cares, with a trust that is complete. You have called on me to receive the kingdom of God like a child. I need your help to do that. Lord, if you would have me care for children or the helpless in a direct way, please show me how I might do that, and give me the means to be a help. Amen.

Day 12

tuesday

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

-Mark 12:28-31

“If we do not say that we love him above all things, let us at least acknowledge that it is our duty, and would be our happiness to do so.” **-Henry Scougal**

LENTEN THOUGHT:

I have heard people say that they do not like reading the Bible or reading about Jesus because he was never direct and is hard to understand. Wrong, I’m afraid, on both counts. Jesus was amazingly direct in his speech, and although he did teach often in parables, he also gave his disciples the application to those parables which are included for us in the Scriptures. Incidentally, Jesus taught in parable form with a purpose in mind as well (Matthew 13:10-11). Mark Twain said that it wasn’t the parts of the Bible that he didn’t understand that bothered him, it was the parts he did understand. How true that is. It is easy to dismiss the Bible as archaic and hard to understand due to a few obscure or difficult readings, but in doing so we dismiss the vast majority of Scriptural teachings that are as plain as the nose on our face. In our passage for today Jesus responds to a question as directly as you possibly can. His answer to a question posed about the greatest commandment? Love God with everything you have, and love your neighbor. He actually went beyond the person’s question, giving the top two commandments. If we could manage just these two important teachings all would be well with our societies, our families, our workplaces, and our nations. No need for military build-up or counter-terrorism, laws against theft and murder, or private security firms. Jesus lived both commandments out perfectly in his earthly ministry. He lived his own utopia in the midst of absolute chaos and proved that chaos will have nothing to do with perfection and love and will kill if it cannot have its own way. The reality is that almost all people would agree that living in a world where these two teachings were lived out would be ideal. The crux lies with actually living them out. Nobody does this.

It’s one thing to say this is the best way to live, it is an entirely different thing to practice it. Jesus did it, but can we? The answer, of course, is no, not perfectly at least. But that does not mean we do not try. Just because we cannot be perfect at something does not mean we never get better at it, or that we should stop doing it. If that were true, we would stop practicing medicine, sending spaceships into orbit, and taking our dogs for a walk. Jesus has told us the two most important things God wants from us. It is the height of arrogance and ignorance to dismiss them because they are hard to do. Obedience to these teachings leads to a better life and a vastly better eternity. We set them aside at our own peril. The great preacher Henry Scougal was right: if we will not love God above all things, we should at least realize that to do so would be the best way to live.

LENTEN ACT:

Today make a conscious effort to think before you act. Ask yourself, “How would I respond to this situation if I truly loved God and put him before everything?” Be intentional about treating others the way you would want to be treated. What would that look like? To actually stop momentarily and respond to your wife or husband or mother or father or son or daughter or co-worker or teacher in a way that would help you the most if you were on the receiving side. To act with another person’s interest in mind above your own self-interest. To love God enough to obey him regardless of the outcome for you. Try it for a day, and see if this day is different from your average day.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, I want to love you today with heart, soul, mind and strength. I want to love those people that I come into contact with like I love myself. Both of these desires are incredibly difficult for me. Please come alongside me today and help me as I try to obey the two commandments that Jesus said were the most important of all the good commandments you gave. Prompt me today, Lord, to stop and think with these commandments in mind before I respond to important interactions. Change me, Lord, so that my actions reflect the actions of Jesus more and more as I grow in my relationship to you. Amen.

Day 13

wednesday

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. “Take away the stone,” he said. “But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.” Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.” When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” -John 11:25-26, 38-44

“The faith of the Bible is about a supernatural Person (God) who speaks in a supernatural revelation (the Bible) of the supernatural coming (the Virgin Birth) of the supernatural salvation (at the cross) which focused in a supernatural experience common to every Christian (the new birth). Against such a background it is very unconvincing to argue that Christians must not look for supernatural interventions from God.”

-Donald Bridges

LENTEN THOUGHT:

One of the primary ways in which Jesus demonstrated to his contemporaries that he was sent by God was in the performance of great “signs.” His ministry was thick with miracles. He demonstrated his power over nature, over sickness and disease, over demonic forces, and over death itself, as we see in our passage for today. His miracles were a sign to unbelievers and believers alike, and even though many were amazed by him and some were convinced, not all believed, demonstrating clearly that an ability to minister in a supernatural way will not, in and of itself, bring people to saving faith. God still works wonders, and people are still healed in the name and power of Jesus. The apostolic age, the age of “signs and wonders,” may have passed in some unique ways, but healing in the name of Jesus continues. Like all the gifts of the Spirit, healing too is abused and misused for human glory. Our world is replete with both charlatans and those who have good intentions leading people astray. Desperate people will believe desperate things, and pay handsomely if they believe that a miracle is within their reach. Believers are called to use their God-given gifts for the glory of God and the good of the church, not for wealth and fame. Behind the mask of

every person promising health and wealth for a sum of money you will find a fool or a materialist, or both. But the misuse of gifts does not give us warrant to dismiss the gifts themselves. God is mighty to save us, and Jesus came with healing in his wings and a demonstration of the power of God. Do not run after men or women who claim the power of God in their ministry while at the same time touting their own agenda and living in the lap of luxury. A cursory knowledge of Scripture will show you what that is all about. But do run after Jesus, the great miracle worker, and never doubt that he can still work wonders in your life. We serve a supernatural God who still intervenes in his creation and in our lives in supernatural ways.

LENTEN ACT:

Take time today to look up these passages of Scripture that speak of Jesus’ supernatural works (Mark 4:35-41; Mark 9:14-29; John 2:1-11). Remember throughout your day that God is a great miracle worker; that as the creator and sustainer of all that we know and see, it is not difficult for him to act in a way that reaches beyond his natural laws. He is Lord of the universe, and his arm is mighty to save. Every spiritual new birth is a miraculous act of God, changing sinners into saints. If you know him today, he has already acted supernaturally in your life.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Almighty Father, I ascribe to you glory and strength, I ascribe to you the glory due your name. I worship you in the splendor of your holiness. Your voice is over the waters, and you thunder over the mighty waters. Your voice is powerful, your voice is majestic. Your voice breaks the cedars, it breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon. Your voice strikes with flashes of lightning and shakes the desert. It twists the oaks and strips the forest bare, and in your temple all cry, “Glory!” You sit enthroned above the earth as King forever. You give strength to your people. You bless your people with peace.* Father, don’t let me see your great works and turn an unbelieving and blind eye. Heal me of my own doubts and fears. Draw me to you during these 40 days and beyond. Amen.*

*adapted from Psalm 29

Day 14

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. **-Romans 10:12-17**

“How many there are ... who imagine that because Jesus paid it all, they need pay nothing, forgetting that the prime object of their salvation was that they should follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ in bringing back a lost world to God.”

-Lottie Moon

40-year missionary to China

LENTEN THOUGHT:

The cause for global missions continues on. The apostle Paul had been a missionary for almost twenty years. He had planted churches across the Roman Empire, had seen innumerable obstacles and suffered many deprivations and persecutions, including beatings that would have killed many men, and after all that, he tells the Christians in Rome that he was eager to take the gospel to Spain! Paul knew he would die one day, he just wanted to be sure that he died on the mission field, not in retirement on a sunny Greek island. The false teaching of universalism has impacted missions in profound ways. Entire denominations that once sent out thousands of missionaries have now almost entirely stopped their missionary efforts. Here's what one mission secretary of the largest denomination in the world said about missions: “In the past we had the so-called motive of saving souls. We were convinced that if not baptized, people in the masses would go to hell. Now, thanks be to God, we believe that all people and all religions are already living in the grace and love of God and will be saved by God's mercy.” No wonder the passion for missions has waned so much in America in the past century. Even a cursory reading of Paul's words in Romans 10 demonstrate to us the urgency that he felt for sharing the gospel: “How are they to believe on him of whom they have never heard?” Jesus' commission to Paul to be a missionary can be read in

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Acts 26:16-18. Read that and see if you can come away from it believing that God has already revealed himself in a saving manner in other religions. Paul did not live and die on the mission field to tell people that they were already saved. Whether we go to the uttermost parts of the world, to our neighbor next door, or to our son or daughter, our call as Christians is to share the good news that God can and will save us out of our darkness and bring us into the light. They cannot hear if we will not tell them, they cannot believe if they do not hear, and they cannot be saved if they do not believe. O how we need to feel the urgency of the gospel message and to believe in the reality of heaven and hell.

LENTEN ACT:

If you know Christ, ask God to instill within you a passion for sharing the gospel today. Be careful not to ask for what you really do not want. To be passionate about the gospel does not mean that you have to sell all your belongings and move to the mission field, but it does mean that you will look for opportunities to share your faith. It means, at the very least, that you will feel a burden for those who do not know the saving power of Christ, whether in the darkest jungles of the world or in the cubicle next to you. Educate yourself in missions and evangelism. Be stirred up by those who have given all so that the gospel might be known. Be intentional about praying for your lost friends and family. If you cannot go in missions, give so that others can. Be a missionary today.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, give me a heart for missions and the gospel. Help me to see the lost like you see them. I pray for _____ today, who does not know you. Open their eyes to see your light, Lord. Use me, if it be your will, to share the gospel with them. Instill in me the urgency of the gospel message and save me from false teaching aimed at blunting the call to share the hope I have in Christ. Amen.

Day 15

friday

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.

-1 Peter 2:13-17

"It is easy to criticize and find fault with the conduct of leaders, and write furious articles against them in newspapers, or make violent speeches about them on platforms. Any fool can rip and rend a costly garment, but not every man can cut out and make one. To expect perfection in kings, prime ministers, or rulers of any kind, is senseless and unreasonable. We would exhibit more wisdom if we prayed for them more, and criticized less."

J.C. Ryle

LENTEN THOUGHT:

God has called us to be obedient people, obedient to him and to the authorities that he's placed over us. The Bible tells us that he has placed every authority over us (Rom. 13:1). That means even the presidents and congressmen and women that we did not vote for and do not want in office are there by God's direction. Although we may disagree with them, we are to obey them when their laws and actions do not force us into sinful behavior. Paul and Peter both call us to be good subjects to the authorities placed over us, and when they wrote these things the rulers of Rome were pagans who declared themselves gods and were persecuting the church. There is a fine line between obedience and conscientious objection, but the clear truth is that we do not have a right to bad-mouth and disobey everyone whom we do not want ruling over us. We are called to live at peace with all men, insofar as it depends upon us. That means today, when you go to school, or to work, or even if you remain at home, God has placed authorities over you, and you are called to honor them, pray for them, and obey them even when you do not want to. We often wonder what God's will is for our life. Our text for today tells us what his will is quite plainly; do good and silence the talk of fools. Our world is full of hot-heads who stir up the simple-minded with ideas that they are victims, and that someone, somewhere, owes them something. The Bible tells us that it's not so much what

other people owe us, but what we owe them. When we allow a biblical worldview to occupy our thinking, we soon realize that God is not looking for victims, he is looking for saints who are willing to be victimized for the cause of Christ. At times our allegiance to God will call us to obey leaders that we not only do not respect, but that do not have our best interests in mind. Are there exceptions? Of course there are, and you will have to use your best judgment in connection with your biblical understanding to decide when the exceptions apply. The Bible does not call us to blind obedience. If your pastor or president demands that you overlook their sin, or directs you to perform acts that are in violation of Scripture and your call to obey God, then by all means, do not allow it (Acts 5:29). Short of that, however, we are called to honor and obedience. Honor your spouse, honor your parents, honor your president, and in doing so, you honor God and demonstrate that you do fear him with a holy, reverent fear.

LENTEN ACT:

Today, take time to pray for your leaders. Pray for your pastors, your elders, your teachers, your boss, and your governmental leaders as well. Get into a habit of praying for them and honoring them in obedience. Are you in a leadership role today? Ask God to make you a good, wise and godly leader. Are you in the role of a follower today? Ask God to make you a good, wise and godly follower. Give people their due honor.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, help me today to be a good follower. I want to honor those who lead me. I want to love those with whom I fellowship at church, to honor the leaders you have placed over me. Help me to make their leading a joy and not a burden, whether they be a spiritual leader or a civil leader. I pray for our president today, for his cabinet, and for Congress. Give them wisdom to lead. Be with our local leaders and with those who serve to protect us as well. Remind me, Lord, to honor those that you have called me to honor. Teach me to fear you properly, to relate to you as the God of the universe, not as my dream maker or wish fulfiller, but as my King and Lord. Amen.

Day 16

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person - such a man is an idolater - has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them.

-Ephesians 5:1-7

“How diligently the cavalry officer keeps his saber clean and sharp. Every stain he rubs off with the greatest care. Remember, you are God’s sword, his instrument. In great measure according to the purity of the instrument will be the success. It’s not great talent that God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A word spoken for Christ when your conscience is clear is worth 10,000 spoken in unbelief and sin.”

-Robert Murray M’Cheyne

LENTEN THOUGHT:

What does it mean to be an imitator of God? Does it mean perfection? Does it mean always making the right decision and never falling into sin? Ultimately, yes, but since the Bible is written to human beings, there must be some way in which we, as fallen people, can still imitate God in spite of our sin. Our passage for today is a difficult one. It calls us to some very high standards of conduct. It calls us to live a life of love, which sounds great, but isn’t easy. Then it calls us to purity of the sort that would be difficult for even the greatest saint. It seems as if you look at the vices from which it calls you to refrain, you feel good about yourself for having one of them mastered, only to read the next sentence and fall under conviction. It then goes on to tell us that anyone like this will not enter the kingdom of God and is guilty of bringing down the wrath of God. So you droop your head, throw up your hands and walk away with a “let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die” approach to life. But our text for today is not a “do this or die” text, but a “live this way because you are loved” text. None of us are capable of living out this type of purity outside of the love of God, and that love has been poured out on us if we know Christ. Do not miss the fact that the text begins with “as dearly loved children.” God loves you, in spite of you. He

saturday

knows where you struggle and why, which is more than you can probably say for yourself. He knows that you are but dust, because he is the one who formed humans from it. Jesus went before you in this, giving himself up to God when the going got tough. He’s asked you to follow his own example, and he will love you through the struggle. This is not a license to sin but an encouragement to persevere. We must strive for purity, for honesty, for clear thinking and clear talking, but we do it because we are loved, not so that we will be loved. Only those who truly love God care to imitate him. When others chalk this up as pie-in- the-sky theology, reject their low view of Scripture and hold fast to the promise of God. He has not left you as an orphan in this world, he is your Father and he has called you to be an imitator, not a quitter. It is possible to do what God has called you to do.

LENTEN ACT:

Today, strive for purity in your life. Live to imitate God: love others; refrain from the sins of the flesh, from the greed that marks us at different times in our lives, from silly and banal talk that does not edify, and remember to thank God for the love he’s poured out into your life. Of course, we should strive to live this way everyday, but today, make it a priority. When you see your reminder that you are abiding in Christ today, remind yourself that you are a child of God and you want to imitate your Father. It has been said that the longest journey begins with the first step, and so it is when we decide to imitate God. It may seem as if you are looking down a very, very long road, but begin the journey with that first step. Remember what was said to a frightened Frodo Baggins (The Fellowship of the Ring); “It’s a dangerous business, Fordo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you do not keep your feet, there’s no knowing where you might be swept off to.” Be swept off to a life of imitation today.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, I want to imitate you. Help me as I try to do that; lift me up when I fall short, as I surely will. Forgive me for the times when I not only do not imitate you but when I do not care that I’m not imitating you. Teach me about purity, teach me about contentment and honesty and clean speech. I want to love others as you love them, to care for them as you care for them, to see them as you see them, and I want to do it more and more each day. I need your help, Father. Amen.

Day 17

monday

“Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.” The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him. Jesus said, “This voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die. The crowd spoke up, “We have heard from the Law that the Christ will remain forever, so how can you say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up?’ Who is this ‘Son of Man?’” Then Jesus told them, “You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light.”

John 12:27-37

“The enjoyment of God is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of friends, are but shadows; but God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams, God is the ocean.”

-Jonathan Edwards

LENTEN THOUGHT:

Jesus was troubled as he approached death, but his prayer was never, “God, save me from this hour.” He was pushed to the limit in the Garden of Gethsemane, to the point of asking God to “let this cup pass,” but he pressed on. As he spoke to the crowds in our passage for today, they asked him to clarify his words, but he would not. Instead, he implored them to walk in his light while they still had the chance, because the light would soon be taken from them. Jesus was that light, and even in his troubled moments he wanted people to come to the light. He wanted them, and you, to be “sons of the light.” Sadly, most people did not heed either his warning or his invitation. Even though he had done so many good things among them, including many miracles, they did not believe. The prince of this presently fallen world is Satan, and although the work of Jesus at the cross would put an end to his claim to this kingdom, his work of blinding people from the truth and taking men and women captive continues until Jesus’ final triumph at the consummation of all things. God has given us light

to see in this dark world, will you walk in it? Or will you join with the men and women of Jesus’ day who questioned his teaching and chose to walk in the dark? Jesus invites you to put your trust in the light, and to bask in the illumination that he offers you. The best this world has to offer you pales in comparison to the joys set before you. Ultimately, you will have to decide if this is true or not, and worth your allegiance. Much hangs in the balance. What will your decision be?

LENTEN ACT:

One of the things that buoyed Jesus through his struggles on earth was the hope and joy he had at the thought of returning to his Father in heaven (Heb. 12:2). He never walked in the dark, yet he still looked forward to heaven. How much more should you and I? As Jonathan Edwards tells us, here we see but scattered beams of the light of the world, there we shall see the Light himself. We will immerse ourselves not in God’s streams, as we do here, but in his ocean. Today, as a part of your Lenten preparations, make it your ambition to walk in the light. What does that look like? It looks like a person who has consciously chosen to trust in the promises of God rather than the lies of this world. It looks like a person who strives to hold fast to Christ as a son of the light, rather than a person who lives by his/her own wisdom. Remind yourself often today that you are a child of the light, and ask God to light the path before you (Ps. 119:105).

LENTEN PRAYER:

Lord, you are a light unto my path. Your words are a lamp to my feet. I need you to light my path today. Help me to live as a son of the light, and not as a child of the darkness. Remind me, Father, that heaven is my ultimate home, and while I walk the earth, let me do so by walking in the light as you are in the light. I worship you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made and because the Lenten season reminds me that you made me for a purpose—that I might live out my life with you as the light of my life, and that I might end my days knowing that my eternity will be spent with you, where shadows scatter and where I will not need the light of the sun, because you will be the light of heaven. Amen.

Day 18

tuesday

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

-Psalm 139:13-16

“In the flood of the loss of humanness in our age—including the flow from abortion-on-demand to infanticide and on to euthanasia—the only thing that can stem this tide is the certainty of the absolute uniqueness and value of people. And the only thing which gives us that is the knowledge that people are made in the image of God. We have no other final protection. And the only way we know that people are made in the image of God is through the Bible and the incarnation of Christ, which we know from the Bible...Without the Bible and without the revelation in Christ (which is only told to us in the Bible) there is nothing to stand between us and our children and the eventual acceptance of the monstrous inhumanities of the age.”

-Francis Schaeffer

LENTEN THOUGHT:

The United States of America is the most permissive of all democratic societies in the modern world when it comes to abortion. The fight for the lives of the unborn used to take place outside the “walls” of the church. Today they rage within the halls of the body of Christ. We are created in the image of God, right from the womb. If you are reading this devotional today with your children, it will be important for you to consider their age and then inform them, if they are old enough to understand and do not yet know, that approximately one million children a year are aborted in our own country. Have you considered the ramifications of this truth? It has simply become a way of life for all of us. I realize as I write this that some who read today’s devotion will be offended. What right have I to pass judgment on such a controversial subject? Do I realize the pain and desperation that young, single mothers go through? What about those who become pregnant through the horrors of sexual crime? Yes, it is a dark, desperate world we live in. A world in which Jesus came to shine the light but men preferred the darkness because their deeds were evil (John 3:19). Read the passage for today from Psalm 139 again, then consider how God may feel about this deadly institution. Consider whether we have demonstrated that sin becomes a slippery slope. We start with abortion in the first trimester, then progress to delivering a child to the point

where the head is visible so that the skull can be crushed. We then progress to questions about the newborn within hours of its new life. Is it now, finally a human being with inalienable rights, or does the mother, father, or state still have a right to end the child’s life? How old is old enough? Now what about the value of adult human life that does not appear from the outside to have dignity or productivity? Now euthanasia is no longer a philosophical discussion but a demand from many and a law in some states. How long until the decisions are no longer made by the dying but by those caring for the dying? And then by those paying for the care of the dying? And then by people in offices typing into computers? This is not just Orwellian paranoia, this is life in the United States and in most of the world. How will you think about the unborn and the infirm, those who do not have a voice of their own? What will you teach your children? How will you balance truth and grace in this delicate situation? How will you pray for and care for those who have suffered through an abortion? Will you at least consider what God thinks about this? In the end, that will be all that matters. Lift up your voice for the innocent and the marginalized in our society. Think God’s thoughts, not a secular, self-serving world’s thoughts.

LENTEN ACT:

Today, pray for the unborn. Pray also for those young women and men who are desperate and looking for a way out of an embarrassing or frightening situation. Pray for the pregnant women who are looking at a bad economy and wondering how they will make ends meet. Pray for the countless thousands of women who live with the guilt of abortion and feel as if they have been abandoned by God and his church. Ask God to give you not only a heart of compassion for the unborn but for the hurting moms and dads too, who cannot take back the past anymore than you can. Ask God to be merciful to them and to this nation. The battle against abortion-on-demand has been largely lost politically; pray then for the individuals, that God might change hearts and minds.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, intervene today on behalf of the innocent ones: the unborn, the abandoned children, the orphans, and the mentally challenged who are abused by the thousands every day in our world. Be merciful, O Lord. Give me a heart for the hurting. Help me to extend the hand of mercy even as I speak on behalf of those without a voice. Change the hearts of people, Lord, and start with me today. Amen.

Day 19

Can a woman forsake the child at her breast, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forsake you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands...

-Isaiah 49:15-16

“God never withholds from his child that which his love and wisdom call good. God’s refusals are always merciful; “severe mercies” at times but mercies all the same. God never denies us our hearts desire except to give us something better.”

-Elizabeth Elliot

LENTEN THOUGHT:

The word “behold” in this passage signals a magnificent change of thought, and it is at least partially due to its contrast with the sentence that immediately precedes our passage for today in Isaiah 49:14: “Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.’” “Zion” is another name for the people of Israel. It is the name of the hill upon which the temple stood in Jerusalem, designating the heart of the nation. In the days of Isaiah the prophet, the people of Israel had so rejected their God and trampled on his laws and his grace that those who had remained faithful were convinced that God had abandoned them. But that was not the case. It is at times amazing how those of us who have been called by God, loved by him, and know the extent of that love through the death of Jesus, continue to harbor doubts about that love. God rebuked the people of Isaiah’s day for their doubts about his love. We at times deserve that rebuke as well. We may very well hear God respond to our questions about his love with words that echo those through Isaiah; “How could I possibly forget you? You are ever before me, engraved on the palms of my hands. How can you doubt my faithfulness and love? How can you possibly say that after doing so much for you I would turn my back and walk away?” It’s hard to determine what is more unbelievable: the never-ending love and faithfulness of God, or the ever-present doubt about that love in the minds of his people, in Isaiah’s day and ours. Although it is rare, we see even in our day men and women who abandon their own children for a life of reckless abandon. God acknowledges the possibility that even the most precious of human bonds can be severed by the deceitfulness of sin. But this is not a possibility with God. In our day, we know that God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son to be a sin offering for us, that we

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might be redeemed. Yet so many of us are beset with anxieties, molested with suspicion, and disturbed with fears as if the love of God were a mirage in the desert, ready to disappear the moment we set ourselves upon it. But the love of God is not a passing shadow, here today and gone tomorrow. The promise of God to love us and sustain us is never a dry well, full of promise but ultimately offering no hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, and his mercies never come to an end (Lam. 3:22). And so we return to the word “behold” in our passage for today. It is a word intended to stir our hearts and our imaginations. Is it not astonishing to you that God would love a rebellious people like us? Is it not astonishing to you that Jesus would die for a heartless people like us? And yet God’s people are so close to his heart that he would write us—not just our names, but our person—upon the palms of his hands, that he may never forget us. This is, of course, metaphorical language, but it is wonderful nevertheless. God cannot love you more perfectly than he does today, and he will never leave you nor forsake you.

LENTEN ACT:

Ask yourself today, “How could God more genuinely demonstrate his love for me than by what he has already done?” Is there something else you need from God to prove that he loves you? There is no reason to try to shield your thoughts from him. If something is lacking, tell him about it. I think you will find that by expressing your thoughts on the matter you will see that your concern is unfounded. Jesus told us that there is no greater way to demonstrate love for another person than to be willing to lay down your life for them (John 15:13). Jesus has done this for you. God’s love is real, rest in it today and forever.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, thank you for your love poured out for me and demonstrated in the death of Jesus. When I doubt that love, bring me back to the truth; do not allow me to wallow in self-pity or false thinking. Your love, Lord, is better than life. Teach me to believe your word and to rest in your love for me. Help me to love others, in turn, as you have loved me; to offer grace and forgiveness as you have offered both to me. I know you will not forsake me; keep me from forsaking you. Amen.

Day 20

“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen... This then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”

-Matthew 6:5-6, 9-13

“It is good that we keep some account of our prayers, that we do not undo them in our practice.”

-Matthew Henry

LENTEN THOUGHT:

Our passage for today has come down to us as “The Lord’s Prayer.” Of course, it is better identified as the “disciples’ prayer,” since it was more for them than it was for Jesus, and they were the ones who asked to learn about prayer. Nevertheless, it is Jesus’ teaching on how we should pray. You probably know that Jesus’ ministry was constantly punctuated by prayer. This obviously raises questions for us about the nature of the Trinity. If Jesus the Son, who is God Incarnate, prays to the Father, who is God in Spirit, how exactly does that work? Why does God pray to God? The most obvious answer is that Jesus is modeling for us a preferred way of life and interaction with the Father. In the incarnation, Jesus drew his life from the Father, and therefore prayer was not just perfunctory for him, it was life giving. We see Jesus as the Son of Man going to prayer at essentially the same times that we are drawn to prayer; when he is physically exhausted, when he is in mourning, when he is preparing for a big decision, when he is sorting out the order of things and seeking the Father’s will. Here he answers the disciples’ question matter-of-factly: “This then, is how you should pray.” He then gives them a model of prayer that the disciples are to emulate, as should we. In many Christian traditions, the Lord’s Prayer is recited as Jesus gave it to the disciples, word for word. There is certainly nothing wrong with that as long as it is not practiced like a magical formula, or becomes a mindless exercise of our memory with no thought or meaning behind it. However, Jesus’ prayer was intended to be a model, not only a liturgical device. In other words, it does not appear that Jesus was telling the disciples to repeat the wording of his prayer every time they prayed, over and over again. Instead, he intended to show them

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a way in which we should approach the Father, who is holy, who is bringing his kingdom to completion, who wills and acts in this world and in heaven, who knows our needs and will supply them, who not only forgives our sins but commands us to forgive others as well, who has triumphed over Satan and will strengthen us as we seek to do the same. This then, friends, is how you should pray.

LENTEN ACT:

Today specifically, and afterward occasionally, take The Lord’s Prayer and use it as a model for prayer. If you are doing these devotions with your children, teach them the prayer, put it firmly into their memory. You may need to start by learning it yourself. There was a day when almost every person in America would have been able to recite the Lord’s Prayer on a moment’s notice, but that day has come and gone. Start your prayers not by asking for your desires but by acknowledging God for who he is. He does not need the reminder, but you do, and it will be good for you to offer him honor and praise. Praise him for his glory and his holiness. Pray that his kingdom might come to earth, that we might know, in some measure, a glimpse of how it is in heaven, where God’s will is always carried out willingly and immediately. Then pray for your daily needs and the desires of your heart. Confess your sin and be willing to think hard about sins of others that you may be holding against them, and offer forgiveness. Ask God for protection against evil, against temptation, and against our enemy, the devil. Follow the model (praise and adoration, petition for needs, confession and forgiveness, protection from evil) and you will be praying as Jesus taught us to pray.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, today I want to serve you with gladness, I want to enter your courts with praise because you are holy, you are God, you made me and all people, and we are yours, the sheep of your pasture. You are good, your steadfast love endures forever, your faithfulness extends to all generations. May your will be accomplished in my life today, and in your creation as well. Meet my needs today, keep me well supplied. I confess my sin to you today and ask for your forgiveness. Help me, Lord, to be a forgiving person in return. Protect me from evil today, guard my mind and my spirit. Amen.

As the Ruin Falls

All this is flashy rhetoric about loving you,
I haven't had a selfless thought since I was born.
I am mercenary and self-seeking through and through:
I want God, you, all friends, merely to serve my turn.

Peace, reassurance, pleasure are the goals I seek,
I cannot crawl one inch outside my proper skin:
I talk of love—a scholar's parrot may talk Greek—
but, self-imprisoned, always end where I begin.

Only that now you have taught me (but how late)
my lack, I see the chasm. And everything you are
was making my heart in to a bridge by which
I might get back from exile, and grow man.
And now the bridge is breaking.

For this I bless you as the ruin falls.
The pains you give me are more precious than all other gains.

C.S. Lewis



Day 21

friday

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’”

-Acts 17:24-28

“Great are you, O Lord, and exceedingly worthy of praise; your power is immense, and your wisdom beyond reckoning. And so we humans, who are a part of your creation, long to praise you—we also carry our mortality about with us, carry with us the evidence of our sin and the proof that you oppose the proud. We delight ourselves in praising you, for you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”

-Saint Augustine

LENTEN THOUGHT:

As Paul preached to the philosophers in Athens (recorded in our reading for today from Acts 17), he shared with them some foundational principles of the God he served, namely, that God does not need anything from human beings, like a temple to live in or food to eat or wine to drink. God made us, we did not make him. That would be news to the Stoic philosophers of Paul’s day. They tipped their hat to the pantheon of gods that the Greek masses worshiped, but they felt themselves too wise to be duped by such stories. Paul tells them that the God he serves created human beings, established them in their own time and space, and revealed himself so that men and women would seek to know him. Since he did not create the world and leave, but is intimately involved in every aspect of human existence, he is in fact knowable. Paul then declared to them in the words of their own poet, “For in him we live and move and have our being.” Paul’s desire was for the philosophers to see their need and to understand that, although life continues on for those who do not have a relationship with God, it does not continue on with the fullness God intended. There is a restlessness to human experience outside of a relationship with the Creator. There is a perfectly good explanation for this—we were created for a relationship with God through Christ. In fact, fullness in life can only be achieved in and through a relationship with Jesus Christ. The genius and multi-talented French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal said it

this way: “There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every human which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God the Creator, made known through Jesus.” This is one of the reasons why you will occasionally hear a well-known athlete or musician or entertainer tell a reporter what the famous rock group U2 declared: “I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.” All the trappings of wealth, all the fame and prestige and the “happiness” that appears to come with it cannot buy fulfillment. God has made us for himself and we are truly restless until we find our rest in him. We were created by God, for God, for our fullest enjoyment in life. We may work ourselves to the top of this world, but we will only find what so many others who have done so before us have found—it is never quite enough. In other words, we can live without acknowledging God, but we cannot live well.

LENTEN ACT:

As you run into friends and acquaintances in the streets, at school, or at your place of work today, take a moment to pray a brief prayer for them. The majority of people in our world live outside of a relationship with Christ. Even many who name themselves “Christian” live almost exclusively under the demands of this world, uninterested in a close relationship with God. Pray that they would come to know God in such a way that might allow them to find true fulfillment in life. That their restlessness might be set at ease. That God would make himself known to them in such a way that they might find greater purpose and meaning in this life. Maybe you, yourself, lack this type of intimacy with God. Maybe, if you were honest with yourself, you would admit that you do not want that type of intimacy. To know God in an intimate way always brings with it change. Yet God can give you that desire if you would but ask. This type of hope and purpose in life is worth the change that accompanies it. Doing so isn’t too big of an ask. After all, “he is not far from each one of us.”

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, fill me with a desire to know you better. Fill me in such a way that I find my contentment only in you. As I pass by people made in your image today, give me a heart for them. Help me to see them through the eyes of Jesus, recognizing their humanity and their potential to be a child of God. Give me a heart for you and for the people your Son died to save. As you fill me, change me and mold me into your image. Amen.

Day 22

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?

-James 2:1-7

"If, through an experience of God's grace, you come to find him beautiful, then you do not serve the poor because you want to think well of yourself, or in order to get a good reputation, or because you think it will be good for your business, or even because it will pay off for your family in creating a better city to live in. You do it because serving the poor honors and pleases God, and honoring and pleasing God is a delight to you in and of itself."

-Timothy Keller

LENTEN THOUGHT:

Jesus told his disciples that "the poor will always be among you" (John 12:8). He was right, of course, but like so many of Jesus' statements, this one has been pulled from its context countless times to excuse greed and lack of concern for biblical justice. Jesus certainly did not mean "the poor will always be around, so do not concern yourself with that or do anything to alleviate their plight." Widows and orphans will also always be among us, but that does not give us biblical warrant to ignore their desperate situation. In context, Jesus was saying that one generous act by a desperately thankful woman should not be judged as extravagance simply because the funds could have been used to feed the poor. He also wanted to drive home the point that he would soon be departing this world (Mark 14:7-9). James reminds us in our passage for today that we are never to consider relative wealth or lack thereof as a measuring rod for determining who is important in the kingdom of God. His point is simple: God cares for the poor, and so should we. Although the world determines human value based on wealth or fame, we are not to follow suit. In James's day, it was primarily the wealthy who were rejecting and slandering the name of Jesus, then dragging believers into court and exploiting them. The early church practiced what Jesus

saturday

and James taught them, and it became a great witness for Christ. The Roman Emperor Julian complained this way about Christians whom he despised: "Nothing has contributed as much to the progress of the superstition of the Christians as their charity to strangers...the impious Galileans provide not only for their own poor, but for ours as well." Christians in Julian's day (A.D. 361) were taking care of their own people, keeping them fed and clothed when they could not do so for themselves. This would be expected, even for pagans. What amazed and infuriated Julian and many other Romans was the fact that Christians also took care of poor Romans who did not profess the faith. Not only were they speaking the truth in love, they were living it out as well. When we speak of the poor in the days of the early church, we speak of the truly poor. There were no government programs to assist the disabled or those with special needs. There are those who exploit "the system" in our day. This is true enough. We should be cautious of such schemes and the people who perpetrate them. But doing so does not allow us to turn a blind eye to all need. The poor are not virtuous because they are poor, but they are often the first to see their need for a Savior. Hence, the kingdom of God is made up of countless human beings who count for little or nothing here yet will be robed in splendor there. Get a head start on it now, and honor the outcast and the truly poor by caring for them as you are able.

LENTEN ACT:

Today, be intentional about an act for the poor, the stranger, the widow, the orphan, in your path. It may be an act of kindness or a one-time monetary gift or donation, or a plan to serve a local charity in a regular way as a means to engage with the plight of the poor on a regular basis in your life. Go beyond simply educating yourself on the plight of the poor to doing something about it, even something small. Give without an expectation to receive back. Give even if you cannot be sure how your time or money will be used. Give and trust God to use the gift as he sees fit.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, do not let me fall, intentionally or unintentionally, into the sin of favoritism. Soften my heart toward the outcast and the marginalized as your heart is softened toward them. Teach me to be generous both financially and in giving honor toward those who deserve honor. I want to honor you by honoring others. Amen.

Day 23

monday

Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither; and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff. “To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

-Isaiah 40:21-26

“From a strictly scientific viewpoint, human beings must be viewed as little more than a chance deposit on the surface of the world, carelessly thrown up between two ice ages by the same forces that rust iron and ripen corn.”

-Carl L. Becker

“Before man can work he must have both tools and materials, but God began with nothing, and by His Word alone out of nothing made all things. The intellect cannot grasp it. God spoke and it was done, He commanded and it stood fast. Primeval matter heard His voice. God said, ‘Let there be... and it was so.’”

-A.W. Pink

LENTEN THOUGHT:

The debate over creation rages on in our universities, public and private schools, in our homes and in our churches. Carl Becker says we are nothing come from nothing; A.W. Pink says we are the work of a God so immense we cannot fathom him. Who do you believe? For Christians, there can be little debate. We may disagree over how much time God took to create the world and the mechanisms he chose to accomplish the task, but there is no mistaking how we came to be. God created, and the combined chorus of a million intellectuals who claim differently cannot change that reality. When a famous scientist like Stephen Hawking chimes in that “the human race is just a chemical scum on a moderate-sized planet,” we rightly feel sorry for a man who has such little hope both for this life and the next, and remember what the Scriptures tell us: “Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?” (1 Cor.

1:20) In my university days, a philosophy professor at my school made a name for himself by mocking Christianity as a matter of order in his class. A litany of Christian students took him to task, only to be insulted, derided, and made to look foolish against his superior intellect. He was a man among babes, and he delighted in his own wisdom. There was not a teenage college student out there who could match his doctorate degree, his philosophical prowess, or his swagger. He reveled in his bad boy approach to teaching and relished the numerous articles in the school paper questioning his ethics. As a sophomore he frightened me; after all, maybe he was right. He was older and wiser than me, and Christianity seemed like foolishness to him. But as a graduate student he only saddened me. He was a shadow boxer, fighting a god who was but a straw man created in his image. His was a pyrrhic victory over a phantom foe. The reality is that God created and he did not remain silent. As followers of this great Creator God we may wonder at the marvels of our universe, our planet, and our bodies, and press to know all we can about his creation. In the end, however, when we have run out of answers, we may trust simply in this: “In the beginning...God.”

LENTEN ACT:

Today, take time to observe God’s creation. You, and everything you see, are the work of his hands. Take an intentional moment to stop and notice the things you daily take for granted. God does not demand that we constantly say “thank you” for everything we see, but it is good for us to look around ourselves occasionally and let the thought sink in that God did all of this. He did not have to make our world beautiful, or even efficient for that matter, but he in fact did. Out of nothing he made all things and then declared them to be good. Take time to appreciate it today.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Lord, thank you for creating me, this world, and the universe you have suspended us in. Your works are glorious and they proclaim your power and your majesty. “When I consider the heavens, the work of your hands, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, who am I that you are mindful of me? O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth” (Psalm 8). I praise you today, Father, for the wonder of your creation. Amen.

Day 24

tuesday

...in earlier times he treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on he shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walk in the darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them. You shall multiply the nation, you shall increase their gladness; they will be glad in your presence as with the gladness of harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. For you shall break the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulders.

-Isaiah 9:1-4

“Daily I expect murder, fraud or captivity, but I fear none of these things because of the promises of heaven. I have cast myself into the hands of God Almighty who rules everywhere.”

-Saint Patrick of Ireland

LENTEN THOUGHT:

The prophet Isaiah, prophesying through the Spirit, saw that a time would come when the little-valued lands of the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali along the Jordan River would see a great light. That light was Jesus the Messiah. It was not only the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali that were languishing in darkness; all lands are in darkness without the light of Christ. All of us are without light when Jesus is not shining in our lives. He tells us that the verdict is bleak because “the Light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than the Light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). Saint Patrick was a godly man who desired to take the light of the gospel into the then pagan lands of Ireland in the 5th century. This man regularly described himself as a sinner, but demonstrated tremendous acts of courage for Christ’s sake. He first arrived in Ireland as a captured slave. Escaping after seven years of servitude, he returned as a free man to evangelize the dark island. He brought the light of Christ to them, as God brought the light of salvation to us in Jesus. He worked tirelessly for the gospel, establishing churches and working toward the conversion of all Ireland. He remained there until the day he died, preaching his final sermon in the city of Saul, where he had established the first Christian church in Ireland. If you know Christ, do you have this type of zeal for the gospel and for the conversion of the lost? If not, why not? It is a difficult yet fair question to ask yourself. Has Christ not saved you from enough to make it worth your time and effort? Or is salvation just a passing thing? If you know Christ,

he has saved you from an eternity without God. Guilt is a weak motivator to share the gospel, but gratitude and praise are not. Ask God to fill your heart with gratitude for your salvation today; to return to you the joy of your salvation, and see if your desire to share the message of hope grows steadily in your life.

LENTEN ACT:

There are many who live around you today who do not know the light of Christ. They live in darkness, even though they may be smarter than you, better looking than you, wealthier than you, or more important than you. Some live right in your midst, in your home, your workplace, your school or your neighborhood. They shop with you, eat with you, maybe even go to church with you. Will you commit yourself to praying for at least one person that you know and could influence who does not know the light of Christ this Lenten season? Pray for them daily until Easter. As you pray, ask God if he might open a door for you to care for them with the love of Christ and so demonstrate the light of Christ.

LENTEN PRAYER:

“Christ as a light, illumine and guide me. Christ as a shield overshadow me. Christ under me, Christ over me, Christ beside me on my left and my right. This day be within and without me, lowly and meek, yet All Powerful. Be in the heart of each to whom I speak, in the mouth of each who speaks to me. This day be within and without me. Christ as a light, Christ as a shield, Christ beside me, on my left and my right.”

-A Prayer of St. Patrick

Father, be a light to me this Lenten season. Shine your light into my life, rooting out the sin and the lack of desire to know you that lies within. Fill me with the light of Christ and help me to shine the light of Jesus into the lives of others. I pray today for _____, that he/she might know you, that you might soften his/her heart so that he/she can see you, that he/she might come to his/her senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken him/her captive to do his will (2 Tim. 2:26). Thank you for being the light of the world and taking away our darkness. Amen.

Day 25

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a ‘sinner.’” But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

-Luke 19:1-10

“I observed that, although I was such a great sinner before conversion, God never burdened me heavily with the guilt of sins committed while I was in ignorance. He only showed me that I was lost if I did not have Christ because I had been a sinner. I saw that I needed a perfect righteousness to present me without fault before God, and this righteousness was nowhere to be found but in the person of Jesus Christ.”

-John Bunyan

LENTEN THOUGHT:

Zacchaeus was a wee little man, so they say, who climbed up a sycamore tree to see Jesus. That very act seems to be a word picture to tell us that Zacchaeus was looking for a savior. He wanted to “know” Jesus in the truest sense, and Jesus wanted to know him too. He was all of the things that said “sinner” to the people of Jesus’ day. He was a Jew and yet he was also a leader of the hated and traitorous Roman tax collectors. His wealth was ill-gotten, and people despised him for it. He was a little guy, so many in the crowd that day would have gladly given him a good thumping if they could get their hands on him. Jesus, however, had a heart for Zacchaeus. He needed a place to stay and Zacchaeus had plenty of room and a heart ready to receive Jesus. It gave Jesus an opportunity to declare his mission statement: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” Zacchaeus had been lost, but now he was found. He had been made aware of his sin and had repented. He had gone even beyond that, demonstrating his repentance by returning his dishonest gains to those whom he had robbed. Zacchaeus was not saved by this good act, but this good act was evidence that he had been saved. Make

wednesday

no mistake, Zacchaeus was a sinful man. For a portion of his life he made his living by cheating honest workers out of their hard-earned wages. But that was the past; Jesus invited him into a different future, a future that did not have to be weighted down by bad decisions made in the past. My guess is that you see parts of your own history in Zacchaeus. Maybe you have wondered if your past has simply been too brazen and sinful for Jesus to forgive. Maybe Zacchaeus looks like a saint compared to who you have been or are today. Jesus has a heart for you and a willingness to cast your sin into a sea of forgetfulness. Zacchaeus was not beyond God’s reach, and neither are you. He looked to Jesus and found Jesus looking back at him, and his life was forever changed. That can be true for you today. Follow Zacchaeus’ example—invite Jesus into your life and let it be said of you “today salvation has come to this house.”

LENTEN ACT:

Today, take stock of your own relationship with God through Christ. Has salvation come to your house? Have you sought the Savior and found him? The story of Zacchaeus is a simple one, and one of the most beautiful salvation stories in all the Bible. He was an outsider who wanted to be an insider, but probably could not find anyone to take him to Jesus. So he found a way and discovered that Jesus had already been looking for him (note that Jesus already knows Zacchaeus’s name). The story is “telescoped” for us, or brought close and sped up. There is no long history of Zacchaeus or what made him want to know Jesus, no insight into the personal workings of his heart that brought him to his final decision, just a simple trust and hope in Jesus. Do you have that today? It can be yours. If it is yours, thank God for your salvation today. If not, ask Jesus to make himself real to you as he did to Zacchaeus. Ask him to rule in your heart and your life, and then go, seek wise counsel from a mature believer and know the joy of salvation.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Lord, I want to know Jesus today as Zacchaeus knew him, as a friend and Savior. Make yourself real to me. Open my heart, show me my sin, lead me to repentance and new life. Give me the righteousness of Jesus since I have none to offer of my own. Bring me to Jesus, Father. Amen.

Day 26

Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

-Psalm 103:1-5

“The most obvious fact about praise—whether of God or anything—strangely escaped me. I thought of it in terms of compliment, approval, or the giving of honor. I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise... The world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players their favorite game... I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.”

-C.S. Lewis

LENTEN THOUGHT:

“The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” So goes the answer to the first question in the Westminster Catechism: “What is the chief end of man?” And if that is true, what you read today from Psalm 103 was part of your duty to God. Do you delight to praise God? Is it a pleasure for you to tell him what he already knows about himself? Does it do you good to speak the words that consummate the joy you feel at times in knowing God? If you are a Christian but find yourself having a hard time enjoying God and your relationship with him, you have reason to take pause and question how committed you are to knowing him. One of the joys we look forward to in heaven is to be in the courts of God, bringing him continual praise. That does not describe everything that we will be doing in heaven, but praise and worship appears to be going on non-stop there. Have you ever thought about what it would be like to have someone claim to be rapturously in love with you but never want to tell you so? Would you not rightly question their claim if it was boring or even awkward for them to tell you so? God wants you to not only enjoy him but to express that joy in praise and worship. Jonathan Edwards said, “God is glorified not only by his glory's being seen, but by its being rejoiced in.” It's one thing to see how God has worked in your life or in the life of another, to see people healed of diseases, to know his gracious forgiveness, to feel his love and compassion, to know all the benefits of following

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him. It is another to actually acknowledge those things and praise him for them. C.S. Lewis was right—a joy is not a complete joy until one has had the opportunity to tell someone about it, to share the joy that has been experienced. God invites us to fulfill all our joys in him, to seek pleasure in knowing him, and to complete our joy by expressing it in praise.

LENTEN ACT:

Today, take some time to praise God. Maybe even now, as you read this devotion by yourself or with your family. What have been his “benefits” to you? Our Scripture passage for today reminds us not to forget them. The old hymn calls us to “count your blessings, name them one by one, count your many blessings see what God has done.” Not a bad idea. Have you ever taken time to write down all that you can recall that God has done for you, even in the past week? Praise him because he is worthy of praise, because he is the only one worthy of praise, because it will do your heart good to praise him, and because God inhabits our praise. Having trouble figuring out how to do it? Try reading Psalm 148 out loud today and simply agreeing with what you read. It is a great psalm of praise and a great starting point for us as we learn to praise God in our own lives.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, I praise you today because of who you are and because of the great things you have accomplished in my life. I praise you for giving me life, for giving me a hope in Jesus, for giving me reason to praise you. I praise you for your creation, for my history and my future. You are a good and gracious God, and even though your ways are beyond my ways, you have shown yourself to me. You have given me the capacity and the opportunity to know you, and for that I am thankful. Fill me with a joy that comes from you, and help me to overflow in that joy so as to bring praise to you by my actions toward others. “I praise you Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, I praise your holy name!” (Psalm 103:1-5) Amen.

Day 27

friday

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

-Philemon 23-24

“Today friendship has fallen on hard times. Few people have good friends, much less deep friendships. Individualism, autonomy, privatization, and isolation are culturally cachet, but deep, devoted, vulnerable friendship is not. This is a great tragedy for self, family, and the church, because it is in relationships that we develop into what God wants us to be... Friendships... are there to be made if we value them as we ought—and if we practice some simple disciplines of friendship.”

-R. Kent Hughes

LENTEN THOUGHT:

It has been truly said, “No man is an island.” We all need friends and co-laborers. Paul had a trusted group of such friends. He was not a lone wolf or a loose cannon, but one who partnered with other believers in friendship and ministry, and one who labored under the authority of Christ and the local church. Mark (John Mark) had once deserted Paul, but was now a trusted friend. Demas would soon desert him as well, but Paul seemed to love the company of his friends and, toward the end of his life, would request their presence and comfort (2 Tim. 4:9). It seems as if Paul may not have been the easiest person to live with, but he was godly and brave and full of the Holy Spirit. These attributes can make even difficult people the kind of people we can work with, pray with, laugh with, and die with. Paul was buoyed in his ministry by faithful companions. Do your best to be a faithful friend and companion as well. Seek the interest of others over your own interests. Be incredibly unique; be willing to receive less so that others can receive more. Give up your rights so others can enjoy theirs. Love deeply, serve faithfully, and be the kind of friend for which others will thank God. And for those of you who may be younger who are reading this (or having it read to you), be careful about the friends you choose. “Bad company corrupts good character” (1 Cor. 15:33), and you should be mindful that the friends you choose will go a long way in determining the type of person you will become. Nothing in Scripture tells us that we cannot have friends who are non-believers. But when you choose your closest friends, I suggest fellow-believers who will be there to assist you and challenge you in your walk with Christ. Non-believers can be

friendly, selfless, open-minded, and true companions, but they cannot hold you accountable to something they do not believe or embrace. They cannot share with you the joy of salvation. With that being said, it would be unjust of you to withhold genuine friendship from someone just because they do not share your faith. Be a loyal friend to the non-believers who share your life, but seek deep, meaningful friendships with those who share your love for Christ. There is a friend that sticks closer than a brother, and a cord of three strands is not easily broken. Friendships are a gift from God.

LENTEN ACT:

Think about your friendships today. Do you have the type of friend or friends that Paul seems to have enjoyed so much? If so, why not take a moment to tell them how much you appreciate their friendship and what it has meant to you. Be specific, tell them why you consider them a friend. Tell them what they have done for you and how they have helped you in your life and/or your walk with Christ. Do you lack such friends? Consider why. Is there the possibility that you have not been the type of person that attracts them? Have you invested in people as you should? Have you demonstrated a love for people and a willingness to sacrifice for others? Do you put others’ needs above your own, or do you seek your own way most of the time? These are hard questions; honest answers will serve you well. Pray that God will bring healthy, vibrant, godly friendships into your life, and live in such a way as to attract them.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, thank you for the friendships you have brought into my life. Help me to cherish them, cultivate them and appreciate them as I ought to. Help me to be the kind of person that attracts friends. Help me to be willing to serve and love and sacrifice and care for others, so as to develop and maintain close, intimate, and personal friendships. Make me wise in the choice of my closest friends, and help me to be a friend to others as well, particularly those who need to know Christ and are looking for a friend. Show me, Father, if there is falseness in me, or a self-centeredness that keeps me from being the friend you have called me to be. Please bring at least one close Christian friendship into my life. Amen.

Day 28

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, “Have everyone leave my presence!” So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh’s household heard about it. Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! Is my father still living?” But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come close to me.” When they had done so, he said, “I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God”... Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.

-Genesis 45:1-8, 14-15

“My heart was heavy, for its trust had been abused, its kindness answered with foul wrong; so, turning gloomily from my fellowmen, one summer Sabbath day I strolled among the green mounds of the village burial-place; where, pondering how all human love and hate find one sad level; and how, soon or late, wronged and wrongdoer; each with meekened face and cold hands folded over a still heart, pass the green threshold of our common grave, whither all footsteps tend, whence none depart. Awed for myself, and pitying my race, our common sorrow, like a mighty wave, swept all my pride away, and trembling...I forgave!”

John Greenleaf Whittier

LENTEN THOUGHT:

Joseph is a “type” or prefiguring of Jesus in the Old Testament. It is not a direct parallel; in other words, the love and forgiveness of Joseph is not exactly the same as that of Jesus, but there are clear correlations. Joseph was one in a million. A man of deep and abiding faith, and a man willing to forgive incredible harms perpetrated against him. Have you noticed the sheer joy and delight, not to mention weeping, that accompanied Joseph’s act of forgiveness? Forgiveness brings with it incredible emotional release. It is often described as “a weight lifted off my chest,” or “like letting go of a great burden.” Isn’t it wonderful that God made it so that both the offering and receiving of forgiveness brings with it so much mental and emotional peace? To forgive

saturday

is often times as beneficial for the forgiver as it is for the one being forgiven. Refusing to forgive always leads to bitterness, and bitterness destroys the one offended far more completely than the offender. Bitterness hardens the human heart and makes even loving people cold and calculating. Jesus tells us that an unwillingness to forgive leads to an unwillingness on God’s part to forgive the embittered soul (Matt. 6:15; 18:35). It is a serious threat. When we have been forgiven so much by our heavenly Father, we dare not withhold forgiveness from those who seek to make peace with us. In the story of Joseph we find a picture of the forgiveness that God offers to us in Christ, who is the “anti-type” to Joseph, the greater fulfillment of the great forgiver. Jesus told the parable of the Lost Son (Luke 15) in part to give us another picture of the richness and completeness of God’s forgiveness. God has lavished us with grace and forgiveness in his Son Jesus, who not only demonstrated, but accomplished, the greatest act of forgiveness known in human history. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Amazing grace. Amazing forgiveness.

LENTEN ACT:

Who do you need to forgive today? Is there someone, or some people, to whom you need to offer forgiveness? Are you willing to do that? It may start only as a mental willingness, but if they know that you are holding a grudge against them, would it not be even better if you were to muster up the courage to tell them about your forgiveness and to ask them to forgive you for harboring the resentment? The first thing Joseph wants to do after he has revealed himself to his brothers and offered them forgiveness is to help them. You can know you have truly forgiven another person when you can hope and pray for their very best. Will you ask God to help you toward that goal this Lenten season?

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, help me to forgive as you have forgiven me. Thank you for the forgiveness you offered me in and through your Son Jesus. I need your help now to do the same. Forgive me now for harboring bitterness and resentment, and for holding back forgiveness when forgiveness has been offered to me so freely, and at so great a cost. Give me a soft and forgiving heart, I pray. Amen.

Day 29

monday

I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

-Philemon 4-7

“I care not where I go, or how I live, or what I endure so that I may save souls. When I sleep I dream of them; when I awake they are first in my thoughts...no amount of scholastic attainment, of able and profound exposition of brilliant and stirring eloquence can atone for the absence of a deep impassioned sympathetic love for human souls.”

-David Brainerd

LENTEN THOUGHT:

Isn’t it interesting that Paul’s hope for his good friend Philemon was that, through the sharing of his faith, he might himself come to a fuller and more complete knowledge of all the benefits he has in his relationship with Christ? How is it that sharing our faith with others leads to knowing more about our own faith? One of the more practical responses to this question is simply the fact that those who share their faith tend to be those who have done the hard work to know their faith. The more we know of our faith, the more excited we become about it and the more likely we are to want others to share in that blessing. “Sharing” here does not mean only “witnessing” or speaking about our faith, although that is surely included. It also means being generous, showing care for fellow believers, fellowshipping in our common faith, and living out our faith in tangible and observable ways. In other words, loving one another in such a way as to demonstrate that we are Christ’s disciples (John 13:35). It seems that the more we share our faith in these and other ways—the more we know about our faith—the more we understand it and appreciate it and give thanks for it. David Brainerd was an intelligent, hard working young man who had a passion for human souls. In the early 18th century, when he was in his early twenties, he set about the task of living among the Native Americans of New Jersey. Day after day he labored among them, learning their language and sharing his faith. If you take the time to read his journal you will find a young man with a profound grasp of his own need for a Savior; a man with a growing understanding of every good thing he had in Christ.

Brainerd struggled against an overbearing legalism, a sense of his own worthlessness in light of the holiness of his Savior, but as he neared death he found peace with God, primarily because he came to understand his faith in God in a deep and abiding way. As he grew in the knowledge of his faith, his understanding of grace increased, as did his desire to see everyone he knew come to experience the grace he had experienced. He died young, before he reached thirty years of age, but he did not die ignorant of the faith that he professed and lived out to the full.

LENTEN ACT:

Today, will you ask God to give you a passion for sharing your faith? The passion you should seek is a passion to care about people who have not heard the good news about Jesus, or have not yet accepted that good news in a saving manner. In so doing, you too will be motivated to learn about your faith and to grow sufficiently in your walk with Christ so as to be prepared “in season and out of season” to share the hope that you have. Be active in sharing your faith. If you are reading this today and you find yourself without a genuine relationship with Christ, take the first step toward a living faith by asking Jesus to take you and make you his own. Submit yourself to Christ, and move toward a full understanding of every good thing he offers.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, give me a passion to know you. Give me a passion to know my faith. And as that passion grows, give me a passion for the lost. Help me to see them through your eyes, as men and women that you love and with whom you want to have a relationship. I want to care about human souls, including my own. I want to have a full understanding of everything you have given me in Christ, an understanding that will give way to a desire to be active in sharing my faith. Give me opportunities to share and opportunities to grow. Allow my knowledge to overflow in love and good works toward others. Amen.

Day 30

tuesday

“...The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, “Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

-Romans 10:8-15

“Don’t let the sands of time get into the eye of your vision to reach those who sit in darkness. They simply must hear. Wives, houses, practices, education, must learn to be disciplined by this rule: ‘Let the dead attend to the affairs of the dead.’ Go thou and attend to the dying.”

-Jim Elliot

LENTEN THOUGHT:

There is a famine in many lands; not a famine for food or water, but a famine for hearing the word of the Lord. Jesus gave his disciples a commission: “Go into all the world and make disciples.” The Twelve did just that, and the Roman Empire, in spite of its virulent attacks on Christianity, was turned upside down. Immediately the little band of twelve men, along with a select few women who had also come to know and follow Christ, began to pray and seek God’s direction. Fifty days after the ascension of Christ, the Holy Spirit came upon the band of followers who were praying in an upper room in Jerusalem, and the rest is history. Within three centuries the Roman Empire declared itself for Christ, and the gospel began its methodical spread across the globe. It has been spreading ever since—in some seasons faster than others—but always spreading. It is called missions, and it is a mandate from God. Are you involved? It goes beyond what we spoke of yesterday, although sharing our faith with our friends, families, and neighbors is certainly included. Missions reach across our borders. Missions goes where many dare not go. To nations hardened against the message of the gospel. To peoples who either have not heard or do not yet care. The world is set in darkness and the true light that gives light to all

men and women has come into the world (John 1:9). Yes, it is presumptuous. Yes, it is galling to many people. Yes, it is seen as arrogant and offensive. Yes, Jesus told us to go anyway. So I ask again, are you involved in missions? Do you give? Do you send? Will you go? Most of us will remain right here in our home city, faithfully declaring the gospel and giving our dollars sacrificially so that others can sacrificially leave friends and families behind as they take the gospel with them to the uttermost parts of the world. Do not fall for the unbiblical teaching that those who do not hear are saved by default, by virtue of their lack of opportunity to hear. If that were true, wisdom would tell us that they would be better off left in darkness so as not to teach them the means by which they may reject the truth and then be found guilty. No, we are called to go for a reason, because those who have not heard must hear. How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? How can they hear without someone preaching to them? How can we dismiss the command of Christ? Have the sands of time clouded our vision?

LENTEN ACT:

Consider today your involvement in missions. Have you asked God how he would have you be involved? I’m not asking you to sell everything and move overseas, although that may be God’s call on your life, and you should be open to such a call. Just as importantly, are you actively involved in getting the gospel to those who have not heard? Are you sacrificing financially to share the expense of missions? Are you praying for missions and missionaries? Are you taking steps to serve locally and possibly nationally or internationally in short-term mission opportunities that will open your eyes to a world desperately in need of a Savior? Ask God to show you if you need to be doing more.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, give me a heart for missions and for those still set in darkness. I pray that you might be glorified in missions, Lord, and that I might have a part to play in that. Show me how to be involved. Give me courage to reach out beyond my comfort zone. Use me to reach the lost. Amen.

Day 31

wednesday

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

-Luke 2:25-35

"People talk about imitating Christ, and imitate him in the little trifling formal things, such as washing the feet, saying his prayer, and so on; but if anyone attempts the real imitation of him, there are no bounds to the outcry with which the presumption of that person is condemned."

-Florence Nightingale

LENTEN THOUGHT:

Joseph and Mary thought they were simply going to proceed with the time-honored practice of naming their newborn son and dedicating him to the Lord. They got more than they were expecting, however, for Simeon, a holy and righteous man, was waiting for them. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit he prophesied that Jesus would be a source of revelation to Jew and Gentile alike and would cause both positive and negative events in human experience. He also foresaw much pain in Mary's own life. We see Jesus as a man of love, and rightfully so. We see him as a man of peace, and again, we are right to do so. But remember that the Christ Child of Advent was destined to bring division, strife, and trouble into our world as well. Jesus pressed issues and spoke in ways that divided people and their relationships. For many, his words and actions were the pivot points that pushed them away from God. For some, the troubles he created did not drown out the voice of God calling them to a relationship with him. Instead, it challenged them to look honestly at their own lives and their own conflicting thoughts and seek the answers in Jesus. In our world

today, people are willing to tolerate religious folk who mind their own business. They might even celebrate the person who is on a spiritual journey, seeking truth. What our world will not tolerate is anyone who claims to have found the truth. By all means seek, but do not find, or if you do, keep it to yourself. The journey is the goal, not the destination. Being "open minded" in our world today means having no strong convictions, except the conviction that you should not have strong convictions. Society today is irritated by people who truly live out the call of Christ in their lives. The Simeon's of the world aggravate us, with their single-minded devotion to God and their truthful lives and words. We want decent, respectable Christianity, not a bold transformation and reckless abandon for God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the pastor/theologian who died at the hands of the Nazis because of his own strong convictions, said: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." Brothers and sisters, have you died for Christ? Have you been crucified with Christ? If you are looking only for respectable Christianity, you will find yourself at odds with the Simeon's of the world and the babe over whom Simeon prophesied.

LENTEN ACT:

Consider today if Jesus has caused a "rising and falling" in your own life. Have you been challenged by him to become a new person? Do you face opposition because of your relationship to Christ, or do people even notice? Is he a light of revelation to you, or simply another cog in your already busy life? Will you allow the revolutionary Christ to work radically in your life this Lenten season?

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, help me to become the person you have called me to be. To give all to Jesus by the power of your Spirit, even if it means radical change in my life. Help me to live in a way that causes people to see Jesus in my life, even if it brings me trouble. Help me to be about the work that Jesus came to accomplish by being willing to serve others, to help them in their oppression, both physical and spiritual, and release me from the oppression that demands that I live a comfortable life at all cost. Make me uncomfortable, Lord, by making Jesus real to me. Amen.

Day 32

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.” Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. If you make the Most High your dwelling—even the LORD, who is my refuge—then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

-Psalm 91:1-11

“Consider what you owe to his immutability. Though you have changed a thousand times, he has not changed once.”

-C.H. Spurgeon

LENTEN THOUGHT:

God is immutable. Now that's a fancy theological word. Here's what it means in laymen's terms: God does not change, nor does he ever need to. God is perfect, and therefore he cannot change for the worse and need not change for the better. Psalm 90, a psalm of Moses, rejoices in the changelessness of God. Psalm 91 picks up with that thought and reminds us of the benefits of serving an unchanging God. If we make our dwelling place in the arms of a changeless God, there is peace and safety, and he becomes a refuge to us. In the wilderness wanderings, Moses and the Israelites were constantly exposed to change. They were moving toward the Promised Land so the call was always, “Onward, this is not our place of rest!” They were not looking for an oasis in the desert, they were looking for a permanent home in a land that flowed with milk and honey. You serve the same God today—the very same God who led the Israelites in the desert toward Canaan. As finite human beings we experience change constantly, but we know no change in our God. If he loved us yesterday, he loves us today. When life throws you a curveball, which it often will, and your hopes are squashed and your prospects are few, you have lost nothing in God. We are pilgrims in this world, and the call to us is always, “Onward, this is not your place of rest!” Like Abraham, we are looking for a city whose foundations are laid by God, an eternal city. And while we wait, we go through all the struggles and hardships that living in a fallen

thursday

world will inevitably bring our way. It can be trying at times, and at times it seems as if our work will never be finished. We go through seasons of life, some better than others, often looking backwards to the “good ol’ days” when times were simpler and we had nothing better to do than to enjoy life lived out through a young, vibrant body. The Scriptures call us to look forward, but we find ourselves always looking back, wishing that we had not experienced so much change. Most of us find life difficult, but we prefer it to the alternative, which always seems to be lurking on the horizon. But God is not like that. He remains ever constant in a constantly changing universe. It is to him that we must look for our strength, and it is to him that we must look for our rest. A “Sabbath rest” is promised to those who trust in him. We cannot experience that rest until we have passed through the gates of death, but we can catch a glimpse of it here. “Come to me, all you who labor and are weary. Cast your burdens on me, and I will give you rest” is the promise of Jesus Christ. It is no sin to seek that rest here and now. Though we endure trouble and change, we are always at home in God, who does not change like shifting shadows.

LENTEN ACT:

Today is the thirty-second day of Lent. You have probably been busy for the past thirty-one days. Take time today to rest in God. Spend some time and relax, let your mind think on the things of God. Praise him, thank him, worship him and rest in his immutability. He is always the same and knows no change. You can trust him, and you can rest in him as a refuge and a fortress. Take some time today, even if it is only ten minutes, to go into a room, close the door, get comfortable, and rest in God. You don't have to talk to him, just listen. Let your mind dwell on thoughts of God. Yes, our faith is an active faith, but it is okay to occasionally stop and enjoy what it means to be a child of God. He is a great God, and that will never change.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Remember, you don't have to talk this time. “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10).

Day 33

friday

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”

-John 15:1-8

“Abide in Jesus, the sinless one—which means, give up all of self and its life, and dwell in God’s will and rest in his strength. This is what brings the power that does not commit sin.”

-Andrew Murray

LENTEN THOUGHT:

Jesus wanted his disciples to remain in him. To remain or abide means simply “to wait for” or “to endure without yielding.” He did not call on them to do so because he needed it—he called on them to do so because they needed it. We need to remain in Christ if we hope to bear any fruit in our Christian walk. We may grunt and strain and tie on fruit to our “tree,” but it will all be man-made and useless for eternal purposes. We also need reminders on a daily basis that we are walking with Christ. Our culture does not encourage us to think deeply and to ponder the greatness of our God. We must be intentional about that! Jesus gave up the glories of heaven in order to remain with us and to give up his life as a sacrifice for our sin. How many times have we glossed over that great truth? How many times have we flippantly referred to our sin as if it cost God nothing to save us from it? He wants a close, intimate relationship with you, and you will be better for it. Do you struggle against sin? Does that question even need to be asked? It is in remaining in the vine, Jesus Christ, that our struggle against sin becomes a victory. The closer we remain to him, the further our enemy stays from us and the less our own sinful inclinations affect us. Not complete victory, not here, but a true sense of living a life for God and not for our own desires becomes not only possible,

but expected, when we, the branches, remain vitally connected to the vine. In Jesus’ earthly ministry he spent close to three years abiding with a small gathering of followers—the twelve disciples and a few other men and women who remained with him. Although we do not see any of these men and women living perfect lives around Jesus in the gospels, we do see that as they remained close to him they were protected, and they were growing. Judas, of course, fell away, but Scripture also makes it clear that he was never fully committed to Jesus (John 6:70; 17:12). Those who remained in Jesus were not lost, and so it remains today. We need a vital connection to Christ, just as a child in the womb needs a vital connection to its mother. When the connection is strong, all is well, but if something is allowed to sever the tie, problems begin almost immediately. Sin does not have to be your master. Abide in him, as he abides in you today. “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

LENTEN ACT:

The goal of our 40 Days with Jesus is to remain in him. Are you doing that? Are you seeing any differences in your life, in your attitude, in your desire for God? Today, purpose in your mind to redouble your efforts to remain in Jesus for the remainder of this Lenten season. Immerse yourself in Scripture, in prayer, in fasting, in serving, in caring for others, in looking at life from the perspective of a Christ follower. Will these forty days be forty days that have changed your perspective and your desire to have a close, intimate relationship with God?

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, I want to remain in you by remaining in Jesus your Son. I need your help, every day, to do that. Remind me of your presence, Lord, keep me focused, not just today but everyday. I want to bear fruit in my life and in ministry to others in your name. Soften my heart toward you, remove my desires that seek only good for myself, only pleasure for myself, only peace for myself, and replace it with your own perspective. Give me a heart that is for you and for your kingdom. Take away my sin, I repent of it, and help me, Father, to seek to know you so intimately that sin becomes not a joy but a burden to me. Amen.

Day 34

saturday

They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet him. This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him any more, not even with a chain. For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones. When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. He shouted at the top of his voice, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that you won’t torture me!” For Jesus had said to him, “Come out of this man, you evil spirit!” Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?” “My name is Legion,” he replied, “for we are many.” And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area. A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. The demons begged Jesus, “Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them.” He gave them permission, and the evil spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

-Mark 5:1-13

“Nowhere in the New Testament are believers ever depicted as living in servile fear of demons. That is precisely the state from which they have been delivered by the gospel.”

-Melvin Tinker

LENTEN THOUGHT:

The devil, evil spirits, demon possession, graveyards and normal humans with super-human strength—all very scary things to think about. Or are they? If the Scriptures are true and the powers of darkness have been defeated at the cross, what fear should believers have concerning our enemy? (Col. 2:15) Our enemy is real. It is vital for us to believe and understand this biblical truth. Yet our understanding of this truth needs to be balanced. C.S. Lewis said, “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist and a magician with the same delight.” Hollywood makes great use of people’s fear of the spirit world. Science mocks it as a silly, backward vestige of our pre-Enlightenment past. Both are mistakes. Demons exist. How many of them exist is not known, but the Bible does seem to imply that many angels were cast out of heaven along with Satan (Rev. 12). Here’s the long and short of it—we need not fear our enemy. We should have a healthy respect for

the truth that he is stronger than we are on this side of heaven, as are those in the demonic realm, but we should also remember that “greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world” (1 John 4:4). Jesus has given us victory not only over sin, not only over death, but over the devil as well. “God will soon crush Satan under your feet,” Paul reminded the church in Rome (Rom. 16:20). We will not crush him on our own, but we can entrust ourselves to Jesus, and in so doing, we can put away any fear of our ancient enemy. We are called to put on the armor of God, and in so doing, we are able to extinguish all the “flaming darts” of the evil one. Movies like to depict demons inhabiting homes, cars, and ancient burial grounds, but the truth of the matter is that demons have little or no interest in the inanimate world. What they are bent on, however, is destroying those that bear the image of God. They are consumed with a desire to kill, steal and destroy, so as to muddle up our lives and create distance between us and God. For the most part, they have the power we give them when we refuse to abide in Christ. When we are in Christ, they are all bark and no bite. Satan is powerless before the Savior, and we are bold in Christ.

LENTEN ACT:

Remember today that you struggle not just against flesh and blood, but also against the rulers, the authorities, and the cosmic powers over this present darkness. If you are reading this with children, comfort their fears of the evil one by reminding them that Jesus abides in them, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom—freedom not to fear an enemy that has no power over God’s people. So, remember that we have a powerful enemy, but remember too that we serve an awesome God. Put on the armor of God and fight the fight, but do not give way to fear (Eph. 6:10-11).

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, I put my hope and trust completely in you today. I know I have a strong adversary, and I know that he is bent against me, but I trust in you, O Lord. I pray that you will remind me to keep my spiritual armor on. Help me to keep my focus on you, to live faithfully and wholeheartedly for you, and to place my confidence in Jesus, who lives and abides in me through your Spirit. Amen.

Day 35

The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him.

-Nahum 1:7

“I ask You neither for health nor for sickness, for life nor for death; but that You may dispose of my health and my sickness, my life and my death, for Your glory... You alone know what is expedient for me; You are the sovereign master, do with me according to Your will. Give to me, or take away from me, only conform my will to Yours. I know but one thing, Lord, that it is good to follow You, and bad to offend You. Apart from that, I know not what is good or bad in anything. I know not which is most profitable to me, health or sickness, wealth or poverty, nor anything else in the world. That discernment is beyond the power of men or angels, and is hidden among the secrets of Your providence, which I adore, but cannot fathom.”

-Blaise Pascal

LENTEN THOUGHT:

Sometimes Scripture does not seem to jibe very well with reality. Is God really good? Is he truly a refuge? Does he really care for those who trust in him? If so, why all the pain and suffering in life? The prophet Jeremiah noticed this apparent discrepancy and, in a moment of brazen honesty, confronted God with these very questions (Jer. 12:1). God answers Jeremiah, but not as we might suppose he would. His answer seems to be something akin to this: “You know very little Jeremiah, and the little you know confuses you. Why seek to know things that you cannot understand and have no experience with which to base your judgments?” (Jer. 12:5) The question is not, does our own personal experience always bear out the truth that God is good? The question is, do we believe what God said is true? General Custer’s experience told him his 7th Cavalry was invincible and that Native American tribes would not unite in large numbers to fight against him. His experience led him astray and fooled him into complacency, and he paid a fatal price for the mistake. It was probably hard for the prophet Nahum to believe his own words in our Scripture reading for today, given his experience as a Jew in a time of great trouble, yet God’s word through him was vindicated. It is not naïve to trust God in spite of present circumstances. His promise is not that all will go well for us at all times in this world from our own perspective; his promise is that all will go well for us from an eternal perspective. Sometimes this is demonstrated

monday

in this life. At other times, it is realized in the life to come. In either case, it is true. Blaise Pascal was a genius, in the real sense of the word, not in the sense in which we throw the word around today in relation to football coaches, singers, and social media influencers. He was a mathematician, physicist, and philosopher. He knew a little bit about hard times, and he knew a little bit about logic. He was enthralled by God and by the experience of being born again in his adult life. He suffered from illness and digestive disorders most of his life, yet he could not be shaken from his firm belief that God was always good. Our own personal experiences are shaky ground to determine the reliability and trustworthiness of the eternal God. Trust and believe; God will make all things right.

LENTEN ACT:

Today, consider whether you really believe that God is good. Consider whether you really believe that “all things work to the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). It is in the hard times, in the “dark night of the soul,” that many doubts creep into our spiritual lives. Take inventory of your life and see if God has delivered on his promises. Consider whether your experience has made it easy to trust in a loving God, or more difficult. Both scenarios are possible. What does this mean to you? Will you wrestle with God on this important question? Will you search his word? Will you trust him enough to consider the hard questions in life? “When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made one as well as the other” (Eccl. 7:14).

LENTEN PRAYER:

Lord, where are you in the valley of despair? There are times when the bad outweighs the good in my life, or in the lives of those I love. How shall I consider these things? Will you please show yourself to me even in my dark days? Help me to see you in the shadows of life, and to believe you when all is not well. Help me to mourn with those who mourn and weep with those who weep. At the same time, teach me to rejoice in you when times are good and to wait on you when you seem distant. I want to trust you always. Amen.

Day 36

tuesday

For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.

-Romans 5:17-18

"I do not fear death. Often I wake in the night and think of it, look forward to it, with a thrill of joyful expectation and anticipation, which would become impatience were it not that Jesus is my Master, as well as my Savior, and I feel I have work to do for him that I would not shirk, and also that his time to call me home will be the best and right time; therefore I am content to wait."

-Francine Ridley Havergal

LENTEN THOUGHT:

Scientists believe that human beings are naturally afraid of only two things; falling and loud noises. Even infants appear to have these fears hard-wired into them. But that changes in short order as we grow older. It isn't long before dozens, if not hundreds, of fears invade our lives; snakes, spiders, bogeymen, robbers, the dark—the list goes on and on. Topping that list, for almost every human being on this planet throughout time, is a fear of death. There is a good, biblical reason for this. Death is our enemy, our first and final enemy. It begins its relentless attack upon us from the moment we take our first breath. Before the fall (see Genesis 3), human beings created in the image of God had nothing to fear. In the harmonious Garden, everything was subject to Adam and Eve. Animals lived in peace with them, the dark did not hide ominous creatures, and nothing could harm them except for their God-given power of choice. That choice left them without a home, without animals as companions, and with an enemy looming over them that simply could not be stopped. That new enemy was death (Gen. 3:19). Sadly, Adam's poor choice led to our greatest fear. One man's trespass led to death and condemnation for his offspring throughout all generations. Now, death is silently waiting for all of us. I can remember many sleepless nights as a young boy laying in bed, staring into the darkness and considering the prospect of death. What is it like? What does it feel like? Would science find a solution in my lifetime? I knew it was inevitable, and had even come to grips with it during the day when the sunshine ferrets those thoughts away into the recesses of the mind. But at night those questions and fears often

found their way back to the foreground, seeking answers and quickening my heart rate. I suspect this is a story common to your experience as well. The fall brought with it tragic consequences. Ground that would not produce life on its own but would have to be worked and cajoled into production. A helpmate that was no longer content with being a helpmate, but would fight for dominance. A natural order that was no longer for us but against us. But let's face it, the real kicker is still death. We can all find happiness here to some extent in spite of the setbacks of the fall, but death really sours the pot. It is just so inevitable and unavoidable that it is truly the most damnable of curses. The Bible tells us that the last enemy to be destroyed is death. It has had a long and ignoble reign, but it too, like all created things, must come to an end. One man brought the curse upon us, and so one man brings the curse to an end. "The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam, a life-giving Spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45). So death is not the final chapter for Christ-followers, it is instead the opening act. Jesus Christ, the last Adam, is the great death-destroyer, the true sin-eater. Therefore, death no longer has mastery over us, and the fear of death is quenched. Death, like everything else, must give way to the blazing glory of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. His reign in our lives removes the fear of death, and his resurrection removes its sting. As the poet John Donne so eloquently said, "Death, thou shalt die!"

LENTEN ACT:

What are your fears about death? Think about that today. Will you spend your life doing everything in your power to either a) not think about it, or b) stave it off with a vast array of costly products and new fads? Have you found the answer to your fears, or are you still searching? If you know Christ, ask God to begin a work in you that will lead to hope and confidence where death is concerned. If you do not know Christ, maybe today would be a good day to consider what you will do about your impending death. How will you manage it on your own? My advice to you is to give up trying. It is useless. Instead, give that fear to Jesus by giving him your life.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, destroy the fear of death in me. Do not let me be paralyzed by fear, but fill me with hope in you, and peace. Amen.

Day 37

wednesday

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh, when my enemies and foes attack me, they will stumble and fall. Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident.

-Psalm 27:1-3

“I am still in the land of the dying. I shall soon be in the land of the living.”

-John Newton

LENTEN THOUGHT:

Our quote for today is from the dying lips of John Newton, whose old and worn out body struggled on for life even as Newton was ready to meet his savior. Yesterday we spoke about the fear of death. Newton did not suffer from this malady. Newton knew only the comfort that he was soon to be with the Lord. When God is our comfort, we need not fear. King David, who wrote the twenty-seventh Psalm, John Newton, the great slave-trader turned pastor and preacher, and you and me, we all need not fear since Jesus has come into our world. Although David did not know the name of Jesus, it was the Spirit of Jesus (the name oftentimes given to the Holy Spirit) that illuminated him, even as the Spirit illuminates us and causes us to put aside fear. As a young man, John Newton worked on a slaving ship, transporting shackled Africans in squalid conditions to the English slave markets. After being pressed into service in the British navy, Newton tried to desert and was lashed 96 times for the offense, leading him to contemplate murdering the captain of the vessel. Fortunately, Newton recovered from his beating and was dismissed from the navy, allowing him to renew his work in the slave trade, eventually becoming the captain of the slave ship Duke of Argyle. Some time later, in a glorious turn of events, Newton converted to Christianity during a raging storm at sea when he begged God for his life while his ship was sinking. After giving himself up to the Lord, the ship's cargo broke loose and amazingly plugged the hole in the vessel, allowing it to drift to safety. Although Newton did not immediately give up the slave trade—a sin for which he heartily repented in his later years—he did eventually leave the sea for a life as a pastor, becoming a champion in England's fight against the slave trade at the side of William Wilberforce. Newton went from a man filled with the fear of dying to a man filled with the grace of God, willing to sacrifice all for the gospel. Transformations like this do not just

happen, they are the work of Christ in the hearts of men and women that bring about supernatural regeneration. King David refused to spend his life in fear, even though his enemies were often encamped around him. Newton refused to waste his life stripping men and women of their freedom and dignity, and thus fearing the wrath of God for his offenses. How about you? Will you spend your life in fear? Not just the fear of dying, but the fear of living? Living apart from the God you know is watching? Living apart from the hope that only he can offer? There is a confidence that comes from knowing that God is on your side. That confidence is secured when you come to recognize your need for a savior. You have little control over your life, and therefore the unknown becomes a source of fear. But God is in complete control, and when he rules in your life, fear is cast aside. By the end of his life John Newton could declare only two truths that he knew for certain: “That I am a great sinner, and that Christ is a great Savior.” Embrace those truths today, and you will be able to say; “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?”

LENTEN ACT:

All of us have fears. You probably do not fear armies besieging you or war breaking out against you, but you may very well fear your enemies and foes advancing against you. The Bible tells us that “perfect love casts out all fear” (1 John 4:18). Today, take your fears before the Lord. He wants to help you deal with them. Be honest with him, as you always should be, and tell him what you fear. Some of your fears may include things that you do not understand about God himself. Don't worry about that; he knows your fears, and it will do you good to openly speak about them. Ask him to strengthen your heart and your resolve. If you are his child, then he is your light and your salvation. Ultimately, you have nothing in this universe to fear.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, I am at times very fearful. Help me today to trust you and believe that you are able to care for me even through the greatest storms of life. Your word tells me; “Do not fear, for I am with you, do not anxiously cast about, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you. I will uphold you with my mighty right hand” (Isa. 41:10). I want to believe that today and live like I believe it. Give me courage as a result of my faith in you. Do not leave me Father, but keep me by your side. Amen.

Day 38

In the Lord, however, woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.

-1 Corinthians 11:11-12

“The world looks for happiness through self-assertion. The Christian knows that joy is found in self-abandonment. ‘If a man will let himself be lost for my sake,’ Jesus said, ‘he will find his true self.’ A Christian woman’s true freedom lies on the other side of a very small gate—humble obedience—but that gate leads out into a largeness of life undreamed of by the liberators of the world, to a place where the God-given differentiation between the sexes is not obfuscated but celebrated, where our inequalities are seen as essential to the image of God, for it is in male and female, in male as male and female as female, not as two identical and interchangeable halves, that the image is manifested.”

-Elisabeth Elliot

LENTEN THOUGHT

Who are more important in the church, men or women? This is often what people talk about when they discuss the “role of women” in the church. In God’s eyes, women are women, and men are men, and he created us purposefully with these gender distinctions. We are currently observing a world that has gone off the deep end, attacking and lashing out at the church because of its inequality and Victorian ways. The church, in return, has responded essentially in two equally harmful ways, by either abdicating all truth to the whims of society, or by building walls to protect ourselves from the world. When we do so, we ostracize our friends and neighbors and lose the right to speak into the world’s brokenness. Homosexuals speak of authenticity, feminists of equality, chauvinists of authority, liberals of justice, conservatives of traditional values, and the debates linger long.

“We can be whatever we want to be” is the cry of modern humanity, and it is a cry, of course, that is profoundly mistaken. We cannot be whatever we want to be, we can only be what we were created to be. God created us male and female, a distinction that in and of itself is beautiful. As our culture continues to merge the two together through gender - blending, transgender identifications, physical sex-change procedures, and the insistence that there is nary a difference between the sexes, our society spins out of control. In the church, the

thursday

“pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15), men and women are called to work together, side by side, for the gospel. We are to recognize our God-given differences, giving deference to one another, caring for one another, and using our assigned gifts to further the kingdom. It is true that men have been given a biblical mandate to lead with a Christ-like humility in the home and the church. And it is equally true that women have been given a biblical mandate to submit to godly, Christ-like leadership, serving with men in a way that recognizes and rejoices in our complimentary roles. But it is also true that we are absolutely dependent upon one another. We cannot be all that God has called us to be, as individuals or as a society, without the distinctive qualities and workmanship that the opposite sex brings to the table. The world tells us this is backward and archaic; the Bible tells us this is good and purposeful. Which will we believe? Will we find our “true identity” by listening to the philosophies of the world, which is passing away, or by returning to the word of God? Men and women, boys and girls, find your identity in Christ Jesus, and live out your divine role as bearers of the image of God.

LENTEN ACT:

Remember today that you are created in the image of God. Regardless of your sex, you bear the markings of one who was created by God to live out your identity in this world and to find your purpose not in becoming something you are not, but by becoming fully the person God created you to be. This cannot be accomplished through surgery, self-help or psychotherapy, it is accomplished through a relationship with your Creator. Remind yourself today, “I am an image bearer of God.” Men, act like men. Women, act like women. Together, at each others’ side, let us work tirelessly for the kingdom of God.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, thank you for making me who I am. I ask you to help me live as your image bearer today in a way that brings honor to you, not comfort to me. Help me as a male or female to live in submission to your word in all things. Keep me from putting a chip on my shoulder, Lord, and seeking to confront every form of lifestyle with which I disagree. Give me grace and a willingness to love those who have yet to find their identity in you. Amen.

Day 39

“That servant who knows his master’s will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.”

-Luke 12:47-48

“God does not exalt his mercy at the expense of his justice. And in order to maintain his justice, all sin without exception must be punished. Contrary to popular opinion, with God there is no such thing as mere forgiveness. There is only justice.”

Jerry Bridges

LENTEN THOUGHT:

The events of Good Friday were the result of divine justice. God’s Son became the atoning sacrifice for not only your sins, if you know Christ, but in an even broader and more mysterious stroke, for the sins of the world. This did not happen because God was a little upset about our sin. God does not wink at sin. If he does, sending his Son to the cross was colossal overkill. No, sin brings with it the wrath of God. Therefore, for those who continue on through life with their self-seeking and denying the truth of the gospel message there will be no forgiveness of sin, only “wrath and fury” (Rom. 2:8). Now that Jesus has risen from the dead and has been exalted by God and given the name that is above every name, God has appointed him to be the judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42; 2 Tim. 4:1). For believers, the final judgment will be a time of eliminating those traits and works done outside of Christ and rewarding those works and traits accomplished in Christ. For unbelievers, it will be a time to judge based on what they have done (Rev. 20:12). Jesus’ judgment will be fair, with some receiving greater or lesser condemnation based on what they knew or did not know of God’s law (Luke 12:47-48). Ultimately, those who have not looked for justification through the work of Christ will stand condemned, and those who have will be declared righteous. Justice will prevail. Either Jesus will pay for our sin or we will pay for our sin, but our sin will be dealt with. Jesus will be impartial (1 Peter 1:17), but the Bible is clear—those who reject the claims of Jesus (who is our only hope) will stand condemned (John 3:18). Those who call Jesus Lord, and who have demonstrated that by placing their hope and

good friday

trust in him, will receive glorified bodies and will enjoy eternity with God. God will be shown to be just, for he will deal with sin in righteousness and holiness, because “the Lord is upright...there is no unrighteousness in him” (Ps. 92:15). It has become vogue today for some teachers and preachers to question final destinations and to declare that a just God would never send anyone to hell. But this simply is not true. A just God has made provision for us to spend eternity with him. That same God has declared that sin will never be glossed over. We are heading to one of two destinations, every one of us. Of this truth the Bible could hardly be clearer. The good news in relation to this hard news was put in motion on the day we call “Good Friday.” It was there, on the cross, that sin was dealt with definitively. As a result of Jesus’ obedience in going to his death, justice was served and mercy was made possible. As our quote for today confirms, God does not merely forgive us. Our forgiveness comes at an incredible cost to God himself. Good Friday allows God to be the one who is both just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:26). Therefore, Good Friday was among the most important days in human history. Please understand, the events of Good Friday will have an eternal impact upon your life, and every life. Choose today whether it will be negative or positive.

LENTEN ACT:

Spend this Good Friday taking time throughout the day to remember what God has done for you in Christ. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him might not die, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). And “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:18). Use this day to think seriously about how you have responded to God’s Son.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, thank you for sending your Son to suffer and die on my behalf. Jesus, thank you for taking upon yourself the sin of the world so that I do not have to carry that sin myself. You are a just God, and you are justified in all that you do. I pray today that you will justify me through Jesus. Amen.

Day 40

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

-Philippians 3:7-11

“To have found God and still to pursue him is the soul’s paradox of love, scorned indeed by the too-easily-satisfied religionist, but justified in happy experience by the children of the burning heart. Come near to the holy men and women of the past and you will soon feel the heat of their desire after God. They mourned for him, they prayed and wrestled and sought for him day and night, in season and out, and when they had found him the finding was all the sweeter for the long seeking.”

-A.W. Tozer

LENTEN THOUGHT:

Another Lent has come and gone. Tomorrow will be Resurrection Sunday. Are you different today than you were Resurrection Sunday last year? Are you satisfied with your relationship with God? Is there anything in your heart that causes you to want more of him? Have you laid aside all things in your pursuit of God? The apostle Paul knew God. God sought him out on the road to Damascus, and Paul reached out to him in return. He found God, and yet he was still pursuing him, day after day, week after week, month after month, considering all his attainments the equivalent of human waste compared to the surpassing glory of knowing him better still. This is the burning heart. It’s a heart that follows after Christ even if Christ should lead you a yard from the very gates of hell. Do you have a heart that burns for God? Do you want one? If your answer is, “not really,” then you need not pursue him any longer. You may have all you want of him and are undoubtedly trusting that it is enough. But if your answer is “yes,” then God is not only waiting to be found but will pursue you in return. He is “not far from any of us” (Acts 17:27). “Seek and you will find, knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; anyone who seeks finds; and to they that knock, the door will be opened” (Matt. 7:7-8).

saturday

Has your heart been touched in your 40 Days with Jesus? Have you tasted of something that you do not want to do without? Use these forty days as a catalyst to launch out into a closer relationship with God. Live to know him and you will grow closer to him. As a youngster I ran track, and the track coach told his runners over and over, “Don’t slow down at the end; run through the finish line!” He was a kind man, but he would not tolerate runners who started slowing down prior to the finish of the race. There is a parallel in our walk with Christ. It isn’t so much about speed, but endurance. We are called to keep pressing on, moving forward, not slowing down. Do not stop, run through the finish line and somehow, by any means, seek to grow in him until you reach your goal of becoming mature in your faith. Establish boundaries, develop disciplines, put aside the things of this world that count for so very little and run with endurance the race set before you. Be there at the end, friend, and finish strong!

LENTEN ACT:

Make it your ambition today to ensure, as long as God gives you life and breath, that you will pursue God. Work and grow and seek God in such a way that next year, Lord willing, when you begin the Lenten season by spending 40 Days with Jesus, you will begin from a position of more intimacy with God. Seek him and you will find him. Press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Seek him in his word, in good Christian fellowship, and in relationships that challenge you in your faith. Seek him in prayer, and you will find him waiting to meet you. Do not give up on God, for God is ever faithful, and will not give up on you.

LENTEN PRAYER:

Father, as this Lenten season comes to a close, I pray that you will prepare my heart for worship tomorrow as I celebrate with the community of Christ the resurrection of your Son from the grave. And when Easter comes to an end, I pray that you will fill me with a desire not to relax and kick back and await another spiritual plunge next year, but that I will continue the process of growing into the image of Christ. I have no idea what this year has waiting for me, but whether it be riches or poverty, joy or sadness, life or death, keep me steadfast in you. Hold fast to me as I hold fast to you. Amen.

Lent

Is this a fast, to keep
The larder lean?
And clean from fat of veals and sheep?

Is it to quit the dish
Of flesh, yet still
To fill the platter high with fish?

Is it to fast an hour,
Or ragg'd to go, or show a downcast look and sour?

No; 'tis a fast to dole
thy sheaf of wheat, and meat,
unto the hungry soul.

It is to fast from strife,
From old debate and hate; to circumcise thy life.

To show a heart grief-rent;
To starve thy sin, not bin;
And that's to keep thy Lent.

Robert Herrick