



Building Faith

THROUGH **REFLECTION & ART**

A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

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Stories Expressing:

Betrayal

Humiliation

Suffering

Condemnation

Forsakenness

Forgiveness

Conversion

NEW PHILADELPHIA MORAVIAN CHURCH



The Lenten season's 47 days invite us into a time of study and examination of the life of Jesus and His ministry.

That ministry began when He was 30 years old, and His first act following baptism was to spend 40 days in the desert. Those desert days were a period of self-imposed exile, a time of contemplation and a time of communing with God. They were also a time of encounters with the tempting devil who offered the Son of Man everything that money could buy. Indeed, those 40 days were a time of preparation for what was to come.

Three years later, after calling disciples and training them, after teaching and preaching, after healing and comforting, Jesus was finally ready to conclude His ministry – His purpose – by traveling to Jerusalem. That week began with a Triumphal Entry...on the back of a donkey. This striking contrast would be seen again.

Jesus's welcome was so jubilant that Pharisees asked him to quiet the disciples. His response? "I tell you, if these were silent, even the stones would shout out.

As He approached the city He loved, Jesus wept. Those shouts of "Hosanna!" still ringing in His ears came from people who just didn't get it; they still didn't understand His message of peace. Jesus was entering into a period called *His Sorrow*.

The next few days – what we call Holy Week – would run the gamut of experiences and emotions for Jesus. There was His anger, no....His fury, at the money changers in the Temple. He overturned their tables and threw them out.

Jesus continued His ministry by teaching the people through parables that offered enlightenment and imparted wisdom, but provocative and conniving priests and scribes who debated Jesus at every turn disputed His lessons.

At the Passover meal with His beloved disciples, Jesus gave the bread and wine new symbolism, a message that was compromised by arguments about "greatness" and upsetting news of a betrayal. The next day would see that offense come to pass, and hours following – less than a full day – would see Jesus humiliated and tortured, condemned and forsaken. Crucified. But forgiveness and conversion were also in the picture.

Turn the page and examine the painting of the Last Supper. It shows the moment when Jesus speaks to His disciples of His body that will be broken for them. All listen with rapt attention. All, that is, save one. Judas's eyes aren't on the beloved rabbi. No, Judas's eyes are on you.

Turn the page to begin the journey into the desert.







Betrayal

Why did he do it?

What was his motivation?

Was it for the money?

Was that why Judas betrayed Jesus?

Greed?

That's one theory. Another is that Judas was trying to force Jesus's hand to make a public claim to be the Messiah.

The fact is that so little is known about Judas that trying to understand his act of betrayal is all just guesswork. Unfortunately, the Gospels don't help because each mention of Judas is similar with scant details. What we do know, though, is that Jesus saw something — some degree of promise — in this man whom he chose as one of His disciples. And because Jesus chose Judas we know that He loved him.

When Jesus was betrayed with a kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane, it came as no surprise. John's Gospel reports that Jesus knew "from the first...who was the one that would betray him." (6:64). And then there was that moment at the Last Supper when Jesus announced, "...one of you will betray me." (13:21)

But it's the kiss — a sign of affection — that is the greatest offense and that feels like the deepest part of betrayal. In the painting, left, by Giotto di Bondone, notice the determined look on Judas's face. There is no hesitation or second thought: He knew what he was doing.

Jesus's expression is more of an enigma. There is no shock or dismay, but rather a look of "Yes, I've been expecting you." These two then, in the midst of chaos, fear, and raised spears, have a brief moment together before the deed is done, and Judas becomes the most famous betrayer of all times. Jesus's fate and Judas's fate: Sealed with a kiss.

DAY 1 ASH WEDNESDAY

In the letter he (David) wrote, “Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die. 2 Samuel 11:15

When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son. 2 Samuel 11:26-27

The first part of this chapter of 2 Samuel 11 is when King David walked out onto the palace roof and saw Bathsheba bathing. He sent for her to be brought to the palace. He slept with her and she became pregnant. David arranged for his military leader, Joab to place Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, in the front of the battle where he would be killed. David's devious plan worked, and Uriah died.

After Uriah died Bathsheba mourned his death for the correct amount of time. After this, David took her for his wife and they had a son. David's sins displeased and betrayed the Lord.

Nathan, a court prophet and advisor to David, met with him. He told him how displeased he and the Lord were with him. He said that the Lord was bringing calamity down on him and the son born to him by Bathsheba would die. David admitted that he had sinned against the Lord. The Lord severely punished David for his sins and betrayal, but in the end, he spared his life and forgave him.

Honestly, sometimes I've struggled with these verses. I think, how could David be forgiven? However, we all sin and can be forgiven if we repent and we ask Jesus to forgive us. What a blessing it is to be loved as Jesus loves us unconditionally. I'm so thankful for God's grace and the wonderful life he's provided for me.

Another lesson I get from this is that we should make every effort not to deceive or lie about anything. If we do, we betray the people we have affected, God, and ourselves.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, I praise you and thank you for all my blessings. I know that you love me, unconditionally. Please forgive me for my sins. Help me not to judge people and be a better person and servant to you Lord Jesus. Amen

Bill Byrd

DAY 2

The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it. Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let us go out to the field. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. Genesis 4:6-8

When we read scripture it is often instructive to try to find ourselves in the story we are being told. In the Genesis passage for today we could be Cain, or we could be Abel.

When God said to Cain, “Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen?, the Creator could just as easily be speaking to any one of us. There is a lot of anger out there and if only by osmosis, some of it has come to live in each of our hearts. And when God spoke about Abel saying, “Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground,” our own individual senses of victimization allow us to think that God must be speaking about us.

We don’t really know if these two brothers are **literal** or **literary** characters. But we do know siblings raised in the same families, under the same disciplines, with all the same benefits, the same genetic code, who when sensing the other to be favored by a parent or another in charge person, places one in the position and with the motive to enact violence and the other to be on the receiving end of that violent act.

Whether we read this scripture seeing ourselves as Cain or as Abel, it is not hard to imagine that they may have been told that they had, like their biblical parents, been created in the *imago dei* — *the image of God*. Could you perhaps see a brotherly betrayal of Abel as a companion betrayal of God? Can you maybe hear Jesus say, “If you have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, you have done it unto me.”?

Peter, Paul and Mary sang a song that utilized the same tune we sing when we sing “O Sacred Head Now Wounded.” If you can access YouTube on your computer, use the link below to hear them sing about the brotherhood/sisterhood of all humanity, and as you listen, mediate on the truth that Jesus’s sacred head was wounded for each Cain, each Abel, each one of us, whichever one we happen to be at any given moment.

Michael Crane

https://youtu.be/ITXCxwtXKwE?si=toWBX1HoX4Xnad_o

- * Unless you are reading this on the church website, or wherever the Lenten guide is offered online, you will need to copy the hyperlink above into your browser to hear the PPM song.
- ** O Sacred Head, Now Wounded is number 345 in your blue hymnal or number 124 in the red hymnal
- *** Be sure the sound on your computer is turned up and since we are not trying to sell you anything YouTube is selling, feel free to click on the “skip ad” prompts that will appear during any ads you may see.

DAY 3

But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. “Here comes that dreamer!” they said to each other. “Come now, let’s kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we’ll see what comes of his dreams.” Genesis 37:18-20 (NIV)

These few words are the outcome of years of resentments developed by some members of a family for one who should be of their own. After fathering ten sons, Jacob has a young son named Joseph who is smart, handsome and has the gift of visions. Joseph has visions that appear as dreams and he also can interpret others' dreams that are visions. This young Joseph is the pampered son who has not learned humility or subtlety. He has described his vision of wheat sheafs bowing to a central sheaf and has interpreted this dream to his older brothers as them bowing to him.

The brothers decide enough is enough and plot to kill this brat. One of the older brothers, Reuben, convinces them to throw Joseph into a dry cistern instead of killing him. While Reuben is away from the group figuring out how to rescue Joseph, the brothers sell Joseph to merchants on their way to Egypt. We know how this story ends decades later with the brothers bowing down to the important Egyptian official who they do not recognize as Joseph when they go to buy grain during a famine.

This early part of the story has layers that deserve examination before we follow the story of God's plan taking Joseph to Egypt. The older brothers feel betrayed by their father given his favoring Joseph. But remember Jacob felt betrayed by his father-in-law who deceived him at his first wedding, substituting Leah for the promised Rachel. The brothers are betraying not only Joseph but also their father by conspiring to tell him that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal. Jacob will grieve for years for his lost son of Rachel.

This story could be a drama in our own day. Someone treats one person badly relative to another not realizing that the resentments may one day become hatred. Then some event can bring that hatred into stark display in a way that may not be violent but may leave emotional scars for the rest of these lives. So many of the stories in our scriptures are timeless reminders that how we treat each other is a basic part of living out our faith. How easy it is to be kind to a thoughtful loving person. We are, however, admonished to also be kind to the mouthy spoiled brat of whatever age. Sometimes trying to live as Christ taught us is really hard.

DAY 3 continued

PRAYER

May we always recognize that everyone with whom we interact is deserving of our respect and care since we are all children of God. We do not know how our actions today may reverberate in the future whether for good or ill, but treating all with kindness and mercy will always be giving glory to God.

Mary Ruth McRae

*My Savior was betrayed,
Reproach and pain to meet;
My sins the Lord conveyed
'Fore Pilate's judgment seat;
These, these did Him deliver
Into the foe's dire hand;
I should have felt forever
The pangs my Lord sustained.*

My Savior Was Betrayed
Lyrics by Ernst Wilhelm von Wobeser and
Heinrich von Bruiningk



DAY 4

Jesus Arrested

While he was still speaking a crowd came up, and the man who was called Judas, one of the Twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him, 48 but Jesus asked him, “Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?” Luke 22:47-48 (NIV)

Luke 22:47-48 contains 2 verses - 44 words (depending on the version you read). Let us take a few phrases and trace the prophecy of Christ's betrayal.

While he was still speaking —

Psalm 41:09 — Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me.

Zechariah 11:12 (NIV) — I told them, “If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it.” So they paid me thirty pieces of silver.

Mark 14:43 (NIV) — Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him were a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief.

Acts 1:16 — “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus.”

How could someone who had walked with Jesus daily betray him? Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. The price of a slave. (Exodus 21:32).

“the man who was called Judas, one of the Twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him.” (Luke 22:47)

Jesus was betrayed by one of His own. Betrayed by an act of loving greeting. A traditional greeting among men in certain parts of the world even today.

Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: “The one I kiss is the man; arrest him.” 49 Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, “Greetings, Rabbi!” and kissed him. (Matt. 26:48-49)

DAY 4 continued

The temple guards had been dispatched to be the arresting officers. But the temple guards returned without Jesus.

But Jesus asked him, "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" (Luke 22:48)

Prior to the betrayal and arrest of Jesus, Jesus was in the garden praying. Jesus rose and went to the disciples only to find them asleep. We know that it was evening. Darkness surrounded the garden. Jesus asked the disciples to pray.

"When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." (Matthew 27:3-4)

How do you think Judas felt when Jesus called him by name? Jesus knew this man Judas was a disciple he had called to follow him. Do you think Judas recalled the words Jesus shared at the Last Supper?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, as you were with your Son when He was betrayed, we pray that you will be with us during our dark days, days when we just don't understand, days when we struggle. Lord, help us to remain full of faith. Amen

Nancy Renn

DAY 5

The Golden Rule

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. (NIV)

So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets. (RSV)

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets. (KJV)

Do for others what you want them to do for you. This is the teaching of the laws of Moses in a nutshell. (The Living Bible) Matthew 7:12

When I received this verse to use for a devotional, my first thought was, how easy, everyone knows what this means. I knew I still needed to do my research, study and reflection and as always, I learned something new.

Matthew 7:12 is part of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 are all part of the Sermon on the Mount. This I did not know. So, I read all 3 chapters and recognized many of the teachings and verses; I even knew some of them by heart, but I had never taken them as a whole.

William Barclay summarized the importance of the Sermon on the Mount, (and I am paraphrasing). *The Sermon on the Mount is "The Ordination Address to the Twelve." The Twelve received from Jesus their ordination address before they went out to their task. Other titles given to the Sermon on the Mount are "The Compendium of Christ's Doctrine," "The Magna Carta of the Kingdom," (William Barclay's Daily Study Bible, notes on Matthew 5).* But Jesus made this address to the crowd and Matthew recorded it so all could know.

After reading all the ways Jesus lays out for us to live, he sums it up with one line that we all learned as children, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Then he states, "This is the law and the prophets." I included the Living Bible translation because I liked the way it said, "This is the teaching of the laws of Moses in a nutshell."

Matthew 7:12 is easy to remember but so very difficult for us to do. We must continually strive to remember this "rule" each time we interact with others. It does not say we must agree or like what the other may be doing but to treat them as we would want them to treat us. We could never do this even once without the help of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 7:28, states, "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed." May we always be amazed at Our Lord. May we always try to do the things he taught us. And he made it easy for us to remember, "Do to others what you would have them do to you."

Lynette Welborn

DAY 6

A false witness will not go unpunished, and whoever pours out lies will not go free. Proverbs 19:5

Jesus was betrayed by a close friend. We've all heard the story. We've all wondered why someone would do something so horrible to a person they cared for so dearly. We would never!

Or would we? Lies, misinformation, mean words, jokes. Words shared with someone about or at the expense of another. It all amounts to gossip. Gossip is a form of betrayal. This is what the author of this verse is speaking of. It hits close to home for me. I love jokes. I love poking fun at others for a good laugh. Often, it's innocent fun. But there are times when it goes beyond that. Sometimes, a joke may come at the expense of something a friend might not want others to know. Even a well-intended sharing of one friend's private concern with another mutual friend may be more than is acceptable. Remembering what is important to the person behind the story is paramount. I'm ashamed to admit I don't always make that my first thought, but it should be.

So, I pray today that the next time I feel the urge to share something that may impact another, I ask God to help me bite my tongue and take a moment to consider the outcome fully. Am I betraying a friend? Jesus knows my heart. What would he think?

PRAYER

Lord, help me guard my tongue!

Paul Williams

Betrayal Personal Reflections

One of our devotions used the Golden Rule. Why do you think this devotion is included in the “Betrayal” section?

This image shows a full page of blank, lined paper. It features approximately 20 evenly spaced horizontal grey lines across its entire width, providing a guide for handwriting or typing. The paper itself is a clean, off-white color.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.





Humiliation

The phone rang at an inconvenient time. I was working against a deadline. But, like many, I can't let a ringing phone go unanswered. I was immediately sorry.

The woman on the other end is someone we've helped several times through our Benevolence ministry. Like many people, she lives hand to mouth. She works two jobs — the one at \$13 an hour is the higher paying of the two — to be able to afford her ridiculously high rent (in a rough part of the city). Her two brothers live in other cities and have their own problems, and she buried her father a couple of years ago. So, there's no help from anywhere or anyone: She's truly alone.

The woman asked: "Ms. Manning, do you know any other churches that have (benevolence) funds like you all do?" My answer was short, since few churches have such funds anymore, most choose to support non-profits that can more effectively help the struggling poor. I get it: Helping people is messy, because their problems are complicated and often have no solutions. Their lives are a house of cards, with the slightest breeze causing collapse, with calamity following. And indeed, that's just where my caller was.

She had been evicted, and was living in her car. She was relying on a supervisor to pick her up for work. The second job had been "let go," since it was further away and required a car. Her car had been "deactivated." That's what happens when your poor credit forces you to buy a car from places that control whether or not you can start your engine.

She was humiliated to have to call me and admit her failures. And I was humiliated as I felt her desperation and helplessly tried to figure out what in the world we could offer.

This little real-life drama is nothing like the humiliation Jesus suffered at the ridicule and contempt from Roman soldiers and from Jewish citizens who called for His death. His treatment is beyond our imaginations. It was treatment heaped on the perfect Son of God at the hands of those He came to save.

But we **can** understand, maybe, the humiliation of this woman who sees catastrophe ahead, and no way out. Who knows that better days are not ahead; who sees no hope on the horizon; who fears loss of employment and even homelessness. It might be the closest we can get to the tragedy that lay ahead for Jesus.

DAY 7

For after I had turned away I repented, and after I was discovered, I struck my thigh; I was ashamed, and I was dismayed because I bore the disgrace of my youth. Jeremiah 31:19

It's humiliating when you speak up to unethical behavior, and there is a complete lack of concern about the behavior, but rather an accusation of slander on your part.

The prophet Jeremiah spoke out calling for repentance and a return to the covenant. It was a message which had not only religious but also political ramifications.

Commentator Robert Davidson wrote of Jeremiah: "...as a result of his highly unpopular Temple Sermon (see chapters 7 and 26), he was *persona non grata* to the religious and political establishment. There were threats to his life; he was debarred from preaching in person in the Temple precincts." Jeremiah was one of the last prophets to warn Judah before the sacking of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. and the subsequent exile of Jews to Babylon.

The verse above comes from a section (chapters 30-33) which is called "the book of consolation." While this unit's theme is hope for the future, there is the realization that God has been correct to apply discipline. In the preceding verse, Ephraim (Judah) is personified as a wild calf:

*"You disciplined me, and I took the discipline;
I was like an untrained calf. Bring me back; let me come back,
for you are the Lord my God."*

The prophet Hosea made a similar bovine comparison ("Like a stubborn heifer, Israel is stubborn" 4:16a). Nobody appreciates being called a stubborn cow.

Realizing the error of its ways and accepting discipline are both promising steps toward reconciliation; but there remains the embarrassment — the humiliation — of being so stupid and contrary in the first place. Ephraim says "I struck my thigh," which sounds like a strange action. Elsewhere in the Bible we read the phrase that penitents "beat their breasts" to show their contrition. If you scan through the many English language translations and paraphrases for this verse, you'll see a variety of expressions besides striking or smoting one's thigh or beating one's breast. The International Standard Version reads: "I slapped my forehead," which brought to mind the facepalm emoji (🤦) "Duh, how could I have been so stupid?!"). The Living Bible's and New Living Translation's "I kicked myself for my stupidity" extends an understandable although physiologically difficult feat.

We could all at times save ourselves from embarrassment by submitting to review/overview from those who love us and want what's in our best interest.

David Blum

DAY 8

He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. Philippians 3:21

What a powerful verse — these words were written by Paul as he was imprisoned for remaining true to his faith and his calling. Earlier in the chapter, Paul looks back on his “previous life”, and speaks of every reason that he had to boast:

- I was a Pharisee
- I was a devout Hebrew
- I was so zealous in my “religiousness” that I persecuted the church for not following the “accepted order of faith”
- I was “legalistically righteous”

And at the time he wrote the letter to the Philippians, Paul was humiliated by all that he had been. He realized that all the things that had brought him pride before he experienced the grace of Christ, were reasons for embarrassment in his new life. God had reached down and scooped him up on that road to Damascus, applied pressure and transformed Paul into an amazing messenger of grace and faith.

So close your eyes, and quiet your mind and envision a piece of clay (or Play-Doh!) in your hands. Close your hands around it and begin to warm it and soften it. As you hold it for longer, the clay or Play-Doh becomes more pliable, easier to shape and sculpt as you apply pressure. Imagine, as you continue to form a re-worked creation, that you focus on the surface of the clay or Play-doh, and you can clearly see your fingerprints on its surface.

So it is with us and our creator. Though it may take finding ourselves broken or humiliated as Paul did, when we allow our Creator God to re-mold and re-shape us, He can transform our brokenness, our humiliation, into glory with Him. He can transform us, broken and imperfect, into a new and re-formed vessel by the hands of our creator. And when we take a moment to focus on the new vessel we have become, we will be able to see His fingerprints on us.

PRAYER

May it be so for each of us on this Lenten journey, Amen.

Evie Blum

DAY 9

I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.” Ezra 9:5

There are times in our lives when we feel humiliated, ashamed, or disgusted with ourselves. Sometimes this experience comes from the acts of others. Satan uses these opportunities to instill a questioning attitude in us: Am I worthy? Am I lovable? Where is my identity?

Without Jesus, the answers to the above questions are disheartening, to say the least. Jesus walked among us as human and experienced all the emotions we do. Satan pressured and tempted Him. The people humiliated and shamed him. They hurt Him mentally, emotionally, and physically. Despite all this, Jesus willingly went to the cross to provide a way out of that suffering for us, the ones who humiliated Him. When we look to Jesus, we can be assured of our identities through Him and do not have to live a life of humiliation and shame, regardless of what the world says.

Sometimes our humiliation and shame are reflections of our own sinful deeds. Again, because of Jesus and His sacrifice, we can trust in the grace of God to bring us into His redemption. Think of how Jesus must have felt when He took every single humiliation, shame, disgust, and all our sins upon Himself on the cross to save us! We do not have to walk in humiliation, shame, or disgust if we accept and believe that Jesus is our Lord and Savior and He has already carried those burdens for us.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, today please let us remember the sacrifice of your Son, Jesus, and rest in the knowledge that Your forgiving grace is bestowed upon us, even as undeserving as we are. We can let the chains of humiliation, shame, and disgust fall far from our shoulders. We love and worship you. In Jesus's name we pray, Amen.

Jenny Macemore

DAY 10

The seers will be ashamed and the diviners disgraced. They will cover their faces because there is no answer from God.
Micah 3:7 (NIV)

The Prophets and the Diviners, those who were seeking guidance from God, were humiliated and disgraced. When they reached out to God, there were no visions; only silence; darkness. They had committed terrible sins and had spoken false prophecies and had led the people astray. They spoke of peace, but were preparing battle against those who opposed them. They had betrayed God and his people. They were now being punished by God, punishment that included abandonment, humiliation, and eventually physical destruction. The false Prophets had ignored their Covenant with God.

Though they also had strayed from their religion and were sinful, God did not abandon the people and spoke to them through the True prophet Micah. Micah told them of their crimes and sins and asked that they now pray to God and ask for forgiveness and mercy.

The Old Testament describes in great detail what a Jewish person had to believe and how he or she must live in order to please God. The verse of this devotion is a somber reminder of the consequences for those who don't obey. Those who abandon God for the love of evil.

The New Testament of the Bible guides us, as Christians, through the essentials of our faith and how we should live our daily lives. To know how to respond when we face difficult decisions. To do what Jesus would do. In most cases, it is much easier to profess our faith than it is to live every day as a true Christian. Temptations, greed, selfishness and lack of focus will move us off Christ's path. This scripture emphasizes how important it is not to let that happen. My prayers are for Jesus to give me strength to strive towards becoming more of a true Christian.

PRAYER

Lord, please give me strength and courage to resist temptation and to live as you did. Thank you for prayer, the forgiveness of my sins and your promise of Eternal Life. In Jesus's name. Amen.

Bob Rustad

DAY 11

Herod with his soldiers humiliated him and mocked him. Dressing him in luxurious clothing, they sent him back to Pilate. Luke 23:11

In chapter 23 we find Jesus being presented to Pilate for questioning. Pilate basically shirked his responsibility and sent Jesus back to Herod since Jesus was from his jurisdiction in Galilee. Herod hoped to see some miracles performed and have some questions answered. Herod received no satisfaction and returned Jesus to Pilate after humiliating him by mocking him and dressing him in luxurious clothing. Pilate eventually found Jesus innocent but was swayed to turn him over to the angry crowds.

The subject of humiliation discussed in this chapter is extremely disturbing. Even as Jesus suffered the ultimate humiliation of dying on the cross, he was further humiliated by being spat upon, beaten, and being taunted by words from people full of hate. What drove the people to taunt Jesus? They had no reason to fear him but his claim to be the Messiah was beyond their comprehension.

The beauty in studying some of these dark events in the Bible is we have an opportunity to learn from others' mistakes. We know for sure that Jesus came to earth to restore us so we can have life everlasting.

Humiliation by definition is to shame or embarrass someone. Unfortunately, this produces two losers. Our challenge during this Lenten season is to understand and learn what Jesus did for us and apply those lessons to our daily lives in the hope of eliminating humiliating activities.

David Stanfield

*Lord, Thy deep humiliation
Has atoned for all my pride;
I need fear no condemnation,
Since for sinners Thou hast died.
Thou becam'st a curse, dear Savior,
To restore me to God's favor;
Thousand, thousand thanks to Thee,
Dearest Lord, forever be.*

*Jesus, Source of My Salvation, verse 2
Lyrics by Ernst Christoph Homburg*



DAY 12

Lessons in humiliation and humility were part of New Philly book club's study of Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* a few years ago during Lent. Bells of Joy, our handbell choir, had practiced a somber spiritual to play during Lent, "He Never Said a Mumbalin' Word." We heard in the words of the spiritual an echo of Gaines's character and of Jesus's deep humiliation and of the humility with which Jesus responds.

In Gaine's book, Jefferson, a Black man falsely imprisoned and sentenced to death, spends his last days writing his story, and readers understand that the humiliation he has been given in the circumstance of his sentence and death, he has finally faced with humility and dignity. Jefferson remembered the example of Jesus, who when faced with his death by crucifixion "never said a mumbalin' word."

The words of the spiritual that was played during Lent by the handbell choir echoed these lines:

They crucified my Lord,
and he never said a mumbalin' word;
they crucified my Lord,
and he never said a mumbalin' word.
Not a word, not a word, not a word.

They nailed him to a tree,
and he never said a mumbalin' word;
they nailed him to a tree,
and he never said a mumbalin' word.
Not a word, not a word, not a word.

The words humility and humiliate are both derived from the same root word, humus, meaning earth or ground, as is the word human. Humility and humiliation are not the same. Humiliation is something done to someone, something that takes away dignity and imposes shame, but humility is a person's response to God and to others that is grounded in reality and of understanding of one's self and one's relation to God. It is a reflection and demonstration of the inner person, a person's heart, a grounding in reality. It is not hubris, inflated pride or thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think.

Jesus responded to Pilate and to all the humiliation heaped upon him in his last days before his crucifixion with humility. In the words of the spiritual, "he never said a mumbalin' word."

During Holy Week, the week between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday, we will read together of the humiliation of Jesus, the treatment of Jesus as he was mocked, spat upon, flogged and treated less than human. We will remember that he responded with humility.

DAY 12 continued

From John 19:7-11:

The Jews answered him (Pilate), "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God."

Now when Pilate heard this, he was more afraid than ever. He entered his headquarters again and asked Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. Pilate therefore said to him, "Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you and power to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin."

Later, Pilate sent Jesus to Herod. Herod and his soldiers "mocked him." As part of this humiliation, Jesus was dressed in "splendid clothing" (Luke 23:11). Jesus was "railed at," "scoffed at," and "mocked" (Luke 23:35–37, 39).

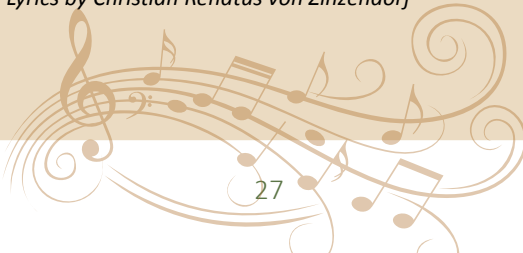
PRAYER

God, we humans can see the lessons of humility and humiliation in your son Jesus's life. Help us to live these lessons humbly. Amen.

Kay Windsor

*Lamb of God, Thou shalt remain forever
Of our songs the only theme;
For Thy boundless love, Thy grade and favor,
We will praise Thy saving Name;
That for our transgressions Thou wast wounded
Shall by us in nobler strains be sounded,
When we, perfected in love,
Once shall join the Church above.*

*My Redeemer, Overwhelmed with Anguish, verse 3
Lyrics by Christian Renatus von Zinzendorf*



DAY 13

When they are diminished and brought low through oppression, trouble, and sorrow, he pours contempt on princes and makes them wander in trackless wastes; but he raises up the needy out of distress, and makes their families like flocks. Psalm 107:39-41

This is a psalm of gratitude for deliverance: God has brought His people back after their exile! The unknown writer creates word pictures to describe the journeys of those returning to Jerusalem. The message, however, is for all people — not just the Israelites — who struggle to reach the city of God.

The Psalm is divided into vignettes that describe particular afflictions or challenges faced by those who had been in exile. Some crossed the desert, suffering hunger and thirst; some were physically ill, or ill through foolish lifestyle choices; some had been imprisoned; others were terrified by storms at sea. In each case, God came to the rescue. Why? Because the people called upon Him for mercy, even in the depths of their sin. “They cried out to the Lord in their trouble,” the psalm tells us. And God answered their cries.

Verse 39 tells us that God will NOT bother to set straight those who continue to disregard His law. It doesn’t matter who they are: If they are intent on making and living by their own rules, He will let them wander along their own destructive paths.

But for those who call upon His name, His power and steadfast love are unbounded. The One who can transform the desert into arable land, can transform our lives as well. He can “set us on high, far from affliction,” and care for us as a shepherd treats a well-tended flock. (Yes, the Lord is our shepherd).

This psalm tells us to call upon the name of the Lord. In the darkest times of despair, call upon the Lord. In unsettled or unhappy family life, call upon the Lord. In relationships that imprison us, call upon the Lord. In experiences and events that humiliate us, call upon the name of the Lord. In our shame, call upon the name of the Lord. He will hear us.

PRAYER

Lord, in my humiliation, distress, unhappiness, and fear, rescue me. Amen

Humiliation Personal Reflections

The Day 11 devotion declares that humiliation has two losers. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

The Day 12 devotion points out that the words humiliate and humility have the same root. What do you think about this? When was the last time you felt humiliated? The last time you behaved with humility?

[illegible]



Suffering

When a jury returns to a courtroom, the accused will quickly look at the faces of those who are pronouncing judgment. Here's the theory: If the jury members have found the individual on trial innocent, they are happy to make eye contact. If, however, they have found the accused guilty, they look away. Why is that? Is it because of the guilt we feel when pronouncing judgment on another, knowing that we, too, have our own sins to account for? Or is it their own sorrow for the one they have condemned, the heinous nature of the crime notwithstanding?

Oddly, that bit of courtroom psychology trivia can be applied to this painting, but in a way contrary to what you might imagine.

Belgian Anthony Van Dyck has made us participants in this event by showing a close-up view of the scene, a technique learned from other artists of Christian devotional work.

This heightens our emotions as we see the expression of the man handing Jesus a reed for a scepter, mocking him as "King of the Jews." The soldier behind him has a different look on his face: curiosity, perhaps? It has been speculated that he is the centurion who will later in the day declare that Jesus surely was the Son of God.

It is Jesus, though, whose face holds our attention and beckons analysis. It is Jesus who cannot look at his mockers. Jesus, hands bound, with eyes downcast, is so filled with compassion for those who torment him, is so filled with grief for the sins of man, that he has to look away. Jesus has found us guilty, and He must look away in His suffering. For the Son of Man, it is unbearable.

DAY 14

And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen and establish you. 1 Peter 5:10

As a teenager I watched my cousin refinish an old chest. The piece had been in the family for years and deserved some much-needed attention. She began the process by thoroughly cleaning the furniture to remove dirt and oils left by years of use. Next, a stripping solution was applied that when gently rubbed and scraped began to take away the old finish bit by bit. Days were spent re-applying more liquid stripper, sanding, wiping down, and sanding again until finally we could see the raw wood. At last the tedious application of the stain rendered the richness of the wood grain. The final step of applying a poly acrylic would protect the wood and insure its longevity. As you can imagine, it took time and perseverance to see this family heirloom brought back to its true character.

As I read the words of 1 Peter 5:10, I thought of how ordinary people can be restored. Even Peter, who failed miserably at times in his life, had a lot to learn along the way. He was known to be impetuous and acted without much forethought before speaking out. At the Last Supper Peter resisted Jesus as He bent to wash his feet, but Jesus told him, "Unless you allow me to wash you, you will have no part in me." Most likely Peter felt that he was not worthy of this act rendered by his Lord.

On another occasion Peter and some fellow disciples failed to stay awake and watch with Jesus the night He spent in the Garden of Gethsemane. And worst of all, Peter denied knowing Jesus three times when His crucifixion drew near. Peter deeply regretted his actions and afterward, he wept bitterly.

But in spite of our human frailties and sinfulness, Jesus knows us well and loves us without end. Jesus made Peter a leader of both Jews and Gentiles and placed him in much authority when he said, "And I tell you, Peter, that on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." In God's time, He strengthened and established Peter so that he could be His faithful servant. He will do the same for us.

PRAYER

Dear God, thank you for the example of Peter's life as well as his shortcomings that show redemption is always possible with You. Amen

Sandra Chitty

DAY 15

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation.

We do not want you to be ignorant, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia, for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. 2 Corinthians 1:3-8

Helen Keller once said, “I cried because I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet.” I’ve heard others make similar statements that often start with the question, “You think you’ve got it bad...?”

The Apostle Paul talks about physical suffering (affliction) and consolation, and he says he doesn’t want his Corinthian brothers and sisters (or us!) to be ignorant about the affliction he experienced in Asia, where he was so “unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself.” Well, unless we go to the book of Acts (in chapter 14) we *will* be ignorant about what happened to Paul and Barnabas there. And we might think that we’ve got it bad!

Paul was arguably the most effective preacher of all times. As a preacher myself, I often look to him as a model. Like all preachers, I have good and not-so-good days in the pulpit. Like Paul, I’ve had the experience of preaching in many places and sometimes in the midst of contexts of division and disagreement. So, beyond the unpleasant responses that preachers might normally encounter (yawns, glances at watches, head nodding (*not* signifying agreement but rather fatigue), and maybe a frown or two) I’ve also had to endure some head *shaking* (in disagreement), vocal protests, and a few walk-outs and post-service verbal confrontations.

But let me tell you about Paul’s experience in Asia. It was in the town of Lystra. It started out well. He healed a man who had been lame since birth! The crowd reacted with shouts of joy! But then they started to worship Paul and Barnabas, thinking that they were gods. So Paul had to preach a sermon to entreat them to give *God* the glory. They were listening to his sermon, but then some folks from Antioch came and stirred up the crowd and they stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city and left him for dead! Some disciples gathered around him and he recovered and the next day, believe it or not, he was preaching again!

DAY 15 continued

Now, I like to imagine having the honor of sitting down with Paul and having a conversation. I would share my “afflictions” with him and comment on what I know of his afflictions (that are *far* worse than mine). But then, I have to think that instead of saying, “You think *you’ve* got it bad?” he would probably say, “You think *I’ve* got it bad? Let me tell you about the one you and I serve — the one about whom we preach. The one who endured affliction that we will never endure. The one who suffered and died for us.”

And then Paul might say, “The good news is that He knows our frame. He knows that we are dust. He became one of us. He emptied himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross. Why is this good news? Because having endured this affliction, He can offer us true consolation. *For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ.*”

Pastor Sam

*They crown your head with thorns, they smite,
they scourge you,
With cruel mockings to the cross they urge you;
They give you gall to drink, they still decry you;
They crucify you.*

*O Dearest Jesus, What Law, verse 2
Lyrics by Johann Heermann*



DAY 16

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.
Isaiah 43:2

God's amazing promise in this verse from Isaiah 43 comes after chapter 42 in which God has punished His people for their disobedience. It is a common theme throughout the Old Testament — God's people rebel and God delivers them. God always comes through for His people despite their failures.

In this life there WILL be trouble — the verse does not say IF you pass through waters or IF you walk through the fire — it says WHEN. As human beings we will all face trials and hardships. Some days the hardships are little inconveniences that annoy us and get in the way of day-to-day living. Sometimes, though, life comes at you like a tidal wave, knocking you off your feet, threatening to overwhelm you with dark, murky waters swirling all around you. Before you realize or can understand what is happening, your life is a raging, destructive fire that threatens to consume you. When my circumstances and personal life make me feel like I am drowning or like I am walking through fire, my only hope is to keep my eyes on Jesus. Rather than focusing on the storms around me, I focus on Jesus and hold on to the promise that He will lead me through anything I am facing.

God's power that was available to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the furnace is promised to all of us! Like Peter stepping out of the boat in response to Jesus, let us keep our eye on Him so we are not overwhelmed by the waters and let us hold on to the promise that he will lead us through anything that we face.

PRAYER

Dear God, thank you for your promise to help us through any circumstance in life that we are facing. Help us to stay close to you and hold on to you so we are not overwhelmed. In Jesus's name, Amen.

Sandra Gray

DAY 17

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn and a time to dance; Ecclesiastes 3:1-4

Whenever I hear this scripture passage I am reminded of a song that was made popular in the sixties by a group called the Byrds. The title was *Turn, Turn, Turn*. It was written by Pete Seeger and it contains the words of these verses. It was written at a time when there was much turmoil in the world and its focus was a call for peace. It is a timely song even for today. Ecclesiastes 3:1-4

The author of this book is also looking for peace and purpose in life. In the first two chapters he questions what purpose there is in working hard or gaining wisdom. It's all a "striving after the wind." In the end, we're all going to die! He is truly suffering from hopelessness and mental anguish!

In chapter three, the author declares that there is a season or time for many actions and emotions that are part of our human life on Earth. We know about seasons in North Carolina. They are fairly distinct and we all have a favorite one. But for each of those seasons, there are pros and cons. I don't particularly like winter, but for those who ski it's wonderful! It's terribly hot now in summer but I can grow a bounty of vegetables in my garden and that makes me happy.

There are also seasons in our lives. Some are happy, some chaotic. Some bring heartache and others bring sheer joy! Some seasons make us want to dance and others bring tears. But the message I hear in this passage is that God is with us through these seasons of our lives. As children of God, we have hope. These verses offer comfort as they point to a negative time followed by a joyous one! That is hope! It's as though God rewards us with a season of happiness after going through a difficult and painful one. We can trust Him in the dark seasons of our lives knowing that He will guide us into brighter joyous ones.

PRAYER

Gracious God, In this season of Lent, guide us to reflect on the goodness you have shown us throughout our lives. Help us to trust in your divine wisdom in difficult times. Amen

Amy Guthrie

DAY 18

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit. Psalm 34:18

The overall theme for Psalm 34 is that God pays attention when we call out to Him, offering escape from or help in times of trouble. Before becoming king, David was in terrible trouble, fleeing Saul who wanted him dead. At one point he turns to the Philistine country of Gath for refuge, only to act insane before the king after being recognized as “future King David.” David wrote Psalm 34 after pulling this insanity trick, praising God for paying attention during his time of distress. But let’s think about this. David didn’t pray for God’s help when he feared for his life in this particular moment. He acted insane before the king. Is this not taking matters into one’s own hands?

Brokenhearted, according to Merriam-Webster, means being overcome by grief or despair. Synonyms of the word include depressed, unhappy, disappointed, and melancholy. How many of us have truly been brokenhearted? Are the words “unhappy” and “disappointed” a fair representation to that feeling of being crushed in spirit? What about “melancholy,” a term used when there seems to be no reason for particular sadness? Melancholia was an actual condition found throughout ancient, medieval and pre-modern medicine used to describe depression, bodily complaints and sometimes delusions. During Biblical times it was custom not to harm the mentally unstable, so David relied on this ploy to escape any wrath from Gath. Was David’s stooping to such a level the moment of being brokenhearted?

Over the past few years I will admit to being brokenhearted. I lost the golden age of my children’s lives to a pandemic. I watched my dad suffer two separate lung cancers. I was shocked by the cancer diagnosis given to my baby brother. I’ve had a few cancer scares myself. I have sat beside my husband during audiology screenings, witnessing him fail to hear sounds, fearing what the new diagnosis of congenital progressive hearing loss means. I have grieved the loss of so many church pew neighbors. It’s probably safe to assume melancholy has been my enemy. There have been moments when I’ve questioned just how low do I need to stoop in my sadness before God will give me a break.

Whether I act insane like David or truly do battle melancholy, neither are situations in which I am taking matters into my own hands. If anything I’d like the matter to be taken out of them. This was what I believe David was doing, and God, recognizing the situation, came to David to save his crushed spirit. Not only did He respond to David’s bizarre behavior by helping him to escape, He subsequently sent others in distress and discontent to help David become king. David’s praising poem of Psalm 34 is written for me, to remind me that God IS near, that God WILL save my crushed spirit. It is in my hands though in having to make the effort to turn to Him.

DAY 18 continued

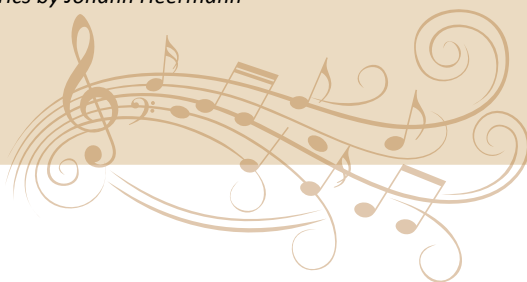
PRAYER

Heavenly Father, just as David praised you for saving the brokenhearted, we thank you for this time of reflection. The Lenten season is meant for us to recognize your nearness and ask for saving. You devoted the life of Jesus for this purpose. May we never take for granted your mercy, protection and comfort. Amen.

Tiffany Henshaw

*O dearest Jesus, what law have you broken
That such sharp sentence should on you be spoken?
Of what great crime have you to make confession,
what dark transgression?*

O Dearest Jesus, What Law
Lyrics by Johann Heermann



DAY 19

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart, I have overcome the world. John 16:33

And another translation:

I have told you all this so that you will have peace of heart and mind. Here on earth, you will have many trials and sorrows; but cheer up, for I have overcome the world.

Physical and mental suffering...it is all a part of the world in which we live. God doesn't promise us a life of pure peace, but he does promise us He will be with us always. In the book of John we realize with this passage that Jesus assures we can have peace with him. Desires determine discipline; if we focus on the word of God our Father, those scripture passages will determine our discipline. Our journey in our faith must always be based on what the Bible says. For example, if we look at our attempts at hobbies or sports, we may often have made more mistakes than successes. Those attempts, though not perfect, show us how to better ourselves. And so it is in life.

There are 100 Bible verses on suffering. One of my favorites is Romans 5:3-5 "Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." I know I have days where I want to say "Dear Lord, my endurance, hope, and character have had enough trials!" And I'm sure Father God answers, "No indeed, you will have more opportunities to practice your faith so you can firmly believe I am with you always." In James 1:2-4 we read "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

I'm sure you've heard the expression "be nice to everyone, because everyone is dealing with something." In our hurt, there are times it would be easy to strike out at others with our anger or frustration. BUT, if we reach out with kindness, caring, and love...as our Father asks us to do...we would spread the joy of our Heavenly Father with others. In all things love...no exceptions!

Years ago, I attended a Beth Moore study at New Philadelphia. When I heard Travis Cottrell sing, the words just enveloped my soul. I heard he was going to sing in Boone, NC, and decided to go. Chuck had been in Washington DC, and he drove straight through to meet me at the church in Boone. It was so crowded, we had to sit on the steps in the balcony. And it was a night I will never forget. When Travis later recorded "This is the Day, the Lord hath made," again he sent my soul soaring with these words:

DAY 19 continued

PRAYER

*Father I am weary, I am pleading for your mercy
And I'm waiting for your answer and I'm struggling with surrender
But I'm trusting through the darkness that surrounds
This is the day the Lord has made, I will rejoice, I will give thanks
And live my life to bring you praise
This is the day the Lord has made.*

*Father through the shadows, I will seek you and I will follow
For your glory, for your kingdom
For redemption, and for freedom
And my weakness through the power of the cross
This is the day the Lord has made, I will rejoice, I will give thanks
And live my life to give you praise.
This is the day the Lord has made.*

*I will carry my cross, and you will carry me
I will carry my cross, and you will carry me.
This is the day the Lord has made, I will rejoice, I will give thanks
And I will live my life to bring you praise
This is the day the Lord has made...
I will rejoice and be glad in it. I will trust you Lord.*

Nancy Hoover

DAY 20

*Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning —
Psalms 30:5 (KJV)*

The second half of this verse was a favorite for Sarah's grandmother. She's been gone for a number of years but her voice lives on in this passage.

I understood her to mean the troubles of today will seem less tomorrow. There is joy in the new day and different perspective on what troubled us yesterday. I got stuck on what to write for this devotion because I kept thinking there are plenty of mornings where joy doesn't come with the first rays of the rising sun. Did Jesus feel joy every morning during his 40 days in the wilderness? This was a solitary journey for him with many tests and temptations.

Perhaps Jesus's 'morning' wasn't as literal as it seems. His morning in the context of this passage could mean his ascension to Heaven, not the literal meaning of the beginning of each day.

The weeping we endure for a night is life's difficulties, sadness, tragedies, loss, and pain. The joy of our morning is the promise of salvation through God's Son. We know what the end looks like so it helps us endure the darkness and continue to fulfill our commission from God on this Earth.

One more point to think about: Joy isn't always something that happens to you. It's a choice as well. The darkness of life's difficulties can be overwhelming at times. Yet the definition of a good day isn't what actually happened TO us in a 24-hour period. It's more about what we CHOOSE to focus on that day that brings us joy and happiness.

PRAYER

May joy find its way to each of our mornings during this Lenten season.
Amen

Bob MacReynolds

Suffering Personal Reflections

Take a look again at the scripture passage for Day 20. Had you ever considered that “weeping may endure for a night” doesn’t mean a literal night, but rather all of life’s difficulties? Does your answer change the way you read this verse and the meaning you take from it?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Suffering takes many forms. Which do you find more debilitating — mental or physical suffering?

[illegible]

Do you know anyone who remains upbeat in spite of physical pain? What coping mechanisms do you think they employ?

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins or other markings on the paper.





Condemnation

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and striking him on the face.

Pilate went out again and said to them, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him." So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" John 19:1-5

It took Anthony Ciseri twenty years to paint this monumental work named Ecce Homo (Here is the Man) seen on the two preceding pages. It captures the moment when Pilate, having had Jesus flogged and humiliated, presents him to the mob below. He grandly gestures and says, "Here is the man!" Pilate hoped that the punishment Jesus had already endured would mollify the crowd. But the cries against Jesus continued. Nothing was going to satisfy them but His death. *"Crucify him! Crucify him!"* they shouted.

Our view is from the middle of things, the same view that one of Pilate's servants might have, making us participants in the scene. We can observe up close, therefore, the only figure whose face we can see from the front. To the right of Pilate is a woman, presumably his wife. The look of distress on her face is explained by the single passage of scripture in the Bible that mentions her:

And as he (Pontius Pilate) was sitting in the place of judgment, his wife sent word to him, saying: Have nothing to do with that innocent man; for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him. Matthew 27:19

The painting presents a conspicuous contrast between Pilate and his prisoner. The garments of the governor are expensive (note the fullness of his robe's fabric). Jesus, too, is in a fine garment, but it's one that was placed on him as a joke, a mockery. Jesus's hands tied behind his back, and the stripes of his flogged back, provide further disparity.

This scene challenges us with questions:

About the Roman governor, who doesn't really want to condemn Jesus to death, but doesn't want to run the political risk of helping him either, we ask, *what or of whom was he afraid?*

His wife is withdrawing from an ugly, anguish-filled scene. *In her sorrow, was there anything more she could have done? Are we as lost as she is?*

"Here is your King," Pilate says to the crowd that responds (like "prostitutes," one writer says) with the declaration "we have no king but Caesar (John 19:15). *Through our sins, what suffering do we cause?*

DAY 21

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Romans 8:3-4

Christ Jesus has been given many names: Savior, Healer, Lord, etc. Ask Google and you will get a list of fifty such names. Not on the list is filter (meaning that which screens unwanted things from a substance to alter its nature). But Paul, the writer of these verses, describes Christ Jesus as being one, in my opinion.

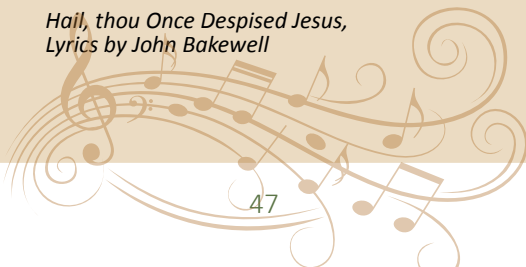
God sent Christ Jesus in the likeness of “sinful flesh and to deal with sin.” Sinful flesh is a lot more than our living being and behavior, but the vast natural desires averse to God: lust, envy, anger, strife, sexual immorality, other gods and the list goes on and on, all being natural spiritual impulses. We are made without a Filter. The Law does nothing to inhibit us, just informs us.

So, how does Christ Jesus accomplish filtering us of our sinful nature? HE, being both God and man, tempted but sinless, lived in the Spirit, accepted our sins, died and ascended to the Father with our sins. Belief and faith in Jesus Christ and our desire to follow Him, infuse us with His Spirit (a powerful wind), to overcome and control desires of the flesh. We are filtered when we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord, Savior and Filter. Thus, as Paul proclaimed in the first verse of Romans 8, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Lacy Bellomy

*Hail, Thou once despised Jesus!
Hail, Thou Galilean King!
Thou didst suffer to release us;
Thou didst free salvation bring.
Hail, Thou agonizing Savior,
Bearer of our sin and shame!
By Thy merits we find favor;
Life is given through Thy Name!*

*Hail, thou Once Despised Jesus,
Lyrics by John Bakewell*



DAY 22

Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. Romans 5:18 NKJV

Romans 5:12-21 is crucial for understanding the good news in the book of Romans. Perhaps it is the most crucial part of the entire letter that Paul penned to the Romans on his third missionary journey. This verse contrasts the stories of two men: Adam who disobeyed God, bringing about condemnation, and Jesus, whose “yes” to God gave us justification.

The Message gives us a clear translation of today's verse:

“Here it is in a nutshell: Just as one person did it wrong and got us in all this trouble with sin and death, another person did it right and got us out of it. But more than just getting us out of trouble, he got us into life! One man said “no” to God and put many people in the wrong; one man said “yes” to God and put many in the right.

Let's simplify... Adam and Eve resided in the Garden of Eden and were given a few responsibilities centered on keeping and expanding the garden. Let's pretend Adam is flying a plane and his job was to take us all to a perfect world. Then Adam sinned, crash landing our plane into the sea, falling short of the intended destination. The ruined plane can't be used to continue the trip. Now how do we get to the perfect world? Yes, I can hear your answer: New transportation! Perhaps there is a new plane at the terminal, with a different pilot, a pilot whose name is Jesus.

Jesus came into the world as one of us, to become the second Man in the verse. He came to rescue us through His blameless life and death, reconciling us to God again. But how do we “get on the Jesus plane”? The first step is to recognize our own sin and believe in Him as our Savior and Redeemer.

Then we ask Him for help and trust Him to lead our journey. We know that His “plane” will never run out of gas. It will carry us safely through the storms of life and it will NEVER fail to complete the journey.

This verse reminds us that we were all on Adam's plane, but his sin brought judgment and condemnation to all men. Our righteous God, through grace, gave us another chance through His Son. He made the free gift of eternal life available to all.

PRAYER

During this Lenten season, it is good to ponder Adam's story and the tree that led to his disobedience. How grateful we are for the story of Jesus whose death on a tree countered Adam's sin. Lord, we are grateful for the cross of Jesus. Amen

Travis Cox

DAY 23

Jesus straightened up and asked her “woman where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

“No one sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.” John 8 10-11

Jesus’s response to the adulterous woman helps us understand judgment, mercy, and God’s perspective on sin. Jesus never says she was not guilty of sin, either morally or legally. Jesus, however, shows us that just because we can do something does not mean it is the best thing to do.

This is an example of forgiveness and grace. Jesus does not claim that the woman is innocent or that her sin was trivial. In fact, Jesus refers to her behavior as sinful. However, He demonstrates that mercy should take precedence over retribution.

As God’s son, Jesus has the moral authority to punish the woman for her sin but chooses forgiveness instead. This highlights a major concept of what it means to be Christian: just because one has the power to do something does not mean it is the best thing to do.

No one can change anything that has happened in the past. All anyone can do is change their behavior from the present forward. This has implications for us as well as for our relationships with others. We often call for retribution against perceived offenses rather than following Jesus’ example of forgiveness. We also need to be willing to forgive ourselves for our sins of the past because we know for certain Jesus will forgive us as we go and sin no more.

PRAYER

Dear Heavenly Father, we pray that you would help us to become more like Jesus by understanding Him, by loving Him, by loving others, by practicing obedience and following Christ’s example as we live our lives. We ask this in your son’s powerful name and for his sake. Amen

Doug & Beth Geringer

DAY 24

But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.
Romans 14:23

Paul has written that for those who are in Christ, some actions are clearly right and other things are clearly wrong. This, however, leaves open the question of practices not clearly right or wrong for all people. For Roman believers, this debate mainly was about the rules and restrictions of the law of Moses. Those in Christ have been freed from following these rules, but doubts lingered. Is it right or wrong now to eat meat that might not be kosher according to the law? Paul divides the church into two groups: One group are those fully convinced that because of God's grace, they are now free in Christ to eat and drink anything. Then there are believers comparatively weak in their faith who do not feel a clear conscience acting against those restrictions.

Paul instructs those who are comparatively strong in their faith to welcome the others and they all should co-exist in the church in unity and peace. Neither group should pass judgment on the other. God has welcomed both groups into his family. Paul lays out the core of the gospel message: salvation by grace alone through faith alone. He addresses the conflicts between law and grace, between Jews and Gentiles and between sin and righteousness.

We found a direct link between this lesson and our Moravian motto:

IN ESSENTIALS UNITY;
IN NONESSENTIALS LIBERTY;
AND IN ALL THINGS, LOVE

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we give praise for your gift of salvation by grace alone!

Sandy & Steve Jones

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound;
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

DAY 25

So they took Haman and they hanged him on the tower until he was dead. It was the same tower that Haman had wanted to kill Mordecai on. After that, the king did not feel so angry. Esther 7:10

At first glance you may be challenged to find inspiration in this verse. What joy can we draw from the hanging of a man, no matter his crimes? However, the context of this verse is crucial. Esther took a profound risk by revealing her Jewish ethnicity, which she had been ordered to keep concealed. Approaching the king out of turn was risky enough, but to tell him she had kept a secret from him — she risked death herself.

There's a message of divine justice and poetic retribution within Haman's demise. Recall Galatians 6:7 "a man will reap what he sows". Haman plotted to take down the king but instead found himself the subject of swift judgment. Esther's bravery revealed Haman's intentions and the king delivered justice.

At the time of her decision though, divine justice was not guaranteed. Esther had no idea what the king's reaction would be. She could hope that he would act with integrity, but who is to say how any of us would react to knowing someone close to us deceived us? Would we be quick to anger, even if that person were delivering a very important message about something threatening us? Could we set aside temporary hurt and feelings of betrayal in order to see the bigger picture?

Esther's bravery and the turning of events were orchestrated by God's unseen hand, guiding circumstances to rescue His people. It serves as a reminder that even in the darkest of times, God is at work, aligning events for the ultimate good of those who trust in Him.

Esther's actions prompt reflection on our own lives. Are we living in a manner that reflects justice, integrity, and courage, even in the face of adversity? Do we trust in God's providence when faced with challenges that seem insurmountable?

Just as Esther took a stand for her people, we are called to stand up for what is right and just, trusting that God will guide our steps and bring about justice in His perfect timing. Additionally, it encourages us to consider the consequences of our actions, reminding us that our choices and behaviors have repercussions that echo beyond ourselves.

PRAYER

Merciful Father, may we always let our actions be guided by what is divine and just. Help us to trust that while the earthly consequences may seem dire, ultimately your providence will determine the outcome. We pray that we will have the courage of Esther when faced with adversity. Amen.

Erin Key

DAY 26

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Romans 8:1

As we examine Jesus' Holy Week journey to the cross and his ascent to heaven, we can stop and study the issue of how the condemnation Jesus faced contributed to His journey. His condemnation by the religious hierarchy and later by His own people, combined to move Him toward His final moments on earth. Through Him, we know how His accepting this condemnation makes it possible for our sins, our condemnation, to be forgiven.

To me, the book of Romans serves as a primer to living the Christian life. In Romans 8:1, Paul references condemnation, especially when considered in the context of the condemnation of Jesus. The verse states, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." This proclamation encapsulates the essence of Christian salvation and reflects the profound impact of Jesus Christ's sacrificial death on the cross.

In the preceding chapters of Romans, Paul makes reference to the human condition marked by sin and the universal need for redemption. The condemnation mentioned refers to the separation from God that humanity faces as a consequence of sin. However, the verse introduces a major shift, proclaiming freedom from condemnation for those who are "in Christ Jesus."

The condemnation of Jesus is closely connected to Christian forgiveness. Jesus, the sinless Son of God, willingly bore the weight of human sin on the cross. His crucifixion was atonement, where he took upon himself the punishment that humanity deserved. As Jesus endured the condemnation of sin on the cross, he simultaneously became the path by which believers could be reconciled with God.

The phrase "in Christ Jesus" is crucial to understanding the depth of this reconciliation. It signifies a profound union between believers and Christ, not merely a superficial association. Through faith in Jesus, individuals become spiritually united with Him, and, as a result, they share in the benefits of His redemptive work. The absence of condemnation, as spelled out in Romans 8:1, is a direct consequence of this union, emphasizing the complete forgiveness and justification that believers receive through their identification with Jesus.

Romans 8:1 serves as a reflective reminder of the freedom and assurance that believers possess through the condemnation of Jesus. The verse encapsulates the heart of the Christian gospel, offering hope and comfort to those who trust in the finished work of Christ. It beckons believers to live in the reality of their union with Jesus, walking in the freedom from condemnation and embracing the transformative power of God's grace.

DAY 26 continued

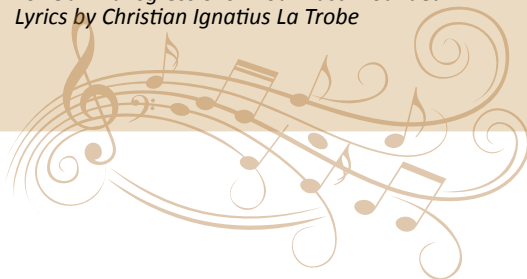
PRAYER

Jesus, may we live in the reality of union with You, walking in the freedom from condemnation and embracing the transformative power of God's grace.

Bob Saturn

*For our transgressions Thou wast wounded,
Our sins, O Lord, on Thee were laid;
Thy sufferings, O what love unbounded
For guilty man the debt have paid!
With humble thanks we now adore Thee;
Thy Cross our glory shall remain;
Yet oft ashamed we weep before Thee,
That we by sin the Lord have slain.*

For Our Transgressions Thou Wast Wounded
Lyrics by Christian Ignatius La Trobe



DAY 27

Now, while we are being judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so we won't be condemned along with the world. 1 Corinthians 11:32

This passage is part of the teaching about the Lord's Supper. Its focus is a clean conscience, the foundation for celebrating this covenant with God and in recognition of Christ's sacrificial death.

Paul addresses an incident within the Corinthian Church when members of the congregation gathered for a fellowship meal as well as the Lord's Supper. The occasion turned less than Godly when people became drunk and ill-mannered toward each other. Those behaviors become a metaphor for our own impure hearts when we come to the Lord's Table.

Coming to the Table means that we are in fellowship with the Lord, and that fellowship is broken if we hold on to unconfessed sin. How can we honor the sacrifice of Jesus, whose blood takes away our sins, if we hold on to a grudge against someone else? How can our hearts be humble if a small seed of hatred is nursed rather than acknowledged before God? Knowing that Christ himself set aside our sin, how can we, then, come to His Table without taking an honest look at ourselves to find the places of compromise in our lives? To do anything else dishonors God.

Fortunately, our Father judges our behavior and us. Yes, that's right: He does! He gives us Fatherly discipline to correct our failures and to save us from the condemnation that comes when we are duplicitous, unloving and harbor ill will toward others.

This discipline comes as part of God's grace. He simply loves us too much to allow unbridled sin.

PRAYER

May we accept your discipline, Lord, as a sign of how much you love us. May we seek always to be in fellowship with you by assessing our lives with clarity and honesty, and by recognizing and confessing our sins. May we awaken each morning with a clear conscience. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

Condemnation **Personal Reflections**

One message from the devotion written for Day 23 is this:

He (Jesus) demonstrates that mercy should take precedence over retribution.

Does this statement challenge you?

If yes, in what way(s)?

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

The devotion for Day 27 describes God’s judgment and “Fatherly Discipline.” Have you ever experienced this? What does it feel like?

[illegible]





Forsakenness

Cyrene is in Northern Africa, about 1,100 miles from Jerusalem. This trip of a lifetime for Simon must have taken weeks, even months, and now here he was, soon to celebrate the Passover.

He was on his way into Jerusalem when he saw a commotion up ahead. He must have wondered what was occurring? And then he saw the stumbling, beaten man carrying the crossbeam of a cross.

He had heard about crucifixions, a method of deterring rebels and troublemakers. But he had never expected to witness one, or worse yet, be brought into the fray. Why was the soldier gesturing to him, singling him out of the crowd? Oh, the One stumbling to His death was faltering under the weight of the beam. Someone had to help Him carry it.

Simon must have been scared to death, wondering whether his own life might be in danger. But the Roman soldiers were only one aspect of his fear; Jesus was the other, for He had been flogged and tortured. Simon saw the blood, and knew that touching it would contaminate him; he would be marked unclean, a terrible status for a pious Jew.

The artist, Titian, has shown Simon as well dressed; his conspicuous ring may even imply wealth. And while there is no historical evidence to suggest such a status, it accentuates the contrast between the beaten, burdened Jesus and the man asked to participate in His journey to the cross. It is the contrast between the Son of God.... and us.

Titian has shut out the rest of the world, focusing only on the two solitary figures. And because we know Jesus's story, we have to wonder: Where is everyone else? Where are the disciples? The ones He had traveled and lived with, the ones he had taught and trusted, the ones He had prepared for ministry....the ones He loved. Where were they? Had they abandoned him?

Jesus's expression of utter forsakenness is haunting...the bloody brow, the bloodshot eyes and the single tear on His cheek. Like Simon, we don't expect to be here. And yet He is right in front of us and we've been summoned to join him. Will we touch Him?

DAY 28

Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone. Psalm 71:9

I may not yet be in the age bracket referenced in this verse, but I think I can understand where David is coming from. When you read the previous verses, you see that David is requesting that God deliver him and rescue him, but now asks God not to forsake him or abandon him because he reaches old age.

I recall when my grandmother was in her early nineties, that she often felt lazy for sitting around all day. She couldn't sew anymore--her fingers weren't nimble. She couldn't really read books anymore--her eyesight was poor. She couldn't cook that much for fear of burning things when she forgot them. She comes to my mind when reading this passage. Maybe she felt like she had been cast away. With no ability to continue to do the daily activities she relished, she probably wouldn't feel like she had the strength to do the work of the Lord that He commands of us.

But when I reflect on her life, she was the definition of Godliness. She was a founding member of Gospel Light Baptist Church, a church that now has hundreds of members and reaches so many people. She was retired from Hanes Hosiery and worked for years as a piece-worker, her hands generating family income by the number of items she sewed per day. She helped anyone she could, either financially or by giving sage advice. I feel that God continued to use her even until her dying day, because she was an example of Christ's love for so many.

PRAYER

May we all realize that even when our days are great in number God, You don't forsake us; You simply uses us differently.

Denise Hunt

DAY 29

And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Mark 15:34

What a verse!

Jesus Christ is hanging on a cross, alongside two condemned criminals. Exhausted. Bloody. Hurting. Thirsty. Hungry. Struggling to breathe. Seemingly alone in this horror called crucifixion. At 3 pm, after being on the cross for six incredible hours, he cries loudly to God in heaven and asks *why* he has been forsaken. *Why* he has been abandoned by his heavenly Father. *Why* he has been left alone to endure this unspeakable agony.

Christ has been trampled and shamed through the past few days, and through the preceding hours on the cross.

In this, Christ's darkest hour, he appears to be filled with despair. Has his heavenly Father really given him up? Is he permanently separated from God? Is Christ rejected by God?

I can imagine many things, but being abandoned by God is beyond my comprehension. Forsakenness, betrayal, condemnation, humiliation, suffering. These states all pale when compared to the possibility of God turning his back on me. This separation is truly, truly unimaginable — and would be the worst possible outcome.

Psalm 22 foretells the Messiah's death: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Just as this psalm of David is a prayer that takes him from immense suffering to great joy, Christ's utterings of abandonment and being forsaken are also only temporary. Our Lord assumed the burden of the cross for us. Jesus is not permanently alienated from his Father, as it seems during this dismal 3pm hour. Instead, God is in control; blessedly, He has not forsaken Christ. He has not forsaken us.

PRAYER

Almighty Father, please silence us. Help us to imagine the darkness of the cross, the feelings of abandonment that Jesus endured, and his feelings of helplessness. Thank you that a glorious Easter resurrection is coming!

Mona Ketner

DAY 30

*Persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;
2 Corinthians 4:9*

We all suffer to varying degrees. Sometimes it comes out of nowhere: illness, loss of a job, or death of a loved one. Sometimes we see it coming, but the circumstance that we think is a hill, grows into a mountain. Whatever the case may be, none of us are immune to suffering. When I am feeling particularly alone or broken, I often turn to the Word for some wisdom or perspective.

The passage above, written by the apostle Paul, sheds some light on human suffering and feelings of forsakenness. It describes the persecution he and the other apostles endured as they spread the gospel of Jesus. Paul suffered so much more than I could ever imagine! He was imprisoned, beaten, and even stoned, but he persevered.

So, what helped Paul through these tough times? I believe it was his perspective.

Paul had a practical perspective. As many of us recall, Paul was a known persecutor of the early disciples of Christ. It wasn't until he was blinded on the road to Damascus that he converted and became one of the most prolific Christian evangelists that the world has ever known. This change from persecutor to persecuted gives Paul a unique perspective. He knew what suffering would come to him as a disciple of Christ, yet he became one anyway. He trusted the Lord to deliver him from his suffering, just as He did for the disciples that came before. Though we know our lives will include suffering, our faith allows us to continue without fear of being destroyed.

Paul had a spiritual perspective. He understood the fragility of physical life and the non-physical strength found through the Almighty. He says, *We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves (2 Corinthians 4:7)*. Though our physical lives are weak and easily broken like the clay jars of scripture, we can never be destroyed because we carry within us power from God.

Paul had a sacrificial perspective. He realized that human suffering reflects the suffering, death and, consequently, the life and resurrection of Jesus. He writes, *Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies (2 Corinthians 4:10)*. This verse tells us that suffering is a component of joy. The brutal sacrifice of Jesus was essential to give us the most gracious gift of eternal life. How wonderful it is that even in our suffering we still live like Jesus and shine the light of His most excellent love!

Paul also had the great gift of eternal perspective. He knew that his path would lead him to physical death but eternal spiritual life. Though he was physically persecuted and struck down, inwardly he was resurrected every day. No matter the woes of his daily life, the glory of eternity outweighed and outlasted any material suffering. Paul writes, *That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are*

DAY 30 continued

being renewed every day. For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). Though our troubles may seem great, we learn that they are only temporary. They pale in comparison to the joy that awaits us for an eternity in heaven.

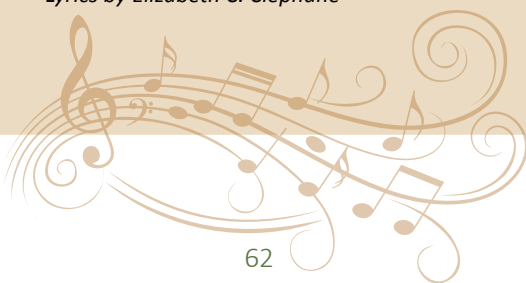
PRAYER

Our merciful Father, let us live with the perspective that Paul has shown us. Guide us to learn from our pasts, find our strength in You, rejoice in Your sacrifice, and always remember the eternal joy that is to come. Help us to remember that we are never alone because You are with us and that by Your power we can never be destroyed. Amen.

Tamara & Craig LaMontagne

*Upon the Cross of Jesus
Mine eye by faith can see
The very dying form of One
Who suffered there for me;
And from my smitten heart with tears
Two wonders I confess,
The wonders of His glorious love
And my own worthlessness.*

*Beneath the Cross of Jesus, verse 2
Lyrics by Elizabeth C. Clephane*



DAY 31

I have not made trouble for Israel,” Elijah replied. “But you and your father’s family have. You have abandoned the Lord’s commands and have followed the Baals.” 1 Kings 18:18

This scripture is about so much more than a simple allegation of forsaking God and His commands. As always, understanding comes with context.

King Ahab is governing Israel during a time of drought brought on by the prayers of Elijah, the prophet. The chapter opens with God instructing Elijah to present himself to Ahab, a new directive since Elijah has been in hiding from the ruthless and vindictive king (whose wife is the bad and beautiful Jezebel). Elijah sets out to follow God’s command.

Meanwhile, back at the palace, Ahab and his servant Obadiah embark on journeys in opposite directions to find fresh grass for the suffering horses and mules. Obadiah and Elijah accidentally meet, and Elijah asks him to return to Ahab and say, “Elijah is here.” A meeting between the King and the Prophet does, indeed, occur, with Ahab addressing Elijah as “you troubler of Israel.” And that brings us to today’s scripture, which is Elijah’s response.

The chapter continues with a classic “good vs. evil” confrontation: The prophet Elijah representing the Lord, God of Israel vs. the 450 prophets of Baal, the god of fertility and rain. The victor would be the one whose god kindled a fire under bulls that each had slaughtered.

The ensuing drama involves a cult frenzy of behavior including self-mutilation, a miraculous fire from heaven, and Baal’s prophets being taken hostage (and subsequently killed). If you’re thinking that Hollywood should tackle this spectacle, it did: The movie, from 1953, was *Sins of Jezebel*, starring Paulette Goddard.

What we’re to learn from this story is more complicated than the big screen can offer, however. Yes, Elijah’s victory can be attributed to the power of God and being God’s man in Israel, but it’s not the end of the story. A reading of the entirety of 1 Kings shows that Elijah and King Ahab meet again and again, and Elijah continues to encounter evil throughout his life. There are tough conversations with God, as Elijah feels repeatedly tested. But it is his steadfastness, his never failing to call upon the name of the Lord that makes him a great prophet and provides us with our lesson.

Persistence in reading the Word and daily prayer build us up. They ground us, help us discern truth and prepare us for challenges and uncertainties of this life. They are signs that **we** have not forsaken God; likewise, while He will test us, He will not leave us.

PRAYER

Like Elijah, may we say each day: “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant...”

Clyde Manning

DAY 32

*For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with deep compassion I will bring you back.
In a surge of anger
I hid my face from you for a moment,
but with everlasting kindness
I will have compassion on you,”
says the Lord your Redeemer. (Isaiah 54:7-8, NIV)*

Isaiah's 66 chapters are divided into the story of God's judgment toward the people of Israel's wrongdoing and the hope we can all receive despite the suffering, injustice, selfishness, horror, and pain we inflict upon others and receive as affliction ourselves.

Isaiah 54 is part of the forthtelling of hope, of our learning to transform pain to compassion rather than transmit it again and again. We want to believe that God is with us always, in everything, through everything, and here is God speaking through Isaiah to his people, saying "For a brief moment I abandoned you. . ." (How Jesus must have felt abandoned for a moment as he cried out through suffering, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? ")

Yet Isaiah 54:8 reminds us that God promises everlasting kindness and compassion to those who might have felt abandoned for a brief moment (and for the Israelites, that moment might have been some 70 years long). Jesus's resurrection, the transformation to an eternal life, fulfills that hope for us that we will not be forsaken in our pain, that we will be shown compassion and mercy.

Lent is that liminal time, that threshold between the joy of celebrating the birth of a Savior, Jesus's incarnation as God with us and the sometimes dark movement through a life often fraught with pain and distress and terrible injustice and finally, death. But the lengthening of light through these dark 40 days journey leads us to the resurrection, the transformation of that pain to hope and compassion. Even if we feel abandoned by God for a "brief moment," God is still with us.

It's too easy sometimes to hide from great pain, cover it up, deny it, or lash out at others because of our own suffering. If our response to pain is to deny that it's there or pass it vengefully to others, then perhaps we will not be able to see that pain transformed to hope, but instead become stuck in inflicting the pain over and over to others. That seems to be part of what Isaiah is saying in Chapters 53, 54, and 55: that if we do not transform our pain and suffering, we will just continue to transmit it to others.

Like energy circuits, maybe some of us are relay stations, allowing energy (pain) to pass through us instead of being transformers that actually alter the electrical charge (pain) that passes through us.

DAY 32 continued

Years ago, just a few months after the death of my teenage daughter, I found myself entering a small musty church building on an uninhabited island off the coast of North Carolina. With a group of teachers, I was studying interconnectedness in a seminar called “Island People, Island Culture.” The church with its gothic windows closed for years since the last inhabitants left the island, was a little musty and damp. Maybe we were just tired from the hours’ hike on the island, but we sat in the pews quietly as if ready for a worship service. Then one of us sat at the old piano and began to play, the notes hesitant at first, even tinny. Someone began to sing “I’ll fly away/To a home on God’s celestial shore,” and the notes rang out across the marsh as others joined the singing. I stepped outside, not wanting to show the emotions and grief I felt hearing that old sweet song. A younger teacher followed me, probably wanting to be of comfort. But she started the conversation with “You must feel God has abandoned you in this pain.” I did not feel abandoned, I told her. In fact, I did feel God had abandoned me for a moment, but I had felt God’s presence with me for all these days as I walked through the pain of Elizabeth’s death. I didn’t know I was quoting Isaiah in that moment, and I didn’t know I understood God’s presence until the younger woman asked me and I spoke it.

I used to pray the Old Testament blessing/benediction with my children (Numbers 6:24-26) as they were learning “pearls” for Sunday School memory work: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.”

PRAYER

May we be aware that God lifts up his countenance on us. May God never hide his face but look at us, see us, see our pain and distress and give us peace -- and hope. Amen.

Kay Windsor

Forsakenness Personal Reflections

What is the closest you've ever come to feeling completely abandoned? For how long did you feel that way? Did the feeling leave you, or did you make a decision to "move past it?"

[illegible]

In the Day 30 devotion, there is description of the various “perspectives” Paul developed or used. Can any of these be applied to your life?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



Forgiveness

Is there a story more familiar? A more compelling example of unconditional love? No. We hold this up as the supreme example of forgiveness. Yet forgiveness, like this painting, is complex. Often, it's about much more than a simple "I'm sorry."

Complexity is certainly true in the story of the Prodigal Son. Though he was sorry for his boorishness at asking for an advance on his inheritance; though he blew through that inheritance with wasteful and riotous living; though he degraded himself and his upbringing by becoming a swineherd, the son now had the gall to come crawling back, as if "I'm sorry" could erase unforgivable behavior. (Does this have a familiar ring?)

This was Rembrandt's last work before his death. Disappointing relationships with his own sons enabled him to give us a message of ultimate "homecoming" and of mercy. It is a solemn painting, quiet, and dignified. The stillness of the scene gives the characters a lasting quality that is unbounded by time. Art historian H. W. Janson writes that the artist has painted a "moment stretching into eternity. So pervasive is the mood of tender silence that the viewer feels a kinship with this group."

Though there are six figures in front of the arched doorway, lighting guides our focus to just three: The father, the prodigal himself, and the older brother.

First, on the right, study the older son, the son who stayed home and helped his father run the estate. He is the "good" son who did the right thing. The scriptures tell us that he was furious at the reception given his younger brother and we, justifiably, ask, *Why shouldn't he be?* Rembrandt hasn't shown us the drama in that part of the story, however; we see this son emotionless, simply observing the scene.

The prodigal son is repellent: His ragged clothing, broken sandals, and shaved head give him the appearance of an outcast. And that's how he feels; indeed, he is on his knees in contrition, his head bowed in humility.

But the father, overcome with emotion, lovingly places his hands on the shoulders of his son in warm acceptance. It is in those hands that direct us to a closer examination. They are different: The left larger and more masculine; the right more feminine. What meaning do we draw from this? Perhaps that the welcome for the repentant sinner is sure, without doubt. The welcome for the sinner shows mercy and gentleness.

Read this story, found in Luke 15:11-32. Look at the painting again.

What do you see?

DAY 33

There, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievance you may have with one and another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Colossians 3:12-13

The church in Colosse was one of several established by the ministry of the Apostle Paul, not directly by Paul, but by a convert of Paul's preaching elsewhere. Paul learned of teaching in the church that diminished the sufficiency of Christ; adding erroneous behavior and beliefs. He wrote to reassure the church and other churches in nearby cities that the things creating conflict were absurd, that Christ and Christ alone should be the focus of their worship and fellowship.

Paul reminds the church who they are in Christ, contrary to thoughts and practices averse to Christ, he offers these words to encourage them how to behave toward one and another.

Reflecting on these scriptures, we too should be vigilant to guard our hearts and minds from worldly diversions and temptations and be of a like mind in our relationship to be forgiving and loving each other.

PRAYER

In Christ alone, my hope is found
He is my light, my strength, my song
This Cornerstone, this solid ground
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm
What heights of love, what depths of peace
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease
My Comforter, my All in All
Here in the love of Christ I stand

Lacy Bellomy

In Christ Alone (My Hope Is Found) lyrics © New Spring Publishing Inc.
Songwriters: Donald A. Koch / Andrew Shawn Craig

DAY 34

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions. Matthew 6:12

My assigned scripture is Matthew 6:12, an important part of our familiar Lord's prayer. The verses that revealed themselves to me as if for the first time were verses 14 and 15. In verse 12, we ask God to forgive our sins as we forgive others' sins. In verses 14 and 15, however, we learn that if we don't forgive others, we are not forgiven either. Now that is a challenge!

My oldest brother died entirely too young in 2005, at age 52. He left a beautiful daughter and son who were in their 20s at the time. Although my niece lives in Arizona and my nephew lives in New York state, I try to keep in touch with them, learn how their children are doing, and remember them on their birthdays and at Christmas.

On Memorial Day weekend in 2022, another of my brothers organized a reunion of my siblings (there were six of us, originally) and our offspring at my brother's home on a lake in Tennessee. He did not want to invite my nephew who lives in New York due to an incident that occurred years ago. I deeply regretted this decision but had to abide by it because my brother was hosting at his home.

I am closer to my niece and nephew than my other siblings are, so when my nephew learned that he was not invited to the reunion, he sent me a text that was quite dark and vicious.

I did not have to forgive my nephew for his words because I knew they came from a place of pain and sadness, and a feeling of unfairness. Still, it drove a wedge in my relationship with him, and he vowed to break ties with his dad's side of the family. Just before this Christmas, I decided to apologize for my role in hurting him. I did so by enclosing a heartfelt letter in his Christmas card. I immediately felt a sense of relief just writing the letter and trying to make amends.

Imagine my joy when I received the kindest text I have had from my nephew in a very long time. He said, "I really appreciate that you still reach out." He even spoke of us getting together sometime soon. My nephew's forgiveness felt like rain washing over me. I know it was mixed with God's promised forgiveness as well.

DAY 34 continued

Many of us, like myself, learned the beautiful Lord's prayer as children. It is amazing how this seemingly simple prayer can be illuminated with new meaning throughout our lives. Is there someone from whom you need to ask forgiveness, or you need to forgive? It can be a hard thing to do and easy to postpone; however, the forgiveness you receive in return is worth seeking right now.

PRAYER

Father, help me to say I am sorry promptly when I am wrong, to forgive others readily, and receive the forgiveness you so freely give through your loving son, Jesus Christ.

Beth Byrd

*Jesus, Source of my salvation,
Conqueror both of death and hell,
Thou Who didst, as my Oblation,
Feel what I deserved to feel,
Through Thy sufferings, death, and merit,
I eternal life inherit;
Thousand, thousand thanks to Thee,
Dearest Lord, for ever be.*

*Jesus, Source of My Salvation
Lyrics by Ernst Christoph Homburg*



DAY 35

Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: let him return to the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. Isaiah 55:7

Isaiah, one of the most well-known prophets, predicted the coming of the Messiah, who would redeem people from their sins. He asked us to invite God into our hearts and lives and to follow God's laws and precepts; he advised that when we follow God's words He will fulfill His promise of much blessings and eternal life. However, this redemption is not just for the righteous but also the unrighteous because the Lord God is a merciful and gracious God. He rains down blessings on both the righteous and the unrighteous. In life, tragedy, unexpected loss and grave diseases may visit even the good, yet many who are wicked will seem to prosper or thrive. Humanly, this makes it a challenge to forgive those who seem undeserving of forgiveness but at all times and especially during the Lenten season, we must remember the Lord Jesus Christ gave his life so that all may be forgiven of our sins.

Most people will ask, who deserves to be forgiven or pardoned? Manmade laws are not justly applied, unlike the Lord God's grace and mercy, which apply to all. We do not have to be well connected or be on the right side to ultimately be forgiven or pardoned of our sinful deeds. We must praise the Lord that his redemptive power is given freely and not based on who you are or know. Forgiveness is not earned because our God put a priceless value on our souls and grace is freely awarded. Now is the time to open your hearts and lives to the Word and repent because salvation is yours and grace and mercy are freely given to both the just and unjust who repent. Romans 6:14 (NIV) "For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace".

As we read in Acts 13:38 "Therefore my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you."

Isaiah's answer is that is death delivers the righteous from terrors of judgment that will strike. This may not apply directly today, but Isaiah's words are comforting, in that death is a gift of God's grace, and those who die having faith in the Lord do enter in peace. As we reflect on the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross, we should always remember that he died for forgiveness of our sins and everlasting life.

PRAYER

Dear Lord, search my heart. Reveal to me any remaining sins where I have attempted to forgive apart from You. I pray You would cover these sins in Your healing grace, and through Your strength, empower me to forgive others as wholly and completely as You first forgave me. In Jesus' Name, Amen

Evon & Carol Crooks

DAY 36

And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.” Mark 11:25-26

The saddest thing about betrayal is that it never comes from your enemies; it comes from those you trust the most.

Betrayal is an act of deliberate disloyalty, a violation or destruction of a person's trust or confidence, and there are many examples. Divulging a secret, cheating on a romantic partner, and delivering someone to an enemy force are just a few of them.

If you have ever been betrayed, you probably asked why. Why do people betray? To gain power? To gain money or attention? To avoid consequences? To protect themselves from harm? Regardless of the reason, the one who betrays is a traitor who says or promises one thing; but does another.

Judas betrayed Jesus. It was deliberate, it was disloyal, and it violated the trust between Jesus and his disciples. Unlike our own experiences with betrayal, Jesus knew it was coming. In Mark 14:18 Jesus said, “Surely, I say to you, one of you who eats with Me will betray Me.” And Judas knew he had betrayed Jesus. Matthew 27:4 records him saying, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.”

Judas' betrayal of Jesus was the ultimate act of treason and led to his crucifixion and death on the cross. Yet Jesus forgave his betrayer, and He forgives us.

The scripture for today's devotion is Mark 11:25-26. And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

Just a few weeks ago we celebrated Christmas and exchanged gifts. Have you ever given or received a gift that came with hidden strings or expectations? That Kitchen Aid mixer for mom came with the expectation that she would bake delicious cakes, and that car detailing kit for dad means we should expect to ride around in a sparkling clean car.

DAY 36 continued

Our Father gave us the gift of salvation through His son Jesus and forgave us of our sins. That gift also came with strings and expectations - that we forgive others as the Father has forgiven us.

PRAYER

Pardon, Lord, and are there those, who my debtors are, or foes? I, who by forgiveness live, here their trespasses forgive. Much forgiven, may I learn, love for hatred to return; then my heart assured shall be, you, my God, have pardoned me.

Nancy Leonard

*Lamb of God, Thou shalt remain forever
Of our songs the only theme;
For Thy boundless love, Thy grace and favor,
We will praise Thy saving Name;
That for our transgressions Thou wast wounded
Shall by us in nobler strains be sounded,
When we, perfected in love,
Once shall join the Church above.*

*My Redeemer, Overwhelmed with Anguish, verse 3
Lyrics by Christian Renatus von Zinzendorf*



DAY 37

*“Come now, let us settle the matter,” says the Lord.
“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.
If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land;
but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.”
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken. Isaiah 1:18-20 (NIV)*

Some years ago, a Presbyterian who had retired to Boone from Raleigh told a story about leaving one of the prominent Raleigh churches behind a man whose name we would recognize if it were stated. The preacher, who was greeting the worshipers as they left, was informed by this unnamed person that he had not appreciated a sermon on the text “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) because he had never sinned.

Well. God is telling his people, through Isaiah, that they are to “Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong.” (Isaiah 1:16) If wrong is not recognized as such, how does one stop doing it. Is that what is happening to too many people around us? My favorite succinct instruction is:

Micah 6:8 (New International Version)
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[a] with your God.

Others prefer The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) that we have just heard as I am this writing near Epiphany. During Christmastide we also hear about John the Baptist and his crying in the wilderness to “Repent!”, an instruction not followed by too many.

John’s admonition is following on this passage from Isaiah that is a conditional, an “if statement”. If the condition is met, the next instruction will be active. However, in the event the condition is not met, other circumstances will prevail. “...but if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.” (v. 20) is a condition that can be avoided. There are two choices. I much prefer “...you will eat the good things of the land” (v.19), which is conditioned on our being “willing and obedient” (v.19). I want to follow John the Baptist’s instruction and remove those things from my life that separate me from God, a definition of sin. I know that I am a sinner who needs to repent daily and ask God to show me how to act out being “willing and obedient”, not for any greedy purpose but because I am thankful for the saving grace of His son Jesus Christ.

PRAYER

Lord, may we never misunderstand our place in your Creation. We are sinners who must show your light to the world that has too many who do not recognize their state of separation from you.

Mary Ruth McRae

DAY 38

“...I [Jesus] say, Love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way you will be acting as true sons of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust too. If you love only those who love you, what good is that? Even scoundrels do that much. If you are friendly only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even the heathen do that.” (Life Application Bible) Matthew 5:44-47

Imagine...

You have been betrayed and deserted by your (supposedly) loyal friends;
You have been convicted of a crime you did not commit;
You have been stripped, mocked, jeered, spit on, beaten, tortured;
You have been nailed through your wrists and feet to a cross to die.

Imagine...

You show love by forgiving and praying for all those who have: betrayed, deserted, convicted, stripped, mocked, jeered, spit on, beaten, tortured and nailed you to a cross to die. This depth of love and ability to forgive is hard to comprehend, and yet, that is what Jesus did. (“Father, forgive these people,” Jesus said, “for they don’t know what they are doing.” Luke 23:34).

Jesus has not only told us how we should treat our enemies, he has **shown us** how to do this through his actions on the cross. We may not know what Jesus was “feeling” towards the Sanhedrin or Judas or Caiaphas or Pilot or Peter or the Roman soldiers or the mob who yelled “Crucify him”. (I have to wonder if even Jesus, in all his holiness, could LIKE these people as the crucifixion scene unfolded. He certainly would not have liked their actions and choices.). BUT...regardless of his “feelings”, he chose to show LOVE. Even as he hung on the cross, dying an unimaginable death, he chose to love his enemies. His choice to act in love is exemplified through his words and actions...his prayer of forgiveness for his enemies.

Now...

Imagine following Jesus’ example.

Certainly some “wrongs” may not be too hard for us to forgive, but sometimes life’s experiences, encounters and situations are just too much!

How can we love and pray for and forgive if:

A friend has let us down or betrayed our confidence. We, or a loved one, have been physically harmed by someone’s criminal actions. A colleague has spread false and unkind rumors about us. A neighbor is unreasonable and just too hard to get along with. A church member has spoken harshly to us. Someone has stolen all our life’s savings.

DAY 38 continued

The list of unfair, unjust, unkind life experiences could go on and on. The point is no one is exempt from these experiences and we all have to deal with them throughout our lives. How can we in our “humanness” love and pray for the people (enemies) who have done these mean and hurtful things to us? The choice to love and pray for our enemies goes against our human nature. Most likely most of us do not “feel” too much love and kindness towards those who hurt us. And yet, through Matthew 5: 44-47 (and other scriptures), Jesus instructs us to love and pray for our enemies. This is not a suggestion from Jesus. This is a command. Consequently, loving and praying for our enemies has nothing to do with how we “feel” but rather has everything to do with our obedience to Jesus.

In order to follow Jesus’ command to love and pray for our enemies, we must have a change of heart, a “heart transplant”, if you will. Of course, we cannot accomplish this type of transplant on our own. Such true and lasting transformation of heart can only be done by the grace of God, through the power of the Holy Spirit. So, when we begin to make Christ-like choices, even when we don’t “feel” like it, our “transplant” begins and our heart can begin to change. C.S. Lewis once wrote, “ Do not waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor; **act** (emphasis added) as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him.”

PRAYER

Dear Heavenly Father, Especially during this Lenten season, please help us to keep our eyes on the Cross and our heart in your Hands. We cannot follow your commands to love and pray for our enemies without your Spirit in our heart. Help us to act in accordance with your word, even when we don’t feel like it, so the world will know that we are children of our Father in heaven. Amen

Marie Rodden

DAY 39

Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.
Luke 23:34

Let's begin by stepping into the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus suffered emotionally and mentally. In this garden, He asked His Father to remove this cup from Him. His approaching death and terrible agony caused Him great dread. Only His Father's will would make Him go through with it—His total obedience to His Father. His agony was so intense that an angel from heaven appeared to strengthen Him. Anguish so intense that an angel (a created being, a ministering spirit) came to strengthen our Jesus because His human nature was in turmoil. Anguish so heavy that His sweat was like blood. In Matthew 26:38 Jesus says, "My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death." I don't know about you, but I have suffered from anxiety. It is a horrible thing, but I've never had so much anxiety that I sweat blood — not even when I suffered a great personal loss. Take a minute and think of the intensity of Jesus's emotions.

Now let's consider His physical abuse. After Pilate granted the Jewish leaders' demands, he had Jesus flogged and handed him over for crucifixion. The Law of Moses (Deut. 25:3) limited a flogging to 39 times, but Pilate had a reputation of being more cruel than other governments. We don't know how many times Jesus was beaten, but Isaiah 52:14 says it was beyond recognition — beyond human semblance. A crown of thorns was placed on his head. Think about how much a wee thorn in a finger or foot hurts. I'm guessing by how cruel His abusers were that they didn't place it gently on His head. The crown was meant to humiliate him. Isaiah 50:6 tells us that His beard was also plucked from his cheeks. Another insult because the beard was regarded as a mark of honor.

Jesus was betrayed, mocked, humiliated, and tortured. He was hung on a cross between two criminals. By this point, His body was so torn, and He had lost so much blood that speaking was almost impossible from lack of breath. And yet, His only thought was for humanity and a place for us in paradise with Him. In His last moments, He asked His Father to forgive those who had done this to Him. Ellicott's commentary describes it best: "Again the silence is broken, not by the cry of anguish, but by words of tenderest pity and intercession." Tenderest pity — pity for his abusers, pity for the criminals beside him, and pity for us. He interceded on our behalf. He is the bridge for our salvation. No greater love than this.

DAY 39 continued

PRAYER

As I hear the Savior call for daily dying
I will bow beneath the weight of Calvary
Let my hands surrender to His piercing purpose
That holds me to the cross but sets me free
I will glory in the power of the cross
The things I thought were gain I count as loss
And with His suffering I identify
And by His resurrection power I am alive
For I am crucified with Christ and yet I live

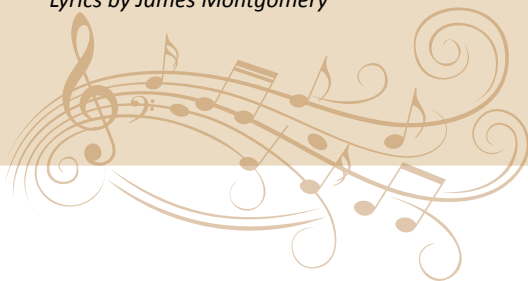
This is our prayer. Amen

Susan Stockwell

(Excerpt from Crucified With Christ by Phillips, Craig, and Dean)

*Follow to the judgment-hall,
View the Lord of life arraigned;
O the wormwood and the gall!
O the pangs His soul sustained!
Shun not suffering, shame or loss;
Learn of Him to bear the Cross.*

*Go to Dark Gethsemane, verse 2
Lyrics by James Montgomery*



DAY 40

Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God has forgiven you because you belong to Christ. Ephesians 4:32 (Living Bible)

The scripture in Ephesians 4:32 instructs us to be kind, tenderhearted and to forgive each other. Being kind and tenderhearted can be easy, but often forgiveness is a bit more difficult. It can be especially hard when the person in need of forgiveness doesn't know he/she did anything that needs forgiving. Each of us is so absorbed in our own worlds that we often do not notice how our words or actions affect others.

It was somewhat surprising to me that God treats all three actions — kindness, tenderness and forgiveness — equally. It would seem that one is not greater than another. In searching how often these words in Ephesians appear in the Bible, kind or kindness is mentioned approximately 400 times, tenderhearted or compassion is mentioned approximately 145 times, and forgiveness is mentioned approximately 128 times, depending on the translation. The important message is to be kind, tender and forgiving in all situations, not just when we feel like it. Christ's perfect example throughout his life was to be kind, tenderhearted and forgiving.

My father was an excellent example of sharing kindness, tenderheartedness/compassion and forgiveness. If I told him that someone was unkind to me or to others, he would always respond "Well Janet, kill them with kindness." My dad taught me a great deal by his example of living according to Ephesians 4:32.

Henri Nouwen inspires me daily with his thoughts, like the one he wrote about forgiveness from August 30, 2023.

"Forgiveness is the name of love practiced among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly. We need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour, increasingly. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family."

No one is capable of loving with such perfection as our Savior. Christ's example of forgiveness on the cross is the greatest example of perfect forgiveness. Even in his darkest hour he asks the Father to forgive mankind. Christ's act of selfless love and compassion is a powerful reminder to forgive.

Nouwen writes: *"But God's forgiveness is unconditional, it comes from a heart that does not demand anything of itself, a heart that is completely empty of self-seeking."*

I am so grateful to Christ for his unconditional forgiveness. When I let go of resentments or an unforgiving spirit, I can then open my heart and let Christ be the center of my life, guiding me to be more like him.

DAY 40 continued

Ephesians 5:1-2 in The Message translation continues Christ's teachings with these words:

"Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that."

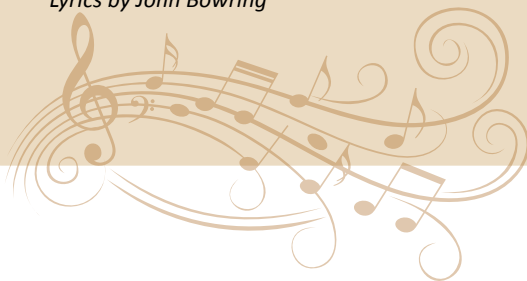
PRAYER

Forgiving and loving Christ, may it be so. Amen

Janet Williams

*When the woes of life o'ertake me,
Hope deceive and fears annoy,
Never shall the Cross forsake me;
Lo! It glows with peace and joy.*

*In the Cross of Christ I Glory, Verse 2
Lyrics by John Bowring*



Forgiveness **Personal Reflections**

In the Day 34 devotion, we read that being forgiven “felt like rain washing over me.” Have you ever felt something like that?

Which is more difficult: Forgiving a trespass, or accepting forgiveness yourself? Why?





Conversion

Look up the word “convert” in a dictionary. It is likely that at the top of the preferred meanings is a focus on changing personal beliefs or persuading someone else to change theirs in a religious context.

But keep reading. Eventually, you’ll find a definition that reads more like this:

The process of changing or causing something to change from one form to another.

While that definition might sound like a description of a chemical process, it could also describe the most important aspect of the conversion of St. Paul.

You’ll remember that Paul, persecutor of Christians, was on his way to Damascus to root out Jewish Christians, men and women who practiced the “Way.” He planned to round them up and bring them back, bound, to Jerusalem.

As he approached the city, a light flashed around him and as he fell to the ground, he heard a voice asking, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul asked, “Who are you Lord?” and then heard a surprising answer: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

Fast-forward finds Saul, blinded from his encounter, staying at the home of Judas of Tarsus. After three days of not eating or drinking, a disciple named Ananias visits and lays hands on him. The “scales” fall from Paul’s eyes and his sight is restored. So, is it that miracle that makes Paul a convert?

The painting on the two previous pages, “The Conversion of St. Paul” by Barolome Esteban Murillo, does, indeed, show the moment of Paul’s encounter with Jesus. Paul is shown falling from a horse, the theory being that he must have been riding to Damascus since it was 135 miles from Jerusalem. But a return to our second definition of convert – the one about changing forms – might give us a broader concept of conversion.

Look at what happened after those scales fell from Paul’s eyes:

1. He was baptized
2. He intentionally spent time with disciples
3. He began proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues
4. His powerful preaching began to amaze people

Doesn’t it sound like Saul was undergoing a process of changing from one form to another? Certainly we’re inspired by the part of his story that happened after the Damascus road: The power of the Holy Spirit began to work in the life of this new convert (noun), turning him into a new man who now could sow seeds of conversion for others.

We don’t hear too many stories of dramatic conversions like Paul’s. For sure there are people who know the day and hour when they were “saved” or the date on which they made a profession of faith. For many others, though, their “conversion story” is one of building faith, day-by-day, bit-by-bit. No thunderbolts, no visions. Just a steady walk with God. That’s also the Holy Spirit at work, and that is a good conversion story, too.

DAY 41

*...and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.
John 8:32*

Each day you and I wake up in a world driven by news reports offered by whichever media outlet we watch, read or listen to, and those reports unfailingly label another's reports as fake news, untrue or at the worst, outright lies. No doubt there is a lot at stake, a lot depends on what we believe to be true.

If, indeed, we believe what John 8:32 says, it is recognizing the truth when we hear, see or read it that has the power to make us free, and free, for Americans, is a word loaded with importance. So how do we know when a news anchor, politician or editorialist offers us some proposition, that they are saying or writing is the truth?

Most often, verse 32 of John is quoted entirely by itself. In reality it is the second half of an If/Then proposition. In John 8:31 Jesus says, "**IF** you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. In verse 32 he goes on to say, "**THEN** you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

We would do well to look at the life of the journalist, news anchor or politician, friend or neighbor offering us a proposition they want us to believe is true to see how their life holds to the teachings of Jesus, who claimed and who we claim to be the way, the truth and the life. (John 14:6) Beyond that, if you act on a particular proposed truth, do you feel that your life is holding to Jesus' teachings?

PRAYER

Lord, give us the discernment of your Spirit as we search for and allow ourselves to be converted by **Truth** in these days.

Michael Crane

DAY 42

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple. Psalm 19:7 (NRSV)

As a pre-teen in the early 2000s, I was a part of the early fandom of American Idol. When homework was completed on Tuesday and Wednesday nights, I commandeered the TV to witness the vocal riffs and runs, the Simon Cowell zingers, and Ryan Seacrest's dramatic cliffhangers about who would be eliminated, "after the break". Inspired to be the next Kelly Clarkson, I begged my mother to allow me to take voice lessons. When I started my lessons, I was shocked that my voice teacher made me practice using hymns and classic standard tunes rather than the latest top-40 hit on the radio. I was particularly crestfallen when my first assigned recital piece was the Shaker hymn, Simple Gifts. It was not the belty-Christina Aguilera hit I was hoping for. While I did not appreciate it then, twenty years later this song remains with me. I find myself singing it quietly in moments when life is complicated, and I am overwhelmed. In a way, it has become a personal prayer.

In the New Revised Standard Version of the assigned verse, we are told the Law of the Lord is perfect and it "revives" the soul. The actual word used in the ancient Hebrew is "shuv" which comes from the Hebrew word "teshuvah", which means to turn or return. So, perhaps a better reading of this phrase is "the law of the Lord is perfect, reorienting the soul." This law of the Lord is a gift because it helps us to turn towards God.

In the darkness of Lent, it is easy to feel encumbered by the preparations (both spiritual and literal) for Holy Week. There are moments when the preponderance of my questions and doubts feels like an indictment of a failed relationship with God rather than an indicator of a wonderful, curious faith. What I am receiving from this beautiful Psalm is a message that I am well-equipped to live a life oriented towards God. Despite feelings of scarcity, I actually do have what I need; and I suspect that you do, too. A life of faith is complicated, but loving God can be very simple.

PRAYER

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight
When true simplicity is gained,
To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,
To turn, turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning we come 'round right. AMEN.

Emily Farnell

DAY 43

After they came to believe Philip, who preached the good news about God's kingdom and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. Acts 8:12

For me the exciting part of this passage is learning how the early church began, the conversion of hosts of people, which eventually became the Christian Church. But to make meaning of the above verse, let me begin earlier ...

The Book of Acts is Volume 2 for Luke with Volume 1 being Jesus' life on earth and Volume 2 being how His life translated to the people then — the Acts of Jesus. The Book of Acts begins with the teachings and preachings of Jesus to the Jews in Jerusalem and the growth of the conversions among the local Jews. These new believers were vocal which caused a stir among the non-believing Jewish leaders. One such outspoken critic of the leadership was Stephen who so enraged them that he was stoned to death. One of those who was active in the stoning was Saul who would later meet Jesus and change his beliefs. However, until that happened, he was active in harassing the believers, going from house to house to gather them and put them in prison.

The frightened believers took to the roads and left Jerusalem for nearby countries, particularly Judea and Samaria — and they took their “good news” with them. There was a centuries old dispute between Samaria and Jerusalem, but the people of Samaria were still Jews. Philip was one of the first to take the teachings to Samaria and as we see in the verse above, the people of this city believed him and were converted — in droves, apparently.

Acts 8 continues in that vein with Philip easily converting the Ethiopian eunuch after explaining an Isaiah passage to him. Philip “proclaimed the good news” to him so well that the Ethiopian man asked to stop along the side of the road to be baptized.

Eventually the believers went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching mainly to scattered Jews. But non-Jews heard the words as well and were taken in by hearing the “good news” that the believers taught and preached. By the time they were in Antioch, much of the teaching was to Gentiles. The large city of Antioch became the city where the first church was established and it was of this group that the term Christian was first applied. It was truly a multi-ethnic international Christian church. Where in the traditional Jewish faith the temple was the core of their religious life, this new church became a new covenant family and the temple resided in each believer.

PRAYER

God, we thank you for these early warriors of your faith, their commitment to their beliefs, and efforts to take your teachings to all the world. We pray for the Church today as the challenges grow stronger. May we all respond according to your will. Amen

Nancy Holland

DAY 44

*P*eter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Acts 2:38 (NRSV)

In Acts 2, we are offered a dramatic story of the Holy Spirit coming down upon Jesus’ Disciples and endowing them with a wondrous gift of speech in other languages. The ruckus of the Spirit drew the locals out into the street and the crowd was bewildered that this group of rag-tag Galileans suddenly could speak their language. Peter delivers a sermon based on the Prophet Joel and extends what many of us who grew up quasi-Baptist would understand as an altar call. In response to what they had seen and heard, the believers in the crowd asked, “What do we do now?” Peter lays out a straightforward formula: repent, be baptized, be forgiven, and receive the gifts of the Spirit. This formula is the antecedent to sacramental traditions that Christians around the world still practice today.

When considering the theme of conversion during this Lenten season, I think it is wise to unpack the word repent (or repentance). In colloquial English, we often reduce this word to merely “being sorry” or admitting a wrongdoing. However, the Greek word used for “repent” in this verse is *metanoia*. *Meta*, means “change” and *noia* means “mind”. Repentance is far more than a verb. It is not just something we do; it is a state of being. We find it when we discern where we are in relation to where Christ hopes for us to be.

While there is an element of personal will and choice involved with taking on a posture of repentance, I think we are short-changing the Holy Spirit if we say this is just about us, mere mortals, doing the work to find enlightenment. We are not changing our minds; By the Spirit, we are changed by grace. And *metanoia* is not a one-time event: because sin draws us away from God, we are constantly called to come back to the dream that God has for each of us. Settling into *metanoia* is not easy and there is not a quick way to get there. It requires study, prayer, and reflection; it requires engaging with people we do not like or understand; it requires vulnerability — is there any better time to do this than Lent?

Thousands of years ago, the Holy Spirit moved and when believers asked, “How should we respond”, Peter told the crowd of believers the first thing to do was “have your mind changed”. The good news is that the same Holy Spirit that showed up at Pentecost is still among us today calling you to that place where your being is most aligned with the God that loves you and wants you to flourish.

PRAYER

Spirit of God, I confess that my sin has drawn me away from where You dream for me to be. Give me the courage and hope to discern Your will so that all that I do is pleasing to You. Change my mind, O God, so that my heart for Your creation will be expanded.

Emily Farnell

DAY 45

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13

“These are dangerous times.” How often have you heard that statement or one similar to it? I believe it’s true. In my 69 years of life, I cannot recall a time when I felt so unsure of entities about which I previously had no question — the U.S. Postal Service, elections, news, either from television or in print, or the efficacy of medicines. Far from being more connected with my friends through the Internet, I don’t answer calls from numbers I don’t recognize and I probably send more mail to trash unopened than read. The list goes on. Please note, I’m not some old geezer crackpot sitting in a dark room wearing a tin foil hat. I’m well educated and read and travel broadly. I am generally curious and seek to understand what I don’t know. I know I’m not unhinged, but I sure feel unmoored. So what’s going on here?

Romans 15:13 helps define the problem and suggests a remedy. When I read this passage three times (a practice of mine during morning prayer), and then reread my first paragraph, it becomes clear that the proper question isn’t, “What’s going on here?,” what I should be asking is, “In whom do I trust?” When I do that, I’m chastened by what I’ve written. I’m a Believer who loves her faith and I know the answer to that question. ***I trust in the Triune God.*** That very sentence is the lifeline that brings me back to port. When I reflect on the sheer power of God to calm angry waters, this beautiful passage, so often given as a benediction, can be prayerfully rewritten as an attestation of confidence.

PRAYER

By the power of the Holy Spirit, I overflow with hope because I trust in God, and the fruit of that trust is joy and peace. Thanks be to God.

Now I am ready to face the day.

Trudy Tudor

DAY 46

.....Living with a Purpose made for you and me.....

But rise and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in which I will appear unto thee; Acts 26:16-18

In this passage Paul is telling about his amazing conversion on that road to Damascus so many years ago. You can still hear his joy and wonder all these many years later. I marvel at his zeal and his excitement. Any conversion is incredible as it radically changes a life, putting you on a new path. Conversion gives purpose beyond our own human vision and dreams. As Christians, we now have a purpose that was birthed in the mind and heart of God and then delivered to earth in the life of his Son. Along with Paul, we now share in the heaven-birthed purpose.

Many of us have wondered at our existence. Why are we here? What is the meaning of my life? But beyond the questions about the meaning of our own life exists the question, *how do I make a worthwhile contribution to this world in my time and in my generation? Is there a larger purpose behind my actions and my way of thinking that will make a difference?*

Good news, Christian! Jesus has come into your life and mine for a purpose, and to give you a life purpose. Simply put, our conversion gives us a behind the scenes look — a peek behind the curtain into the Heavens and the eternal. We now can see one of our new purposes in life is to help others out of this world into that New World built and prepared by Jesus for all those who by faith, like Paul, have a Damascus experience of meeting Jesus. It will be different for each of us yet the same in many ways.

The catechisms tell us man's purpose is to KNOW AND LOVE GOD. 1 Peter 2:9 states that we are chosen to DECLARE THE PRAISES OF THE ONE WHO BROUGHT US INTO THE LIGHT. And Eph 2:10 says we are called TO GOOD WORKS. Whatever our individual ways of fulfilling our purpose may be, they will compliment those universal purposes.

Joan of Arc as she was tied to the stake and the fires were raging around her proclaimed that all of us live for something, though most with little purpose or intent. One life is all we have to live. What will you burn for?

Helen Leabee

DAY 47 EASTER SUNDAY

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. (KJV)

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (NRSV)

When writing a devotional, I begin by researching the Bible verse and its context in the book where it appears. My understanding is Paul wrote at least four letters to the Church in Corinth with two of these letters appearing in the New Testament.

- Paul's first letter is referenced in 1 Corinthians 5:9.
- His second letter, 1 Corinthians in the New Testament, addresses various issues that had arisen in the Christian community since Paul had left.
- The third letter is sometimes called the "Severe Letter" or "Letter of Tears." This now lost letter addresses issues that were tearing the church apart. Primarily the arrival of false apostles who were assaulting Paul's character, causing strife among the believers, and teaching false doctrine. This letter is referenced in 2 Corinthians 2:3-4 and 7:8.
- His fourth letter, 2 Corinthians, begins with Paul trying to reconcile with the Corinthian Church. He defends his actions, his apostleship, and expresses his love for them. Paul challenges the church for not raising and sending a gift of support to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. This is not as much about the money, but giving evidence that the Gospel has transformed the church.

After Paul had started the Church in Corinth and left, many had rejected Paul's teaching and returned to the life they once lived. Using 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul is reminding them a new life awaits them through God's salvation. Jesus's death on the cross and resurrection is evidence of God's love and new way of life. When they accept Jesus, they become a new creation and the old person is left behind. They are no longer controlled by their sinful ways, but by the Holy Spirit.

The same transformation Paul offered to the Corinthians is available to us. This transformation is not easy and God knows it. That is why God has given the gift of the Holy Spirit to help us become the new creation in Christ and not return to our old ways. We cannot make this transformation on our own. Changing our behavior is not easy or natural for us. It will not happen overnight. That is why it is important to read the Bible and spend time with Jesus daily. It might not seem like much is happening at first, but day-by-day and bit-by-bit we are being transformed into a new creation in Christ.

Sometimes one translation may speak to me more than others. In this case, I looked at the King James and New Revised Standard Versions. While the King James Version

DAY 47 continued

is known for its poetic nature and imagery, the word “creation” instead of “creature” draws me to the New Revised Standard Version. To me, the word “creation” better reflects the process of bringing something new into existence. This does not mean this will be a smooth process free of setbacks, but the goal of “...everything old has passed away, everything has become new” will be achieved.

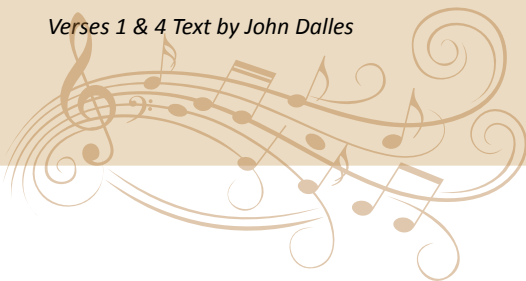
PRAYER

Lord, day-by-day and bit-by-bit, may the time we spend with you produce the transformation we desire — a new creation in Christ! Amen

Smitty Welborn

*God renew us by your Spirit!
Come in gladness, hearts console!
Grant us joy so we may share it!
O! restore us; make us whole!
God refresh your whole creation!
Timeless is salvation's role!
Grant us boundless celebration!
God, restore us; make us whole!
God Renew Us by Your Spirit!*

Verses 1 & 4 Text by John Dalles



Conversion **Personal Reflections**

On Day 42 we read, *A life of faith is complicated, but loving God can be very simple.* What does that mean? How do you react to that statement?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Conversion **Personal Reflections**

In what ways has your faith story been one of turning from “one form to another?”

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Closing Words from Pastor Sam

*Lord, who throughout these forty days
for us did fast and pray,
teach us with you to mourn our sins,
and close by you to stay.*

We began the season of Lent by singing those words, and over the past 40 days we have tried to stay close to Jesus. We have walked with Jesus through betrayal, condemnation, humiliation, physical and mental suffering, forsakenness and abandonment, forgiveness and conversion. And maybe more importantly, throughout this season Jesus has walked with us — He has “abided” with us. We asked Him to do that when we sang the fourth verse of that hymn:

*And through these days of penitence,
and through your Passiontide,
for evermore, in life and death,
O Lord! with us abide.*

Throughout the agony that we focused on through art and prayer and reflection, we couldn’t help but realize that we already knew the end of the story. We looked ahead to that ending when we sang, on the first Sunday in Lent, the last verse of that hymn:

*Abide with us, that through this life
of doubts and hope and pain,
an Easter of unending joy
we may at last attain!*

And now, here we are! We have attained this “Easter of unending joy!” But we had to walk with Jesus (and Jesus had to walk with us) throughout those 40 days of doubts and hope and pain in order to fully appreciate the unending joy that we have in Jesus on Easter Sunday.

Every year on Easter Sunday, I have the honor of beginning our worship service by proclaiming, “The Lord is risen!” And the congregation responds by affirming, “The Lord is risen indeed!” And then I say these words: “Sing this aloud, proclaim it to the ends of the earth.” In other words, “Use your creative God-given gifts to spread the word and share this Easter joy!” And you respond by saying, “The Lord has set his people free!” And having walked with Jesus on the long road to freedom, our joy in Jesus is even greater.

A joyous Easter season to all of you!

Art attributions



Cover: *Entry into Jerusalem*
Lippi Memmo, 14th century; Collegiate Church of San Gimignano, Italy



The Institution of the Eucharist during the Last Supper Peter Paul Rubens, c. 1632-32; Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, Italy

Stories Expressing:

Betrayal | Humiliation | Suffering | Condemnation
Forsakenness | Forgiveness | Conversion



BETRAYAL: *The Betrayal of Christ (Kiss of Judas)* Giotto di Bondone, c. 1305; Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy



HUMILIATION: *Jesus en casa de Anas* Jose de Madrazo, c. 1803; Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, Spain



SUFFERING: *The Mocking of Christ*
Anthony van Dyck, c. 1628-30;
Princeton University Art Museum,
Princeton, NJ



FORGIVENESS: *Return of the Prodigal Son*
Rembrandt Van Rijn, c. 1661-69; Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia



CONDEMNATION: *Ecce Homo* Antonio Ciseri, c. 1871-91;
Gallery of Modern Art of the Pitti Palace, Florence, Italy



FORSAKENNESS: *Christ Carrying the Cross* Tiziano Vecellio (Titian), c. 1565; Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, Spain



CONVERSION: *The Conversion of St. Paul* Bartolome Esteban Murillo, c. 1675-82; Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, Spain

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