

LENTEN DEVOTIONAL GUIDE 2019



BAYLOR
TRUETT SEMINARY

As we follow along on the journey with Jesus to the cross, the season of Lent engages our hearts and minds so that we are truly ready to celebrate once we arrive at Resurrection Sunday. Lent is a time of contemplation, a time of dedication, and a time of preparation. In our tradition, we have sometimes been tempted to gloss over Lent and Holy Week in a rush to get to Easter, but it is in the journey of contrition and repentance that the true splendor of Christ's triumph over sin and death is magnified. To fully realize the beauty and hope of the Risen One who loves us so deeply, we must also know the disorientation of the darkness.

Students of Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary have written the Lenten devotionals from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday. On Sundays, we have included only the Scripture passage for the purpose of meditation and contemplation.

Our hope and prayer in compiling and sharing these reflections is that they might encourage you and enhance and deepen your experience of the Lenten journey this year. Please read the Scripture for each day and then read the reflection, followed by the prayer, closing thought, or challenge offered by the author.

May you be blessed and inspired by these words.

In Christ,

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**This year's Lenten Devotional Guide uses The Voice translation for the Scripture included at the beginning of each devotional.*

ASH WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6

MATTHEW 6:1-6

Jesus: But when you do these righteous acts, do not do them in front of spectators. Don't do them where you can be seen, let alone lauded, by others. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. When you give to the poor, do not boast about it, announcing your donations with blaring trumpets as the play actors do. Do not brazenly give your charity in the synagogues and on the streets; indeed, do not give at all if you are giving because you want to be praised by your neighbors. Those people who give in order to reap praise have already received their reward. When you give to the needy, do it in secret—even your left hand should not know what your right hand is doing. Then your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.

Likewise, when you pray, do not be as hypocrites who love to pray loudly at synagogue or on street corners—their concern is to be seen by men. They have already earned their reward. When you pray, go into a private room, close the door, and pray unseen to your Father who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.

MADISON HARNER:

It can seem a bit strange to start our Lenten journey off with these words from Jesus, as we walk out bearing the sign of the cross on our foreheads with ashes. That is until we realize it isn't the act itself Jesus is warning us about; it's the motivation behind the act.

I'm reminded of the prophet Amos speaking to the Israelites in Amos 5. He tells them that God despises their religious festivals and that, even though they are bringing forth burnt offerings, God will not accept them. God, no doubt in the Levitical code and Deuteronomy, laid out correct worship for the Israelites. They were given instruction on how to submit to God through ritual sacrifices and burnt offerings, but we see time and time again where this act was defiled. Their "rite" worship was not correct worship.

Jesus doesn't say "if you give alms" or "if you pray," for it is assumed that we are doing these things, but that whenever we give alms and pray, that we do it with and for the right reasons. God cares less about the act, and more about the heart and posture in which we come to worship. Our worship is a reflection on our relationship with God. When we are living in unjust worship, we present ourselves living unjust lives and in wrong relationship with God.

I don't know how many of you have iPhones, and I haven't checked to see if the Androids have a version of this, but with the new Apple update you can now see how much Screen Time you use. And not only the Screen Time, but you can also see how many notifications you get, from which app, and then a break-down of how much time spent in each category. Social media is a problem. I spend far too much time on it than I am willing to admit, and if social media hasn't become an idol and epidemic in our society, I don't know what has. I'd like to say it isn't sin. But is it proper worship to spend hours of my day looking at my phone before I spend just a few minutes of my morning and evening in prayer?

One way we can keep our motivation in line is to work on our relationship with God the way Jesus demonstrates for us. Multiple times Jesus went off and prayed by himself, staying connected with Abba, before and after he ministered to others. As we strive to worship God with all that we have, let us put forth our best to give, serve, and pray with the motivation to bring Light to the world around us.

Spend some time today intentionally putting away any distractions, whether it be your phone, people around you, chores... and pray with the One who delights in you—not because of anything you did or will do, but because you are a Beloved Child of God, who desires to know you intimately.

THURSDAY, MARCH 7

ACTS 7:3-34

God gave him this command: “Leave your country. Leave your family and your inheritance. Move into unknown territory, where I will show you a new homeland.” First, he left Chaldea in southern Mesopotamia and settled in Haran until his father died. Then God led him still farther from his original home—until he settled here, in our land. But at that point, God still hadn’t given him any of this land as his permanent possession—not even the footprint under his sandal actually belonged to him yet. But God did give Abraham a promise—a promise that yes, someday, the entire land would indeed belong to him and his descendants. Of course, this promise was all the more amazing because at that moment, Abraham had no descendants at all.

God said that Abraham’s descendants would first live in a foreign country as resident aliens, as refugees, for 400 years. During this time, they would be enslaved and treated horribly. But that would not be the end of the story. God promised, “I will judge the nation that enslaves them,” and “I will bring them to this mountain to serve Me.” God gave him the covenant ritual of circumcision as a sign of His sacred promise. When Abraham fathered his son, Isaac, he performed this ritual of circumcision on the eighth day. Then Isaac fathered Jacob, and Jacob fathered the twelve patriarchs.

The patriarchs were jealous of their brother Joseph, so they sold him as a slave into Egypt. Even so, God was with him; and time after time, God rescued Joseph from whatever trials befell him. God gave Joseph the favor and wisdom to overcome each adversity and eventually to win the confidence and respect of his captors, including Pharaoh, the king of Egypt himself. So Pharaoh entrusted his whole nation and his whole household to Joseph’s stewardship. Some time later, a terrible famine spread through the entire region—from Canaan down to Egypt—and everyone suffered greatly. Our ancestors, living here in the region of Canaan, could find nothing to eat. Jacob heard that Egypt had stores of grain; so he sent our forefathers, his sons, to procure food there. Later, when they returned to Egypt a second time, Joseph revealed his true identity to them. He also told Pharaoh his family story.

Joseph then invited his father Jacob and all his clan to come and live with him in Egypt. So Jacob came, along with 75 extended family members. After their deaths, their remains were brought back to this land so they could be buried in the same tomb where Abraham had buried Sarah (he had purchased the tomb for a certain amount of silver from the family of Hamor in the town of Shechem).

Still God’s promise to Abraham had not yet been fulfilled, but the time for that fulfillment was drawing very near. In the meantime, our ancestors living in Egypt rapidly multiplied. Eventually a new king came to power—one who had not known Joseph when he was the most powerful man in Egypt. This new leader feared the growing population of our ancestors and manipulated them for his own benefit, eventually seeking to control their population by forcing them to abandon their infants so they would die. Into this horrible situation our ancestor Moses was born, and he was a beautiful child in God’s eyes. He was raised for three months in his father’s home, and then he was abandoned as the brutal regime required. However, Pharaoh’s daughter found, adopted, and raised him as her own son. So Moses learned the culture and wisdom of the Egyptians and became a powerful man—both as an intellectual and as a leader. When he reached the age of 40, his heart drew him to visit his kinfolk, our ancestors, the Israelites. During his visit, he saw one of our people being wronged, and he took sides with our people by killing an Egyptian. He thought his kinfolk would recognize him as their God-given liberator, but they didn’t realize who he was and what he represented.

The next day Moses was walking among the Israelites again when he observed a fight—but this time, it was between two Israelites. He intervened and tried to reconcile the men. “You two are brothers,” he said. “Why do you attack each other?” But the aggressor pushed Moses away and responded with contempt: “Who made you our prince and judge? Are you going to slay me and hide my body as you did with the Egyptian yesterday?” Realizing this murder had not gone unnoticed, he quickly escaped Egypt and lived as a refugee in the land of Midian. He married there and had two sons.

Forty more years passed. One day while Moses was in the desert near Mount Sinai, a heavenly messenger appeared to him in the flames of a burning bush. The phenomenon intrigued Moses; and as he approached for a closer look, he heard a voice—the voice of the Lord: “I am the God of your own fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” This terrified Moses—he began to tremble and looked away in fear. The voice continued: “Take off your sandals and stand barefoot on the ground in My presence, for this ground is holy ground. I have avidly watched how My people are being mistreated by the Egyptians. I have heard their groaning at the treatment of their oppressors. I am descending personally to rescue them. So get up. I’m sending you to Egypt.” »

MARCH 7, cont'd.

MICHELLE SHACKELFORD:

Today's passage comes to us nestled in a broader story, the familiar narrative of Stephen's wrongful accusations and gruesome murder. In our portion of the story, Stephen speaks before his accusers of the larger narrative of God's work in the world, particularly that which is found in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. He briefly recounts the lives of Abraham, Joseph, and Moses, and he points to God's faithfulness in the lives of each man.

Abraham, we are reminded, was called by God to leave his homeland and travel to an unknown place, where he would not receive any land for himself, but God would give it as an inheritance to his descendants. Oh, and his wife was barren. And then, those descendants that God promised to bring to him would be enslaved in an unknown territory (a.k.a., exile), but that would not be the end of the story. God would then give to Abraham a son named Isaac, and through Isaac we were given the covenant of circumcision.

Then, a few generations down the line, Joseph appeared on the scene, a beloved son of his father Jacob (son of Isaac). Stephen's narration of the story glides over the struggle of jealousy among Joseph and his brothers, highlighting the fact that Joseph's brothers, the ones who sold him into slavery, are the patriarchs of our faith. He also notes that Jacob moved to Egypt, where he died, and the bodies of the entire family were laid to rest in the sacred space called Shechem.

Following the favor Joseph found with the king of Egypt, a new king rose to power who did not know Joseph and who dealt a hard hand to the Israelites in the land. Enter Moses, who was raised as a child of the king (the same king who ordered all the Israelite babies in the land to be brutally murdered—a genocide, to be sure), though when he later encountered an Israelite being mistreated by an Egyptian, his true colors showed forth as he murdered the Egyptian man. Though Moses considered his life completely over, he met God in the form of a burning bush, and God reminded him that the place where he was standing is sacred ground, where shoes do not belong. God called Moses through this experience to rescue the Israelites from the power of the king in whose palace Moses had been raised.

Phew! This is not even the entirety of Stephen's pre-death sermon! Though there is more to Stephen's monologue, we focus our attention today on the stories he tells of these three men, where I find a common thread being woven throughout each man's experience.

Each of these men faced some pretty unlikely circumstances. Abraham had no sons, and God promised to make of him a great nation. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers and imprisoned before he rose to power and then died in Egypt. Moses was a misfit in the house of the king, a murderer, and a man filled with self-imposed shame.

Though these men faced great barriers in their life journeys, God continually called them out, into an unknown territory, outside of their familiarity and comfort, where God could make of them a great nation and turn each man's life into God's answer to generations of prayer and faith.

Often we pray for God to intervene in certain situations in our world and in our daily lives. While the Spirit of God often comes in response to such prayers, sometimes God calls us to the task. It may look like going into the very place of our deepest wounds in order to truly come home to ourselves, to God, and to one another. It may look like Moses's mom, hiding her baby in a waterproofed basket and sending him down the river. It may look like being called to our Egypt, to the "God-forsaken" places in our world where we clearly do not belong, and bringing God's love and hope anyway. Whatever it looks like, sometimes God calls us to be the answer to our own prayers.

What is one way you can be answer to prayer (whether yours or another's) today?

FRIDAY, MARCH 8

ACTS 7:35-42:

Now remember: this was the same Moses who had been rejected by his kinfolk when they said, “Who made you our prince and judge?” This man, rejected by his own people, was the one God had truly sent and commissioned by the heavenly messenger who appeared in the bush, to be their leader and deliverer.

Moses indeed led our ancestors to freedom, and he performed miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness over a period of 40 years. This Moses promised our ancestors, “The Eternal One your God will raise up from among your people a Prophet who will be like me.”[a] This is the same one who led the people to Mount Sinai, where a heavenly messenger spoke to him and our ancestors, and who received the living message of God to give to us.

But our ancestors still resisted. They again pushed Moses away and refused to follow him. In their hearts, they were ready to return to their former slavery in Egypt. While Moses was on the mountain communing with God, they begged Aaron to make idols to lead them. “We have no idea what happened to this fellow, Moses, who brought us from Egypt,”[b] they said. So they made a calf as their new god, and they even sacrificed to it and celebrated an object they had fabricated as if it was their God.

And you remember what God did next: He let them go. He turned from them and let them follow their idolatrous path—worshipping sun, moon, and stars just as their unenlightened neighbors did. The prophet Amos spoke for God about this horrible betrayal:

Did you offer Me sacrifices or give Me offerings during your 40-year wilderness journey, you Israelites?

MEGAN MAXWELL:

For Christmas I got my husband an ancestry DNA testing kit. It was something that he had been talking about for a while, but in all honesty, I did not understand the hype surrounding learning his ancestry. Whenever people ask what country my family comes from or where my maiden name originated, I have no idea. I usually just say Germany, because, well I have blonde hair and blue eyes and I know no one will attest.

However, the more research I started to do on these testing kits, the more intrigued I became with the idea of knowing my family's history. There is something about tracing the health, careers, faith, and movement of those who came before you that gives life more depth.

This is exactly what Stephen does in front of the chief priest. He gives an account of Israel's history to show Israel's consistent patterns of rebellion. However, with this story of rebellion also comes a narrative of mercy that flows from the Lord time and time again.

We are creatures of habit, and if we do not take time to look back at our past and study our history, then we will continue to make the same mistakes. This is why Stephen uses the Old Testament to ground his argument. He knows that these patterns of rebellion seen through God's people will not just cease after the incarnation of Christ.

Stephen tells the story of our ancestors, whom God rescued from Egypt at the Red Sea and in the wilderness (v.36) and who were so quick to forget God's hand in their past. Instead, when Moses took longer than the Israelites wanted to come down from Mt. Sinai, they became impatient and made their own calf, offered it to an idol, and reveled in the works of their hands (v. 41).

How often do we forget God's past accomplishments in our life when we are faced with a current uncertainty? Take some time in silence to remember the ways that God has shown up in your life and came to your rescue. Then, read Acts 7:1-42 and reflect on the times that Stephen speaks about the Old Testament where God continually promised and rescued our ancestors.

SATURDAY, MARCH 9

JOHN 12:27-36

My spirit is low and unsettled. How can I ask the Father to save Me from this hour? This hour is the purpose for which I have come into the world. But what I can say is this: "Father, glorify Your name!"

Suddenly a voice echoed from the heavens.

The Father: I have glorified My name. And again I will bring glory in this hour that will resound throughout time.

The crowd of people surrounding Jesus were confused.

Some in the Crowd: It sounded like thunder.

Others: A heavenly messenger spoke to Him.

Jesus: The voice you hear has not spoken for My benefit, but for yours. Now judgment comes upon this world, and everything will change. The tyrant of this world, Satan, will be thrown out. When I am lifted up from the earth, then all of humanity will be drawn to Me.

These words foreshadowed the nature of His death.

Crowd: The law teaches that the Anointed is the One who will remain without end. How can You say it is essential that the Son of Man be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man You are talking about?

Jesus: Light is among you, but very soon it will flicker out. Walk as you have the light, and then the darkness will not surround you. Those who walk in darkness don't know where they are going. While the light is with you, believe in the light; and you will be reborn as sons and daughters of the light.

After speaking these words, Jesus left the people to go to a place of seclusion.

JONATHAN BALMER:

"...[He] was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead...." —The Apostles Creed

Crisis (κρίσις), that is judgment, and the "ruler of this world" being driven out (Jn. 12:31)—this is what Jesus promises before the hour of his death. And he ties this action with a topic not present in many modern protestant sermons: "The Hallowing of Hell" or Jesus' "descent to the dead."

Martin Luther, in a 1533 sermon at Torgau, preached on this topic. Then, he discouraged speculation on how Christ, in united body and soul, could be in the tomb and taking territory from the Devil in hell (or in the place of the dead) all at the same time. And yet, he urged all to believe, with scripture, that "through Christ, hell has been torn to pieces and the devil's kingdom and power utterly destroyed." Luther did not want us to get hung up on mapping out too literally, "Jesus' trip to hell," as if we could make a travel guide based upon the occasion.

But perhaps we're not in danger of taking this "harrowing of hell" too literally anymore. Maybe, instead, we've failed to see sin as a reigning reality in our world at all—a reality that God does not merely sit idly by observing but responds to in the incarnation and crucifixion.

Do you have a sense that sin is not only an error, a foible, or a misstep, but also a Kingdom that you, me, all of us, are dominated by and subject to? Jesus did not enter into neutral territory. Jesus did not come to a welcoming world. Jesus stormed the shores of the cosmos and shattered the kingdoms of evil. There is not a pebble in the world, in our human existence, Jesus left untroubled.

Dealing honestly with ourselves, there is much in our world which must be troubled. Advertising campaigns engorge our appetites; social media inflames our anger; politics commands our loyalties. Our hopes, dreams, and fears are provoked from without and within us. And they are more often our masters than not. Following your passion and seeking opportunity are central to our concepts of freedom. And, yet, far from being captains of our own destiny, we find ourselves bound by those very desires much more than we are liberated in following them. »

MARCH 9, cont'd.

The resurrection of Jesus does not happen without a descent into the darkest realms of humanity's bondage. To say Christ is King, and Christ is risen, is also to (as an old English baptismal liturgy says), reject Satan and all his empty promises. In our moment of crisis, of judgment, Jesus judges the world, and drives out the Evil One reigning. He is lifted up in entering into the depths of our despair. He willingly goes into every place we are bound by sin, and every place that we make sin a stronghold. Jesus, Prince of Peace, conquers in his death.

Even between Good Friday and Easter, the Son of Man draws us to himself. Even in the day evil seems to have won, we may walk in the Light. For the Light himself descends to every unimaginable depth in which we may find ourselves. And he will not leave us there.

The Lord has Glorified His name. He will do so again.

But that Christ on His cross did rise and fall,
Sin had eternally benighted all.
Yet dare I almost be glad, I do not see
That spectacle of too much weight for me.
Who sees God's face, that is self-life, must die;
What a death were it then to see God die?

—Divine Poems, Good Friday, 1613, Riding Westward
John Donne

SUNDAY, MARCH 10

LUKE 4:1-13

When Jesus returned from the Jordan River, He was full of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit led Him away from the cities and towns and out into the desert.

For 40 days, the Spirit led Him from place to place in the desert, and while there, the devil tempted Jesus. Jesus was fasting, eating nothing during this time, and at the end, He was terribly hungry. At that point, the devil came to Him.

Devil: Since You're the Son of God, You don't need to be hungry. Just tell this stone to transform itself into bread.

Jesus: It is written in the Hebrew Scriptures, "People need more than bread to live."

Then the devil gave Jesus a vision. It was as if He traveled around the world in an instant and saw all the kingdoms of the world at once.

Devil: All these kingdoms, all their glory, I'll give to You. They're mine to give because this whole world has been handed over to me. If You just worship me, then everything You see will all be Yours. All Yours!

Jesus: [Get out of My face, Satan!] The Hebrew Scriptures say, "Worship and serve the Eternal One your God—only Him—and nobody else."

Then the devil led Jesus to Jerusalem, and he transported Jesus to stand upon the pinnacle of the temple.

Devil: Since You're the Son of God, just jump. Just throw Yourself into the air. You keep quoting the Hebrew Scriptures. They themselves say,

He will put His heavenly messengers in charge of You, to keep You safe in every way.

And,

They will hold You up in their hands so that You do not smash Your foot against a stone.

Jesus: Yes, but the Hebrew Scriptures also say, "You will not presume on God; you will not test the Lord, the one True God."

The devil had no more temptations to offer that day, so he left Jesus, preparing to return at some other opportune time.

MONDAY, MARCH 11

1 JOHN 2:1-6

You are my little children, so I am writing these things to help you avoid sin. If, however, any believer does sin, we have a high-powered defense lawyer—Jesus the Anointed, the righteous—arguing on our behalf before the Father. It was through His sacrificial death that our sins were atoned. But He did not stop there—He died for the sins of the whole world.

We know we have joined Him in an intimate relationship because we live out His commands. If someone claims, “I am in an intimate relationship with Him,” but this big talker doesn’t live out His commands, then this individual is a liar and a stranger to the truth. But if someone responds to and obeys His word, then God’s love has truly taken root and filled him. This is how we know we are in an intimate relationship with Him: anyone who says, “I live in intimacy with Him,” should walk the path Jesus walked.

KAREN BECK:

I had a great childhood. While I faced the usual challenges of life, I faced them with my loving parents by my side. They were married, committed to each other, and loved each other. Both were believers, and my family was always active in the church. I can’t remember a time when I didn’t know God. Christian adults were a regular fixture in my life. They loved me, taught me, and lived life with me. I looked up to them, desired to please them, trusted them, and followed their godly examples. Life was good.

But like so many other good things, the innocence of my childhood came to an end. As I grew into a young woman, my rose-colored glasses were removed. The same people who had shaped my understanding and trust of Christ were living lives so far from the lives they had taught me to live. They were unfaithful to their spouses. Many struggled with addiction. Some checked their faith at the door and chose to leave the church. I learned the hard way that my mentors were sinners too and that even the most Christ-like Christians were capable of giving into temptation. This realization broke my heart and shook my faith.

In his first letter, John writes, “Don’t sin. But when you sin, know that you have an advocate.” These commands follow his contrasting description of life lived in the light versus life lived in darkness. Jesus knows that we will sin. But as redeemed and forgiven people, we do not have to live in shame, hiding our sin from others and even from ourselves. If we walk in the light, our sinfulness should be illuminated. We no longer have to hide. Instead, we are to celebrate the forgiveness and freedom that we find in Christ, our heavenly advocate.

Believers may feel that they must live “perfect” lives since they are living examples of Christ to those around them. While there is truth to this dynamic, Scripture calls us to walk as he did. How did he walk? He walked in truth and in light. As we walk in truth, we recognize the fact that we are imperfect people. Our rebellious hearts fail us time and time again. Sinfulness is still a part of our nature. Pretending to be perfect or portraying our lives as such helps no one. Walking in truth allows us to minister to others who struggle in the same ways. As we walk in the light, we find the freedom to admit our mistakes, repent, and try again. We have no secrets to keep or image to maintain. Living in the light gives us the freedom to be who we really are.

But, we must also remember that while Jesus walked in truth and in light, he also lived a sinless life. Scripture clearly teaches that to belong to Christ means to follow his ways (1 John 2:6). This passage begins with John’s desire that the people avoid sinning. Walking as Jesus involves sanctification. As we grow in our faith and understanding, our attitudes and behaviors should change as well. Being honest about our mistakes should never be a license to embrace our fallen nature. Jesus came to set us free from our sinfulness!

Walking in the ways of Jesus reflects the art of balancing two realities about our lives. On the one hand, we are sinners and must live honestly about that fact. Bringing our sin into the light removes its power. Sin is real and present. We must identify it and call it out. At the same time, because we belong to Christ, we should strive to be more like him. Holy living is a part of who we are. We should not apologize for that, but should instead seek to obey his commands and change our hearts to be more like his.

In the Lenten season, may we take time to be with our Lord and let him shine his light on our hearts and minds. As he speaks his truth to us, may we embrace the change needed to live as he lived. May we seek fellowship with others who walk in the light, allowing us to be transparent and honest with one another.

TUESDAY, MARCH 12

2 PETER 2:4-21

For God did not spare the heavenly beings who sinned, but He cast them into the dark pits of hell to be kept until the time of judgment; and He did not spare the ancient world, but He sent a flood swirling over the ungodly (although He did save Noah, God's herald for what is right, with seven other members of his family); and God condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, reducing them to ash as a lesson of what He will do with the ungodly in the days to come (although again He did rescue Lot, a person who did what was right in God's eyes and who was distressed by the immorality and the lawlessness of the society around him. Day after day, the sights and sounds of their lawlessness were like daggers into that good man's soul). If all this happened in the past, it shows clearly the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from their trials and how to hold the wicked in punishment until the day of judgment.

And above all, it shows He will punish those who let the desires of their bodies rule them and who have no respect for authority. People like this are so bold and willful that they aren't even afraid of offending heavenly beings, although the heavenly messengers—in spite of the fact that they have greater strength and power—make no such accusations against these people before the Lord. These people who speak ill of what they do not understand are no different from animals—without sense, operating only on their instincts, born to be captured and killed—and they will be destroyed just like those animals, receiving the penalty for their evil acts. They waste their days in parties and carousing. As they feast with you, these stains and blemishes on your community are feasting on their deceptions. Their eyes are always looking for their next adulterous conquests; their appetites for sin cannot be satisfied. They seduce the unwary soul, and greed is the only lesson they have learned by heart. God's curse lies upon them. They have veered off the right road and gotten lost, following in the steps of Balaam, the son of Beor, the false prophet. Balaam loved the reward he could get by doing evil, but he was rebuked for crossing the line into sin; his own speechless donkey scolded him in a human voice, an amazing miracle that reined in the prophet's insanity.

These people I'm talking about are nothing but dried-up springs, mists driven by fierce winds; the deepest darkness has been set aside for them. They speak in loud voices empty and arrogant. They exploit the desires of the flesh, take advantage of sensual natures, to entangle people who have just escaped from those who live by deception. They claim to offer them freedom, but they themselves are enslaved by corruption because whatever a person gives in to soon becomes his master. Those who have been pulled out of the cesspool of worldly desires through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Anointed One, yet have found themselves mired in it again are worse off than they were before. They would have been better off never knowing the way of righteousness than to have known it and then abandoned the sacred commandment they had previously received and dived back into the muck!

JOSHUA SHARP:

Today's passage overflows with language of damnation, judgment, and destruction. Peter draws on various stories from the Old Testament and Jewish tradition to demonstrate God's wrath against false teachers, who are an ongoing problem for God's people. This is a difficult and somber text, perfectly fitting for a difficult and somber season of the Church year like Lent. False teachers and God's judgment are unpleasant realities, but they are realities nevertheless, and we must address them.

Throughout the Bible, false teachers repeatedly show up to lead God's people astray. As Peter addresses these false teachers, he invokes stories and examples that will sound familiar to those who know their Old Testament: fallen angels, people destroyed in the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, and the prophet Balaam. Each example illustrates the sin of the false teachers and God's certain judgment against them. These illustrations are integrated into a stream of downright vicious invective. The meaning is clear: God's wrath burns against false teachers, and their judgment is certain. Interestingly, Peter does not focus on the false doctrine these teachers promote—he focuses primarily on their poor character.

As dreadful as Peter's pronouncements sound, there is still hope in this text. First, Peter also gives examples of those who escape God's judgment: Noah, Noah's family, and Lot. God is not all wrath, all the time; he rescues those who trust and obey him. Second, God's judgment is a good thing in the wider context of the Bible. The world is trapped under the power of sin and death. When God witnesses evil, he cannot and will not simply "let it go." God's judgment flows out of his righteousness and his plan to set the world right. »

MARCH 12, cont'd.

Those of us who believe in Christ should not read this text in isolation from the rest of the Bible, lest we become inward-looking and prideful. We are not to see ourselves as “the lucky few” who get to escape God’s wrath, sitting smugly in our churches as the rest of the world burns. Nor are we to waste time with speculations about when the end will come. Our responsibility is to reach the world with the love of Christ. Our task is to proclaim the gospel of Christ crucified, the gospel of repentance and forgiveness for sins. We are to bear witness to the goodness of Christ and warn others about the coming judgment.

Father, we cannot invoke your love without acknowledging your wrath. You hate the sin that is tearing your creation apart. You hate the way we blaspheme your name and destroy each other. Lord, grant us repentance and humility so that we will not be like the false teachers Peter warns against. And please work through us to show your love to the world. Use us to lead others out of darkness and into the light. May we never be arrogant as recipients of your mercy, and may we never be content just to sit and let the world burn. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 13

LUKE 21:34 - 22:31

Jesus: So be careful. Guard your hearts. They can be made heavy with moral laxity, with drunkenness, with the hassles of daily life. Then the day I've been telling you about might catch you unaware and trap you. Because it's coming—nobody on earth will escape it. So you have to stay alert, praying that you'll be able to escape the coming trials so you can stand tall in the presence of the Son of Man.

Through this whole period of time, He taught in the temple each day. People would arrive at the temple early in the morning to listen. Then, at day's end, He would leave the city and sleep on Mount Olivet.

This daily pattern continued as they came closer to the holiday of Unleavened Bread, also known as the Passover.

The chief priests and religious scholars continued looking for a way to kill Jesus; they hadn't been able to act yet due to their fear of the people's reaction. At this point, Satan entered into one of the twelve, Judas (also called Iscariot). Judas set up a private meeting with the chief priests and the captains of the temple police to discuss a plan for betraying Jesus and putting Him in their hands. This was just the kind of break they had been waiting for, so they were thrilled and agreed to a handsome payment. Everything was settled, and Judas simply waited for the right moment, when the crowds weren't around, to betray Jesus into their custody.

They came to the Day of Unleavened Bread, a holy day when a special lamb (called the Passover lamb) had to be sacrificed. Jesus chose Peter and John and gave them instructions.

Jesus: Go and make all the necessary preparations for the Passover meal so we can eat together.

Peter and John: Where do You want us to make preparations?

Jesus: When you enter the city, you'll encounter a man carrying a jar of water. Just follow him wherever he goes, and when he enters a house, tell the homeowner, "The Teacher has this question for you: 'Where is the guest room where I can share the Passover meal with My disciples?'" He'll show you a spacious second-story room that has all the necessary furniture. That's where you should prepare our meal.

They did as He said and found everything just as He said it would be, and they prepared the Passover meal. When the meal was prepared, Jesus sat at the table, joined by His emissaries.

The meal that Jesus and His disciples shared is still celebrated today among followers of Jesus. We surround it with varied rituals and music, but the original meal took place in the midst of great drama and tension. The disciples were arguing, and Jesus was teaching them yet another lesson about life in the kingdom of God. Jesus even spoke of His own suffering and their betrayal and denial. Yet through it all, Jesus' focus remained on the central theme of His life and mission: the coming of the kingdom of God.

Jesus: It has been My deep desire to eat this Passover meal with you before My suffering begins. Know this: I will not eat another Passover meal until its meaning is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.

He took a cup of wine and gave thanks for it.

Jesus: Take this; share it among yourselves. Know this: I will not drink another sip of wine until the kingdom of God has arrived in fullness.

Then He took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and shared it with them.

Jesus: This is My body, My body given for you. Do this to remember Me.

And similarly, after the meal had been eaten, He took the cup.

Jesus: This cup, which is poured out for you, is the new covenant, made in My blood. But even now, the hand of My betrayer is with Me on this table. As it has been determined, the Son of Man, that firstfruit of a new generation of humanity, must be betrayed, but how pitiful it will be for the person who betrays Him.

They immediately began questioning each other.

Disciples: Which one of us could do such a horrible thing? »

Soon they found themselves arguing about the opposite question.

MARCH 13, cont'd.

Disciples: Which one of us is the most faithful, the most important?

Jesus (interrupting): The authority figures of the outsiders play this game, flexing their muscles in competition for power over one another, masking their quest for domination behind words like “benefactor” or “public servant.” But you must not indulge in this charade. Instead, among you, the greatest must become like the youngest and the leader must become a true servant. Who is greater right here as we eat this meal—those of us who sit at the table, or those who serve us? Doesn’t everyone normally assume those who are served are greater than those who serve? But consider My role among you. I have been with you as a servant.

You have stood beside Me faithfully through My trials. I give you a kingdom, just as the Father has given Me a kingdom. You will eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and you will have authority over the twelve tribes of Israel.

Simon, Simon, how Satan has pursued you, that he might make you part of his harvest.

RUBY WAYMAN:

When examined closely, this entire passage covers a ton of material. It begins in chapter 21 where Jesus is with his disciples observing various people putting their gifts into the treasury. Jesus begins his teaching on “the end times” and “signs” to look for. In verse 34, which begins the section covered, Jesus is imploring his disciples to stay vigilant in their prayer life and not be enamored with worldly things. He likens worldly things to drunkenness—the incapacitating, clear-thinking obstruction of our thoughts and actions. One thing that stands out in verse 37 is that Jesus taught in the synagogue during the day and retreated at night to Mount Olivet. Jesus did this often after a strenuous day of teaching. He retreated to spend alone time with the Father, to rest and recharge his spiritual battery.

Chapter 22 begins with the Feast of Unleavened Bread approaching. The timing here is critical. The Feast of Unleavened Bread—called the Passover—coincides with what is soon to happen to Jesus. The Feast (Passover) was celebrated by the Jews every year to commemorate the “passing over” by the Angel of Death of the households that had been marked by the blood on the doorposts. Chapter 22 moves quickly but somberly through stages. We see the chief priests and scribes already plotting to kill Jesus; Satan enters Judas and Judas agrees to betray Jesus. There is no indication in Scripture that Satan asked for permission to enter Judas. Instead, it portrays Judas as having put himself in a position that allowed Satan to enter him. Perhaps Judas grew impatient. Perhaps he grew greedy.

The day of Unleavened Bread (the day on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed) arrived. Jesus is very direct in telling Peter and John to “go and prepare the Passover for us...” Jesus gave them very precise directives which they found exactly as Jesus had said. By verse 15 Jesus states clearly, “I have earnestly desired to eat THIS Passover with you before I suffer.” This is a clear distinction from the previous Passover meals he had shared with his disciples. It was THIS Passover meal that would culminate in his death. Jesus would become the ultimate Passover lamb. We see foreshadowing in verse 18 where Jesus says, “I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the Kingdom of God comes.” Jesus knew that by this time Judas had already betrayed him and the events of his death had been put in motion.

What’s also interesting is that after Jesus finished pouring out his heart about his suffering and his betrayal by one of his own, his disciples immediately begin arguing about who the greatest is. Jesus again delivers an allegory about who is greater, the servant or the one sitting at the table—Jesus was both sitting at the table and serving. They missed his message again. This passage ends with Jesus telling Peter that Satan has demanded they (the disciples) be sifted (tested), but Jesus tells Peter that he (Jesus) has prayed specifically for him (Peter). Jesus knows Peter will deny him.

Advent is our season of anticipating life. We anticipate our LORD’s birth. Lent is our season of anticipating our LORD’s death and resurrection. The lessons Jesus gave his disciples remain relevant to us today. We must be in constant prayer with the Father so that we can remain vigilant and faithful when trouble comes. We must seek alone time with the Father to strengthen our relationship with him. Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper to remind us that his broken body and blood were given for us. Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice that redeems us to this very day. We must always be cognizant of our heart’s desires so that we don’t fall into the temptations of the world and end up in positions like Judas.

Jesus will never fail us; his instructions are exact, precise, and timely. The greatest is always the one that serves his/her fellow human being. Lastly, we, his disciples, will be sifted like wheat. We will be tested. We expect hardship and it is ok because Jesus, the High Priest, King of Kings is praying for you, me, and all our brothers and sisters. He has our back.

LORD, thank you for loving us as much as you do. Strengthen us, LORD, so that we can not only withstand the sifting but conquer it with absolute faith in YOU. Keep us ever mindful, LORD, of our responsibility to one another. And finally, LORD, remind us to seek your face every day so that we can find rest and peace. In the name of your most precious son, Jesus. Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 14

PHILIPPIANS 3:2-12

Watch out for the dogs—wicked workers who run in packs looking for someone to maul with their false circumcision.

We are the true circumcision—those who worship God in Spirit and make our boast in Jesus the Anointed, the Liberating King—so we do not rely on what we have accomplished in the flesh.

If any try to throw around their pedigrees to you, remember my résumé—which is more impressive than theirs. I was circumcised on the eighth day—as the law prescribes—born of the nation of Israel, descended from the tribe of Benjamin. I am a Hebrew born of Hebrews; I have observed the law according to the strict piety of the Pharisees, separate from those embracing a less rigorous kind of Judaism. Zealous? Yes. I ruthlessly pursued and persecuted the church. And when it comes to the righteousness required by the law, my record is spotless.

But whatever I used to count as my greatest accomplishments, I've written them off as a loss because of the Anointed One. And more so, I now realize that all I gained and thought was important was nothing but yesterday's garbage compared to knowing the Anointed Jesus my Lord. For Him I have thrown everything aside—it's nothing but a pile of waste—so that I may gain Him. When it counts, I want to be found belonging to Him, not clinging to my own righteousness based on law, but actively relying on the faithfulness of the Anointed One. This is true righteousness, supplied by God, acquired by faith. I want to know Him inside and out. I want to experience the power of His resurrection and join in His suffering, shaped by His death, so that I may arrive safely at the resurrection from the dead.

I'm not there yet, nor have I become perfect; but I am charging on to gain anything and everything the Anointed One, Jesus, has in store for me—and nothing will stand in my way because He has grabbed me and won't let me go.

MEGHAN HENDRICKSON:

Nothing compares to knowing Jesus. There is nothing better than being found in his presence. Though I am pulled and pressed from every direction, I hear the voice of my shepherd.

"Come, follow me," he whispers as he reaches out to rescue me with fresh mercies for today. "But what about..." No. "But first, I just need to..." No. Once more, I have fallen for the lie that life is measured by my accomplishments (or lack thereof). My shepherd who calls me by name—he is the life.

As the Holy Spirit carries me away to our secret place, I am reminded there is nothing more worthy of my time than being with my shepherd, even if just for this moment. He is the source of life. He is the only one who can fill me to overflowing with love. I am created to pour out love upon those around me today freely. He is the well that never runs dry.

He calls me to faith. He invites me to trust him. Though I do not feel I have the strength to face what lies before me today, my shepherd whispers, "I will be with you always." Yes, this is the promise that brings my soul to life each morning. How quickly I forget.

As my shepherd clothes me with his presence, he knows my wandering heart and whispers, "Do not worry about tomorrow. Come, follow me. Keep in step with my Spirit. I will be with you always."

"Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him. In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us," (Colossians 3:10-11 NLT).

Lord, I am sorry for placing the demands and worries of this life above you. Thank you for rescuing me today. When I awake each morning, please remind me that nothing compares to the infinite worth of knowing you. All the days of my life, I ask that you come to find me and invite me to follow you. I want nothing more than to live this life hand-in-hand with my shepherd. I desire you more than anything on earth. I want to be with you always, even to the end of the age.

FRIDAY, MARCH 15

PHILIPPIANS 3:17-20

Imitate me, brothers and sisters, and look around to those already following the example we have set. I have warned you before (and now say again through my tears) that we have many enemies—people who reject the cross of the Anointed. They are ruled by their bellies, their glory comes by shame, and their minds are fixed on the things of this world. They are doomed. But we are citizens of heaven, exiles on earth waiting eagerly for a Liberator, our Lord Jesus the Anointed, to come and...

SCOTTY SWINGLER:

While Paul's words at the end of Philippians 3 might strike our modern sensibilities as arrogant, one should not fall into the trap of thinking the Apostle is being brash or prideful. On the contrary, Paul is speaking entirely out of concern for the young generation of believers at Philippi, for whom he has a unique and deep affection (see 1:3-8; 4:1, 15). This is apparent in verse 18 of our text, in which Paul communicates with emotions sincere enough to prompt tears. We should read this text and see a beloved pastor, an elder mentor, and a concerned father-figure kindly urging the young congregation to think wisely about to whom they look as role models.

We live in an American culture which puts its celebrities on pedestals of idolatry. This is easy to see when movie stars adorn magazine covers, but this celebrity worship often takes place within the walls of the church. The "Christian celebrity,"—whether a musician, athlete, pastor, or politician—can be found on the covers of Bible study curriculum and posters around the Christian bookstore. Paul is warning us to be extremely careful about the people we hold highly.

Paul encourages the young church to imitate Christ. Before we imitate anyone else, we must strive to be like Jesus. The Son is the ultimate revelation of God's character, and he proclaims "Follow Me" throughout the gospels. We should ask the Holy Spirit to mold us into "little Christs." Christian celebrities, even pastors, can have selfish motives for their public faith; we're incapable of knowing who is sincere and who is "set on earthly things." We must look to Christ.

For the sake of the church in Philippi, Paul recognizes that their knowledge of Jesus is slim. We don't know if this congregation yet had access to one of the gospel writings, and we can be quite confident that none of them had actually known Jesus personally. Their only point of reference is Paul, who has met the risen Messiah on the road to Damascus and who has been commissioned by God to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. Thus, it is appropriate for them to lean on Paul's writings and teachings in order to know the risen Christ. Paul's "imitate me" is not to hold himself highly, but rather, to hold the character of Jesus highly. He instructs the church at Corinth similarly in 1 Corinthians 11:1. These churches do not yet have a compiled New Testament from which to draw wisdom and knowledge on how to follow Jesus. All they have is Paul.

We have the blessing of access to the compiled Holy Bible from which we see the person of Jesus Christ. Before looking to Christian celebrities or any Christian who's been placed as a role model, may we look to Christ and only hold His name highly. People will fall short, every time. Their motives may be impure. But Jesus is the human example we can trust, look up to, and follow with full confidence. May we tear down the idols of celebrity culture and exalt the name of Jesus Christ.

Have you put someone other than Jesus on a pedestal? Are you imitating someone other than Christ? Ask God to reveal this to you and to help you rid yourself of any idolatry in your life.

SATURDAY, MARCH 16

MATTHEW 23:37-39

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem. You kill the prophets whom God gives you; you stone those God sends you. I have longed to gather your children the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you refuse to be gathered. Surely you can see that God has already removed His blessing from the house of Israel. I tell you this: you will not see Me again until you say, with the psalmist, "Anyone who comes in the name of the Eternal One will be blessed."

KELLY SHAJARI:

That moment when your heart stops. Your gut lurches. Your breath catches in your throat like ice. All of this when you realize in that devastating moment—I am too late. I missed it. Whether it's a train, a class, an opportunity. Nothing is more devastating than the lament of regret, of 20/20 hindsight: *What I wouldn't give to go back in time and choose differently. Why, oh why, did I not see what I see now?*

We are a people of hard hearts, of blindness. Sin makes us this way. Even in our pursuit of holiness and righteousness, our spirits betray us as people who are ultimately violent when we believe ourselves threatened—whether physically or regarding our ideologies or beliefs. In our words, our actions, our justification, we breathe violence and condemnation. We are not willing—to reason, to listen, to be gathered amidst differing worldviews and opinions. For this, as in ancient times, Jesus laments and weeps.

History repeats itself, and we sadly find consistently over time that we continue to kill our prophets. We continue to produce martyrs. We prosecute our truth-tellers, our Nathans or Johns who tell us, pleading and urgent: "You are that man! That woman! What you are doing is not lawful!" We tear our House apart, as one divided it cannot stand, then look around sadly and in disbelief as Jesus' words echo: Look, your House is left to you desolate. How I longed to gather you, but you were not willing...

In the midst of strife and our hard hearts, we end up missing Jesus completely. Holy moments pass by unnoticed. Gifts of the sacred go by unseen and unappreciated. God whispers fall upon rocky soil. Loving invitations to a deeper and richer Christ-life are realized too late. Jesus passes us by. In our rejection of His people, our neighbors, of clinging so desperately to our own ideas, we ultimately reject our gentle and loving Master—who longs to gather us all in unity.

Dear brothers and sisters, let this not be so. As Christ has said "I am willing," let us live in willingness, obedience, to our sweet Savior's call to love him and one another. In this season of Lent, may we ask for the gift of sight: to see Jesus moving in our midst, and to not let him pass by unnoticed.

Lord Jesus, we are so grateful that you are a willing God, a God who woos us and gathers us. We ask for healing from and forgiveness for our blindness, violence, hard hearts—we humbly ask for new hearts and a new spirit within us; remove from us our hearts of stone and instead give us hearts of flesh. Amen.

SUNDAY, MARCH 17

LUKE 9:28-36, 37-43

Those words had about eight days to settle in with the disciples. Then, once again, Jesus went away to pray. This time He took along only Peter, John, and James. They climbed a mountainside and came to a place of solitude.

Jesus began to pray and the disciples tried to stay awake, but their eyes grew heavier and heavier and finally they all fell asleep. When they awakened, they looked over at Jesus and saw something inexplicable happening. Jesus was changing before their eyes, beginning with His face. It seemed to glow. The glow spread, and even His clothing took on a blinding whiteness. Then, two figures appeared in the glorious radiance emanating from Jesus. The three disciples somehow knew that these figures were Moses and Elijah. Peter, James, and John overheard the conversation that took place among Jesus, Moses, and Elijah—a conversation that centered on Jesus' "departure" and how He would accomplish this departure from the capital city, Jerusalem.

The glow began to fade, and it was clear that Moses and Elijah were about to disappear.

Peter (to Jesus): Please, Master, it is good for us to be here and see this. Can we make three structures—one to honor You, one to honor Moses, and one to honor Elijah, to try to capture what's happening here?

Peter had no idea what he was saying.

While he spoke a cloud descended, and they were enveloped in it, and fear fell on them. Then a voice came out of everywhere and nowhere at once.

Voice from Heaven: This is My Son! This is the One I have chosen! Listen to Him!

Then the voice was silent, the cloud disappeared, and Moses and Elijah were gone. Peter, James, and John were left speechless, stunned, staring at Jesus who now stood before them alone. For a long time, they did not say a word about this whole experience.

They came down the mountain, and the next day yet another huge crowd gathered around Jesus. There was a man in the crowd who shouted out.

Man in Crowd: Teacher! Please come and look at my son here, my only child. From time to time, a demonic spirit seizes him. It makes him scream and go into convulsions. He foams at the mouth. It nearly destroys him and only leaves after causing him great distress. While You were up on the mountain, I begged Your disciples to liberate him from this spirit, but they were incapable of helping us.

Jesus: O generation faithless, twisted, and crooked, how long can I be with you? How much can I bear? Bring your boy here.

The boy had taken a few steps toward Jesus when suddenly the demon seemed to rip into the boy, throwing him into convulsions. Jesus spoke sternly to the demonic spirit, and the boy was healed. Jesus presented the boy to his father.

The crowd began cheering and discussing this amazing healing and the power of God, but Jesus turned to His disciples.

MONDAY, MARCH 18

ROMANS 4:1-12

In light of all of this, what should we say about our ancestor Abraham? If Abraham was made right by performing certain works, then he would surely have something to brag about. Right? Not before the Creator God, because as the Scriptures say, “Abraham believed God and trusted in His promises, so God counted it to his favor as righteousness.” Now, when you work a job, do your wages come as a gift or as compensation for your work? It is most certainly not a gift—you are only paid what you have earned. So for the person who does not work, but instead trusts in the One who makes the ungodly right, his faith is counted for him as righteousness.

Remember the psalm where David speaks about the benefits that come to the person whom God credits with righteousness apart from works? He said,

Blessed are those whose wrongs have been forgiven and whose sins have been covered.

Blessed is the person whose sin the Lord will not take into account.

So is this blessing spoken only for the circumcised or for all uncircumcised people too? We remind you what the Scripture has to say: faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness.

So when was the credit awarded to Abraham? Was it before or after his circumcision? Well, it certainly wasn't after—it was before he was circumcised. Eventually he was given circumcision as a sign of his right standing, indicating that he was credited on the basis of the faith he possessed before he was circumcised. It happened this way so that Abraham might become the spiritual father of all those who are not circumcised but are made right through their faith. In the same way, God destined him to be the spiritual father of all those who are circumcised as more than an outward sign, but who walk in our father Abraham's faithful footsteps—a faith he possessed while he was still uncircumcised.

SCOTT DALTON:

Romans 4:1-12 may be the most offensive passage in the entire Bible. For those of us who have lived for any period of time, you know that we live in a world of “haves” and “have-nots.” I’m not just talking about socioeconomics—I’m talking about the kind of judgmental attitude that exists in every organization, every group, and every human heart. It is the kind of attitude that says, “you need to wear the proper workout clothes or else you are not welcomed here.” This kind of attitude sees the bumper sticker of the politician it didn’t vote for in the last election on the interstate and thinks, “Oh! That’s why they are such a terrible driver,” as if political support was directly correlated to one’s driving ability. Or perhaps this attitude murmurs, “Oh, you don’t know who [insert author that only people who have advanced degrees read] is?” and smugly thinks to itself, “this is the reason why America is headed straight to the toilet.”

People do this kind of work all the time—we love to divide people into the good and bad, the pretty and ugly, the useful and the burdensome, the brave and the cowardly. Unfortunately, for those of us who like to divide people into the worthy and unworthy, God offers that we are more alike than different. In fact, God lumps us all in together in a single category: the ungodly. This is half of the great scandal of the “righteousness” that Paul is driving at in this passage. In God’s economy there is no “worthy” and “unworthy” person. It is like what Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in *Gulag Archipelago*, “If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?” The line runs down the middle of the human heart, and God—more than anyone—understands the complexity of the human experience.

And so, we come to the second great scandal of this passage, verse 5, which offers that as much as the condition of the human being is marked by this gray sort of “ungodliness.” God is quite pleased to move humans to a new status. This new status is unalterable—it is like taking a one-way ticket to a far-away land, never to return again. Historically, this new status is called being “justified,” but we might also call it being safe or being home with God. The real scandal of grace is that it comes for the ungodly. We would like to think that God’s grace is reserved only for the good, the pretty, the useful, the brave. In fact, it is quite the opposite. God justifies the ungodly which, as it turns out, is you and me. The ungodly are those who need saving because they are not God—they are messed up people. As it turns out, we are all messed up. »

MARCH 18, cont'd.

No one is righteous, not one. For all of the gray motivations we have (am I writing this to be approved by you or because I want to worship God?) and damage we do or have done, we can be assured that God is coming for us—he is in the game of justifying the ungodly. It doesn't make sense and it is quite offensive, but it is the scandal of grace: God justifies the ungodly. God delights in saving messed up people.

O LORD, your grace is overwhelming. If I am honest, I live my life mostly as if I need to jockey for your approval by being better than others or by improving myself. You are pleased to call me your child even when I insist on being your slave. Teach me to live into this freedom you have given me and to enjoy my forgiveness. Thank you for your fierce love.

TUESDAY, MARCH 19

1 CORINTHIANS 10:1-13

I wouldn't want you to be ignorant of our history, brothers and sisters. Our ancestors were once safeguarded under a miraculous cloud in the wilderness and brought safely through the sea. Enveloped in water by cloud and by sea, they were, you might say, ritually cleansed into Moses through baptism. Together they were sustained supernaturally: they all ate the same spiritual food, manna; and they all drank the same spiritual water, flowing from a spiritual rock that was always with them, for the rock was the Anointed One, our Liberating King. Despite all of this, they were punished in the wilderness because God was unhappy with most of them.

Look at what happened to them as an example; it's right there in the Scriptures so that we won't make the same mistakes and hunger after evil as they did. So here's my advice: don't degrade yourselves by worshiping anything less than the living God as some of them did. Remember it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and then rose up in dance and play." We must be careful not to engage in sexual sins as some of them did. In one day, 23,000 died because of sin. None of us must test the limits of the Lord's patience. Some of the Israelites did, and serpents bit them and killed them. You need to stop your groaning and whining. Remember the story. Some of them complained, and the messenger of death came for them and destroyed them. All these things happened for a reason: to sound a warning. They were written down and passed down to us to teach us. They were meant especially for us because the beginning of the end is happening in our time. So let even the most confident believers remember their examples and be very careful not to fall as some of them did.

Any temptation you face will be nothing new. But God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can handle. But He always provides a way of escape so that you will be able to endure and keep moving forward.

COLEMAN REIDLING:

The fans of the professional soccer team in Liverpool, England often sing the following words: "You'll never walk alone." This song has become a mantra to the supports of the club through good times and bad. The words "you'll never walk alone" remind me of God's faithfulness to us. It also reminds me that the Christian life is to be lived in fellowship with others.

1 Corinthians 10:13 strikes a chord that rings out through all of Scripture: God is faithful to his people always. Perhaps this is why Paul begins the chapter by recounting Israel's ancient history in the Exodus narrative. God's people were led out of from oppression in Egypt. Through this exit they had to trounce across wilderness and even through a sea. And yet, God was faithful to his people. Paul notes in chapter 10 that God provided clouds to guide them day and night, provided safe passage through the sea, nourished them with bread from Heaven, and gave them the water they so needed. Certainly, God is faithful! He did not give up on Israel even though they missed the mark so often.

In his first letter to the believers in Corinth, Paul admonishes them to crave no evil. He instructs them to not commit idolatry, immorality, not to try to lord it over the Lord, or grumble against him like Israel did in the wilderness. It may be easy at first glance to read these as a list of "do's" and "do not's," but at the core of this letter is a heartfelt plea to trust God. The *Cliff's Notes* might read, "Avoid Israel's mistakes, and trust God no matter what." After all, what is idolatry other than a want for control of a pocket-sized god? Idolatry stems from a lack of trust in God. Likewise, what is immorality other than a want of pleasure that stems from a lack of trust in God? The same is true for putting God to the test and complaining against him. All these things Paul wants Christians to flee arise from a lack of trust in God's faithful hand.

Just before the promises of verse 13 comes a warning in verse 12: "Let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall" (NASB). Remember, you're not too big to fail. However, at the same time remember that your God is too faithful to fail you. »

And then comes the gripping assurance of verse 13. Paul states that no temptation has come your way that isn't common to others. He empowers the readers with the confidence that they do not walk alone because temptation is a universal struggle for people. After all, even Jesus Christ, our solid Rock, was tempted by Satan for a time. And Christ endured and overcame temptation so that you could overcome it as well.

God is the cloud leading you through confusing circumstances. God is your deliverance through a raging sea. God is your sustenance when desolation is all around you. »

MARCH 19, cont'd.

We serve a faithful God. God will make a way for you to endure whatever is weighing down on you. It may not be comfortable. You may not feel great all the time. But thanks be to God that you never walk alone.

In light of God's faithfulness to me, is there anything I cannot trust him with?

As you notice God's faithfulness shining through your circumstances from time to time, be sure to write them down. Hold on to them in a safe place for later reference. This way, you will have a tangible reminder of God's faithfulness even when you are tempted to not trust him. (This is what God's people did in Joshua 4:1-7).

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20

LUKE 13:22-31

He was pressing toward Jerusalem, His journey taking Him through various towns and villages. In each one, He taught the people. Once a person asked this question:

Inquiring Individual: Lord, will only a few people be rescued?

Jesus: Strive to enter through the narrow door now, because many people—hear Me on this—will try to enter later on and will not be able to. Imagine you want to enter someone's home, but you wait until after the homeowner has shut the door. Then you stand outside and bang on the door, and you say, "Sir, please open the door for us!" But he will answer, "I don't know where you're from."

Then you'll say, "Just a minute. We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets." But he'll say, "Sorry, I have no idea where you're from. Leave me, all of you evildoers." Then you'll see something that will make you cry and grind your teeth together—you'll see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves will be on the outside looking in.

And then you'll see people streaming in from east and west, from north and south, gathering around the table in the kingdom of God, but you'll be on the outside looking in. That's how it will be; some are last now who will be first then, and some are first now who will be last then.

Right then some Pharisees came and warned Him.

Pharisees: You'd better get out of here because Herod is plotting Your murder.

ERIC BALMER:

"There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth..." (13:28) Yikes! Those are not the words of Jesus we like to think about often. We love the Jesus that provides rest for the weary, hope for the hopeless, and promises of salvation. Weeping and gnashing of teeth is brutal imagery we would rather forget. However, I do not believe these are the words that should stick with us from these verses.

Earlier in chapter 13, Jesus speaks in two different parables: the Mustard Seed and the Yeast. Each of these parables compares the Kingdom of God to things the audience might not expect. First, a mustard seed was used in the Jewish tradition to connote the smallest of all the seeds. Despite the initial size of the seed, its impact is far-reaching and perhaps unexpected. As for the yeast, only a little is needed to permeate the entire dough.

So, is it merely a coincidence these two parables precede Jesus' discussion on the narrow door of God's Kingdom? Most definitely not! The key to understanding this verse comes the previous two parables, along with verse 30. Jesus says, "Some who seem least important now will be greatest then, and some who are the greatest now will be least important then."

Greatness in the Kingdom of God is directly counterintuitive to our human understanding and manmade criteria. Jesus himself said many will try to enter the door, but fail. After all, everyone wants glory and prestige. Lots of people would love to sit at the right or left hand of Jesus like James and John. Yet, many do not realize or understand what that means. Even though it seems rather flashy to be close to Jesus and all his glory, he tells us that in order to follow him, we must deny ourselves, our desires, and preferences.

Following Jesus and being part of the Kingdom of God requires us to live in a way most people on this earth would pass on. When I was teaching youth one Wednesday night, I had mentioned the idea that God's Kingdom is an "upside down kingdom." After I had finished the lesson, one of my students approached me and said to me, "Wouldn't it be our world that is upside down, because God's Kingdom is how it should be?"

I thought that was a great response. If we are to live as Christ calls us to do and if we believe his way leads to life, our lives will seem upside down to a world that itself still needs to be made new and right-side up.

Lord, we are grateful that your Kingdom way is not based on our own criteria. Thank you for the free grace offered through the life, death, and resurrection of your son, Jesus. As we accept your mercy each day, transform our lives, attitudes, and actions. Foster your Kingdom in our churches and our world. Give us the strength to humble ourselves for others and for your glory. Amen.

THURSDAY, MARCH 21

REVELATION 2:8-11

Write down My words, and send them to the messenger of the church in Smyrna. “These are the words of the First and the Last, the One who was dead and returned to life:

“I know [your deeds and] the difficult ordeal you are enduring and your poverty, although you are actually rich. I am aware of the offensive accusations preached by those who call themselves ‘Jews.’ But these people are not the Jews they pretend to be; they are actually the congregation of Satan. In the face of suffering, do not fear. Watch; the devil will throw some of you into prison shortly so that you might be tested, and you will endure great affliction for 10 days. Be faithful throughout your life, until the day you die, and I will give you the victor’s wreath of life.

“Let the person who is able to hear, listen to and follow what the Spirit proclaims to all the churches. The one who conquers through faithfulness even unto death will escape the second death.”

CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMSON:

“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

“Easy for you to say, Son of God. This world is scary. The powers of this world are scary. And they might actually throw me in prison, if not worse to me and others.”

I wonder if anyone in that small community in Smyrna had the same gut reaction I did. I would rather type something here about how faithful I am, or have been, or will most definitely continue to be. But Lent is not the time for putting up a face to our fellow Christians. It’s a time of being brutally honest with one another about where we are. And my first reaction is to say, more often than not, “but Jesus...”

And if I’m honest with myself, what follows that “but Jesus...” is always a selfish excuse. But Jesus, what if I say this and people just think I’m crazy? What if I admit to believing this idea and I am persecuted for it? What if I follow this call and only earn a modest income for the rest of my life?

What if my faith leads to less security?

What if my faith leads to less stability?

What if my faith makes me lose social standing and sway in the word?

When I get down to what inspires my gut reactions to Jesus’ demand on my life, it’s usually a fear of losing something I have placed over my call to faithfulness. Meanwhile, there is so much suffering and oppression in the world that demands the faithful to embody sacrificial care.

In the season of Lent, we cut ourselves off from what distracts us from the call of God to take up our cross and follow the way of Christ. There are idols that, over time, we place in our lives to take up other ways, ones that give us more money, privilege, or security.

What is in our lives today that keep us fearful of embodying a faithful witness?

FRIDAY, MARCH 22

REVELATION 3:1-6

The One: Write down My words, and send them to the messenger of the church in Sardis. “These are the words of the One who has the seven Spirits of God, the Perfect Spirit, and the One who holds the seven stars:

“I know the things you do—you’ve claimed a reputation of life, but you are actually dead. Wake up from your death-sleep, and strengthen what remains of the life you have been given that is in danger of death. I have judged your deeds as far from complete in the sight of My God. Therefore, remember what you have received and heard; it’s time to keep these instructions and turn back from your ways. If you do not wake up from this sleep, I will come in judgment. I will creep up on you like a thief—you will have no way of knowing when I will come. But there are a few in Sardis who don’t have the stain of evil works on their clothes. They will walk alongside Me in white, spotless garments because they have been proven worthy.

“The one who conquers through faithfulness even unto death will be clothed in white garments, and I will certainly not erase that person’s name from the book of life. I will acknowledge this person’s name before My Father and before His heavenly messengers.

“Let the person who is able to hear, listen to and follow what the Spirit proclaims to all the churches.

DILAN BRADDOCK:

With the prominence of social media, we millennials have learned the craft of manufacturing an online image. This applies to Christian millennials too, as we have mastered the art of looking like a “good Christian” on social media. We retweet our favorite mega-pastor’s zinger from last Sunday, stick up for Jesus on Facebook, and resist the urge to post anything possibly inappropriate on Instagram and BAM! we are “good Christians” and seemingly have everything together. If we are being honest, it’s far easier to keep up our Christian appearances online than it is to do the strenuous work of discipleship. This task of inward examination is uncomfortable, but it is what the season of Lent asks of us.

The letter to the Church in Sardis is the fifth of seven letters found in the book of Revelation. During the time of this letter’s composition, Sardis was a desirable city with an enjoyable climate, situated on a strategic mountain range among a fertile valley. The city also possessed a long history of cultural relevance and economic prosperity. Gordan Fee remarks that all of these factors led to the people of Sardis being caught up in “an illusion as to their security and their real significance”.¹ Fee claims this illusion likely spread to the local congregation. External factors gave Sardis an inflated view of their own significance and fooled outsiders into assuming the Church was healthy. This is why the messenger preaches, “You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.” You see, manufactured images can trick others, and maybe even ourselves, but not God.

The problem for the church in Sardis was not that they were marred by heresy, weakened by persecution, or rotten with moral decay. Sardis’ condemnation was attributed to their puffed-up image of themselves, which had produced complacency. The criticism of being dead is followed by a stern warning that “If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief.” The messenger of the Lord called the church to remember what they received, obey it, and repent.

Catchy slogans, impressive buildings, and large congregations give churches the appearance of life, but we know this isn’t what the Gospel is about. Yet Americans have become so enamored with our own version of Christianity that we cannot see the ways in which we have strayed off the path. And it’s not only modern day churches who resemble Sardis; if we are being honest, we ourselves also resemble Sardis. It’s easy to continue manufacturing a reputation of being alive, but faith without works is dead. We know how to produce an image that says we are thriving in Christ, but often this isn’t the truth. We refuse to pause and evaluate ourselves for fear of what we might discover.

Thankfully, Lent is a season of reflection, where we journey into the desert with Christ and examine our most inward self. This journey into the wilderness rips us from our complacency and forces us to throw off these images we have created for ourselves. Here we can see the gaps between our lives and the one Jesus calls us to. Lent is a chance to wake up, and soberly examine the death within us. The good news is that if we do so and realign ourselves with God, the Lord promises he “will never blot out our names from the book of life but will acknowledge them before the Father and his angels.”

Now I don’t know about you, but I have some work to do.

¹Fee, Gordan. Revelation: New Covenant Commentary (Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth Press, 2011) 45.

SATURDAY, MARCH 23

LUKE 6:43-45

Count on this: no good tree bears bad fruit, and no bad tree bears good fruit. You can know a tree by the fruit it bears. You don't find figs on a thorn bush, and you can't pick grapes from a briar bush. It's the same with people. A person full of goodness in his heart produces good things; a person with an evil reservoir in his heart pours out evil things. The heart overflows in the words a person speaks; your words reveal what's within your heart.

ADAM CHANEY:

Last spring, a man in a pickup truck pulled into my driveway while I was mowing my lawn. He greeted me with a wave and introduced himself. He then pointed to two tall but sickly-looking trees that were leaning into the west side of my house. He asked if I was interested in having the two trees taken down. Indeed, the trees concerned me, but I had successfully ignored them for years. Both are “scrub tress,” a kind of weed that springs up quickly with a relatively short life span. These trees were admittedly dangerous and produced less and less shade with each passing year. Yet, I love trees and I hate when they are cut down. I have a very limited number of trees in my yard, and I just didn't want to see them go. I almost turned the man away, until he asked, “You got youngins?” I said, “Yes, two children.” He replied, “Well, I bet one of ‘em is sleeping in that room under those trees. A good strong wind could make you regret not doing something about it.” He was right! Those trees could produce some bad fruit if left alone. That afternoon, the man in the truck cut down both trees. When they came down, the stumps revealed that the trees were barely hanging on by a thin exterior shell. The trees were rotten through the core and hollow deep into the ground. They were on the verge of producing awfully bad fruit in our lives.

In a similar way, many people attempt to live with a thin exterior shell, which gives off the appearance of fruitfulness and faithfulness to Christ. Yet, on the inside, at their core, they are hollow, barren, and unable to yield good fruit.

The sixth chapter of Luke's Gospel includes Jesus' “Sermon on the Plain,” in which Jesus tells us what the Kingdom of God is like, on earth as it is in heaven. Devotees of Jesus become increasingly like him; they become Christ-like. This is because the ethics of the Kingdom of God are not based on intellectual ascent or moralistic rule following, but a covenantal relationship with the living God. The Kingdom is at work in a person's life when they are yielded to the Lordship of Christ and daily choose to follow the leading of the Spirit. That is when good fruit is produced.

What we say, what we do, and who we are cannot be separated. Our words and actions are the fruit that is extended out to the rest of the world, but the quality of that fruit is dependent upon the character of the tree. Our decisions, actions, practices, and behaviors tell a story about who we are and what we believe. We can claim to be disciples of Jesus. We can say he is our Lord. But, the way we proceed through each day reveals whether or not it is true. Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Plain talking about the devastating effects of calling Jesus Lord without truly submitting to his Lordship. When we hear his voice and ignore his word, we are building a structure in our lives that is destined for destruction.

What type of tree are you? What type of fruit does your life produce? Are you attempting to stand against the winds and waves of life with only a thin exterior shell grounding you? Is the core of your life hollowed out or abundantly full? How might you obediently yield to the Lordship of Christ in this Lenten season?

SUNDAY, MARCH 24

LUKE 13:1-9

As He said this, some people told Him the latest news about a group of Galilean pilgrims in Jerusalem—a group not unlike Jesus' own entourage. Pilate butchered them while they were at worship, their own blood mingling with the blood of their sacrifices.

Jesus: Do you think these Galileans were somehow being singled out for their sins, that they were worse than any other Galileans, because they suffered this terrible death? Of course not. But listen, if you do not consider God's ways and truly change, then friends, you should prepare to face His judgment and eternal death.

Speaking of current events, you've all heard about the 18 people killed in that building accident when the tower in Siloam fell. Were they extraordinarily bad people, worse than anyone else in Jerusalem, so that they would deserve such an untimely death? Of course not. But all the buildings of Jerusalem will come crashing down on you if you don't wake up and change direction now.

(following up with this parable) A man has a fig tree planted in his vineyard. One day he comes out looking for fruit on it, but there are no figs. He says to the vineyard keeper, "Look at this tree. For three years, I've come hoping to find some fresh figs, but what do I find? Nothing. So just go ahead and cut it down. Why waste the space with a fruitless tree?"

The vineyard keeper replies, "Give it another chance, sir. Give me one more year working with it. I'll cultivate the soil and heap on some manure to fertilize it. If it surprises us and bears fruit next year, that will be great, but if not, then we'll cut it down."

MONDAY, MARCH 25

ROMANS 2:1-11

So you can see there are no excuses for any of us. If your eyes shift their focus from yourselves to others—to judge how they are doing—you have already condemned yourselves! You don't realize that you are pointing your fingers at others for the exact things you do as well. There's no doubt that the judgment of God will justly fall upon hypocrites who practice such things. Here's what is happening: you attack and criticize others and then turn around to commit the same offenses yourselves! Do you think you will somehow dodge God's judgment? Do you take the kindness of God for granted? Do you see His patience and tolerance as signs that He is a pushover when it comes to sin? How could you not know that His kindness is guiding our hearts to turn away from distractions and habitual sin to walk a new path?

But because your heart is obstinate and shameless, you're storing up wrath that will count against you. On the day of His choosing, God's wrath and judgment will be unleashed to make things right. As it goes, everyone will receive what his actions in life have cultivated. Whoever has labored diligently and patiently to do what is right—seeking glory, honor, and immortality—God will grant him endless joy in life eternal. But selfish individuals who make trouble, resist the truth, or sell out to wickedness will meet a very different fate—they will find fury and indignation as the fruit of living in the wrong. Suffering and pain await everyone whose life is marked by evil living (first for the Jew, and next for the non-Jew). But if you do what is right, you will receive glory, admiration, and peace (again, first for the Jew, then for the non-Jew). God has no favorites.

BRIANNA CHILDS:

"To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable." —C.S. Lewis

In Christian culture, we are often exposed to phrases that are overused and end up being used ironically or sarcastically and simply make us chuckle. The phrase, "check your heart" is one of those with which we might be familiar.

I heard it many times growing up and maybe even took it a little too seriously. Though it's overused and often used in jest, I cannot help but think about it in that serious context once again.

In the culture we live in today, it is all too easy to store up wrath in our hearts, sometimes without even realizing it. Heart changes in a little at a time, against our enemies, against strangers, even against those we claim to love most. They can be disguised as resentment, righteous anger, or, as we see in this text, judgment. When we look around, the example of a hard and impenitent heart is the most frequent example set for us, but that does not mean it is the example that reflects the heart of our God.

Instead, when we look at verse four, we see that it is always the kindness of our righteous and compassionate God that leads us to repentance. The kindness of our God is an ever-flowing source toward us and for us to draw from, leading us to confession and repentance day by day.

This cannot end with only the way we relate to our God, however. We must extend that same kindness to those enemies, strangers, and loved ones. The hard and impenitent heart is the one that C.S. Lewis describes above. When we refuse to allow that kindness to soften it and to embrace the love that is so freely given to us by God, slowly it becomes unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.

I pray that in this Lenten season we would be ready to give away the loving kindness that has led us to repentance. May we embrace the vulnerable love that our Beloved models for us first. The more we see, know, and receive the loving kindness of our Savior, the more we forget about the judgment, wrath, and resentment that we are often so prone to extend. May we deeply explore the riches of his kindness, forbearance, and patience, and may they flow from us freely, bringing the goodness and glory of our God on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

TUESDAY, MARCH 26

ROMANS 2:12-16

If one lives life without knowledge of the law—the teachings of the Torah—he will sin and die apart from the law. If someone else lives life under the law, his sin will be judged by what the law teaches. Here's my point: just because a person hears the law read or recited does not mean he is right before the one True God; it is following the law that makes one right, not just hearing it. For instance, some outsiders who are not required to follow the law often live quite naturally by its teachings. Even though the law wasn't given to them, in themselves they have the law. Here's the thing: their lives demonstrate that God has inscribed the law's teachings on their hearts. On judgment day, their consciences will testify for them, and their thoughts will both accuse and defend them. This good news given to me declares that this affirmation and accusation will take place on that day when God, through Jesus, the Anointed One, judges every person's life secrets.

KINGSLEY EAST:

The law is never an easy or light topic to bring up in the Bible; in fact, it's an impossible topic because we all know that we cannot keep the law. In this passage, Paul shows us that all people, Jews who have the law and Gentiles who do not have the law, still disobey the law. One is not better than the other for living under strict commandments or by living with a free, lawless spirit. At the end of the day, everyone knows what is right and wrong, as the text says, "what the law requires is written on their hearts." Therefore, we have no excuse not to do what God calls us to in the law, for God created us to follow his perfect law.

This passage shows two types of people: those with the law and those without the law. Throughout my life, I've fluctuated between both sides. Sometimes I fall into legalizing my actions and trying to measure whether I did more good or bad in a day. This often leads to me doing neither good nor bad, just numbly going through life's motions so as not to risk hurting myself or others. At other times, I've opted to live according to worldly freedom; because Christ lived a perfect life for me, I can live an entirely imperfect life (also known as cheap grace). This way of living requires me to pretend that I'm ok with what I'm doing, which can only last so long before the Lord graciously opens my eyes. On both sides of the spectrum, God is faithful to show me a third way of living: in Christ.

Because we all fall short of keeping the law, we need the gospel of Jesus Christ. In this passage, Paul invites us to experience this new way of living. Instead of defining oneself as a Jew, Gentile, good Christian, or renegade, we can live in Christ. We no longer have to fear the law because Christ followed it perfectly for us. Further, we don't have to run from the law because we trust that God's law is good for us. The hope of the gospel enables us to be doers of God's word, giving him glory in our failures and successes.

In this season of your life, is it tempting to live legalistically or with no regard to the law? *Ask God to grant you peaceful assurance that your identity is found in Christ.*

Is there someone in your life who you find yourself judging for their lifestyle? *Ask Christ to grant you compassion to see people the way that he sees them.*

What areas of your life seem too gray to know right from wrong? *Ask the Holy Spirit to grant you wisdom and discernment in this specific area.*

As you step into this day, ask God to open your heart to the gospel of Christ. Instead of putting your worth in your works, find your identity in Christ. Resting in the assurance that you are saved by faith, not works, live out God's calling to be a doer of his word.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 27

LUKE 13:18-21

Jesus (explaining): Do you want to understand the kingdom of God? Do you want Me to tell you what it's like? It's like a single mustard seed that someone took and planted in his garden. That tiny seed grew and became a tree so large that the birds could fly in and make their nests in its branches.

Do you want Me to tell you what the kingdom of God is like? It's like some yeast which a woman hid within a huge quantity of flour; soon the whole batch of dough was rising.

DANIEL HARRIS:

Before the parable of the mustard seed and the yeast, Jesus heals a woman on the Sabbath who had been crippled for 18 years. What's interesting in this passage is that Jesus approaches her. This is in stark contrast to the healing narratives in the gospel of Mark where people had to go through a great deal of effort in order to be healed in one passage, going so far as removing a thatched roof to lower a paralytic down to see Jesus!

Immediately after the healing of the crippled woman, the leader of the synagogue rebuked Jesus in front of a crowd for healing on the Sabbath. Jesus rebukes him in turn and says, "(O)ught not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for 18 long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" This naturally leads into the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast.

The main thrust of these parables is about the Kingdom of God. Each of these parables speaks of the Kingdom as something small which grows into something large. The parables are about the Kingdom of God breaking into the world as a small mustard seed and growing into a large tree where birds can find their rest.

So why does Jesus tell these parables right after the story of healing on the Sabbath? When reading this passage, it can be easy to think it is about the legalism of the synagogue leader. But, there is something much deeper going on. When Jesus heals the woman, he shows a small example of what the Kingdom of God looks like. However, the synagogue leader can't see past his own cultural expectations to see the Kingdom of God unfolding right in front of his own eyes. Jesus subverts the synagogue leader's expectations of what he thought the Kingdom of God should look like.

In a way, I empathize with the synagogue leader. My wife is more charismatic than I am which made it difficult to find a church home when we first moved to Waco. One Sunday, we visited one of the more charismatic churches in Waco. This wasn't my first rodeo, but I realized something while we were there. While I might think that speaking in tongues or prophesying over people in the way they do is weird or uncomfortable, I shouldn't let my expectations hold me back from seeing the inbreaking of the Kingdom happening right in front of my eyes.

Lent is a time for us to look forward to Passion week which culminates in Resurrection Sunday. During this time, let's reflect on the inbreaking of the kingdom which starts with something as simple as Jesus healing a crippled woman and ends with a tree or a loaf of bread. Let's reflect on the Kingdom which started out of something as simple as a baby being born in a manger. Let's reflect on a Kingdom which subverts our expectations of what a king should look like; a king who was crowned with a crown of thorns. Let's pray, "your kingdom come" as we seek the inbreaking of the Kingdom which will fully culminate in the coming Christ.

THURSDAY, MARCH 28

2 CORINTHIANS 4:16 - 5:5

So we have no reason to despair. Despite the fact that our outer humanity is falling apart and decaying, our inner humanity is breathing in new life every day. You see, the short-lived pains of this life are creating for us an eternal glory that does not compare to anything we know here. So we do not set our sights on the things we can see with our eyes. All of that is fleeting; it will eventually fade away. Instead, we focus on the things we cannot see, which live on and on.

We know that if our earthly house—a mere tent that can easily be taken down—is destroyed, we will then live in an eternal home in the heavens, a building crafted by divine—not human—hands. Currently, in this tent of a house, we continue to groan and ache with a deep desire to be sheltered in our permanent home because then we will be truly clothed and comfortable, protected by a covering for our current nakedness. The fact is that in this tent we anxiously moan, fearing the naked truth of our reality. What we crave above all is to be clothed so that what is temporary and mortal can be wrapped completely in life. The One who has worked and tailored us for this is God Himself, who has gifted His Spirit to us as a pledge toward our permanent home.

BRYAN DEVRIES:

During a portion of each Sunday worship service, my local church displays a slide which lists several prayer needs of our congregation. It does not take long for me to become overwhelmed by the list of burdens experienced by fellow brothers and sisters within my local church, let alone the entire world. Concerns such as cancer, depression, loneliness, and addiction only begin to describe the prayer needs. In fact, the temptation is ever present to be overcome by the weight of these difficulties and, consequently, to think and live as if there is no other alternative. We begin to believe that we are just broken people. After all, suffering is difficult and oftentimes feels like it is never going to end.

But directly below this list of weighty needs is provided a list of praises and answered prayers. A once divided marriage has been reconciled. A woman has been designated cancer-free. A former drug addict has found life and freedom in Christ. In this lies an important reminder that even though we endure suffering, trials, and tribulations, and even in the very midst of these hardships, Jesus is working to make all things new. Yes, our mortal bodies are wasting away. Some days, even perhaps many days, we truly feel it. We are broken people, but that is not all we are. At the very same time that we feel these afflictions, Jesus is restoring our spirit, our inner man, by the power of his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has been given to us as a pledge of his faithfulness. That which has been started will be completed so that in the end God might be glorified in all things.

We do live in a tension in this time between the times. Jesus has come and brought the hope of resurrection. Sin and Death have already been defeated, but they have not yet been destroyed. Jesus will come again and bring this hope in its fullness as he puts an end to Sin and Death for good. So, take heart, my brothers and sisters! Our King is coming!

Over the course of the Lenten season, keep a prayer journal by logging personal prayer needs (and those of others) on the left side of the page. Commit to praying daily for these needs and interceding for others. On the right side of the page, write down any answered prayers and praises. Similarly, devote time each day to praising and thanking God for the ways in which he has yet again proved his faithfulness.

FRIDAY, MARCH 29

2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-15

In light of this, we live with a daring passion and know that our time spent in this body is also time we are not present with the Lord. The path we walk is charted by faith, not by what we see with our eyes. There is no doubt that we live with a daring passion, but in the end we prefer to be gone from this body so that we can be at home with the Lord. Ultimately it does not matter whether we are here or gone; our purpose stays fixed, and that is to please Him. In time we will all stand in judgment before the throne of the Anointed, the Liberating King, to receive what is just for our conduct (whether it be good or bad) while we lived in this temporary body.

So because we stand in awe of the one true Lord, we make it our aim to convince all people of the truth of the gospel; God sees who we really are, and I hope in some way that you'll look deeply into your consciences to see us as well. But we hope you understand that we are not trying to prove ourselves to you or pull together a résumé that will impress you. We are simply hoping that you will find a sense of joy in connecting with us. And when you are approached by others (who may value appearances more than the heart) asking questions about us, you will be able to offer an answer for them. If we seem out of control or act like fanatics, it is for God. But if we act in a coherent and reasonable way, it is for you. You see, the controlling force in our lives is the love of the Anointed One. And our confession is this: One died for all; therefore, all have died. He died for us so that we will all live, not for ourselves, but for Him who died and rose from the dead.

EMMITT DRUMGOOLE:

"When you're little, the piano can look like it has a thousand keys. You're staring at an expanse of black and white keys that stretches farther than two small arms can reach. Middle C I soon learned was the anchoring point. It was the territorial line between where the right hand and the left hand traveled. Between the treble and the bass clefs. If you could lay your thumb on middle C, everything else automatically fell in place." —Michelle Obama, Becoming

My mother is a musician. She won't tell you in casual conversation, but if you spend enough time with her, you could not help but pick up on it. Perhaps you may spot a pair of her treble clef earrings gracefully swinging from her earlobes or her rich soulful hum floating within the well-worn melody of a Gospel hymn. These are small glimpses that reveal the inner musician deep within her being. If that doesn't suggest musicianship, then the sleek black Yamaha baby grand piano in her front room is a most likely giveaway.

I never learned to play the piano, but my sisters did. Beginning with major scales and minor scales, then on to Chopsticks and Für Elise, my sisters learned together, my mother watching over them as their fingers glided with increasing confidence over the black and white ivory keys. When my sisters would get confused on their parts or struggled to find their starting place, my mother would guide their fingers to middle C. For experienced and aspiring musicians alike, the first lesson is also one of the most important lessons. No matter where you are in your journey, be sure to know where to find middle C.

For those who seek to follow God, we must also identify that which grounds our faith. For Paul, the love of Christ was his guiding hope and his guiding motivation for every action and reaction to his experiences in life. Through Paul's ministry of proclaiming the Gospel and establishing Christian communities, he would often encounter opposition, discouragement, abandonment, and imprisonment. Nevertheless, he was always of good courage. How so? Because Paul identified the grounding of his faith and what centered him in both his joys and challenges. He identified his middle C: Christ and him crucified.

The love of Christ compels our inner being to draw near to God, our source of life, while the cross of Christ compels us to die to ourselves daily. It is in the life of Christ that we experience both living and dying, and in so doing exemplify the life of Christ.

When we embrace both Christ's love and our cross, comfort and joy can be found even in the most dire of circumstances. We are able to have joy when nothing seems joy worthy. Likewise, we are able to set aside our selfish ways, no longer living as slaves to ourselves, but living freely for the One who died for all. We join in his death, so that we who are partakers of his life may experience that life with others. Our grounding truth, that we are invited into life and even death in him, ensures that we will never be lost in the discordant melodies that life can often bring. We know what is to be done, and we know where we must begin. We must find Christ and him Crucified. He alone is our middle C.

Consider the last few months. If your last few months were a song what would the title of that song be? Elaborate.

What areas in your life do you sense God calling you more deeply into Christ-likeness? Where is God calling you to deeper sacrifice and selflessness?

Lord, teach me to center my life around you. Amen

SATURDAY, MARCH 30

LUKE 15:1-10

Jesus became increasingly popular among notorious sinners—tax collectors and other social outcasts. The Pharisees and religious scholars noticed this.

Pharisees and Religious Scholars: This man welcomes immoral people and enjoys their company over a meal!

Jesus (with another parable): Wouldn't every single one of you, if you have 100 sheep and lose one, leave the 99 in their grazing lands and go out searching for the lost sheep until you find it? When you find the lost sheep, wouldn't you hoist it up on your shoulders, feeling wonderful? And when you go home, wouldn't you call together your friends and neighbors? Wouldn't you say, "Come over and celebrate with me, because I've found my lost sheep"? This is how it is in heaven. They're happier over one sinner who changes his way of life than they are over 99 good and just people who don't need to change their ways of life.

Or imagine a woman who has 10 silver coins. She loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the whole house, and search diligently until that coin is found? And when she finds it, doesn't she invite her friends and neighbors and say, "Celebrate with me! I've found that silver coin that I lost"? Can't you understand? There is joy in the presence of all God's messengers over even one sinner who changes his way of life.

DENISHA AKPAN:

A Doppler fetal monitor is used to detect the miraculous sound of a heartbeat. Medical professionals will use this machine during routine doctor's appointments to hear a heartbeat for the very first time and throughout pregnancy. This rhythmic sound carries with it the identity of life, purpose, ownership, and responsibility.

The parables of The Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin represent the heartbeat of God! The setting is of high importance because it emphasizes the company of Jesus, sinners. It shows the heart of Jesus to be among those who are considered the least (15:2).

We see several parallels within these parables, which points to a cycle of loss, searching, finding, and rejoicing as we read one parable after the other. Not once do we read about the "lost" being chastised or devalued for being out of place. Instead, we read how the cycle consistently ends with a celebration of the lost being found.

The main purpose of these parables is not to teach us that Jesus is tirelessly searching for the lost. The God of the Universe does not misplace or lose sight of anything. He sees you! He sees us! The purpose is to show that although we can never become lost to God, God can certainly become lost to us. These parables highlight the reality that God takes on this active responsibility and pursues us when we have lost our way.

An arrhythmia is an irregular heartbeat that beats out of its created rhythm. It may be too fast, too slow, or skip a beat. It has lost its normal way. Has your heart ever run ahead or away from God? Has it ever sat still in a place he didn't design for you? Have you ever skipped over the desired direction and path he was calling you to? Did you find yourself feeling lost, abandoned, unsearched for, or unseen?

When we take our eyes off of Christ, we began to wander. Jesus still sees us in those moments and does all the work to pursue us, toss us over his shoulder, and carry us back home (15:5-6). The parables require nothing of the "lost" other than to repent (15:7, 10).

Our Father willingly meets us right where we are, walks with us, talks with us, eats with us, hears our hearts, and leads us back to repentance each and every time. He desires to be near, even if that means abandoning all else to claim and heal our delicate, out of sync, individually lost hearts.

As both parables state, "Rejoice with me!" (15:6, 9). Today, let us rejoice and celebrate the King of Kings willingly abandoning everything, so the "One" can be brought back home again! And Again. And Again.

Daddy, thank you for always seeing me, hearing me, and carrying me back home! My heart is prone to wander. Yet your mercy never leaves me lost. I repent! Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me. Help me to see you. Amen!

SUNDAY, MARCH 31

LUKE 15:1-3, 11-32

Jesus became increasingly popular among notorious sinners—tax collectors and other social outcasts. The Pharisees and religious scholars noticed this.

Pharisees and Religious Scholars: This man welcomes immoral people and enjoys their company over a meal!

Jesus (with another parable): Wouldn't every single one of you, if you have 100 sheep and lose one, leave the 99 in their grazing lands and go out searching for the lost sheep until you find it?

MONDAY, APRIL 1

REVELATION 19:1-8

The scene changed. After this, I heard the great sound of a multitude echoing in heaven.

Multitude: Praise the Lord!

*Salvation and glory and power truly belong to our God,
for true and just are His judgments.
He has judged the great whore
who polluted the entire earth with her sexual immorality,
And He has vindicated the blood of His servants, which she shed.*

Again praise spilled from heaven.

Multitude: Praise the Lord!

The smoke rises up from her ruins forever and ever.

And the twenty-four elders and four living creatures fell on their faces and worshiped God who reigns on the throne.

Four Living Creatures and 24 Elders: Amen, Praise the Lord!

*A Voice from the Throne: Give praise to our God,
all of you, God's servants,
All who reverence Him,
small and great.*

And I heard what seemed to be an immense crowd speaking with one voice—it was like the sound of a roaring waterfall, like the sound of clashing thunder.

Multitude (in unison): Praise the Lord!

*For the Lord our God,
the All Powerful, reigns supreme.
Now is the time for joy and happiness.
He deserves all the glory we can give Him.
For the wedding feast has begun; the marriage of the Lamb to His bride has commenced,
and His bride has prepared herself for this glorious day.*

The church that suffered and remained pure is now prepared for a time of glorious celebration. As Israel has been the bride of God, now the church—the bride of the Anointed One—will be intimately united with the Lamb. God and His people are about to become one. The marriage feast has been arranged at great expense, and the festivities are about to begin. But before the wedding, some things need to be put in order.

*She had been given the finest linens to wear,
linens bright and pure,
woven from the righteous deeds of the saints.*

ADAM JONES:

It is natural for a 21st century Christian to open to Revelation 19 and be startled and confused. The chapter begins with God bringing the great whore to justice. This is not typically a passage talked about in Vacation Bible School. Explaining the metaphors (the “Great Whore” represents Babylon, and Babylon represents the Roman Empire) provides context but does not make the beginning of the passage any less uncomfortable. It would be easy to gloss over the first part of the passage and skip to the part about the Lord reigning. But during Lent the difficult parts are not skipped, they are confronted. Christians are surrounded with idols that compete for their affection and attempt to disrupt the marriage of Christ to his bride, the church. As we observe the many mistakes of our individual and corporate past and present, it can become discouraging to think about the many gods substituted for the One True God. But the passage reminds us that we have hope.

APRIL I, cont'd.

Even though the church is faced with adultery, God will ultimately crush the idols. Christ will rescue his bride. Because we can have hope that God will deliver us, Christians can be people of hope. Christian hope is powerful, not passive. Through the Holy Spirit, the church can actively work to address idolatry and oppression within the church and the world. Doing so will prepare the church for the marriage of the Lamb, when humanity's relationship with God will be fully restored.

Take a few minutes to reflect on your own life. What are the things that attempt to disrupt your relationship with God? Confide in someone you trust and together come up with practical ways to confront your idols with hope.

TUESDAY, APRIL 2

REVELATION 19:9-10

Guide: Write this down: "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage feast of the Lamb." What I am telling you are the true words of God.

At that, I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he refused my praise.

Guide: Stop it. Don't you see? I am a servant like you and your brothers and sisters, all who hold fast to the testimony of Jesus. Address your worship to God, not to me! For the testimony about Jesus is essentially the prophetic spirit.

ADAM DUBBERLY:

"Idols... We all need them."

I heard this line verbatim yesterday as I sat down to watch the conference championship round of the NFL playoffs. It was a pregame video package emphasizing the young versus old matchups that were coming in both games for that day. The video stated that we must have idols to look up to so that one day we can surpass them and become an idol ourselves. The final frame of the video showed a young actor portraying the Kansas City quarterback as a child watching the TV in his home as the New England quarterback played on his television. The phrase "Be your idol" slowly faded into "Beat your idol."

The opening phrase stuck with me. "Idols... We all need them." As I passed the phrase over and over in my mind, I began to think that the promotional video might be right. As humans we are created to worship; we crave something to devote ourselves to. In Isaiah 43:21, God declares that we were formed by God to declare his praise. So the football video may have been right. We would need idols in the absence of the one true God because we need to praise, we need something to adore, we need to devote ourselves to someone greater than ourselves. Lucky for us, the absence of God is not something that exists, and the person deserving of our worship is not someone we will ever be able to surpass in greatness. Our God is worthy of praise because he is bigger, kinder, more just, and perfectly holy, and we never will be.

Now, I don't want to decry the evil of an NFL commercial. While the wording was unfortunate, the message of the video was well intentioned: "Role models help us become better versions of ourselves." But as we see in Revelation, when that admiration turns to adoration, a big problem emerges. In our verses in Revelation, John falls down to worship a heavenly being (much more deserving than a human quarterback right?) but the angel reprimands him immediately. One who is delivering the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven is absolutely worthy of admiration, but we cannot let our admiration turn to adoration. There is only one worthy of our worship, and compared to God, an angel of heaven is merely "a fellow servant...to the testimony of Jesus."

Wealth, safety, Baal, family, a golden calf, sex, popularity, "likes," health, America.

Idols take every form we let them. Some are worthy of our admiration; none are worthy of our adoration. While we wait for the return of Christ in this season of Lent, what are we worshipping in his place?

Who is your role model? Why do you admire them? Take a moment to reflect on the fact that they are imperfect, and as worthy of admiration as they may be, they are not worthy of your adoration; they are not worthy of your worship.

As we wait for the return of Christ this Lenten season, let us not fill our waiting with unworthy idols.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 3

LUKE 9:10-17

The emissaries whom Jesus had sent out returned, and Jesus took them away from the crowds for a time of retreat in a city called Bethsaida. They gave Jesus a full report of their accomplishments and experiences. But soon the crowds discovered where they were and pursued Him. Jesus didn't turn them away; He welcomed them, spoke of the kingdom of God to them, and brought health to those who needed healing.

Picture what happened while in Bethsaida, where Jesus and His disciples were spending time with the crowds:

The sun is low in the sky, and soon it will be dusk. The twelve come to Jesus with advice.

Disciples: Send the crowd away so they can find lodging and food in the nearby villages and countryside. We're out here in the middle of nowhere.

Jesus: No. You give them something to eat.

Disciples: Are You kidding? There are at least 5,000 men here, not to mention women and children. All we have are five loaves and two fish. The only way we could provide for them would be to go to a nearby city and buy cartloads of food. That would cost a small fortune.

Jesus: Just do this: organize them in little communities of about 50 people each and have them sit down.

They do what Jesus says, and soon groups of 50 are scattered across the landscape.

Then Jesus takes the five loaves and two fish, and He looks up to heaven. He praises God for the food, takes each item, and breaks it into fragments. Then He gives fragments to the twelve disciples and tells them to distribute the food to the crowd.

Everyone eats. Everyone is satisfied. Nobody goes away hungry. In fact, when the disciples recover the leftovers, they have 12 baskets full of broken pieces.

KIM BREWER:

I'm going to say something that might sound shocking. It was shocking to me at first. I submit to you that this story, the feeding of the 5,000, isn't about the miracle of Jesus turning five loaves and two fish into enough food to not only feed the entire crowd but to have food left over. I said it was going to sound shocking. After all, every sermon I've ever heard on this story has come to the same conclusion. Give your meager gifts to God, and he will abundantly bless you more than you could ever imagine. I don't doubt this truth because I see it in my life day after day.

But what if there's more?

What if we're meant to see that Jesus wasn't just concerned about the spiritual needs of those who were in the crowd? Yes, we are told that he taught about the kingdom of God. I wouldn't have expected anything different. And he could have stopped there. But he didn't. He also healed those who needed to be cured and then fed them. These actions encompass not only the spiritual, but also the healthcare and material needs of those in attendance. As a church, we often elevate spiritual needs so far above anything else that we end up with this tunnel vision that keeps us from realizing someone's need for basic things such as food, shelter, and health. If we are to truly use Jesus as our example, I propose that the Church must focus on the whole person. Instead of launching right into a discussion about where someone will spend eternity if they were to die tonight, maybe we talk about if they have a place to stay tonight. Or if they need a meal. Or ask them about any hurts that we can pray about. If we start looking at people not only as sinners in need of a Savior, but also as a being created in the image of God, the Holy Spirit will take care of the rest.

And what if we're to read this and see that Jesus was trying to teach the disciples what it meant to live in community, that you can't just send people away when life gets difficult or when you don't have any answers. Because to be a true community means fully participating in the priesthood of the believer by looking after each other and providing for those that can't provide for themselves. What if this event was the precursor to the church who shared everything in common and made sure that no one had any needs? Maybe this is the call from Jesus for us, as the quote says, to build a longer table instead of a taller fence when we find that we have more than we need.

Lord, help us to always look to you as an example of how to live in the world. To learn that that loving you means loving our neighbor. And that to love our neighbor as ourselves means that we are to take care of each other in all facets of life, not just when it's convenient or easy. Help us to see each other as you see us and to love each other as you love us. In the love and power of your name, Amen.

THURSDAY, APRIL 4

PHILIPPIANS 2:19-24

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy your way. He will visit soon so that he may report to me how you are doing. To hear all that is going on with you will truly encourage my heart. There is no one like Timothy. What sets him apart from others is his deep concern for you and your spiritual journey. This is rare, my friends, for most people only care about themselves, not about what is dear to the heart of Jesus the Anointed. You know Timothy is genuine in the Lord's ways. He has been a faithful partner to me as we express the good news, as much as my own flesh and blood would have been. I expect to send him soon, and I will as soon as I see how things turn out here. I trust in the Lord that it won't be very long before I can come and be with you in person.

TROY DICKS:

A creative rewriting of Paul's letter as if it were personally sent to my church:

Dear Philippi,

I am reflecting as my future in this world is uncertain. I now share in the rejection and persecution of Christ. My bondage has taken me into the presence of more who were lost like us before we heard the good news. Society thought they cast me out, but the gospel is for the outcast. The people thought they made me a prisoner, but the Gospel liberates slaves to sin and death. I hope you allow our separation to be used the same way Christ's separation from the Father was used for the gathering of more to new life.

I know that you in the past struggled with the Idols of this world. I, too, was comfortable only looking to preserve my way of life. I enjoyed the pleasures of this life. I rejoice in you, brothers and sisters, that you no longer make plans to secure your future in this life. You have given up your possessions, turned from gluttony, greed, sexual immorality, and so much more. I am joyful most of all because your faith is great. You have been found to be a people of service, love, and truth in word and deed.

Timothy, my son, is trustworthy. He has proven himself to you as he championed the gospel with me. I hope to send him to you soon. Help him, my brothers and sisters, as God will send him to you in my absence because he genuinely loves you and will serve with you in the way of Jesus Christ. Do more for him than you would me in reverence to Jesus. Sacrifice as you have in the past to see that everyone in Philippi might witness the love Christ has given you.

I rejoice again at the hope I have for you that you will continue to live out the Gospel with or without Timothy until I return. Let there be more sent out from you without fear as you sent Epaphroditus to me for the Gospel's sake. If I die here or am freed, I am confident I will meet you again. This separation is temporary and necessary so that more believers may be present when we meet again in this life or the next.

Is the report about us collectively and individually in line with Jesus? What needs to change?

Are we making plans to satisfy our own interests or the interests of Jesus Christ and his Gospel?

Are we willing to be separated (losing reputation or relocating or changing social class) from friends and family for the sake of the Gospel?

Who can we support in the spreading of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

FRIDAY, APRIL 5

PHILIPPIANS 2:25 - 3:1

But for now, I think it is best to send Epaphroditus home to you. He has become my dear brother in the Lord. We have worked well together and fought great battles together, and he was an encouraging minister to me in my time of need. He could not wait to see you all. He was concerned for you when he found out you knew how sick he really was. In fact, he nearly died. But once again, God was exceedingly kind and covered him with His mercy. And I, too, by His mercy, have been spared sorrow on top of sorrow.

I am so excited to be sending him back to you! I can picture the joy on your faces when he arrives; I can feel my worries falling away. Welcome him joyfully in the Lord. Esteem all spiritual leaders like Epaphroditus because he placed his life in grave danger for the work of the Anointed; he risked his life to serve me when you couldn't.

It is time that I wrap up these thoughts to you, my brothers and sisters. Rejoice in the Lord! (I don't mind writing these things over and over to you, as I know it keeps you safe.)

MICHAEL LIGA:

Pure love, pure faith, pure hope,
Longing for Christ invited, longing for a body-united.
Sought and cared for the great Apostle Paul,
Witnessed God's mercy above all.
Through illness, distress, and long gone from home,
Never-ending, never-failing is my Lord, my perfect shalom.

I, Epaphroditus, risked it all,
Til death do us all,
Not for Paul,
Not for myself,
But because Christ risked it all,
His death for us all,
Not for Paul,
Not for me,
But for his bride, us all.

Homecoming awaits,
Dear brothers and sisters,

Obeys, not because we will retain gifts,
But because God's mercy inputs
Not luxurious poverty, but orthodox novelty
Rejoice, not because we are free from pain,
But because God's mercy retains
Not the absence of sorrow, but the promise for tomorrow.

To live is Christ,
To die is gain.

Heavenly Father, we yield in humility and hope in anticipation. I pray that as we reflect upon the testimony and service of Epaphroditus, we might see the tangible example of Christ. As such, I pray that the Church might obey your will until death, as the life to come waits for our resurrection. Knowing that our days are numbered, I pray that we do work that is fruitful to your kingdom. Until we wait for your Son's coming, we will stay faithful and diligent in the work ahead, in Jesus' Name through the Spirit, amen.

Practice sacrificial service and obedience. Our service to God doesn't have to be gratuitous and big. God simply is pleased by our obedience to him every day. Practice daily obedience, as Epaphroditus and Christ do. Yes, there will be suffering and sacrifices, but there will also be joy because Christ lives in us. To live is Christ, and to die is gain.

SATURDAY, APRIL 6

JOHN 11:45-57

As a result, many of the Jews who had come with Mary saw what happened and believed in Him. But some went to the Pharisees to report what they witnessed Jesus doing. As a result of these reports—and on short notice—the chief priests and Pharisees called a meeting of the high council.

Pharisees: What are we going to do about this man? He is performing many miracles. If we don't stop this now, every man, woman, and child will believe in Him. You know what will happen next? The Romans will think He's mounting a revolution and will destroy our temple. It will be the end of our nation.

Caiaphas, the High Priest That Year: You have no idea what you are talking about; what you don't understand is that it's better for you that one man should die for the people so the whole nation won't perish.

His speech was more than it seemed. As high priest that year, Caiaphas prophesied (without knowing it) that Jesus would die on behalf of the entire nation, and not just for the children of Israel—He would die so all God's children could be gathered from the four corners of the world into one people. In that moment, they cemented their intentions to have Jesus executed.

From that day forward, Jesus refrained from walking publicly among the people in Judea. He withdrew to a small town known as Ephraim, a rural area near the wilderness, where He set up camp with His disciples.

The Passover was approaching, and Jews everywhere traveled to Jerusalem early so they could purify themselves and prepare for Passover. People were looking for Jesus, hoping to catch a glimpse of Him in the city. All the while, some Jews were discussing Him in the temple.

Some Jews: Do you think He will decide not to come to Jerusalem this year for the feast?

In the midst of this confusion, the Pharisees and the chief priests ordered that if anyone knew the whereabouts of Jesus of Nazareth, it must be reported immediately so they could arrest Him.

JANET GALARZA:

"Many" believe in what they had seen, but "some" did not. In the previous passage, Jesus did a wonderful miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead. All those who had been present, mourning with the family, saw what Jesus had done. Lazarus had been in the grave for four days, and Jesus had the stone from his tomb removed and called him out from the dead. Everyone who was there saw what Jesus had done.

But even though everyone saw what Jesus had done, not everyone responded in the same way. Although many who saw did believe in Jesus, there was a small group that saw the event and, instead of believing in Jesus and praising God for what they had seen, went to inform the Pharisees.

Upon hearing this information, the Pharisees and chief priests gathered to meet upon deciding on what would result as a plot to kill Jesus. They did not rejoice in the good news. They did not give glory to God nor believe in Jesus.

How can people see the works of God, the miracle found in Jesus and hear about the wonders of the Lord, the salvation story, and not believe? The people present at the raising of Lazarus all saw and heard the same thing, yet not all reacted the same way.

In this time of Lent, we must prepare our heart to the living and ever-speaking word of God. Jesus has done a marvelous and wondrous work. He has saved us and wiped our sins away. We now belong to the family of God.

Let us remember that our calling is one of active service, active listening, active hearing, and active seeing. What does it mean to believe and how is that evident in my daily living? What have I turned a blind eye to? What do I need to confess to God?

"I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe." —Ephesians 1:18

SUNDAY, APRIL 7

JOHN 12:1-8

Six days before the Passover feast, Jesus journeyed to the village of Bethany, to the home of Lazarus who had recently been raised from the dead, where they hosted Him for dinner. Martha was busy serving as the hostess, Lazarus reclined at the table with Him, and Mary took a pound of fine ointment, pure nard (which is both rare and expensive), and anointed Jesus' feet with it; and then she wiped them with her hair. As the pleasant fragrance of this extravagant ointment filled the entire house, Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples (who was plotting to betray Jesus), began to speak.

Judas Iscariot: How could she pour out this vast amount of fine oil? Why didn't she sell it? It is worth nearly a year's wages; the money could have been given to the poor.

This had nothing to do with Judas's desire to help the poor. The truth is he served as the treasurer, and he helped himself to the money from the common pot at every opportunity.

Jesus: Leave her alone. She has observed this custom in anticipation of the day of My burial. The poor are ever present, but I will be leaving.

MONDAY, APRIL 8

HEBREWS 10:19-25

So, my friends, Jesus by His blood gives us courage to enter the most holy place. He has created for us a new and living way through the curtain, that is, through His flesh. Since we have a great High Priest who presides over the house of God, let us draw near with true hearts full of faith, with hearts rinsed clean of any evil conscience, and with bodies cleansed with pure water. Let us hold strong to the confession of our hope, never wavering, since the One who promised it to us is faithful. Let us consider how to inspire each other to greater love and to righteous deeds, not forgetting to gather as a community, as some have forgotten, but encouraging each other, especially as the day of His return approaches.

COURTNEY HAWORTH:

In order to fully understand the gravity of what is being said in this passage, we must first go back to the Old Testament. In chapter 16 of Leviticus, we learn, in immense detail, about the Day of Atonement. This was the one day of the year when one person, the high priest, was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies and make an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the people. In verse 2 we read these words of the Lord to Moses, “Tell your brother Aaron not to come just at any time into the sanctuary inside the curtain before the mercy seat that is upon the ark, or he will die; for I appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat.” After this terrifying warning, the Lord continues to provide Moses with the intricate details of what the high priest will do on the Day of Atonement. The instructions for Aaron to follow are extensive, but in brief, there will be a holy tunic, holy underwear, a turban, a sash, a bath, and lots and lots of blood.

With Leviticus 16 in mind, let us return back to our passage in Hebrews 10. The author of the book calls us “friends” as they remind us that we are no longer bound by the intense rules and restrictions of the Day of Atonement. Instead, we are to enter into the presence of God with confidence because the perfect sacrifice of Jesus’ blood has been made on our behalf. A new covenant has been established through which our sins are forgiven. There is no longer fear of death when entering the Lord’s presence because the great high priest, Jesus Christ, has taken on human flesh, given his life as a sacrifice, and been raised from the dead to be seated at the right hand of God.

In Leviticus, the high priest was required to “bathe his body in water” before putting on the holy attire. In verse 22 of Hebrews 10, the author beckons us to approach God “with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” As we read and reflect on this, may we not only remember the soul-cleansing blood of Jesus, but may we also be reminded of our own baptism when we were washed in the water.

“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.” Now that the author has called us to draw near to God and approach his presence with confidence, they remind us to hold fast to our hope in the Faithful One. And in assuring us of the hope we have in the God who keeps his promises, we are reminded of the Lord’s goodness and faithfulness. Just as his promise to redeem his created people and reconcile them back to himself was fulfilled once and for all through Christ’s sacrifice, so will all of God’s promises be fulfilled for he is faithful.

*As we continue on in this Lenten season,
May we be provoked to love and good deeds.
May we meet together with brothers and sisters in Christ.
May we encourage one another.
May we spend time in the presence of the Holy One.
May we hope in him alone.*

TUESDAY, APRIL 9

1 JOHN 2:18-28

My children, this is the final hour. You have heard that the antiChrist, the greatest enemy to His kingdom, is coming, but in fact, many antiChrists are already here. This development tells us how late it really is. A group has left us, but they were not part of our family. If they were truly our brothers and sisters, they would have remained for the duration with us. When they left, they made it ever so obvious that they were not part of us.

You have been given an anointing, a special touch from the Holy One. You know the truth. I am not writing to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it. You know that no lie belongs to the truth. The liar is the one who says, "Jesus is not really the Anointed One." This is the antiChrist, the one denying both the Father and the Son. Anyone who denies the Son does not know the Father. The one affirming the Son enjoys an intimate relationship with the Father as well.

Let the good news, the story you have heard from the beginning of your journey, live in and take hold of you. If that happens and you focus on the good news, then you will always remain in a relationship with the Son and the Father. This is what He promised us: eternal life.

I also am writing to warn you about some who are attempting to deceive you. You have an anointing. You received it from Him, and His anointing remains on you. You do not need any other teacher. But as His anointing instructs you in all the essentials (all the truth uncontaminated by darkness and lies), it teaches you this: "Remain connected to Him."

So now, my little children, live in Him, so that whenever He is revealed, we will have confidence and not have to hang our heads in shame before Him when He comes.

BRYAN DEVRIES:

"As for you, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. This is the promise which he himself made to us: eternal life." —v. 24-25

Abide. I often think of this word in terms of its application to laws or rules. People should be law-abiding citizens. Children should abide by their parents' instructions. Workers should abide by the policies of their employer. These instances reflect acts of obedience and compliance. Here in 1 John there is an element of this understanding of abiding. The apostle John reminds Christian believers to follow the teachings that they first received when they came into fellowship with Christ and one another. But it also goes much deeper. The word which we typically render here in English as "abide" is the Greek word "meno." It means to remain as one, to not depart, and/or live. In this sense it goes beyond just an instruction to follow rules for the well-being of ourselves and others. Here it is a fundamental calling. John reminds his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ that there are a host of other narratives in this world, which compete against the gospel for their attention. These counter narratives promise many things: wealth, fame, knowledge, power, happiness, etc. But these things are all temporary and do not ultimately fulfill the deepest human need. The only way to combat these competing ideas is to allow the One who satisfies now and forever to live and remain in us. In so doing, and only in so doing, we can live and remain in him. What is the promise if we allow the Spirit to abide in us and we abide in the Son and the Father? Eternal life.

The authors of the great hymn, "I Need Thee Every Hour" caught this vision of abiding in Christ. They realized that abiding in Christ is not just necessary for eternal life; it is also vital for our current life with its frequent ups and downs. The third verse states: "I need thee every hour, in joy or pain; come quickly, and abide, or life is vain." Christ desires that we abide in him because he can carry our burdens and he enjoys fellowship with his people. He promises to abide in us. Will we commit to abiding in him?

O Lord, we come to you broken, but we do come. We boldly approach your throne because we recognize our utter dependence on you and you alone. Help us to abide in the One who abides in us. Open our eyes to the things of this world which seek to distract us from abiding in you, the ultimate source of life. "[We] need thee, O [we] need thee; every hour [we] need thee! O bless [us] now, [our] Savior, [we] come to thee." Lord, we make that refrain the cry of our hearts this Lenten season. Help us to live and remain in you. Amen.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 10

LUKE 18:31-34

He took the twelve aside and spoke privately to them.

Jesus: Look, my friends, we are going up to Jerusalem. Everything the prophets have written about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the outsiders. They will mock Him, disgrace Him, and spit on Him; they will scourge Him, and they will kill Him. And on the third day, He will rise from death.

But they had no comprehension of what He was talking about. The meaning was hidden from them, and they couldn't grasp it.

HOLLY WINFREY:

In this section of scripture, Jesus tells the 12 disciples what was going to happen soon. He tells them he will be mocked, insulted, spat upon, flogged, and killed, but they do not understand.

The NRSV says “they did not grasp what was said.” This seems to happen a lot in the Gospels... The disciples witness healings, miracles, and teachings over and over for days on end. They travel, eat, and even sleep alongside of Jesus but they still “did not grasp what was said.”

It is easy to blame the disciples for being ignorant, but what does that say about us?

We can reflect upon our whole lives that are filled with grace made anew daily and we still sometimes cannot “grasp what was said.”

Sometimes life is filled with confusion, hurt, pain, death of loved ones, and sadness. It is easy and warranted to question God and question what is happening in our world, but we also have the blessing of new mercies every morning.

Not only in this passage did Jesus predict his death, he also predicted his resurrection.

In this season of Lent, may we not only reflect on the death of Christ, but we should reflect on the resurrection of our savior! There is hope in this world, hope in a new day, and hope of eternity with our Lord.

As you end your day, reflect on grasping what Jesus said and pray this prayer adapted from J. Philip Newell:

*At the rising of the sun and at its setting, you are God and we thank you.
At the beginning of our days and at their end, you are God and we thank you.
As day moves forward into night
As darkness covers the earth,
As the glory of the sun descends into the west,
As the whiteness of the moon appears in the heavens.
We gather again to be aware of your presence,
We gather again to seek your blessing.
Hear our prayers for the earth, O God,
Hear our prayers for the nations.
As we enter the stillness of night,
Hear our prayers for peace.*

Amen

THURSDAY, APRIL 11

HEBREWS 2:1-9

That is why we ought to pay even closer attention to the voice that has been speaking so that we will never drift away from it. For if the words of instruction and inspiration brought by heaven's messengers were valid, and if we live in a universe where sin and disobedience receive their just rewards, then how will we escape destruction if we ignore this great salvation? We heard it first from our Lord Jesus, then from those who passed on His teaching. God also testifies to this truth by signs and wonders and miracles and the gifts of the Holy Spirit lighting on those He chooses.

Now clearly God didn't set up the heavenly messengers to bring the final word or to rule over the world that is coming. I have read something somewhere:

*I can't help but wonder why You care about mortals
or choose to love the son of man.
Though he was born below the heavenly messengers,
You honored the son of man like royalty,
crowning him with glory and honor,
Raising him above all earthly things,
placing everything under his feet.*

When God placed everything under the son of man, He didn't leave out anything. Maybe we don't see all that happening yet; but what we do see is Jesus, born a little lower than the heavenly messengers, who is now crowned with glory and honor because He willingly suffered and died. And He did that so that through God's grace, He might taste death on behalf of everyone.

MARCIEL WHITEHURST:

Listen. Pay Attention. Reflect. These verbs come to mind in the opening sentences of Hebrews. The writer is calling us into a moment of reflection, as to anchor our souls in faith. Verse 1 exhorts us to pay attention so we will not drift away. It is easy to lose ourselves in the hustle and bustle of life.

If you're a student, you're likely managing a challenging course load with work, ministry, and possibly a family. If you're married, you're trying to manage your career, spouse, and children. If you're a ministry leader, you're constantly juggling care for the congregation and care for your home. Listen to the voice of God. Pay attention to his word. Reflect on your life and anchor your heart in God so you won't drift away in the business of life.

Salvation. Justification. Repentance. Security. Salvation begins with God. What a great word of comfort. Our new lives in Christ were solidified by the word of God. God loved us when we didn't love him back. God loved us when we strayed away from the foundations of our faith. God loved us when we weren't sure who we were in Christ. God's love secures our place in eternity because it is confirmed by him. We are saved, justified, forgiven, and secure in the hope of Christ. We can rest knowing that we will no longer pay the penalty of our sins because of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.

Care. Verses 6-8 share the uniqueness of humankind. God cares for us in ways that nature does not experience. In your imperfections, failures, brokenness, and sin, God cares for you. The infinite God cares for finite humans. The infinite God keeps humanity on his mind. The infinite God cares for humanity in a special way. This should give you comfort that God cares for you regardless of what you've done in the past. God cares for you in your darkest moments. God cares for you when life seems pointless. God cares for you in a special way.

Glory and Honor. Verse 9 concludes with a celebration that has permanently impacted the course of humanity, "...by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." Christ tasted death so you can live in his presence for eternity. That is a profound statement. Christ loved the world enough to die for our mistakes. He paid a price that we are unable to pay. If it were not for the grace of God, no man would be able to realize the beauty of salvation. As we observe the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, remember the price he paid. Without nails, blood, and an old rugged cross, we would not meet our purpose. Give all glory and honor to God for the great things he's done throughout this Lenten season because he cared enough for you to sacrifice his Son so that you may experience life eternal in his presence.

FRIDAY, APRIL 12

HEBREWS 2:10-18

It only makes sense that God, by whom and for whom everything exists, would choose to bring many of us to His side by using suffering to perfect Jesus, the founder of our faith, the pioneer of our salvation. As I will show you, it's important that the One who brings us to God and those who are brought to God become one, since we are all from one Father. This is why Jesus was not ashamed to call us His family, saying, in the words of the psalmist,

*I will speak Your Name to My brothers and sisters
when I praise You in the midst of the community.*

And in the words of Isaiah,

I will wait for the Eternal One.

And again,

Look, here I am with the children God has given Me.

Since we, the children, are all creatures of flesh and blood, Jesus took on flesh and blood, so that by dying He could destroy the one who held power over death—the devil—and destroy the fear of death that has always held people captive.

So notice—His concern here is not for the welfare of the heavenly messengers, but for the children of Abraham. He had to become as human as His sisters and brothers so that when the time came, He could become a merciful and faithful high priest of God, called to reconcile a sinful people. Since He has also been tested by suffering, He can help us when we are tested.

TYLER PHILLIPS:

The suffering of Jesus only looks like grace when it is viewed from the pit; suffering people see grace most clearly.

When we approach the cross as comfortable or affluent people, we find only a series of demands. Do you have too many possessions? Give them up! Do you have power? Create action steps towards downward mobility! When we approach the cross as (so we believe) wise people, it becomes a theoretical tool in our hands to be leveraged rather than the free gift of salvation. We impose the law of our own theories on others, often without indwelling them ourselves. Or, perhaps, we might approach the cross as people who are proud of our holiness or spiritual progress. Then, Lenten fasting becomes a tool to reach greater spiritual heights. It becomes a law we obey to get ahead in the eyes of our peers, even as we talk outwardly about following the example of the One who, “made himself nothing, by taking the very nature of a servant” (Phil 2:7). This law can’t be satisfied; it offers little hope.

How do we escape this propensity to turn the cross into a law? How do we take seriously the suffering Christ’s call to empty ourselves? How do we avoid filling ourselves with pride rather than grace? How do we approach the cross rightly?

It turns out that we don’t approach the cross at all; the suffering Christ has come to us, whether we want to see him or not.

When we gaze upon the suffering of the cross, we don’t see a rule or theory or practice to be emulated. We see ourselves. We see human brokenness at its most evil, disobedient, and oppressive. We are not self-sufficient and holy, but brutal, unwise, and radically finite. We are in the clutches of death itself. Those who suffer in their physical circumstances, who live their lives in the pit of despair, see this most clearly. For the weary, it is not an offense that Jesus came as one who suffers, but a profound hope that God has entered into the experience of suffering to give the gift of Christ’s resurrected life. God raises us to new life by grace; his burden is light.

While we all experience various degrees of blindness and self-deception, it is true that all us live in the pit. The world is caught in a web of “the power of death” (Heb 2:14), experienced more viscerally by those who suffer now, and yet experienced finally by all. At the beginning of Lent, we hear the reminder: “you are dust.” May we hear in these words the promise of a God who took on flesh and dust to redeem us for new life. As we hear the Lenten call to humility, may we be reminded of the grace that inspires and sustains our fast.

SATURDAY, APRIL 13

LUKE 22:1-13

This daily pattern continued as they came closer to the holiday of Unleavened Bread, also known as the Passover.

The chief priests and religious scholars continued looking for a way to kill Jesus; they hadn't been able to act yet due to their fear of the people's reaction. At this point, Satan entered into one of the twelve, Judas (also called Iscariot). Judas set up a private meeting with the chief priests and the captains of the temple police to discuss a plan for betraying Jesus and putting Him in their hands. This was just the kind of break they had been waiting for, so they were thrilled and agreed to a handsome payment. Everything was settled, and Judas simply waited for the right moment, when the crowds weren't around, to betray Jesus into their custody.

They came to the Day of Unleavened Bread, a holy day when a special lamb (called the Passover lamb) had to be sacrificed. Jesus chose Peter and John and gave them instructions.

Jesus: Go and make all the necessary preparations for the Passover meal so we can eat together.

Peter and John: Where do You want us to make preparations?

Jesus: When you enter the city, you'll encounter a man carrying a jar of water. Just follow him wherever he goes, and when he enters a house, tell the homeowner, "The Teacher has this question for you: 'Where is the guest room where I can share the Passover meal with My disciples?'" He'll show you a spacious second-story room that has all the necessary furniture. That's where you should prepare our meal.

They did as He said and found everything just as He said it would be, and they prepared the Passover meal.

JACOB BRENTON:

In John 14:2-3, the author records Jesus saying, "In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also." Christ spent much of his earthly ministry seeking to prepare his disciples to proclaim and live into the goodness of the Kingdom of God. While the Johannine author relays a message of Christ's heavenly preparation for the life to come, in the passage above other Gospel writers phrase this preparation in different metaphors. Mark, for example, compares this preparation to sight, going as far as to compare the spiritual "sight" of the disciples to the physical sight of Bartimaeus.

However, in today's passage from the Gospel of Luke, Christ is not the character making heavenly preparations or seeking to prepare the disciples for a Kingdom life. In this passage, the preparations for the Feast of the Unleavened Bread are left up to us. The author of Luke gives readers two examples of how we might prepare: the example of Judas with the chief priests and scribes, and the example of the other disciples seeking an upper room.

This Lenten season, we could choose to follow the example of Judas, believing we know best what to do and how to carry out what we believe to be God's will. Doing so may win us the approval and teamwork of esteemed leaders and a hefty paycheck. But the author of Luke warns us of the danger in trusting in our own way, claiming that Judas was not just guilty of betrayal, but was being used of Satan. There is no other way this author can make sense of why someone counted in Christ's disciples would betray him, other than this being the work of the enemy.¹ Sometimes even our best intentions fall awry and work against our stated goals.

Rather than following the earthly path in this season of preparation before Easter, may we instead follow the example of the other disciples. The disciples asked Christ where he would have them prepare the Passover meal in this passage. They then followed his directions to an upper room. In that upper room, they would soon celebrate God's grace in Passover at a table together, inviting even Judas into communion with them. All too soon, all the disciples in this room would betray or deny Christ, just as you and I are guilty of doing. Christ's body and blood were preparing to be broken for us.

In the meantime, however, before we can face the gruesome tragedy of Good Friday, or even imagine a resurrection, we have been called to prepare. Prepare our hearts. Prepare our souls. Prepare the world around us and the community in which we worship. Let us prepare, not out of our best guesses or intentions for what might be right, but instead prepare a table surrounded by sinners and betrayers, that we might soon commune with our savior. Amen.

¹Richard B. Vinson, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentaries: Luke, (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2008), 665.

SUNDAY, APRIL 14

LUKE 19:28-40

When He finished the parable, He pushed onward, climbing the steep hills toward Jerusalem.

He approached the towns of Bethphage and Bethany, which are near Mount Olivet. He sent two of the disciples ahead.

Jesus: Go to the next village. When you enter, you will find a colt tied—a colt that has never been ridden before. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you why you're untying it, just say, "The Lord needs it."

So the two disciples found things just as He had told them. When its owners did indeed ask why they were untying the colt, the disciples answered as they had been instructed.

Disciples: The Lord needs it.

They brought the colt to Jesus, threw their coats on the colt's back, and then sat Jesus on it. As Jesus rode along, some people began to spread their garments on the road as a carpet. When they passed the crest of Mount Olivet and began descending toward Jerusalem, a huge crowd of disciples began to celebrate and praise God with loud shouts, glorifying God for the mighty works they had witnessed.

Crowd of Disciples: The King who comes in the name of the Eternal One is blessed!

Peace in heaven! Glory in the highest!

Pharisees (who were in the crowd): Teacher, tell these people to stop making these wild claims and acting this way!

Jesus: Listen—if they were silent, the very rocks would start to shout!

MONDAY, APRIL 15

JOHN 12:1-11

Six days before the Passover feast, Jesus journeyed to the village of Bethany, to the home of Lazarus who had recently been raised from the dead, where they hosted Him for dinner. Martha was busy serving as the hostess, Lazarus reclined at the table with Him, and Mary took a pound of fine ointment, pure nard (which is both rare and expensive), and anointed Jesus' feet with it; and then she wiped them with her hair. As the pleasant fragrance of this extravagant ointment filled the entire house, Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples (who was plotting to betray Jesus), began to speak.

Judas Iscariot: How could she pour out this vast amount of fine oil? Why didn't she sell it? It is worth nearly a year's wages; the money could have been given to the poor.

This had nothing to do with Judas's desire to help the poor. The truth is he served as the treasurer, and he helped himself to the money from the common pot at every opportunity.

Jesus: Leave her alone. She has observed this custom in anticipation of the day of My burial. The poor are ever present, but I will be leaving.

Word spread of Jesus' presence, and a large crowd was gathering to see Jesus and the formerly deceased Lazarus, whom He had brought back from the dead. The chief priests were secretly plotting Lazarus's murder since, because of him, many Jews were leaving their teachings and believing in Jesus.

BEN HAWORTH:

He is the one,
who dines with the formerly dead,
having called them to life
once more.
He knows the clarity of loss

that comes to those left to mourn.
He knew that soon
it would be the fullness of his time
and our turn to weep.
Perhaps that is why he let her do it—

Knowing that we would remember,
the scene; of her
on the floor,
hair wet,
entangled around his feet,

Soaked with the perfume,
that ensnared our senses and sensibilities
and held us captive
within the walls of our own horror;
in that infinitesimal moment.

In his absence,
memory clarified by loss,
the scene plays once more in sequence,
of how we dined with the dead come alive.
Is this your gift to us—

the memory of that night?
That each time we smell perfume,
each time we are told to worry about the cost
because the sacrifice is not economically or politically
or socially efficient or sensible;

That each time, we might remember,
Your gift of the memory;
when you declared extravagance and overindulgence
the posture of devotion,
For those who have received their dead once again.

TUESDAY, APRIL 16

JOHN 12:20-36

Among the crowds traveling to Jerusalem were Greeks seeking to follow God and worship at the great feast. Some of them came to Philip with an important request.

Greek Pilgrims (to Philip): Sir, we are hoping to meet Jesus.

Philip, a disciple from the Galilean village of Bethsaida, told Andrew that these Greeks wanted to see Jesus. Together Andrew and Philip approached Jesus to inform Him about the request.

Jesus (to Philip and Andrew): The time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth: unless a grain of wheat is planted in the ground and dies, it remains a solitary seed. But when it is planted, it produces in death a great harvest. The one who loves this life will lose it, and the one who despises it in this world will have life forevermore. Anyone who serves Me must follow My path; anyone who serves Me will want to be where I am, and he will be honored by the Father. My spirit is low and unsettled. How can I ask the Father to save Me from this hour? This hour is the purpose for which I have come into the world. But what I can say is this: "Father, glorify Your name!"

Suddenly a voice echoed from the heavens.

The Father: I have glorified My name. And again I will bring glory in this hour that will resound throughout time.

The crowd of people surrounding Jesus were confused.

Some in the Crowd: It sounded like thunder.

Others: A heavenly messenger spoke to Him.

Jesus: The voice you hear has not spoken for My benefit, but for yours. Now judgment comes upon this world, and everything will change. The tyrant of this world, Satan, will be thrown out. When I am lifted up from the earth, then all of humanity will be drawn to Me.

These words foreshadowed the nature of His death.

Crowd: The law teaches that the Anointed is the One who will remain without end. How can You say it is essential that the Son of Man be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man You are talking about?

Jesus: Light is among you, but very soon it will flicker out. Walk as you have the light, and then the darkness will not surround you. Those who walk in darkness don't know where they are going. While the light is with you, believe in the light; and you will be reborn as sons and daughters of the light.

After speaking these words, Jesus left the people to go to a place of seclusion.

JULIA WALLACE:

The time was coming and would soon be passed
For that Event of which the prophets told:
Man's Savior would be hung on wooden mast
Fulfilling Israel's prophecies of old.

Though to the world He came as God had planned,
Man did not know Him by His humble form;
Nor could their simple minds yet understand
That death means Life in the New Earth transformed.

So as the day for Jesus' death drew nigh
He sought to share with them this verity:
All those who seek to live must learn to die
For only in Self's death are you then free.

But in man's form Christ knew man's bitter plight—
The sacrifice that must first be endured—
For Death does not go down without a fight
Nor Safety linger by without allure.

With troubled soul our Savior yearned to pray:
"Father, save me from this dark and dire hour";
Yet in His trust His prayer took new display:
"Glorify Your name with holy power."

Thus spoke our Savior days before his death,
May this same prayer be uttered on our breath.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 17

JOHN 13:21-32

Jesus was becoming visibly distressed.

Jesus: I tell you the truth: one of you will betray Me.

The disciples began to stare at one another, wondering who was the unfaithful disciple. One disciple in particular, who was loved by Jesus, reclined next to Him at the table. Peter motioned to the disciple at Jesus' side.

Peter (to the beloved disciple): Find out who the betrayer is.

Beloved Disciple (leaning in to Jesus): Lord, who is it?

Jesus: I will dip a piece of bread in My cup and give it to the one who will betray Me.

He dipped one piece in the cup and gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. After this occurred, Satan entered into Judas.

Jesus (to Judas): Make haste, and do what you are going to do.

No one understood Jesus' instructions to Judas. Because Judas carried the money, some thought he was being instructed to buy the necessary items for the feast or give some money to the poor. So Judas took his piece of bread and departed into the night.

Upon Judas's departure, Jesus spoke:

Jesus: Now the Son of Man will be glorified as God is glorified in Him. If God's glory is in Him, His glory is also in God. The moment of this astounding glory is imminent.

KATELYN KEELING:

Loss is impossible to grapple with.

Actively seeing something—someone—slip through your fingers rips helpless, confused, agonized howls of wind from your lungs. You are a spectator to your own grief. You are a silent witness to the betrayal of the safety you had constructed for yourself—a house built tall with wide walls, punctuated with hope, walls decorated in yellow and justice.

Jesus sits at the table like I imagine he has done so often with his disciples. The table is a familiar place to be with his most beloved companions. But this night is different from the rest. Jesus is aware of what is coming and troubled. He has tried to show them by kneeling and washing their dirty feet. He has tried to warn them before. But the hour is soon coming, and he feels it. A shift is building. Perhaps he looks around at the beloved disciples gathered, eating, drinking, laughing, completely oblivious to the sudden slicing betrayal that is lurking, lingering, waiting to strike and shatter.

Everything is about to change.

Jesus tries to warn his friends that they may not be caught up in the strength of the water, not be tossed and blindly twisted in the undertow, unable to make sense of what is happening.

The question hangs between them at the table like a crooked frame on a wall. Someone pokes another, nudging them to be the one to break the silence and ask for some clarification.

Lord, who is it?

In a final appeal, one last gesture, Jesus dips bread, and reaches.

Jesus' arm outstretched, bread between his fingers, eyes fixed on Judas. His disciple was in anguish. As clearly as he could see things spinning, shifting around them, he could see Judas. Judas reaches forward for Jesus, for the bread. His fingers brush Jesus' as he takes it from his outstretched grasp. »

APRIL 17, cont'd.

And then his disciple Judas is gone.

Satan had entered his body.

The rest of the room had fallen away. In that moment, all Jesus saw was Judas, his disciple, for whom he cared. But Jesus is still in control, despite the adversary. Things will happen because Jesus lets them, not because the adversary has willed it so. Jesus looks at Judas' eyes. He knows. Jesus says quietly, "What you are about to do, do quickly."

Once Judas is gone, Jesus turns to the rest of his confused disciples. He sees them, too. Just like he saw Judas.

Jesus Christ—God Incarnate—on the eve of his tremendous suffering, saw his suffering disciple, saw the weight, saw the anguish, saw the shift. He knew the grief that was waiting to wrap around Judas' shoulders once the night had passed and Satan was long gone.

Our God sees our anguish—even in the middle of our betrayal. Our God sees and knows and expresses compassion. Our suffering matters to God. God sees, and hears. God dips the bread and reaches it out to us, a sign of friendship.

We only need to sit down at God's table, reach our hand out, and take it.

THURSDAY, APRIL 18

JOHN 13:1-17

Before the Passover festival began, Jesus was keenly aware that His hour had come to depart from this world and to return to the Father. From beginning to end, Jesus' days were marked by His love for His people. Before Jesus and His disciples gathered for dinner, the adversary filled Judas Iscariot's heart with plans of deceit and betrayal. Jesus, knowing that He had come from God and was going away to God, stood up from dinner and removed His outer garments. He then wrapped Himself in a towel, poured water in a basin, and began to wash the feet of the disciples, drying them with His towel.

Simon Peter (as Jesus approaches): Lord, are You going to wash my feet?

Jesus: Peter, you don't realize what I am doing, but you will understand later.

Peter: You will not wash my feet, now or ever!

Jesus: If I don't wash you, you will have nothing to do with Me.

Peter: Then wash me but don't stop with my feet. Cleanse my hands and head as well.

Jesus: Listen, anyone who has bathed is clean all over except for the feet. But I tell you this, not all of you are clean.

He knew the one with plans of betraying Him, which is why He said, "not all of you are clean." After washing their feet and picking up His garments, He reclined at the table again.

Jesus: Do you understand what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and truly, that is who I am. So if your Lord and Teacher washes your feet, then you should wash one another's feet. I am your example; keep doing what I do. I tell you the truth: a servant is not greater than the master. Those who are sent are not greater than the one who sends them. If you know these things, and if you put them into practice, you will find happiness.

AUSTEN WINFREY:

This might not be so for you, but I feel like this story gets lost within all of the Easter festivities each year. Even though the author of John does not give us a "Lord's Supper" story like the other Gospels, we get a thought-provoking story that is unique to this Gospel. This story of Jesus being with his disciples gives us a wonderful image of who Jesus truly is.

The beginning is interesting here. The story begins with Jesus knowing that his "time" was coming very quickly. Then the author narrates that Jesus truly loves his companions even though the audience knows the disciples could have been much better on their travels. We also find out that Judas has already been convinced by the enemy to sell Jesus out. The classic "I love you but y'all are the worst" parental speech is surely on the horizon, right?

Jesus does something no one would be expecting, disciples or audience. As the supper begins, The Messiah takes off his outer robes and girds up in a towel or "an apron" as it says in Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. He starts to wash his disciple's feet. The Christ was doing servant's work, Gentile servant's work at that! Peter, once again, does not understand, and the audience is surely on Peter's side on this one. What is Jesus up to?

Jesus goes on to give us the best example of servanthood and love (other than the Crucifixion) throughout the entire Bible. Jesus washes all of the disciples' feet including Peter (the not so great leader of the crew) and Judas (the one that was talked into turning his back on him).

I think we all can relate to the disciples within this passage. The Lord gives us grace and mercy when we sin and cares so deeply for us that he sits with us and washes us clean. This foreshadowing of the sacrificial love that our Lord has for humanity is exhibited on the cross in Golgotha.

As we continue travelling through this holy journey, pray the words of Jesus into existence in your own life.

"So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

How do we bring this text alive in our own lives this week? How are we serving our neighbors (even the ones we don't think deserve it) as followers of the Lord Jesus?

FRIDAY, APRIL 19

JOHN 18:1 - 19:42

When Jesus finished praying, He began a brief journey with His disciples to the other side of the Kidron Valley, a deep ravine that floods in the winter rains, then farther on to a garden where He gathered His disciples.

Judas Iscariot (who had already set his betrayal in motion and knew that Jesus often met with the disciples in this olive grove) entered the garden with an entourage of Roman soldiers and officials sent by the chief priests and Pharisees. They brandished their weapons under the light of torches and lamps. Jesus stepped forward. It was clear He was not surprised because He knew all things.

Jesus: Whom are you looking for?

Judas's Entourage: Jesus the Nazarene.

Jesus: I am the One.

Judas, the betrayer, stood with the military force. As Jesus spoke "I am the One," the forces fell back on the ground. Jesus asked them a second time:

Jesus: Whom are you searching for?

Judas's Entourage: Jesus the Nazarene.

Jesus: I have already said that I am the One. If you are looking for Me, then let these men go free.

This happened to fulfill the promise He made that none of those entrusted to Him will be lost. Suddenly Peter lunged toward Malchus, one of the high priest's servants; and with his sword, Peter severed the man's right ear.

Jesus (to Peter): Put down your sword, and return it to the sheath. Am I to turn away from the cup the Father has given Me to drink?

So the Roman commander, soldiers, and Jewish officials arrested Jesus, cuffed His hands and feet, and brought Him to Annas (the father-in-law of Caiaphas the high priest). You may remember that Caiaphas counseled the Jews that one should die for all people. Simon Peter and another disciple followed behind Jesus. When they arrived, Peter waited in the doorway while the other disciple was granted access because of his relationship with the high priest. That disciple spoke to the woman at the door, and Peter was allowed inside.

Servant Girl (to Peter): You are one of this man's disciples, aren't you?

Peter: I am not.

All the servants and officers gathered around a charcoal fire to keep warm. It was a cold day, and Peter made his way into the circle to warm himself.

Annas (to Jesus): Who are Your disciples, and what do You teach?

Jesus: I have spoken in public where the world can hear, always teaching in the synagogue and in the temple where the Jewish people gather. I have never spoken in secret. So why would you need to interrogate Me? Many have heard Me teach. Why don't you question them? They know what I have taught.

While Jesus offered His response, an officer standing nearby struck Jesus with his hand.

Officer: Is that how You speak to the high priest?

Jesus: If I have spoken incorrectly, why don't you point out the untruths that I speak? Why do you hit Me if what I have said is correct?

Annas sent Jesus to Caiaphas bound as a prisoner. As this was happening, Peter was still warming himself by the fire.

Servants and Officers: You, too, are one of His disciples, aren't you? »

Peter: No, I am not.

One of the high priest's servants who was related to Malchus—the person Peter attacked and cut off his ear—recognized Peter.

High Priest's Servant: Didn't I see you in the garden with Him? »

APRIL 19, cont'd.

Peter denied it again, and instantly a rooster crowed.

Before the sun had risen, Jesus was taken from Caiaphas to the governor's palace. The Jewish leaders would not enter the palace because their presence in a Roman office would defile them and cause them to miss the Passover feast. Pilate, the governor, met them outside.

Pilate: What charges do you bring against this man?

Priests and Officials: If He weren't a lawbreaker, we wouldn't have brought Him to you.

Pilate: Then judge Him yourselves, by your own law.

Jews: Our authority does not allow us to give Him the death penalty.

All these things were a fulfillment of the words Jesus had spoken indicating the way that He would die. So Pilate reentered the governor's palace and called for Jesus to follow him.

Pilate: Are You the King of the Jews?

Jesus: Are you asking Me because you believe this is true, or have others said this about Me?

Pilate: I'm not a Jew, am I? Your people, including the chief priests, have arrested You and placed You in my custody. What have You done?

Jesus: My kingdom is not recognized in this world. If this were My kingdom, My servants would be fighting for My freedom. But My kingdom is not in this physical realm.

Pilate: So You are a king?

Jesus: You say that I am king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the cosmos: to demonstrate the power of truth. Everyone who seeks truth hears My voice.

Pilate (to Jesus): What is truth?

Pilate left Jesus to go and speak to the Jewish people.

Pilate (to the Jews): I have not found any cause for charges to be brought against this man. Your custom is that I should release a prisoner to you each year in honor of the Passover celebration; shall I release the King of the Jews to you?

Jews: No, not this man! Give us Barabbas!

You should know that Barabbas was a terrorist.

Pilate took Jesus and had Him flogged. The soldiers twisted thorny branches together as a crown and placed it onto His brow and wrapped Him in a purple cloth. They drew near to Him, shouting:

Soldiers (striking at Jesus): Bow down, everyone! This is the King of the Jews!

Pilate (going out to the crowd): Listen, I stand in front of you with this man to make myself clear: I find this man innocent of any crimes.

Then Jesus was paraded out before the people, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe.

Pilate: Here is the man!

Chief Priests and Officers (shouting): Crucify, crucify!

Pilate: You take Him and crucify Him; I have declared Him not guilty of any punishable crime!

Jews: Our law says that He should die because He claims to be the Son of God.

Pilate was terrified to hear the Jews making their claims for His execution; so he retired to his court, the Praetorium.

Pilate (to Jesus): Where are You from?

Jesus did not speak. »

APRIL 19, cont'd.

Pilate: How can You ignore me? Are You not aware that I have the authority either to free You or to crucify You?

Jesus: Any authority you have over Me comes from above, not from your political position. Because of this, the one who handed Me to you is guilty of the greater sin.

Pilate listened to Jesus' words. Taking them to heart, he attempted to release Jesus; but the Jews opposed him, shouting:

Jews: If you release this man, you have betrayed Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king threatens Caesar's throne.

After Pilate heard these accusations, he sent Jesus out and took his seat in the place where he rendered judgment. This place was called the Pavement, or Gabbatha in Hebrew. All this occurred at the sixth hour on the day everyone prepares for the Passover.

Pilate (to the Jews): Look, here is your King!

Jews: Put Him away; crucify Him!

Pilate: You want me to crucify your King?

Chief Priests: We have no king but Caesar!

Pilate handed Him over to his soldiers, knowing that He would be crucified. They sent Jesus out carrying His own instrument of execution, the cross, to a hill known as the Place of the Skull, or Golgotha in Hebrew. In that place, they crucified Him along with two others. One was on His right and the other on His left. Pilate ordered that a plaque be placed above Jesus' head. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." Because the site was near an urban region, it was written in three languages (Greek, Latin, and Hebrew) so that all could understand.

Chief Priests (to Pilate): Don't write, "The King of the Jews." Write, "He said, 'I am King of the Jews'!"

Pilate: I have written what I have written.

As Jesus was being crucified, the soldiers tore His outer garments into four pieces, one for each of them. They wanted to do the same with His tunic, but it was seamless—one piece of fabric woven from the top down. So they said,

Soldier (to other soldiers): Don't tear it. Let's cast lots, and the winner will take the whole thing.

This happened in keeping with the Hebrew Scriptures, which said, "They divided My outer garments and cast lots for My clothes." These soldiers did exactly what was foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus' mother was standing next to His cross along with her sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. Jesus looked to see His mother and the disciple He loved standing nearby.

Jesus (to Mary, His mother): Dear woman, this is your son (motioning to the beloved disciple)! (to John, His disciple) This is now your mother.

Now you know who "the beloved disciple" is: the last eyewitness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Mary has become family to John, fulfilling the dying wish of Jesus, his Savior. For those who are gathered at the foot of the cross, family is less about blood kinship than it is about covenant obedience.

The mother of the Lord will serve the redemptive purposes of her son and the Savior of the world until her last day on earth. Anyone feeling sorry for himself should think about Jesus. He spent all this time before His death, and through His death, demonstrating how to love and how to serve. He is asking John to do no more in serving Mary than He did in serving us.

From that moment, the disciple treated her like his own mother and welcomed her into his house. Jesus knew now that His work had been accomplished, and the Hebrew Scriptures were being fulfilled.

Jesus: I am thirsty.

A jar of sour wine had been left there, so they took a hyssop branch with a sponge soaked in the vinegar and put it to His mouth. When Jesus drank, He spoke:

Jesus: It is finished!

In that moment, His head fell; and He gave up the spirit. The Jews asked Pilate to have their legs broken so the bodies would not remain on the crosses on the Sabbath. It was the day of preparation for the Passover, and that year the Passover fell on the Sabbath. The soldiers came and broke the legs of both the men crucified next to Jesus. When they came up to Jesus' cross, they could see that He was dead; so they did not break His legs. Instead, one soldier took his spear and pierced His abdomen, which brought a gush of blood and water. »

APRIL 19, cont'd.

This testimony is true. In fact, it is an eyewitness account; and he has reported what he saw so that you also may believe. It happened this way to fulfill the Hebrew Scriptures that “not one of His bones shall be broken”; and the Hebrew Scriptures also say, “They will look upon Him whom they pierced.” »

After all this, Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple who kept his faith a secret for fear of the Jewish officials, made a request to Pilate for the body of Jesus. Pilate granted his request, and Joseph retrieved the body. Nicodemus, who first came to Jesus under the cloak of darkness, brought over 100 pounds of myrrh and ointments for His burial. Together, they took Jesus' body and wrapped Him in linens soaked in essential oils and spices, according to Jewish burial customs.

Near the place He was crucified, there was a garden with a newly prepared tomb. Because it was the day of preparation, they arranged to lay Jesus in this tomb so they could rest on the Sabbath.

MICHELLE SHACKELFORD:

What if the Gospel of John had ended at John 19:42? Aside from the fact that the Gospel of John would likely not exist if the story ended in this way, let's just imagine that it did. Jesus is betrayed by Judas, then betrayed by Peter three times while Jesus is put on trial through the night, then he is flogged and crucified. His body is regarded by the Jews as a problem, and they want it removed from the cross before the Sabbath Day. Thus, a soldier pierces Jesus' side to ensure he is completely dead, and his body is laid in a nearby tomb.

Boom, the end of the story. (In our imaginative understanding, of course.)

What if Holy Week did not end in resurrection? What if the entire point of Holy Week was not its culmination on Sunday?

At the risk of sounding crazy by posing these questions, I ask that you wrestle with the possibility. Not the possibility that Jesus might not have resurrected—we try not to be heretics. Instead, I invite you to wrestle with the reality that while the disciples and others were living out the narrative we know so well today, they didn't know how it would end.

At this point in the living of the narrative, Peter and Judas see first-hand the effects of their betrayal and denials of Jesus. Jesus is taken away by the religious leaders, beaten to a pulp, and crucified for all to see. The Rabbi they had given their lives to follow is now dead, and not just dead but dead after a murder of the least honorable kind. And he is placed in a tomb, as far as we know, forever.

I imagine that for all involved, including Jesus, the time between Jesus' death and Resurrection Sunday were the longest days in the history of time and space.

The reality of Good Friday reminds us of the age-old question that likely all of us have asked of God—where are you?

Sometimes we come to Good Friday like the other 10 disciples who did not directly betray or deny Jesus, broken and confused but perhaps with less guilt on our shoulders. At other times we come to Good Friday like Judas and Peter, wondering how we could have betrayed and denied our Rabbi who loved us so well and washed our feet just a few hours before his death. Regardless of the person we are when we approach Good Friday, today is a day in which we encounter the seeming absence of God, when God seems totally silent.

Good Friday is an opportunity for us to gaze into the deep darkness of the tomb. The stone has covered the entryway, and no light can enter in. In the same way, it is an opportunity for us to look into the deep darkness of our own souls.

To be sure, we know that there is great hope in the reality of Good Friday, for we know what is coming soon. But the disciples didn't know that; not because Jesus hadn't told them, but because they were blind to the meaning of Christ's teachings.

What is your Good Friday today? Perhaps it is an outward situation among friends or relatives. Perhaps it is within you, where it seems that God is absent and silent in the places and spaces where you need God the most. Perhaps it takes on a communal meaning, and the entirety of our world lies in wait together on this day for hope to be re-born in very real ways.

Whatever Good Friday means to you cognitively or theologically, as we journey with Jesus through his death and resurrection, may we pause in the gap that lies between Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday. Here, we find deep darkness and a strong absence of hope. Perhaps it is in these very places within and around us that God is preparing one of the greatest miracles of all time, regardless of whether we are the “faithful” disciples or the very betrayer of our Lord.

SATURDAY, APRIL 20

JOHN 19:38-42

After all this, Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple who kept his faith a secret for fear of the Jewish officials, made a request to Pilate for the body of Jesus. Pilate granted his request, and Joseph retrieved the body. Nicodemus, who first came to Jesus under the cloak of darkness, brought over 100 pounds of myrrh and ointments for His burial. Together, they took Jesus' body and wrapped Him in linens soaked in essential oils and spices, according to Jewish burial customs.

Near the place He was crucified, there was a garden with a newly prepared tomb. Because it was the day of preparation, they arranged to lay Jesus in this tomb so they could rest on the Sabbath.

BEN FOUNTAIN:

It truly is finished. Jesus of Nazareth gave up his spirit, and now a broken, naked, and almost unrecognizable corpse hangs on the cross. It is the body of a man who said he would destroy the temple and in three days raise it up. This same man performed signs, cast out demons, taught of the kingdom of God, and loved people. He was supposed to be the messiah and save Israel from the world, the political kingdom of Rome. Instead, his limp body is pinned to a tree. Jesus is dead and no matter how much we want to skip over this part of the narrative, we can't because Jesus had to die. What now? Jesus is dead and we know what happens on Easter, but how do we not fast forward?

This is where we find in the narrative a man named Joseph of Arimathea, who is a disciple of Jesus, but not openly because of fear from the very people who killed Jesus. Luke's gospel and Mark's place him in the same party with the Jews, and Matthew's gospel lets us know he is also a man of wealth. What we gather from this is Joseph is well acquainted with Jewish religion and customs, but we can also infer he is well acquainted with many of the men who plotted to kill Jesus. He knows their anger, pride, and fear and that he would die the same death for following Jesus, yet it is Joseph and not one of the 12 that comes to Pilate and asks for the body. Another man named Nicodemus enters in with myrrh and aloes to help bury the body of Jesus. Nicodemus is also a Pharisee if we remember back to John 3, which in turn makes this an odd duo to perform the burial. We know one who for sure has personally interacted with Jesus and another who most likely has, but the narrative stands that these two men are the ones to bury the body of a dead man. They don't know Jesus will rise again in three days and victory will be had over the sins of all. All they know is the man they chose to follow and believe was crucified, and they did what they thought to be necessary. They would have to find some way to move on despite broken dreams and dying hope, but first they chose to bury the man whom they respected, loved, and followed. In their faithfulness they buried him.

This isn't about a moral obligation that we have to be faithful even when all hope is lost even though certainly we could see the lesson there. This is about the reality that Jesus is dead, and the actions performed by Joseph and Nicodemus affirm that. Jesus died in order for every sin to be paid for and for us to be united with God, and this could not happen if Jesus simply pretended to be dead. This passage points to the body in the tomb to recognize Jesus is dead and buried with him is sin. We see the weight of our sin and humanity and the horror of the cross because it was we that lead him there. However, even in the sobering thought of our sin, we see something else in Jesus' death, and that is love. Jesus embodied what he said in John 15:13 because he really did lay down his life. He really did pay it all and satisfied God's wrath. Jesus chose to take on the sins of the world not just from before him and during his life, but the sins of today and the future. His real death symbolizes the great love of God and the cost of God's choice so we wouldn't have to die. Today we reflect on God's love and sacrifice and acknowledge that in order for Jesus to be resurrected, he really did die.

EASTER SUNDAY, APRIL 21

LUKE 24:1-12

Early on Sunday morning, even before the sun had fully risen, these women made their way back to the tomb with the spices and ointments they had prepared. When they arrived, they found the stone was rolled away from the tomb entrance, and when they looked inside, the body of the Lord Jesus was nowhere to be seen. They didn't know what to think. As they stood there in confusion, two men suddenly appeared standing beside them. These men seemed to glow with light. The women were so terrified that they fell to the ground facedown.

Two Men: Why are you seeking the living One in the place of the dead? He is not here. He has risen from the dead. Don't you remember what He told you way back in Galilee? He told you that the Son of Man must be handed over to wicked men, He must be crucified, and then on the third day He must rise.

The women did remember Jesus' words about this, so they returned from the tomb and found the eleven and recounted for them—and others with them—everything they had experienced. The Lord's emissaries heard their stories as fiction, a lie; they didn't believe a word of it. (By the way, this group of women included Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, along with a number of others.) Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. When he reached the opening, he bent down, looked inside, and saw the linen burial cloths lying there. But the body was gone. He walked away, full of wonder about what had happened.