



JOURNEY TO THE CROSS

READINGS AND DEVOTIONS FOR LENT

lent

PROVIDENCE CHURCH

Journey to the Cross

READINGS & DEVOTIONS FOR LENT

Kendal Haug & Will Walker

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· SOLI DEO GLORIA ·

Contents

PREFACE: WHAT IS LENT?	5
INTRODUCTION: HOW TO USE THIS BOOK	6
FIRST DAYS OF LENT	8
FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT	19
WEEK ONE: <i>REPENTANCE</i>	20
SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT	39
WEEK TWO: <i>HUMILITY</i>	40
THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT	59
WEEK THREE: <i>SUFFERING</i>	60
FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT	78
WEEK FOUR: <i>LAMENT</i>	79
FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT	97
WEEK FIVE: <i>SACRIFICE</i>	98
SIXTH SUNDAY OF LENT	117
WEEK SIX: <i>DEATH</i>	118
EASTER SUNDAY	137

Preface: What is Lent?

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are at the very heart of Christianity. The good news of the gospel is that God has acted in history to conquer evil and reconcile sinners to himself through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. For those who have been united with this Jesus – who have submitted to Him as savior and Lord – have been united with Him in the likeness of His death and will one day be united with Him in the likeness of His resurrection (Rom. 6:5). Lent, therefore, is about living out of our union with, and identity in, Christ. Lent is first and foremost about the gospel making its way deeper into our lives.

On the Christian calendar, Lent (from Latin, meaning “fortieth”) is the forty days beginning on Ash Wednesday and leading up to Easter Sunday. Sundays themselves are not counted in these forty days, as they are generally set aside as days of renewal and celebration (“mini-Easters” of sorts).

The number forty carries great biblical significance based on: the forty days of rain Noah and his family endured in the flood, the forty years Israel spent in the wilderness, Jesus’ forty-day fast in the wilderness, the forty days Jesus spent on the earth after his resurrection, and so much more. Forty days has been used by God to represent a period of trial, testing, and preparation.

Likewise, Lent is a season of preparation and repentance during which we anticipate the death (Good Friday) and resurrection (Easter Sunday) of Jesus. It is this very preparation and repentance – aimed at grasping the intense significance of the crucifixion – that gives us a deep and powerful longing for the resurrection, the joy of Easter.

As the title of this devotional suggests, Lent is a journey to the cross: meditating on our sin and weakness, looking to Jesus as our perfect example and substitute, and being heightened in our worship of his victory over Satan, sin, and death. On the cross, Jesus took our place to appease God’s righteous anger toward our sin and rebellion. He was separated from God so that we could experience union with God. He was crushed by God so that we could be adopted by God. He was raised with God so that we too might be raised with God. The drama of how this unfolded is the story of Lent.

The journey of Lent is to immerse ourselves in this grand story so that it might increase our appreciation of Easter and love for Jesus. May we mourn the darkness in our hearts and rejoice in the light of God who came into the world to save us!

Introduction: How to Use This Book

This book is a devotional guide for the season of Lent. Each day consists of Scripture readings, meditations, reflection questions, and prayers—all aimed toward directing your heart to God and deepening your understanding of the events that led to Easter.

Each week of the devotional is focused on a different theme: repentance, humility, suffering, lament, sacrifice, and death. Although not exclusive to Lent, these themes capture the content and tone of the season. They point us to Jesus, and to put it simply: Lent is about Jesus. Our aim is to reflect meaningfully on his journey to the cross, so that we might take up our cross and follow him.

The themes are built out as you go through the week, and every day will follow a distinct pattern ...

Call to Worship

Worship starts with God. He calls us into his presence, and we respond by coming before him in faith. Each day in this guide begins with a *Call to Worship*, which is generally a Scripture reading or Psalm that directs our focus to God as the initiator of our salvation and our Covenant Lord. Our Lenten journey must begin and end with God.

Confession

As we consider the greatness of a holy God and experience his presence in our lives, we are mindful of our sin and idolatry. God does not turn us away, but invites us to confess our sins and be cleansed. This is a normal rhythm of worship, but during Lent we have a heightened sense of desperation in this regard. Use these moments each day, not merely reciting lines on a page, but as a way to walk humbly before God and deepen your desire to live in the light with him.

Contemplation

This section of the guide is made up of three things: 1) GOSPEL READINGS follow the narrative of Jesus' own journey to the cross from the gospel according to Mark. 2) DEVOTIONAL thoughts touch on some aspect of that week's theme. Engage these sections with a spirit of submissiveness to God's Word and openness to his grace. 3) REFLECTION questions relate to the devotional. Use these to press the truths of the gospel deeper into your heart and wider into your life. How is God speaking to you, and how do you want to respond?

Closing Prayer

Using the words from various liturgical resources, these prayers close each day as an added way to commune with God and express your desire to be transformed by his Spirit.

A word about Sundays: Sundays in Lent are intended as a foretaste of Easter Sunday—they are “mini-Easters.” This guide includes professions (statements) of faith in Christ and hymns about his resurrection on each Sunday in order to allow you to rest, reflect, and rejoice. When Sunday comes each week, feast on these great truths with much joy and celebration in your heart.

A word about fasting: Traditionally, Lent is a time when we fast, or give things up. When we deny ourselves familiar comforts, we learn something powerful about our weaknesses, our needs, and our deepest longing for God. Fasting is a tangible, physical activity that points to our spiritual longing to be rooted in Jesus alone and find our true comfort and joy in him. Consider how you might meaningfully engage in the discipline of fasting this Lenten season as a supplement to this guide.

Lastly, a pastoral encouragement: Our God is “able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us” (Eph. 3:20). Give yourself to Him this Lenten season through meditation, preparation, and repentance. Your reward will be the same as that of Jesus: the overwhelming joy of Easter resurrection. May you be renewed in your love and affection for him!

The First Days of Lent

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* Day 1: Ash Wednesday

Call to Worship

Blow a trumpet in Zion; sound an alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming; it is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness! Like blackness there is spread upon the mountains a great and powerful people; their like has never been before, nor will be again after them through the years of all generations. "Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster."

[JOEL 2:1-2, 12-13]

Confession

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Amen.

[PSALM 51:1-2,6,10-12]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

[MARK 8:27-30]

DEVOTIONAL

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Lenten season. The aim of Ash Wednesday is threefold: to meditate on our mortality, sinfulness, and need for a savior; to renew our commitment to daily repentance in all of life; and to remember with confidence and gratitude that Jesus has conquered sin and death. Our worship today should be filled with gospel truth because it is a witness to the power and beauty of our union with Christ and to the daily dying and rising with Christ that comes with this unity.

During a traditional Ash Wednesday service, ashes are applied to the worshiper's forehead (the "imposition") in the shape of a cross. In Scripture ashes or dust symbolize

mortality (Gen. 18:27), mourning (Est. 4:3), judgment (Lam. 3:16), and repentance (Jon. 3:6). An ashen cross serves as a reminder that you come from dust and to dust you shall return one day. It is also a call to “Consider yourself dead to sin and alive in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:11).

As you begin this journey of Lent, you must start with rending your heart—tearing it from self-absorption and binding yourself (mind and devotion) to Jesus. Regardless of your current state or your proneness to wander, you must “Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love” (Joel 2:13). After all, Lent is not about your faithfulness, but rather about the faithfulness of Jesus on your behalf. He is the faithful One!

REFLECTION

1. *Spend some time being still before God, asking the Spirit to search you: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23-24).*
2. *What hesitations or hindrances do you have in beginning this journey of Lent?*
3. *What habits/tendencies of self-absorption do you need to tear yourself from?*

Closing Prayer

Journey with us, O holy God, as we begin our way to the cross. Sharpen our focus, that our attention may center more on you than ourselves. Lead us through the shadows of darkness and prepare our hearts, that we might be a people of prayer, ready to perceive and respond to your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. In his name we pray. Amen.

[WSB]

Call to Worship

The Lord upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing. The Lord is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works. The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desire of those who fear him; he also hears their cry and saves them. The Lord preserves all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy. My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and let all flesh bless his holy name forever and ever.

[PSALM 145:14-21]

Confession

Holy and merciful Father, we confess to you ... that we have sinned by our own fault in thought, word, and deed; by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart, and mind, and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not forgiven others as we have been forgiven. We have been deaf to your call to serve, as Christ served us ... We have grieved your Holy Spirit.

[BCP]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

[MARK 8:31-38]

DEVOTIONAL

The Lenten season is a time of preparation and repentance in which we make our hearts ready for remembering Jesus' passion and celebrating Jesus' resurrection. It can be a deeply meaningful journey so long as we get past mere externalities.

You may be familiar with the outward aspects of Lent: ashes on foreheads, conversation about giving up sugar or caffeine or TV. But Lent, like spiritual life in general, is not merely external. There are internal realities that give depth and meaning to our actions, things like humility, sacrifice, repentance, and faith. In other words, there is more to Lent than deciding between coffee and TV.

You could, of course, just decide that you are not going to drink coffee for forty days and be done with it, but to do so would be to deprive yourself of far more than coffee. You would miss something that God wants to do *in* you this season.

Jesus fasted from food and water for forty days in the wilderness. It was not a religious ritual or merely a display of his restraint. Rather, it was a time of trial and temptation which he endured by entrusting himself to God and being nourished on the Word of God. The point of the wilderness, for Jesus, was to experience the real presence of God with him, and power of God at work in him.

Though they may look the same from the outside, participating in Lent and “playing” at Lent are entirely different realities. So give up coffee if you want to, but don’t pretend that the absence of a beverage will sufficiently help you draw near to God.

The Lenten practice of denying usual comforts is a means of deepening our sense of union with Jesus, and reorienting our life around the things of God. We give up that which distracts and entangles because we want to experience some real joy and freedom in Christ.

When considering what to give up for Lent, begin with whatever habits or things lie at the heart of your consumer lifestyle. Forsake them for the sake of being consumed by the God-life. Lent is not about what we do for Christ. It is about plumbing the depths of what he has done for us.

REFLECTION

1. *In what areas of your life have you settled for the appearance of godliness?*
2. *In what ways do you sense a need for the Spirit of God to make Jesus real to you?*

Closing Prayer

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. Teach us, Lord, to count our days that we may gain a wise heart. Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

[BASED ON PSALM 90]

Call to Worship

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." A voice says, "Cry!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

[ISAIAH 40:3-8]

Confession

Most merciful God whose Son, Jesus Christ, was tempted in every way, yet was without sin, we confess before you our own sinfulness; we have hungered after that which does not satisfy; we have compromised with evil; we have doubted your power to protect us. Forgive our lack of faith; have mercy on our weakness. Restore in us such trust and love that we may walk in your ways and delight in doing your will. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And he said to them, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power." And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only.

[MARK 9:1-8]

DEVOTIONAL

At the onset of Jesus' ministry, John announced his coming in fulfillment of Isaiah 40: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." This is the cry of Lent: Prepare the way of the Lord! Make room for him in your thoughts and activities and affections.

An appropriate response to this announcement is to take stock of our lives, to reconsider how we are living our lives in light of God's presence and power made available to us in Jesus. And that is what Lent is for, to reflect on our lives as they are and as they could be.

Giving up a habit or a food or a pleasure is not distinctly Christian. People give up things all the time in the name of self-help, or worse, vanity and vengeance. The point of Lent is to reorient life God-ward. This reorientation has to do with desert and wilderness.

A "wilderness experience" in our language usually means one has been gone for a while and now returns with new insight or perspective, "a new lease on life." Whether it is a trip to the third world, or a hike in the mountains, people are stripped of their usual comforts, removed from the safety of familiarity, and are forced to see the world from a different vantage point.

Our aim during Lent is something like a wilderness experience. We want to shake up our lives significantly enough that when we reach for our usual comforts and grasp a fistful of air, we are forced to cling to Christ – his body, his blood. We want to see just how upside down our world really is as our "important things" prove to be perishable goods, as the light shines on our "righteousness" and exposes the layers of "self" beneath the surface, and as our "busy" lives are shown to simply lack wisdom.

The desire is a new lease on life, a view into the vast world of God, a deep breath and long look above the tree line of self-absorption. So in Lent we focus on getting away from the life of flesh and into the life of the Spirit, denying our ways and embracing God's.

The point of giving things up is not to be reminded of how much we miss them, but rather to be awakened to how much we miss God and long for his life-giving Spirit. This means, of course, that Lent is not only about giving up things. It is also about adding things, God-things.

- » Having given up junk food for a healthy diet, what will you do with the energy you gain?
- » Having given up reading magazines, what will you read now?
- » Having given up Facebook, to whom will you devote meaningful conversation?
- » Having given up lunch, how will you rely on God for the strength of "food from heaven"?
- » Having given up TV as a default activity, how will you use that time to cultivate quality family time?
- » Having given up isolation, how will you immerse yourself in community?
- » Having given up shopping, will you see those who need clothing in your city?
- » Having sacrificed whatever form of selfishness you indulge, how will you meet the needs of others?

The practice of giving something up for Lent is a way of entering into the wilderness with Jesus. Don't worry about whether or not your sacrifice is a good one. It's not a contest. Just make your aim to know Christ more fully, and trust him to lead you. Seek to replace that thing with devotion to Christ—his Word and his mission. God may lead you to give up and take up more as you go. That's good. Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus.

REFLECTION

1. *What measures will you take to reorient your life around the things of God during this season?*
2. *What will you give up? What will you add?*

Closing Prayer

Merciful God, we come to you today realizing that we are not how you want us to be. Help us let go of our past, that we may turn toward you and live again the life of faith. Help us call out our fear and hatred, our anger and self-pity. Lift the burden they place on our shoulders. Help us set aside our guilt and enter a season of healing. As we pray and fast today, help us become simple people, that we may see you plainly. Let us draw near to you now. Amen.

[WSB]

Call to Worship

Let us look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

[HEBREWS 12:2-3]

Confession

God of exodus and wilderness, God of refuge and help, hear us now as we make our confession to you. In times of temptation we forget what you have done for us. You give us everything we need, yet we often remain unsatisfied; you trust us to care for creation, yet we often abuse that trust and spoil what we have been given. You show us the way we are to follow, yet we often continue on the path of self-indulgence and self-centeredness. Forgive us, we pray. We ask for your direction, your patience, your love, in the name of Jesus Christ, who, in spite of his temptations, was faithful to your saving Word. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And as they were coming down the mountain, he charged them to tell no one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean. And they asked him, “Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” And he said to them, “Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.”

[MARK 9:9-13]

DEVOTIONAL

Lent is a journey that ends with resurrection, but by way of the desert and the cross. Anyone who takes it seriously quickly discovers the challenge of entering into this wilderness. It is not a casual shift—we must devote ourselves to it as a matter of the heart. Nor is it a sudden shift—we have to unravel the entangled habits of our bodies, and make ready our preoccupied minds. In these first few days, we have been trying to downshift slowly and thoughtfully from our normal routine into the rhythms of Lent.

There are perhaps a few groups of people at this point: latecomers, early goers, and those who are neither here nor there.

Latecomers: If Lent were a party, you just walked in the door and aren't quite sure what has already been said and done. Part of you wants to blend in like you know what you are doing, and part of you wonders if you should just go home and try to make it on time next year. Good news for you: The Lent party is a gospel party! The gospel of Jesus does not discriminate against when or how you got here. It only beckons you to come as you are.

What should you do now that you are here? Set aside some time for understanding and prayer. Catch up on the reading, worship Jesus, and ask him to lead you in this journey. Decide on something that you will give up and something that you will take up in order to draw near to God. Do not worry about what you have missed or whether or not you are doing it right. "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble" (Matthew 6: 33-34).

Early Goers: If Lent were a race, you are starting to lose energy. You began with enthusiasm, but you have already forgotten at times what you are supposed to be doing, or you may simply feel defeated by how well everyone else seems to be doing. Good news for you: You are worse than you think, but also far more loved by God than you ever imagined. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, which means you have been set free from "performing Lent". Indeed, the very thing that Lent beckons us to consider is the death of Jesus, in whom all of our unfaithfulness and shame was condemned once for all, so that we may breathe easy in the company of God's family.

What should you do if you have already strayed? Get back on course. Repent of making Lent about what you do or don't do (or what other people do) and run to the cross where "God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do, by sending His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Romans 8:3).

Neither Here Nor There: You are neither here (late) nor there (gone). You are running with the pack, fully present at the party. Good news for you: The gospel is deeper and fuller than you ever imagined! "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted" (Hebrews 12:1-3).

This is what Lent is about: joining the company of God's people to consider Jesus' suffering and death; denying ourselves and being sustained by God so that we may run straighter and stronger; gaining hope and strength from the faithfulness of God in Christ Jesus. Wherever you are today – behind, astray, on course – fix your eyes on Jesus, our brave frontrunner and generous host.

REFLECTION

1. *What have you learned about God and yourself in these first days of Lent?*
2. *What areas of fear or pride are hindering you from fully committing to this journey?*
3. *How would you articulate your need for God and your longing to know his presence and power more authentically than you do?*

Closing Prayer

O Lord our God, long-suffering and full of compassion: Be present with us as we enter this season in which we recall our Savior's sufferings and celebrate his triumph. Give us your Holy Spirit, so that as we acknowledge our sins and implore your pardon, we may also have the strength to deny ourselves and be upheld in times of temptation through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

[WSB]

First Sunday of Lent

This is the good news that we have received, in which we stand, and by which we are saved: Christ died for our sins, was buried, was raised on the third day, and appeared first to the women, then to Peter and the Twelve, and then to many faithful witnesses. We believe Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One of God, the firstborn of all creation, the firstborn from the dead, in whom all things hold together, in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell by the power of the Spirit. Christ is the head of the body, the church, and by the blood of the cross reconciles all things to God. Amen.

[BASED ON 1 CORINTHIANS 15; COLOSSIANS 1]



How deep the Father's love for us
How vast beyond all measure
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure
How great the pain of searing loss
The Father turns His face away
As wounds which mar the Chosen One
Bring many sons to glory

Behold the Man upon a cross
My sin upon His shoulders
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers
It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished
His dying breath has brought me life
I know that it is finished

I will not boast in anything
No gifts, no power, no wisdom
But I will boast in Jesus Christ
His death and resurrection
Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer
But this I know with all my heart
His wounds have paid my ransom

[STUART TOWNEND]

Week One

o o o

REPENTANCE

Call to Worship

Oh sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth! Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the Lord made the heavens. Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness.

[PSALM 96:1-5, 11-13]

Confession

Father in heaven, we need to be forgiven. We have tried to heal ourselves. Instead of trusting in the death of Jesus Christ, we have tried to work off our guilt. We have tried so hard to pile up good deeds that outweigh our sins. Instead of trusting in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have tried to change through our own efforts. We have tried to change our hearts through sheer willpower. Forgive us for trying to heal ourselves. Forgive us for neglecting your grace. Forgive us and heal us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And when they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and scribes arguing with them. And immediately all the crowd, when they saw him, were greatly amazed and ran up to him and greeted him. And he asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" And someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a spirit that makes him mute. And whenever it seizes him, it throws him down, and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid. So I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able." And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me." And they brought the boy to him. And when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. And it has often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." And Jesus said to him, "'If you can!' All things are possible for one who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You mute and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again." And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by

the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” And he said to them, “This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.”

[MARK 9:14-29]

DEVOTIONAL

Lent is a time of particular focus on repentance, which does not mean that we atone for our sins, or even that we feel deep shame about them. Repentance is our response to the fact that Jesus atoned for our sins and bore our shame on the cross.

The word “repentance” has a negative connotation in our culture. To say that someone needs to repent implies they have done something *really* bad, and should feel really bad about it. While that may be true in some respect, the call to repentance is fundamentally good news. One Bible commentator says, “Repentance from the beginning of time to this present hour has been, and remains, the most positive Word from the heart of God.”

Because God made us for himself, our highest good is to repent and turn to God.

In the Old Testament, the sins of God’s people and their lack of repentance led to their exile. God ordained their ruin and captivity at the hand of Pagan nations. It was horrific at every level: physical, national, cultural, and spiritual devastation. As awful as it sounds, it was actually a demonstration of God’s love. As a father disciplines his children, “the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Hebrews 12:6). The point of discipline is correction and restoration. It is an invitation to fellowship.

Paul says it is God’s kindness that leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). God calls us to himself, convicts us of our sins, comforts us with his love, and changes us by his grace. Our repentance begins and ends with God! When we make it about what we will do to make things right with God, we veer off the road of faith into one of two ditches.

On one side of the road, we express resolve: “I will never do that again!” We act as if we can wipe the slate clean with our sincerity and earn a pardon with our passion. When we promise to never do that again, we are saying that we really can be good enough, and we’ll prove it this time. But repentance is not a do-over. Nor is it a system of works-righteousness. Rather, it is a means of experiencing the abundant grace of God toward us in Christ. Grace exposes our desire to be good enough and digs to the root of our sins. Who we really are—that is the realm in which grace intends to go to work, to renovate our lives and help us work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Mere resolution defrauds repentance of its lasting true fruit.

On the other side of the road, we express remorse: “I can’t believe I did that.” Feelings of shame and guilt are natural, but the Bible says there are two kinds of grief: worldly and godly (2 Corinthians 7:10). “Worldly grief” turns us in on self so that we are primarily concerned with our feelings and self-interests. So we feel bad, but only because we got caught. We are troubled, but only until the negative attention goes away. A common symptom of worldly grief is self-loathing: If we can just feel bad enough, or punish ourselves enough, we can make up for what we’ve done and appease God’s wrath

against our sin.

“Godly grief,” on the other hand, “produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret” (2 Corinthians 7:10).

The one who has godly grief understands that her sin is against God as well as others, and that it reflects a deeper wickedness in her heart. She knows that admitting and regretting are not the same as repenting.

True repentance always terminates on Jesus. It does not wallow in self-loathing or delight in self-flagellation. Rather, it allows an honest sense of our sinfulness to drive us toward the depth of Christ’s mercy in the gospel.

REFLECTION

1. *In what areas are you feeling shame, guilt, a need for a do-over, or drive to “do better”?*
2. *Take a few moments and confess these areas to God. Thank him for his grace and mercy in the gospel that frees us from being slaves to these things.*

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, out of your love and mercy you breathed into dust the breath of life, creating us to serve you and our neighbors. In this season of repentance, restore to us the joy of our salvation and strengthen us to face our mortality, that we may reach with confidence for your mercy, in Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

[WSB]

Call to Worship

I will recount the steadfast love of the Lord, the praises of the Lord, according to all that the Lord has granted us, and the great goodness to the house of Israel that he has granted them according to his compassion, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. For he said, "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely." And he became their Savior. In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

[ISAIAH 63:7-9]

Confession

Holy and merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not forgiven others as we have been forgiven. Accept our repentance, O God, and let your anger depart from us. In your mercy forgive what we have been, help us amend what we are, and direct what we shall be, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." But they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him. And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

[MARK 9:30-37]

DEVOTIONAL

Last Wednesday, people around the world marked their foreheads with ash as a sign of their humanity and mortality. We find this symbolism and practice throughout the Bible. When Abraham petitioned God, he said, "Behold, I have undertaken to speak to

the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27). When the people of Nineveh heeded Jonah’s warning, the king “arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.” This is the posture of repentance.

In the book of 2 Chronicles, God instructs Solomon in a prayer of repentance “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (7:14).

When God’s people went astray, there was often a corporate aspect to their repentance. They would fast and mourn and pray together for God to heal and bless their nation. That kind of repentance is appropriate when we find ourselves feeling the consequences of cultural or national sin. For instance, I am both troubled and tempted by the rampant materialism and objectification in our country. I am a participant, but it is much bigger than any one person. We need to repent corporately for these kinds of things.

As necessary as corporate repentance was and is, it can become more about ritual than relationship. The prophets spoke out against this kind of empty worship. The prophet Joel warned Israel to “rend your heart, not your garments” (Joel 2:13). One commentator summarizes the point like this: “What was needed was not ritual alone, but the active involvement of the individual in making a radical change within the heart and in seeking a new direction for one’s life. What was demanded was a turning from sin and at the same time a turning to God. For the prophets, such a turning or conversion was not just simply a change within a person; it was openly manifested in justice, kindness, and humility.”

The term used extensively by the Prophets (*shubh*) means “to turn” or “return,” so the idea of returning from exile is in view. John the Baptist was cut from the same fabric as the prophets. He called his own generation to make a radical turn in the direction of their lives by pointing them to the soon-coming Messiah. Life as usual is crooked. Right side up is upside down. Make room for the straight path of Jesus.

Here is the beginning of repentance: in humility we must turn to God. This is simple, but essential. God is the Creator of heaven and earth, the primary mover, the ultimate point of reference, and our highest good—King of kings and Lord of lords. Because the world and everything in it belongs to God, any form of repentance must be addressed to him.

That seems obvious, but it is possible to believe in God and functionally exclude him from our lives, to act as if we are ultimate. How often do we consider our circumstances and think, “What do I need right now? How do I feel about this? What do I like or not like about this?” We even enter into prayer and worship with these kinds of self-focused questions. In these moments, though we believe in God, we are not functionally aware of his presence with us and his providence in our circumstances. If we were, we might say, “Father, you know what we need;” “How do you feel about this?” “Teach us your will, that we may know what is ‘good and pleasing and perfect’” (Romans 12:3). Notice two key differences: the questions are directed toward God, not self, and are concerned

for “us” and not just “me.”

So the first step in repentance is to address God. Acknowledge his sovereign control over all things, recognize his presence in our circumstances, and invite him into the stuff of our lives. Questions about what we think and feel and need are not bad questions, but they are secondary matters. Our primary focus is on God, his kingdom, and his righteousness (Matthew 6:33). Above all else, repentance is an address to God in which we plead for his mercy and rest in Christ. In Christ, our ashes are turned to beauty, for he has clothed us with the garments of salvation and covered us with the robes of righteousness (Isaiah 63).

REFLECTION

1. *What areas of your life seem apart from God’s control? Where is it difficult to feel God’s presence in your circumstances?*
2. *Is there any area of your life in which you are resistant to God’s control? Confess this in prayer to him.*

Closing Prayer

God of love, as in Jesus Christ you gave yourself to us, so may we give ourselves to you, living according to your holy will. Keep our feet firmly in the way where Christ leads us; make our mouths speak the truth that Christ teaches us; fill our bodies with the life that is Christ within us. In his holy name we pray. Amen.

[WSB]

Call to Worship

Let us worship God, who has done great things. We rejoice in our God, who made a way through the desert of this world. Let us worship God, who has caused streams of mercy to flow in the wasteland. We are the people God has formed through Christ; we worship him, and we rejoice! Let us worship God in spirit and in truth. We praise God for the grace that has saved us. Alleluia! We rejoice!

[BASED ON ISAIAH 43:19-21]

Confession

Almighty and merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against You and one another in both our actions and our inactions. We recognize that in Jesus Christ our light has come, yet often we choose to walk in shadows and ignore the light. Gracious God, forgive our sins and remove from us the veil of darkness that shrouds our lives. Illumined by your Word and sacrament, may we rise to the radiance of Christ's glory. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward. "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.' For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

[MARK 9:38-50]

DEVOTIONAL

An honest friend once confessed, "My struggle with repentance has to do with knowing myself well enough to see what I should repent of." Even when we know that repentance is important in general, we do not know what to repent of in particular. Similarly,

sometimes we have a matter to bring to God, but we do not know the depths of it. This is why we begin by seeking the face of God, because we need the bright light of God's presence to shine into the dark corners of our soul.

This is the good news that John proclaims: "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). In the Old Testament, "light" speaks to the character of God and the truth of his word. In John's writings, "light" is the glory of God in the person of Christ and the practice of his Word. The latter is an unveiling and extension of the first. God has revealed himself, not only in Christ but also in his Word. There is no falsehood in what he has revealed. It is right and trustworthy, truth in its purest form.

Addressing God is not a formality. It is a desperate cry: "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me" (Psalm 139:23-24).

But that sounds mechanistic. What about the mysterious working of God? What is the dynamic of spiritual repentance that differentiates it from natural penitence? And more practically, "How do I get from regret over my sin to true repentance?"

That God is the one who beckons and arouses the repentance is what makes it more than empty ritual. Natural repentance is aroused by fear or pride. Regarding fear, I turn from my ways because I dread consequence or loss of approval from others. Regarding pride, I tell myself that I need to turn from my ways because "I'm a good Christian." I must stop doing this because I don't want to be like the kind of person who does this. I'm not like that.

We cannot fix or manage the problem of sin. You can only be rescued from it and sanctified in the midst of it.

If you are observing Lent – denying usual comforts, reorienting your life in some way around the things of God – then isn't this your prayer? *God, illuminate my path! Search my heart and test my anxious thoughts. Shed light on my dark ways. I want a clear picture of what my life is about, and where it is headed. How will I turn from my ways if I cannot see them?*

When we feel the pains of hunger, the habitual desire to watch TV, the consuming desire to buy something, our thoughts turn here: "Search me, O God." We want to know the ways that sin has entangled us, blinded our perception, distorted our tastes, and weakened our desires. We are preparing the way in our heart for God to speak, making straight a path in our soul for the Spirit to work.

How does God search and test and illuminate? God has many instruments, I suppose, but we must begin with the sharpest one. The Bible is the Word of God, "sharper than any double-edged sword ... dividing soul and spirit ... judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). His word searches us, convicts us, enlightens us, and leads us. This is why a greater devotion to the Bible is a good idea during the Lenten season. Remember, we give up and take up. When we give up something, we make a clearing in

our lives, but unless the clearing is filled up with light, we stumble around in the dark. “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:103-105).

REFLECTION

1. *In what areas of your life are you merely trying to fix or manage the problem of sin?*
2. *What would it look like for you to move toward true repentance in that area?*

Closing Prayer

Creator of the heavens and earth, Speak light into our immeasurable darkness. Expose the chaos of our steps and bring order to our lives. Light of the World, full of grace and truth, open up the kingdom of heaven to us. Tell us what you hear and see and give us ears and eyes.

Call to Worship

Oh give thanks to the Lord; call upon his name; make known his deeds among the peoples! Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wondrous works! Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice! Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually! Remember the wondrous works that he has done, his miracles and the judgments he uttered, O offspring of Israel his servant, children of Jacob, his chosen ones! Sing to the Lord, all the earth! Tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the Lord made the heavens.

[1 CHRONICLES 16:8-13, 23-26]

Confession

Father of mercies, we confess that we have sinned against you. By your Holy Spirit, come and work repentance into our hearts. Help us to see you as you are: with outstretched arms, a loving heart, and power to save. Help us to see Jesus, the friend of sinners, and to follow him more faithfully. As we have received him, so strengthen us to walk in him, depend on him, commune with him, and be conformed to him. Give us an experience of your grace that makes us bold, that we might joyfully live for the good of others. Amen.

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and crowds gathered to him again. And again, as was his custom, he taught them. And Pharisees came up and in order to test him asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away." And Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate." And in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. And he said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

[MARK 10:1-12]

DEVOTIONAL

I have a friend who tells me, "Reality is your friend." I have another friend who replies, "But sometimes your friends are ugly."

When we bring our lives into the light, they aren't as pretty as we thought they were. But that is the reality we must embrace. It truly is our friend because it points us to God, who "is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

The primary means by which we walk in the light with God is the simple act of confession. Confession does not secure forgiveness, but rather facilitates the power of forgiveness and its cleansing effects in the life of the believer. The acting agent is the blood of Jesus, his sacrificial death on the cross (1:7). Jesus is willing and able to cleanse us and restore our relationships if we will just get the real us in the light.

To walk in darkness means to neglect or even deny the truth about God, or about ourselves. A toddler may close his eyes and believe that he cannot be seen, but only because he does not see. So it is with the one who walks in darkness. He thinks his way of seeing things is in fact reality, but nothing could be further from the truth. He will not be able to have fellowship with God or with others until he sees according to truth. In the realm of truth, he will be able to relate to God and others on the basis of what is real, and experience the cleansing power of Jesus' blood.

That sounds great "on paper," but when it comes to our actual lives, we are not always so eager to be honest. Instead, we deal with reality in other ways. We distract ourselves with the artificial lights of work, entertainment, and hobbies. When ordinary busyness doesn't work, we take it up a notch and give ourselves to something so completely that it consumes us. These are our addictions. When we feel stressed or bored or frustrated or empty inside, they take us to another world where we can forget all our troubles, at least for a little while. Addictions are dangerous because we are not only ignoring reality, but also making it far worse.

Pretense, excuses, busyness, addiction, and despair are not our friends. They turn us in upon ourselves, which leads to death. An honest look at reality, with God's help, gives us insight into the way sin works and how God can bring healing and transformation to those areas of our lives. We can only repent of what we are able to see.

This is why community is such an essential context for true repentance. Our friends and family can see our blind spots, and we need them to tell us. We need a community where it is okay to talk about our struggle against temptation and sin, how sin is wrecking our lives, and how our brokenness causes us to look for worth and joy and peace outside of God. Can we talk about these things without condemning each other, or condoning sin? Can we talk about our problems without someone always fixing it with their "solutions"? Can we weep with those who weep, and pray for those who are struggling?

Search us, O God! Every dark corner and every hidden place.

REFLECTION

1. *What is your practice of confession and repentance like? Where do you need to grow?*

- In what areas of your life are you guilty of walking in isolation? What areas of your life does no one know about? What areas of struggle do you need to invite your community into?*

Closing Prayer

God of call, God of transformation, God of the Lenten journey, help us to discern your still, small voice. Open us to change and growth, that we may walk with Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

[WSB]

Call to Worship

Let us worship God, for whom our souls thirst and our bodies long. Listen, listen to me, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. We have come to hear the Word God has sent. God's Word will not return empty but will accomplish through us his holy purpose. Let us worship God in spirit and in truth. Then we will go out with joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills will sing; the trees of the field will clap their hands.

[BASED ON ISAIAH 55:2, 11-12; JOHN 4:24]

Confession

Everlasting God, fountain of all life and the true home of every heart: our hearts are restless until they rest in you. Yet we confess that our hearts have been enslaved by selfish passion and base desire. We have sought after many things and have neglected the one thing needful. We have not loved you with our whole hearts; help us to turn to you and find forgiveness. Lead us home, that we may again find in you our life and joy and peace. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

[MARK 10:13-16]

DEVOTIONAL

Let's return to God's instruction to Solomon: "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Repentance begins with seeking God, embracing the way things really are by confessing them, and then turning from our wicked ways. For confession and turning to occur, we must take responsibility for our sin.

The word "sin" has been defined and applied in so many ways that I think most people have adopted a rather trite view of sin that is focused on specific actions that break God's rules. The biblical concept of sin is not less than that, but it is more, much

more. Let me share a helpful definition of sin from a 19th century philosopher named Soren Kierkegaard: “Sin is the despairing refusal to find your deepest identity in your relationship and service to God. Sin is seeking to become oneself, to get an identity, apart from God.”

We were made for God, to center our entire life on him and find our sense of worth and purpose in him. Anything other than that is sin. Tim Keller summarizes Kierkegaard’s point this way: “Sin is not just the doing of bad things, but the making of good things into ultimate things. It is seeking to establish a sense of self by making something else more central to your significance, purpose, and happiness than your relationship with God.”

This is a meaningful way to think about sin because we all identify with trying to build our identity on something. In our culture it tends to be things like achievements, or relationships, or being thought of as a good Christian. Everyone is building his or her identity on something.

In my experience of trying to establish myself on the basis of other people’s approval, I found it to be an exhausting and frustrating endeavor. This is what St. Augustine meant when he said, “We were made for God, and that our hearts are restless until they find rest in him.”

This is how Israel got to where they were. They made other things ultimate and whored themselves out to false gods who could not save. Israel was always running to other gods and then coming back to the Lord. This is the nature of our sin. We give ourselves out to false gods and then come running back to God when our life is in ruins.

The gospel sets us free from this kind of fickle faith. God approves of us in Christ, without condition. We are accepted and adopted into his family. We don’t need anything more than what we have been given in Christ. We cannot accomplish anything more than what he has already done on our behalf. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Therefore, we are free to accept responsibility for our sin without fear of condemnation.

We not only admit that we have sinned, but also that we have sinned because we were tempted by our own desires, and willfully gave ourselves to them. This kind of ownership is necessary for true repentance, and stands in contrast to many of the ways we typically try to deal with our sin.

We try to justify our sin. When you become aware of sin, do you feel the need to nuance everything, explain how complicated things are, or make excuses? Taking responsibility for sin means we say, “I lusted because my desires are perverted” ... “I lied because I am afraid of what people think about me” ... “I ate that because I do not have self-control around food.”

We try to downplay our sin, hoping or assuming that God overlooks our sin. We don’t think sin really affects our ability to relate to God, or hinders the flow of his blessing. We think we are the exception. Taking responsibility for sin means we say, “My sin is

destructive and grieves God. I will not be right with him until I deal with this.”

We pretend things are better than they really are, cleaning the outside of the cup while we are filthy on the inside.

Taking responsibility means we say, “It doesn’t matter how good people think I am. God sees right through me, and is not impressed or tricked by my lip service. God hates hypocrisy!”

Our problems are bigger than our circumstances: we are broken on the inside. And repentance is deeper than what we do: we need to repent of who we are. Remember, repentance is good news. It is hope that God will restore us. Conviction of sin is a difficult pill to swallow, but it is good medicine to the soul.

REFLECTION

1. *What has God been bringing to your mind today? What is your reaction?*
2. *How are you trying to justify it in your head? Do you want to keep hiding it?*
3. *Do you have worldly grief over that sin?*

Closing Prayer

God of mercy, you are full of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in mercy, and always ready to forgive. Grant us grace to renounce all evil and to cling to Christ, that in every way we may prove to be your loving children, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

[WSB]

Call to Worship

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

[2 CORINTHIANS 5:14-17, 21]

Confession

God of compassion, in Jesus Christ you did not disdain the company of sinners but welcomed them with love. Look upon us in mercy, we pray. Our sins are more than we can bear; our pasts enslave us; our misdeeds are beyond correcting. Forgive the wrongs we cannot undo; free us from a past we cannot change; heal what we can no longer fix. Grace our lives with your love and turn the tears of our past into the joys of new life with you. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." Peter began to say to him, "See, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal

life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

[MARK 10:17-31]

DEVOTIONAL

Martin Luther said the Christian life is a walk of repentance and faith. Understanding the various aspects of repentance and putting them together through reflection helps us keep them together in our theology and practice. So let's retrace some of our steps this week.

Repentance is a response to God's grace. It leads to joy and restoration. Not frustration from trying harder, and not despair from beating yourself up. Those are forms of penance. Jesus is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes, not tries harder or feels worse (Romans 10:4). He condemned sin in the flesh in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1-4). Therefore, repentance is motivated by love for God and a desire for fellowship with him.

Repentance is addressed to God. King David's famous confession is a great example of addressing God: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" (Psalm 51:1-3). His transgressions were adultery and murder, two sins clearly against other people. Yet, he says to God: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (51:4). This does not abrogate his responsibility to others, but simply underscores the primacy of God in all things.

Repentance is walking in the light. There was a time when David walked in darkness, unwilling to see things for what they were. In Psalm 32, he writes: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer." (32:3-4). Only when he came clean with God did he experience the grace of God: "I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,' and you forgave the iniquity of my sin." (32:5).

Repentance is taking responsibility for our sin. In Psalm 51, David locates the problem: "I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" (51:4). He does not blame or justify or look for a way out. He goes on: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (51:5). The problem is not just that he sinned, but that he is sinful. It would not be enough to clean the outside of the cup, which is why he seeks a deeper cleansing: "Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being ... Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow ... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." (51:6-7, 10).

Repentance is turning to God in faith. In everyday language, repentance means to "change your mind," to reconsider how we are living our lives in light of our new identity

and purpose in Christ. We are prone to wander, to pursue life on our terms, to locate our sense of worth and joy and peace outside of God. So the call to repentance is a standing invitation to give up our idolatrous pursuits, and turn to the one true God who restores us to the life for which we were made. We cannot save ourselves.

Repentance is initial and ongoing. You may get in the light, and feel very liberated. But then it won't be long until you are unmotivated, feeling the disappointment of another rut. This does not underscore the failure of repentance, but merely teaches us that repentance is both initial and ongoing. Real change always requires a clean break, reaffirmed through subsequent decisions. If you are in a mess, and it has happened over weeks or months or years, it is not going to get cleaned up right away. It's a lifestyle.

"Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit" (Psalm 51:12).

REFLECTION

1. *How has studying repentance this week changed your attitudes and affection for Christ's work on the Cross?*
2. *What is God speaking to you about this week? Where is he bringing conviction? What actions do you need to take in response?*

Closing Prayer

God of compassion, through your Son, Jesus Christ, you reconciled your people to yourself. Following his example of prayer and fasting, may we obey you with willing hearts and serve one another in holy love through Jesus Christ. Amen.

[WSB]

Second Sunday of Lent

We believe the Word was in the form of God and did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. He emptied himself, took the form of a servant, and was born in our own likeness. We believe he humbled himself and became obedient unto death. We believe God has highly exalted him, and bestowed on him the name that is above every name. We believe that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth; and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

[BASED ON PHILIPPIANS 2:6-11]



Rise, O church, and lift your voices, Christ has conquered death and hell.
Sing as all the earth rejoices; resurrection anthems swell.

Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ, the risen King!

See the tomb where death had laid Him, empty now, its mouth declares:
“Death and I could not contain Him, for the throne of life He shares.”
Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ, the risen King!

Hear the earth protest and tremble, see the stone removed with pow’r;
All hell’s minions may assemble, but cannot withstand His hour.
He has conquered, He has conquered, Christ the Lord, the risen King!

Doubt may lift its head to murmur, scoffers mock and sinners jeer;
But the truth proclaims a wonder thoughtful hearts receive with cheer.
He is risen, He is risen, now receive the risen King!

We acclaim Your life, O Jesus, now we sing Your victory;
Sin or hell may seek to seize us, but Your conquest keeps us free.
Stand in triumph, stand in triumph, worship Christ, the risen King!

[JACK HAYFORD]

Week Two

o o o

HUMILITY

Call to Worship

Let us worship God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ. We are new creations; the old has gone, the new has come! Let us worship God as Christ's ambassadors. Through us and through our worship may we announce the good news to all. Let us worship God in spirit and in truth. Praise God! We are reconciled, redeemed, renewed!

[BASED ON JOHN 4:24; 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17-21]

Confession

We confess that even though we have been united with Christ, our thoughts and words are divisive. We have been comforted with His love, but have withheld our love from others. We have fellowship with the Spirit of God, yet we still seek our own way. Forsaking unity, we have acted out of selfish ambition. Exalting ourselves, we have sought to be praised. Neglecting our neighbor, we have looked to our own interests above all else. But You, oh Lord, have not withheld your love from us. You became nothing so that we might gain everything. Have mercy upon us, according to your great compassion through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

[BASED ON PHILIPPIANS 2]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise."

[MARK 10:32-34]

DEVOTIONAL

From beginning to end, Jesus' life on earth was marked by humility. "Though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7-8).

Jesus "emptied himself." This is not to say he became something less than God in his humanity, "for in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Colossians 2:9). It is to say that he became human, laying down his glorious form to take up a body of flesh.

An incomparable condescension. The Son of God gave up his seat at the right hand of the Father for a place at the table with sinners and tax collectors. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). “Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Jesus “humbled himself.” The emphasis is on obedience to the will of the Father, which was the death of his Son on a cross. An unbearable thought. But it is in his obedience that we see his humility. The night before his crucifixion, Jesus “began to be greatly distressed and troubled. He said to his disciples, ‘My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.’ And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, ‘Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me’” (Mark 14:33-36). “The cup” is Old Testament imagery for the wrath of God against sin. Jesus, in the garden, acknowledges what is to come on the cross, where he will take upon himself God’s judgment against the sin of the world. Jesus’ agony in the garden was more than betrayal or death, both of which are tragic in themselves. It was about the infinitely perfect and eternally unbroken love between the Father and his beloved Son, and the prospect of the Father turning away. The mere taste of it was overwhelming sorrow.

The thought of drinking the cup in full was so dreadful that Jesus asked if there was any way to avoid it. He went to God like a little child who believes that Dad is able to get him out of whatever difficulty he’s in. Jesus asked, “Dad, you can do anything ... can you take this cup from me?” For Jesus’ whole life, whenever he turned to the Father in prayer, he found comfort and strength. All the light and love of heaven flooded his soul. This time he turns to the Father and “finds hell rather heaven opened up before him” (William Lane).

It was sorrow unto death. When you see that the mere taste of the cup was enough to throw the Son into this kind of pain, then you are ready in this season to consider what the full experience on the cross must have been like for him. You can begin to understand the depth of humility that says, “Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36).

REFLECTION

1. *Have you given thanks for the humility of Jesus?*
2. *What are you holding on to that you need to let go of for the good of others?*
3. *Do you sense a need to submit to God in some area of your life?*

Closing Prayer

Almighty and everlasting God, who, of thy tender love towards mankind, hast sent thy Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, to take upon him our flesh, and to suffer

death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility: Mercifully grant, that we may both follow the example of his patience, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

[BCP]

Call to Worship

“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

[ISAIAH 55:1-3, 6-9]

Confession

Almighty God, who knows all and sees all: We confess our constant striving for righteousness, acceptance, and approval from sources that leave us empty. We ask your forgiveness, and we renew our hope in Christ alone, who offered Himself to appease your wrath and forgive our sins. We find all comfort in His wounds, and we have no need to seek or invent any other means to reconcile ourselves with God, than this one and only sacrifice which renders believers perfect forever.

[ADAPTED FROM THE BELGIC CONFESSION, ART. 21]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” And he said to them, “What do you want me to do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” And they said to him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

[MARK 10:35-45]

DEVOTIONAL

Jesus is God, but he became a servant. He is the righteous judge, but gave himself up to the verdict of wicked men. This is the humility of our Lord: He had nothing to gain; yet he gave up all he had.

Everyone esteems the virtue of humility, but to step into the reality of our lives is to remember how contrary it is to our thinking. In so many ways we are accustomed to building ourselves up – proving our worth, impressing people, vying to be noticed and honored. Ironically, we even hope to be recognized for our humility. If you think giving up TV or coffee for Lent is hard, give up trying to get attention for a day. You will realize how pervasive our desire is to be lifted up.

In the Old Testament, exchanging clothing for sackcloth was the outward symbol of making oneself low. It was trading in an outward expression of one's position in society and putting on the lowest position. To be made low in our day, we must know what it means to say, "Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36). Roy Hession offers these penetrating words: "First of all, our proud self must be broken. Our own self must give up its rights. Our self is hard. It does not want to obey God. It likes to show that it is right. It wants to go its own way. It wants to claim all its rights. It always seeks glory for itself. The self must bow to God's will. It must confess that it is wrong. It must give up its own way. It must obey the Lord Jesus. It must give up all its glory. Only in this way can the Lord Jesus have all and be all in our lives. We must die to self."

Repentance must begin with humility, because even our repentance can be motivated by pride. We may turn from our ways only to protect our image. We tell ourselves, "I'm a good Christian. I have stopped lying or being lazy because I don't want to be like the liars and slackers. I'm not like that." So we look to Christ, who did not give himself to the approval of men, but entrusted himself to the Father.

During Lent, we are trying to make room in our lives for God to shed some light. God will shed light into the dark corners, but that kind of light can only be received with humility. Hession puts it this way: "The man who knows, day by day, the meaning of brokenness is the man who humbly agrees to what God shows him about himself."

REFLECTION

1. *From whom do you want approval or attention? What are you pursuing or doing in order to lift yourself up?*
2. *Are you willing for every stone to be turned over in your soul?*

Closing Prayer

O God of grace ... You have imputed my sin to my substitute and you have imputed his righteousness to my soul, clothing me with a bridegroom's robe, decking me with jewels of holiness. But in my Christian walk I am still in rags; my best prayers are stained with sin; my penitential tears are so much impurity;

my confessions of wrong are so many aggravations of sin; my receiving the Spirit is tintured with selfishness. I need to repent of my repentance.

[VOV]

Call to Worship

Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock. For he has humbled the inhabitants of the height, the lofty city. He lays it low, lays it low to the ground, casts it to the dust. The foot tramples it, the feet of the poor, the steps of the needy." The path of the righteous is level; you make level the way of the righteous. In the path of your judgments, O Lord, we wait for you; your name and remembrance are the desire of our soul. My soul yearns for you in the night; my spirit within me earnestly seeks you. For when your judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world learn righteousness. O Lord, you will ordain peace for us, for you have indeed done for us all our works.

[ISAIAH 26:4-9, 12]

Confession

Almighty God, in Jesus Christ you love us, but we have not loved you. You have opened your heart to us, and in our pride we have spurned your care. You have given us all things, and we have squandered your gifts. We have grieved you and caused hurt to others, and we are not worthy to be called your children. Have mercy on us, O Lord, for we are ashamed and sorry for all we have done to displease you. Cleanse us from our sin and receive us again into your household, that we might nevermore stray from your love but always remain within the sound of your voice. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And they came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart. Get up; he is calling you." And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. And Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And the blind man said to him, "Rabbi, let me recover my sight." And Jesus said to him, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way.

[MARK 10:46-52]

DEVOTIONAL

Pride is the great enemy of humility. Bob Thune observes: "The brashest expressions of pride are easy to spot: the athlete who boasts about her talent, the arrogant entrepreneur who flaunts his achievements, or the well-connected neighbor who name-drops in

every conversation. Most of us are smart enough to avoid appearing prideful in these obvious ways. But that’s just the problem. We can avoid looking prideful without actually killing our pride.”

To put pride to death, we must “trace this serpent in all its turnings and windings,” as the great Puritan John Owen wrote. We must get a fuller picture of what pride is and how it looks, and the Bible helps us with this.

On the one hand, the Bible tells us that pride often manifests itself as arrogance: the Apostle John refers to this as “the pride of life” (1 John 2:16). But on the other hand, the Bible affirms that pride can manifest itself as subtle self-centeredness, looking out for your own personal interests (Philippians 2:4).

In other words: the essence of pride is self-concern. Preoccupation with self. It may manifest itself as arrogance and boasting or as self-protection and fear of people—but it’s pride either way. If we want to cultivate humility, we must put pride to death. How? By looking to Jesus as both our model and our mediator.

Jesus is our model, because though he had every reason to be prideful (he was perfect), he chose instead the path of humility. Scripture commands us to follow his example: “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:5-7).

One cannot be like Jesus without humility, but if we merely try harder to be like him, we will miss the gospel. The heart of the good news is that we can be more like Jesus only if, and because, we are united with him.

We are united with Christ by grace through faith in his life, death, and resurrection. Because we have rebelled against God, we deserve to be crushed by his divine wrath. Even in our willful rebellion, we ourselves cannot bear the full wrath of God, hence our need for a mediator, someone to stand in our place and plead our case before God. Jesus “humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8)—taking our shame and guilt upon himself, and enduring the wrath of God against sin, so that those who humbly come to him can be forgiven and reconciled to God. This is the Good News of Easter!

Do you want to be set free from self-concern to love and serve others in humility? Do you want to be set free from numbering your accomplishments, talent, or network? Look to Christ, who was humble in life and broken in death to set you free from self-concern.

REFLECTION

1. *What are the major areas of self-concern in your heart?*
2. *How does the example of Jesus inspire and challenge you? How does the reconciling work of Jesus liberate you?*

Closing Prayer

Humble my heart before thee, and replenish it with thy choicest gifts. As water rests not on barren hill summits, but flows down to fertilize lowest vales, So make me the lowest of the lowly, that my spiritual riches may exceedingly abound. When I leave duties undone, may condemning thought strip me of pride, deepen in me devotion to thy service, and quicken me to more watchful care. When I am tempted to think highly of myself, grant me to see the wily power of my spiritual enemy; Help me to stand with wary eye on the watch-tower of faith, and to cling with determined grasp to my humble Lord; If I fall let me hide myself in my Redeemer's righteousness, and when I escape, may I ascribe all deliverance to thy grace.

[VOV]

Call to Worship

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever.

[LUKE 1:46-55]

Confession

Righteous God, in Christ you became sin for us. You took what we are so that we might become what you are. But we confess that often we ignore our sin. We confess that we too often do not confess. We keep silent about the sin that clings to us. But our sins are too great a burden for us. Forgive us. In Christ take away our iniquity. You are our stronghold, our hiding place. May we confess our sins, that we might then rejoice and be glad in you and in the righteousness that flows over us as a mighty stream of grace. In Christ, Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately.'" And they went away and found a colt tied at a door outside in the street, and they untied it. And some of those standing there said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" And they told them what Jesus had said, and they let them go. And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!"

[MARK 11:1-11]

DEVOTIONAL

Pride is thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to think (Romans 12:4). However, humility is not thinking less of ourselves than we ought to think, but simply

thinking of ourselves less. What we have to offer is from God, and should be offered in faith as an act of worship, not for our gain but for the good of others (Romans 12:1-8).

All of us want to be part of a community where pride and ego are put to death and selflessness and service are brought to life. This is just the kind of community that the Bible calls us to: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4).

Notice that the key to this kind of community is humility. In other words, our lack of concern for others and service to others is primarily because we lack humility. All forms of self-concern manifest themselves in a lack of love for others. We become consumers instead of servants. Such self-absorption can turn an entire community in on itself, concerned only about those within it and indifferent to the staggering needs of the world around it.

Our consumerism is rooted in a lack of faith. We are worried about what others think because we are not convinced that God delights in us (Psalm 149:4). We are anxious because we do not believe God will meet our needs (Matthew 6:32). We vie for attention because we do not think God rewards what is done in secret (Matthew 6:6). We compare ourselves to others because we forget that Jesus is our righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30). A consumer is self-seeking because he is preoccupied with building his own kingdom in order to meet his own needs. During Lent, Jesus especially calls us to re-right our lives, to “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).

The simple practice of self-denial in Lent teaches us that those who trust God to meet their needs are free to consider the needs of others. They discover this gospel paradox: As long as I’m looking to get my needs met, I will never get my needs met. But when I begin to meet the needs of others – when I begin to live for them instead of for myself – I find that God graciously takes care of my needs in the process. The grace of God turns us into servants. Instead of demanding that we be served, we joyfully lay down our rights and seek to serve God and others.

God’s grace toward us in Christ needs to get down deep into our hearts in order to change us. We need to acknowledge our resistance to grace, which manifests itself in our desire to establish our righteousness and meet our needs apart from God. Jesus came to serve—to heal, to feed, to make more wine, to wash feet, and to die. When we humbly receive the fullness and sufficiency of his love, then we will find ourselves increasingly joyful and selfless as we delight in serving others.

REFLECTION

1. *How has God met your needs recently? Are you resistant to grace?*
2. *How do you need to experience the gospel more deeply in order to serve others more faithfully?*

Closing Prayer

O thou God of all grace, make me more thankful, more humble; Inspire me with a deep sense of my unworthiness arising from the depravity of my nature, my omitted duties, my unimproved advantages, thy commands violated by me. With all my calls to gratitude and joy may I remember that I have reason for sorrow and humiliation; O give me repentance unto life; Cement my oneness with my blessed Lord, that faith may adhere to him more immovably, that love may entwine itself round him more tightly, that his Spirit may pervade every fibre of my being. Then send me out to make him known to my fellow-men.

[VOV]

Call to Worship

The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made. All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your saints shall bless you! They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom and tell of your power, to make known to the children of man your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations.

[PSALM 145:8-13]

Confession

Word of God Incarnate, you came to this world to accomplish salvation. By your grace you call us to repent, to be crucified with you, that we might be raised as new creations. But we confess that we often do not live as renewed people. We confess that often we “go with the flow” instead of stemming sin’s tide. Forgive us when we do not show evidence of renewal. Forgive us when we let the fruit of the Spirit be choked by the weeds of evil. You have made us your children, members of your kingdom. Help us to show evidence of that every day as we work to bring your justice, peace, gentleness, goodness, love, joy, and hope to all we meet. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve. On the following day, when they came from Bethany, he was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And he said to it, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard it. And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And he was teaching them and saying to them, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.” And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and were seeking a way to destroy him, for they feared him, because all the crowd was astonished at his teaching. And when evening came they went out of the city.

[MARK 11:12-19]

DEVOTIONAL

We are to think of ourselves with “sober judgment, according to the measure of faith that God has assigned” (Romans 12:4). In other words, the humble person knows who he is, and whose he is.

This is the secret to Jesus’ remarkable humility. Even as a child, Jesus was about his Father’s business. People always questioned his identity, but he was not thrown off by their doubt or criticism (Mark 8:27-30). When the crowds were flocking to Jesus, he withdrew to prayer. He did not need the approval of the masses because he was rooted in the words that came down from heaven: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). Without any hubris, Jesus could say, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Without self-concern, Jesus could say, “The Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death” (Mark 10:33). Jesus lived and died for us.

In contrast to pride and fear, the humility we see in Jesus is marked by dependence and confidence. If we aspire to walk in this path, we will have to think with sober judgment. We will have to be clear-eyed about who we are and whose we are. Where do we get this kind of clarity?

The gospel tells us who we are: We are made in the image of God, created in his likeness for his glory. This truth speaks to both our dignity and our dependence. Before and after the fall, people need God in every aspect of life, “for in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

The gospel tells us whose we are: We belong to God, body and soul. He is our Maker, to whom we belong by virtue of design. He is our Father, whom we belong to by means of adoption. He is our Master, and we are his bondservants. He is our king, and we are his subjects. “Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

We believe this gospel, but we need help in our unbelief. We need others to remind us of the gospel, to speak the truth in love for our edification. We must be grounded in community if we are to be rooted in the gospel. In other words, the very people from whom we are trying to hide our true selves, God has ordained to help us see.

To use Dan Allender’s phrase, “You can’t see your own face.” That is, when God shines light on our lives, as we have been talking about, we become visible to others. We desperately need them to tell us what they see, good and bad. It’s not that other people’s opinions are absolute truth, but neither are our isolated opinions of ourselves. To be humble means we are willing to be seen as we are, by God and man. Our pride resists this kind of exposure, but it takes humility to become humble.

Roy Hession comments: “We cannot be in the light with God, and in the darkness with our brother ... We must be willing to know ourselves for what we really are, and we must be willing for our brother to know this as well. We will not hide ourselves from those

with whom we should be in fellowship. We will not cover our faults. We will speak the truth about ourselves with them. We will be ready to give up our spiritual privacy. We will not keep bad feelings in our hearts about another person.”

If we aspire to love one another, then we aspire to be humble enough to accept and speak to whatever the light reveals. In humility we are becoming less concerned with our prestige. Our wills are breaking and we are not demanding our rights anymore. On the journey to the cross, fear is losing its grip as we cling to our identity in Christ. Pride is being starved because we are letting go of our need to be right and our desires to be recognized. We are being liberated from the solitary confinement of self-concern.

REFLECTION

1. *How does your community help you know who and whose you are?*
2. *Are you walking in darkness with those who are close to you?*
3. *What aspects of the gospel do you need to believe anew today?*

Closing Prayer

O Lord Jesus Christ, you are enthroned in the majesty of heaven, yet you gave up that heavenly perfection to become a servant. We adore you for laying aside your glory and clothing yourself in complete humility as one of us. We praise you for the example of washing your disciples’ feet. Teach us to do as you have done. Deliver us from pride, jealousy, and ambition, and make us ready to serve one another in lowliness for your sake, O Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

[WSB]

Call to Worship

The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad! Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around. His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth. O you who love the Lord, hate evil! He preserves the lives of his saints; he delivers them from the hand of the wicked. Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart. Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name!

[PSALM 95:1-5, 10-12]

Confession

Almighty God, who is rich in mercy to all those who call upon you; hear us as we come to you humbly confessing our sins, and imploring your mercy and forgiveness. We have broken your holy laws by our deeds and by our words, and by the sinful affections of our heart. We confess before you our disobedience and ingratitude, our pride and willfulness, and all our failures and shortcomings toward you and toward our family and friends. Have mercy upon us, most merciful Father, and through your great goodness grant that we may from now on serve and please you in newness of life; grant us this, we pray, through the mediation of Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.

[BCP]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." And Jesus answered them, "Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."

[MARK 11:20-26]

DEVOTIONAL

"James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" (Mark 10:35).

How's that for humble prayer? "Before I say what I want, I want you to say you'll do it." We are good at telling God what we want, but we are not very good at learning what God

wants. That kind of learning takes patience, reflection, study, obedience, and all kinds of things that require deep humility. It's much easier just to go with what we think is best.

Jesus entertains the request: "What do you want me to do for you? And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (10:36-37).

It was an absurd request, but not to them of course. They had it in their heads that Jesus would deliver them from their oppressors and establish an earthly reign. Further, they saw themselves as high-ranking officials in the new regime.

Their perception of reality and their notion of what was good and right prevented them from understanding what Jesus had just told them: "The Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him" (10:33-34).

If you come to God on your terms, expecting him to fit into your worldview and align with the way you think things ought to be, you are starting off on the wrong foot, and that will lead you down the wrong path. You'll end up saying things that are absurd.

Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (10:38). In other words: "My glory is not what you think it is. And the path of glory is certainly not what you think it is." Like we often do, these brothers had mistaken importance for significance. Importance speaks to the value we derive from things like position, status, and the esteem of others. It is about building our brand: dropping names, getting close to popular people, flaunting knowledge, looking busy, defining spiritual maturity by activity and achievement, exalting public gifts above the others. Significance speaks to the value we add to people and culture. It's about building others up: remembering their name, drawing near to the fringe, teaching others, being accessible, defining spiritual maturity by love for others, exalting Jesus as the head of the body, and appreciating the contribution of each member.

"The cup" refers to the suffering that Jesus was about to endure. Before he could be exalted to his throne, he had to be hung on a tree. The disciples could not die the mediator's death, but they would drink from the cup of his suffering. Greatness in the kingdom always involves a cross.

It was a teaching moment for the disciples, and for us: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:45)

Humility is not the absence of position and power. It is the use of such things for the good of others. If we can get our minds and affections around the true greatness of Jesus and his cross – and what that means for us – then we can be great in the kingdom of God.

REFLECTION

1. *How is God's glory being made visible in your weakness and brokenness?*
2. *Do you want to be first so you can be seen as great, or to be last where true greatness often goes unnoticed?*
3. *You may feel like God isn't speaking to you about various things, but have you let go of what you want so that you might be able to listen with unbiased ears?*

Closing Prayer

Humble my heart before thee, and replenish it with thy choicest gifts. As water rests not on barren hill summits, but flows down to fertilize lowest vales, So make me the lowest of the lowly, that my spiritual riches may exceedingly abound. When I leave duties undone, may condemning thought strip me of pride, deepen in me devotion to thy service, and quicken me to more watchful care. When I am tempted to think highly of myself, grant me to see the wily power of my spiritual enemy; Help me to stand with wary eye on the watch-tower of faith, and to cling with determined grasp to my humble Lord; If I fall let me hide myself in my Redeemer's righteousness, and when I escape, may I ascribe all deliverance to thy grace. Keep me humble, meek, lowly.

[VOV]

Third Sunday of Lent

By his resurrection he has overcome death so that he might make us share in the righteousness he won for us by his death. By his power we too are already now resurrected to a new life. Christ's resurrection is a guarantee of our glorious resurrection.

[HEIDELBERG Q.45]

Jesus Christ is the hope of God's world. In his death, the justice of God is established; forgiveness of sin is proclaimed. On the day of his resurrection, the tomb was empty; his disciples saw him; death was defeated; new life had come. God's purpose for the world was sealed.

[OUR SONG OF HOPE, ST. 4]



Man of Sorrows! what a name
For the Son of God, Who came
Ruined sinners to reclaim.
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood;
Sealed my pardon with His blood.
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Guilty, vile, and helpless we;
Spotless Lamb of God was He;
Full atonement can it be?
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Lifted up was He to die;
"It is finished!" was His cry;
Now in heaven exalted high.
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

When He comes, our glorious King,
All His ransomed home to bring,
Then anew His song we'll sing:
Hallelujah! What a Savior!

[PHILIP BLISS]

Week Three

o o o

SUFFERING

Call to Worship

Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever! Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me free. The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

[SELECTED VERSES FROM PSALM 118]

Confession

Holy Lord, I have sinned times without number, and been guilty of pride and unbelief, of failure to find thy mind in thy Word, of neglect to seek thee in my daily life. My transgressions and short-comings present me with a list of accusations, But I bless thee that they will not stand against me, for all have been laid on Christ; Go on to subdue my corruptions, and grant me grace to live above them. Let not the passions of the flesh nor lustings of the mind bring my spirit into subjection, but do thou rule over me in liberty and power.

[VOV]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, and they said to him, "By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?" Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer me." And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'From man?'"—they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

[MARK 11:27-33]

DEVOTIONAL

Lent is the season leading up to Easter. It is a time of preparation and repentance in which we remember Jesus' suffering and anticipate his resurrection.

The question you often hear is, "What did you give up for Lent?" Throughout history, Christians have observed Lent by fasting or other acts of self-denial. The danger with tradition, of course, is that it can become mere ritual, or even a source of pride. We want to recapture a spirit of faith in this season.

Unlike repentance and humility, which happen in and through us, suffering and persecution simply happen to us. The former is a response of faith to the grace of God at work. The latter requires a response of faith in the goodness and wisdom of God, even when it seems he is not at work.

The subject raises a difficult question: Why does God allow us to suffer? We are always searching for answers to this question, for ourselves and for our world. Not knowing “why” is part of the suffering.

One day when Jesus and his disciples were walking, they passed by a man blind from birth. “And his disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). They were looking for answers.

Based upon God’s covenant promises with Israel, Jews were inclined to expect God to invariably bless them materially in response to pious living. Conversely, they expected that those who did evil were to experience divine discipline in various forms. In short, they expected God to bless them for doing good, and to punish others for their sin.

We see this mindset revealed by Job’s friends in the book of Job. In truth, Job was being tested with adversity because of his piety, and not because of sin (Job 1:1-12). Job’s friends persisted in trying to force him to confess that his suffering was the result of some sin he had committed. If he but forsook his sin, they insisted, then God would again bless him.

Perhaps Asaph had the same assumptions about prosperity and poverty. He was frustrated and angry with God because the wicked appeared to prosper while the pious did not (Psalm 73:1-14).

This is why the disciples framed the question the way they did. Their explanation for suffering was that someone was being punished for sin. But Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him” (John 9:3).

Jesus was not offering a trite explanation of all suffering, but rather pointing to his own suffering that would explain the love of God. Jesus voluntarily and unjustly endured suffering, even unto death. Not because he sinned, but because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). He did this so that the works of God might be displayed in him, “whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (3:25-26).

We do not have all the answers about why we suffer, but we do know what the answer cannot be. It cannot be that God doesn’t see or care, for he sent his own Son to enter into our suffering. And it cannot be a hopeless situation, for he conquered sin and death by raising his Son from the dead.

REFLECTION

1. *How does the reality of suffering challenge your faith?*
2. *Have you tried to explain suffering in ways that might be unbiblical?*
3. *How does Jesus' death and resurrection give you strength and hope?*

Closing Prayer

Help me to be resolute and Christ-contained. Never let me wander from the path of obedience to thy will. Strengthen me for the battles ahead. Give me courage for all the trials, and grace for all the joys. Help me to be a holy, happy person, free from every wrong desire, from everything contrary to thy mind. Grant me more and more of the resurrection life: may it rule me, may I walk in its power, and be strengthened through its influence.

[VOV]

Call to Worship

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

[1 PETER 1:3-9]

Confession

If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. Almighty God, our Redeemer, in our weakness we have failed to be your messengers of forgiveness and hope. Renew us by your Holy Spirit, that we may follow your commands and proclaim your reign of love, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

[BASED ON PSALM 130:3-6]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And he began to speak to them in parables. “A man planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a pit for the winepress and built a tower, and leased it to tenants and went into another country. When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others: some they beat, and some they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But those tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ And they took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard. What will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this Scripture: “‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?’” And they were seeking to arrest him but feared the people, for they

perceived that he had told the parable against them. So they left him and went away.

[MARK 12:1-12]

DEVOTIONAL

Whenever I try to make sense of suffering, I end up in the same dilemma. On one hand, I know that my hardships and afflictions are relatively insignificant compared to what I see around me; much less, what I am aware of around the world. On the other hand, I cannot deny that I get sick, stretched, slandered, and snubbed. Privileged as they are, I feel burdened by my circumstances and frustrated with my struggle against sin. It's dishonest to say I don't suffer, at least from my perspective.

So how are we to view the various forms of hardship and trial that we face? What is the relationship between our faith and suffering?

Some teach that Jesus suffered so we wouldn't have to, but an honest assessment is that no one escapes suffering in a fallen world. It is more than physical hardship. It's also emotional pain, relational woes, soul unrest, and spiritual attack. Jesus' death does not take away our suffering, but it gives profound meaning and purpose to it.

Consider James' exhortation to those who suffer: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4).

I said previously that suffering happens *to* us. We cannot control our circumstances, but we can control how we think about them. Dan McCartney comments, "Knowing how to interpret events and actions is a large part of wisdom, and the faithful attitude of the Christian is one of joy."

We can rejoice on two accounts. First, suffering provides a context for our faith to mature. The "trials of various kinds" represent the pressures of life that threaten our sense of well-being. When we are sick or stuck or grieved, we tend to doubt God's sovereignty and goodness in our lives. Every test of our body or mind or emotion is fundamentally a "testing of our faith" (1:2). In other words, the quality of our faith is proven in suffering, tested and shown to be genuine. In the way that an object is proven to be gold in the fire, the "proof" of our faith is in the "fiery trial" (1 Peter 4:12). Whether we are talking about common adversities or more acute hardships, we can embrace and even rejoice in suffering because we know that it produces character and hope and maturity (Romans 5:3, James 1:2-4).

Second, suffering focuses our hope on the consummation of all things, when God "will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore" (Revelation 21:4). Just as Jesus endured the cross for the joy set before him (Hebrew 12:2), so too we look to the day when the steadfast will receive the crown of life (James 1:12).

Wisdom, suffering, and maturity are all bound together in the person and work of Christ. He “became to us wisdom from God” (1 Corinthians 1:30), and he was “made perfect through suffering” (Hebrews 2:10). So then: we are justified by Christ’s suffering and sanctified by ours. By this we are reminded that suffering is not a setback to our agendas, but rather an orientation to God’s agenda, which is to form the character of Christ in us.

Ultimately, God does not ask us to explain suffering. He asks us to rejoice in it and endure it.

REFLECTION

1. *How have you questioned God’s sovereignty or goodness in your life?*
2. *How does the desire for comfort over character play out in your life?*
3. *Are you willing to ask God to purify your faith?*

Closing Prayer

O God Whose will conquers all, there is no comfort in anything apart from enjoying thee and being engaged in thy service; Thou art All in all, and all enjoyments are what to me thou makest them, and no more. I am well pleased with thy will, whatever it is, or should be in all respects, And if thou bidst me decide for myself in any affair, I would choose to refer all to thee, for thou art infinitely wise and cannot do amiss, as I am in danger of doing. I rejoice to think that all things are at thy disposal, and it delights me to leave them there. Then prayer turns wholly into praise, and all I can do is to adore and bless thee.

[VOV]

Call to Worship

Praise the Lord! Praise the name of the Lord, give praise, O servants of the Lord, who stand in the house of the Lord, in the courts of the house of our God! Praise the Lord, for the Lord is good; sing to his name, for it is pleasant! For the Lord has chosen Jacob for himself, Israel as his own possession. For I know that the Lord is great, and that our Lord is above all gods. Whatever the Lord pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps. Your name, O Lord, endures forever, your renown, O Lord, throughout all ages. For the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants. O house of Levi, bless the Lord! You who fear the Lord, bless the Lord! Blessed be the Lord from Zion, he who dwells in Jerusalem! Praise the Lord!

[PSALM 135:1-6, 13-14, 20-21]

Confession

Lord, You come to us, but we do not recognize You; You call, but we do not follow; You command, but we do not obey, You bless us, but we do not thank you. Please forgive and help us. Lord, You accept us, but we do not accept others; You forgive us, but we do not forgive those who wrong us; You love us, but we do not love our neighbors. Please forgive and help us. Lord, You showed us how to carry out Your mission, but we still insist on our own; You identified with the poor and needy, but we seek our own wants and desires; You suffered and died for all, but we turn to our own comfort. In the midst of our lack of faith, You are always faithful! Please forgive and help us, You are the faithful one! Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to trap him in his talk. And they came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way of God. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?" But, knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." And they brought one. And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him, "Caesar's." Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they marveled at him.

[MARK 12:13-17]

DEVOTIONAL

The forty days of Lent parallels the forty days that Jesus went without food in the wilderness, so one of the ways we identify with his suffering is by practicing self-denial. Whether it's food or TV or "me-time," we deny ourselves particular comforts and

pleasures as a way of remembering what he endured. The point is not to manufacture suffering, as if we could earn some kind of righteousness through self-denial. Our heart in Lent is simply to de-clutter our self-absorbed lives. Making room to remember how our Lord suffered for us.

It began in the wilderness: “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry” (Luke 4:1-2).

The striking thing in this story is that Jesus went into the desert under the direction of the Holy Spirit. He chose this suffering. Indeed, his whole life was a choice to enter into our suffering. Again, we are not to go looking for hardship. “Each day has enough trouble of its own trouble” (Matthew 6:34, NIV).

God does not tell us to choose suffering, but that does not mean he will always keep it from us. Jesus was in the wilderness because the Holy Spirit led him there. Further, the Apostles were adamant that Jesus’ death at the hands of sinners was “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). The testimony of Scripture is that Christians need to embrace suffering as part of our calling and endure it as part of our witness:

- » “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Peter 4:12).
- » “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (Philippians 1:29).
- » “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

Our wilderness is not literal, but it is very real. We are tempted – perhaps even determined – to sustain ourselves, to escape our vulnerability, and to chase our aspirations without thought of others.

But Jesus offers us another way, a humble way that waits patiently – despite the suffering – for the Spirit of God to direct our steps. He reveals to us what it means to embrace our humanity without short cuts.

“The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread’” (Luke 4:3). Certainly Jesus could have done this, but the lack of bread revealed a deeper hunger for God, and a deeper satisfaction of being sustained by God.

“And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him ... worship me, it will all be yours” (4:5-7). It would all be his eventually, but to have it now would be to have it without suffering and death. How often do we worship whatever promises to give us what we want now, without inconvenience or discomfort? But Jesus worships God alone, not because it is easier, but because it is truer and far better.

“And [the devil] took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you’” (4:9-10). Had Jesus done this, he could have ended all this temptation and trial. How often do we call upon God for miraculous solutions to our suffering, not because we trust him in our circumstance but because we want out of it? But Jesus would not put God to the test.

We live into our in-Christ-humanity by surrendering to the Holy Spirit, wherever he may lead us. This season is about waiting, maybe even suffering the loss of things that have come to define us, because we know that our life is dust, and because we are looking forward to resurrection life.

REFLECTION

1. *How does your inclination to avoid hardship hinder your ability to follow Jesus?*
2. *How does the Spirit’s presence in your suffering comfort and strengthen you?*
3. *Is the Spirit currently leading you somewhere you don’t want to go?*

Closing Prayer

O Holy Spirit, as the sun is full of light, the ocean full of water, Heaven full of glory, so may my heart be full of thee. Vain are all divine purposes of love and the redemption wrought by Jesus except thou work within, regenerating by thy power, giving me eyes to see Jesus, showing me the realities of the unseen world. Give me thyself without measure, as an unimpaired fountain, as inexhaustible riches.

[VOV]

Call to Worship

Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness! Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?" Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them. The heavens are the Lord's heavens, but the earth he has given to the children of man. The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any who go down into silence. But we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore. Praise the Lord!

[PSALM 115:1-8, 16-18]

Confession

O Christ, out of your fullness we have all received grace upon grace. You are our eternal hope; you are patient and full of mercy; you are generous to all who call upon you. Save us, Lord. O Christ, fountain of life and holiness, you have taken away our sins. On the cross you were wounded for our transgressions and were bruised for our iniquities. Save us, Lord. O Christ, obedient unto death, source of all comfort, our life and our resurrection, our peace and reconciliation: Save us, Lord. O Christ, Savior of all who trust you, hope of all who die for you, and joy of all the saints: Save us, Lord. Jesus, Lamb of God, have mercy on us. Jesus, bearer of our sins, have mercy on us. Jesus, redeemer of the world, grant us peace. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection. And they asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife, but leaves no child, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. There were seven brothers; the first took a wife, and when he died left no offspring. And the second took her, and died, leaving no offspring. And the third likewise. And the seven left no offspring. Last of all the woman also died. In the resurrection, when they rise again, whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife." Jesus said to them, "Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong."

[MARK 12:18-27]

DEVOTIONAL

There are many prophecies in the Old Testament about the Messiah, some of which describe the suffering that he would endure. In Psalm 22, David's prayer depicts the anguish that Jesus would experience in his death. Notice how accurately this foretells the words and experience of Jesus:

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? ... But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; "He trusts in the LORD; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!" ... I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death. For dogs encompass me; a company of evildoers encircles me; they have pierced my hands and feet; I can count all my bones; they stare and gloat over me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots" (Psalm 22:1, 6-8, 14-18).

This psalm was written about six hundred years before Jesus was born, before crucifixion was even invented. So when Jesus cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" he was revealing himself as the Messiah. But more than that, he cried out because the pain of abandonment was overwhelming. What he had tasted in the garden was now being poured out in its fullness upon the beloved Son.

Jesus suffered more than anyone has ever suffered. If you experienced the wrath of God against sin in this way, it would still not approach the degree of suffering that Jesus endured. He had never experienced sin or separation from God and he bore the entirety of humanity's sin on the cross. No one has ever suffered like Jesus suffered.

We also see here that nobody has ever obeyed like Jesus obeyed. He turned to God even while he was being condemned. He was faithful even while being forsaken. No one has ever trusted and obeyed like this.

Jesus is described as a worm and not a man. This is an interesting metaphor in the context of persecution. When I am insulted or accused or mocked, my inclination is to defend myself. The human tendency is to be annoyed, envious, resentful, anxious, and proud. We are not like worms. We are more like a snake that rears up and strikes back. But Jesus is a worm and not a man. He was willing to let men tread on him. He did not strike back or defend himself. He went humbly and willingly to the cross.

Why did he do this? Because he had his mind set on something else.

Those who have their minds set on earthly things are, in Paul's words, "enemies of the cross of Christ" (Philippians 3:18). This phrase indicates that those who spurn suffering and make their primary aim comfort, success, and pleasure are at odds with the cross of Christ, the very symbol of his suffering. To shun our suffering is to shun his. To embrace his suffering is to embrace our own. Paul's deepest desire was "to know Christ and the

power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings” (3:10).

For this to become our deepest desire, we must be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). So meditate on his life. Let the magnitude of his sacrifice sink in. Let the pain of his suffering be real to you. Let his victory be a groundswell of hope in your soul. Indeed, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:2-3).

REFLECTION

1. *Have you felt abandoned or forsaken by God? Have you felt mocked or persecuted by others?*
2. *How have you tried to find comfort?*

Closing Prayer

Strengthen me against temptations. My heart is an unexhausted fountain of sin, flowing on in every pattern of behaviour; Thou hast disarmed me of the means in which I trusted, and I have no strength but in thee. Thou alone canst hold back my evil ways, but without thy grace to sustain me I fall. Keep me sensible of my weakness, and of my dependence upon thy strength. Let every trial teach me more of thy peace, more of thy love. Thy Holy Spirit is given to increase thy graces, and I cannot preserve or improve them unless he works continually in me. May he confirm my trust in thy promised help, and let me walk humbly in dependence upon thee, for Jesus' sake.

[VOV]

Call to Worship

Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them. Full of splendor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered; the Lord is gracious and merciful. He provides food for those who fear him; he remembers his covenant forever. He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the inheritance of the nations. The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy; they are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name! The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!

[PSALM 111]

Confession

God of mercy, whose Son, Jesus Christ, longs to gather us in the wide embrace of his love, we confess that we have been wayward children. We have disobeyed your commands; our ears have been deaf to your call; our hearts have been cold to your love. In thought, in word, and in deed we have hurt others and dishonored your name. In your great mercy receive us yet again as your well-beloved children, not because we are worthy but for the sake of him who loved us and gave himself for us. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Jesus answered, "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.

[MARK 12:28-34]

DEVOTIONAL

In his letter to those who had been scattered because of persecution, Peter exhorts believers to look to the example of Christ in order to endure their suffering:

“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:21-24).

Two themes are woven together here: the example of Christ’s suffering and the saving purpose of Christ’s suffering. Since Jesus suffered for us, leaving us an example, belonging to him means following “in his steps.”

Peter’s elaboration of Jesus’ example clearly identifies him with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, where the Messiah is portrayed not only as one who bears our sin on the cross, but also carries the burden of sin to the cross. Just as the Suffering Servant “surely has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (53:4), Peter knew Jesus as one who grieved over sin and as a man of sorrows. Just as the Suffering Servant was “oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth” (53:7), Peter recalls that, “when he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten.”

The example of Christ was to endure accusation and insult without responding in kind. He determined to entrust himself to God, who “judges impartially according to each one’s deeds” (1:17). Thus, Peter’s exhortation is to “let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good” (4:19).

Peter not only saw Jesus as one who fulfilled the actions of the Suffering Servant, but more importantly as the one sent by God to fulfill the purpose of the Suffering Servant. Edmund Clowney draws out both aspects when he writes, “In Isaiah’s songs, the Servant is both identified with the people of God and distinguished from them. He suffers for them, stands in their place, and bears the judgment of their sins.”

In whatever suffering or persecution comes our way, we are to follow in Jesus’ steps: “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.” This verse underscores the important connection between the example set by Jesus and the means by which we are able to follow his example. We are justified by his suffering, and we are sanctified by ours.

For Peter, Jesus’ sufferings were not merely an example, for apart from the saving purpose of Christ’s suffering, the example is of little value. This is why Peter grounds the imperative in the indicative. We can endure suffering because Jesus suffered for us. We have hope because we have been healed.

That Jesus “committed no sin” and yet was crucified speaks to the injustice of his death,

humanly speaking. However, Peter would have remembered that on the day when Jesus the innocent one was sentenced to death by Pilate, Barabbas the insurrectionist was set free. Likewise, because of the cross the guilty are set free because of the “unjust” substitution of Jesus in their place. This is the just justification of God: “the righteous for the unrighteous” (3:18).

REFLECTION

1. *How does Jesus’ life challenge you?*
2. *How does his death move you?*

Closing Prayer

Blessed Lord Jesus, no human mind could conceive or invent the gospel. Acting in eternal grace, you are both its messenger and its message, lived out on earth through infinite compassion, applying your life to insult, injury, death, that I might be redeemed, ransomed, freed. Blessed be you, O Father, for contriving this way; eternal thanks to you, O Lamb of God, for opening this way, praise everlasting to you, O Holy Spirit, for applying this way to my heart. Glorious Trinity, impress the gospel upon my soul, until its virtue diffuses every faculty; Let it be heard, acknowledged, professed, felt. O unite me to yourself with inseparable bonds, that nothing may ever draw me back from you, my Lord, my Saviour.

[VOV]

Call to Worship

The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad! Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around. His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth. O you who love the Lord, hate evil! He preserves the lives of his saints; he delivers them from the hand of the wicked. Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart. Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name!

[PSALM 97:1-5, 10-12]

Confession

Lord, we have denied you by refusing to know you. We have betrayed you by keeping our distance. We have mocked you by pretending we are not yours. Lord, we are lost; let your forgiveness find us. Welcome us into your strong, forgiving arms and let us feel reconciled again. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And as Jesus taught in the temple, he said, “How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared, “‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.”’ David himself calls him Lord. So how is he his son?” And the great throng heard him gladly. And in his teaching he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

[MARK 12:35-40]

DEVOTIONAL

During Lent we give extended thought to the suffering that Jesus endured, but we know the outcome—an empty tomb. For us, this is an exercise in reflection, but for the disciples it was a testing of faith. We see what God was doing in the garden of Gethsemane, and we know the great necessity of the cross of Christ. Otherwise, we too would fall asleep and run for safety. It’s easy to look back.

Jesus saw it coming. Luke says, “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). Knowing what had to happen, Jesus stayed the course. A serious reflection on his suffering must account for the fact that our Lord looked forward, never back.

We look back all the time, longing for comforts past, wondering what might have been. Even though we have taken up life with Jesus, seasons of suffering challenge our resolve and fix our attention to how things used to be. Our hunger for restoration and relief from burdens turns our heart to the past, but Jesus has only an eye for what is set before him.

The Israelites experienced this in the forty years they spent wandering in the desert. They argued with Moses, idealizing their life in Egypt and questioning the goodness of the Lord. They complained about the Lord's provision, not because he didn't provide, but because they weren't content with what he provided.

The paradox of suffering is that it is actually a gift – one we might like at times to give back – but a gift nonetheless. God gives us suffering as a way of giving us himself, for it is in our suffering that we become acutely aware of his presence and power. Hardship empties us of our self-reliance so that we might soak in what it means that we are children of God, chosen by God and in covenant relationship with him—the very covenant purchased by Christ's blood.

The Israelites in the wilderness and Christ on the cross both stand as a testament, old and new, that God does not forsake his people. More than this, they remind us that suffering is a gift from God that very tangibly embeds his promises in our daily life. Of course, we have to be looking to him to receive it as such.

Ultimately, suffering is about learning to receive whatever God has placed in our hands as his goodness for us today. For Jesus, the journey to Jerusalem was a gift. Gethsemane and Golgotha were gifts. They were not easy gifts to receive, which is why he had to say, "Not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36). And it is why he taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done" (Matthew 6:10), because if we are not looking for God's kingdom come, we always be looking back for our kingdom gone.

REFLECTION

1. *What do you long for from the past?*
2. *How can you see God's goodness in your present hardships?*
3. *What do you need from God to move forward in obedience?*

Closing Prayer

Fill me with thy Spirit that I may be occupied with his presence. May his comforts cheer me in my sorrows, his strength sustain me in my trials, his blessings revive me in my weariness, his presence render me a fruitful tree of holiness, his might establish me in peace and joy, his incitements make me ceaseless in prayer, his animation kindle in me undying devotion. Send him as the searcher of my heart, to show me more of my corruptions and helplessness that I may flee to thee, cling to thee, rest on thee, as the beginning and end of my salvation.

[VOV]

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

In life and in death we belong to God. Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve. We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God. Jesus proclaimed the reign of God: preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel. Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal. With believers in every time and place, we rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[FROM A BRIEF STATEMENT OF FAITH]



I hear the Savior say, "Thy strength indeed is small;
Child of weakness, watch and pray, Find in Me thine all in all."

Lord, now indeed I find Thy power and Thine alone,
Can change the leper's spots and melt the heart of stone.

And when before the throne I stand in Him complete,
"Jesus died my soul to save" my lips shall still repeat

Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow.

O Praise the one who paid my debt
And raised this life up from the dead

[ELVINA HALL AND KRISTIAN STANFILL]

Week Four

o o o

LAMENT

Call to Worship

But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

[LAMENTATIONS 3:21-26]

Confession

Almighty God, you created the world, and it was good. But our first parents fell into sin, and we have inherited their corruption. We confess that we have turned our backs on you; we have served our own idols; we have sought our own glory. Forgive our sin, O God, and renew us by your grace, that we might bring redemption to the world, in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

[MARK 12:41-44]

DEVOTIONAL

Lent is a season of sorrow. More than usual, we are aware of the frail and fallen condition of our world, and certainly in our own body and soul. Our reflection during this season stirs a deep sense that something is wrong. Something greater than just our individual sin, it is the pervasive effects of sin. Distraction. Deception. Discord. Despair. Disaster. Death. These are deep wounds.

What are we supposed to do with our pain, anger, grief, and confusion? Can I bring these things before God? People like Job, David, Jeremiah, and even Jesus reveal to us that these emotions can be turned into prayers of faith.

First, hear the good news: “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18). Not only does God hear and understand our pain, he is especially

inclined toward those who are hurting. We often think that being a Christian means we must always be happy in God, sweeping our grief under the rug of God's sovereignty. Yet, God desires to enter into our pain: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Romans 8:26).

Second, the Scriptures teach us to lament, to wail and mourn and plead before the God who draws near to the brokenhearted.

- » Jeremiah lamented over the plight of Israel because of her sin: "All her people groan as they search for bread; they trade their treasures for food to revive their strength. Look, O LORD, and see, for I am despised ... For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me, one to revive my spirit; my children are desolate, or the enemy has prevailed" (Lamentations 1:11,16).
- » The psalmists lament in times of trouble: "With my voice I cry out to the LORD; with my voice I plead for mercy to the LORD. I pour out my complaint before him; I tell my trouble before him" (Psalm 142:1-2).
- » Jesus lamented over Jerusalem: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Matthew 23:37).

Lament is not about getting things off your chest. It's about casting your anxieties upon God, and trusting him with them. Mere complaining indicates a lack of intimacy with God. Because lament is a form of prayer, lament transforms our cries and complaints into worship. Walter Brueggemann says that undergirding biblical lament is "a relationship between the lamenter and his God that is close and deep enough for the protester to speak in imperatives, addressing God as 'you' and reminding him of his covenantal promises." Anyone can complain, and practically everyone does. Christians can lament. They can talk to God about their condition and ask him to change things because they have a relationship with him. To lament is to be utterly honest before a God whom our faith tells us we can trust.

Biblical lament affirms that suffering is real and spiritually significant, but not hopeless. In his mercy, our God has given us a form of language that bends his ear and pulls his heart.

REFLECTION

1. *What breaks your heart? What about your own brokenness frustrates or grieves you?*
2. *How do you normally deal with these emotions? Can you say these things to God?*

Closing Prayer

We hear Jesus say: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And we too at times pray: “Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame.” We hear the words of the ancient psalm even as we see Jesus: “But I am a worm and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads; ‘Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—let him rescue the one in whom he delights!’” And we too pray: “Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.”

[WSB]

Call to Worship

Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for my soul. I cried to him with my mouth, and high praise was on my tongue. If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God has listened; he has attended to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me!

[PSALM 66:16-20]

Confession

Lord, we have not kept watch for you. We have occupied ourselves with our own concerns. We have not waited to find your will for us. We have not noticed the needs of the people around us. We have not acknowledged the love that has been shown to us. Forgive us for our lack of watchfulness. Help us to wait to know your will. Help us to look out for the needs of others. Help us to work and watch for your coming. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?" And Jesus began to say to them, "See that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains.

[MARK 13:1-8]

DEVOTIONAL

The best way to learn this language of lament is to enter into the prayers made available to us. These are intimate windows into the human soul, the creation condition, and the heart of God. Let's consider Psalm 13, a lament of King David:

David is at the end of his rope. He is tired of trying, almost to the point of despair. In the midst of his physical and emotional fatigue, he cries out to the Lord: "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long

must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" (13:1-2).

How often have we wanted to ask this very question: "How long! How long must I carry around this burden, how long will this conflict continue, how long will I be single, how long will I go unrecognized, how long will the oppressed be silenced?" We have asked these questions with wet cheeks and clenched fists, but have we directed our cry to God?

Though he wonders if God has removed his hand from his life, David's words are decidedly addressed to God: "Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death" (13:3). He is not just venting. He wants answers. He wants to see a light at the end of the tunnel, the light of God's presence, the light of justice. Anything else feels like death.

If God seems distant and if David has been running in his own strength for so long, what hope does he have for crossing the chasm that seems to separate them? What hope does he have of being delivered from his circumstances and sorrow and into the light of God's presence? What reason does he have to believe that God will bridge the divide and answer his cry for help? He leans not on his present experience of God, but rather the eternal character of God: "But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation" (13:6).

The Hebrew word for "steadfast love" is *hesed*, a rich, complex word that means so much more than what we often mean when we say "love."

We are very loose with the word "love". I love my wife, and I love coconut in my chili. You know there is a difference, of course, but you have to infer the meaning based on the context. Spousal love is much different than love of food. Even when I do not have warm, fuzzy feelings for my wife – hypothetically speaking – I am still committed to her in a way that I am not committed to anyone or anything else. And my loyal love flows from that commitment.

If you take away the context, then it's easy to reduce love to something that is basically sentimental, which is how many people think of God's love. Most people would say that God is a loving God, but their notion of God's love lacks substance because it has been removed from the context of redemptive history, wherein his mighty deeds toward his people flow from his covenantal commitment to them. The *hesed* of God is a combination of strength in action, fierce commitment, and tender emotional care. God is a mighty warrior, a faithful husband, and a wise Father. This is love that David remembers and trusts in his time of need. This is how he can begin with "How long?" and end with "my heart shall rejoice."

The goal of deliverance is always worship. May the love of God fill us up and turn our complaints and rants into a prayer of faith and a song of praise.

REFLECTION

1. *What are your “how long?” questions?*
2. *How have you experienced God’s love in the past? How do you need to grow in your understanding of God’s love in order to trust him now?*

Closing Prayer

Remembering Jesus, we make bold even in our lament to offer words of trust and praise: “I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you: You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him; stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel! For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him. From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him. The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD. May your hearts live forever! All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations. To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him. Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.”

[WSB]

Call to Worship

Oh sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The Lord has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises! Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody! With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord! Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it! Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

[PSALM 98]

Confession

Gracious God, we affirm that you alone are good. But we have sought our good in other things. We have pursued joy in the creation rather than in the Creator. We have not loved what is truly good. Forgive our sin, O God. Forgive us for refusing to believe that You are good, and that You do good. Have mercy upon us, according to Your goodness, according to Your unfailing love. Amen.

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

“But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

[MARK 13:9-13]

DEVOTIONAL

Perhaps the most notable lamenter in all of Scripture is Jeremiah, known as the “weeping prophet.” As a prophet and a priest, he lived in the tension of representing God and the people. The people were unfaithful to God, and would not heed the prophet’s warning. He longed for them to repent, but he could see the judgment of God coming. There would be no deliverance, only captivity and exile.

The book of Lamentations captures the pain and sorrow and prayer that are bound up in the heart of the one who weeps for his beloved city. In the first chapter, we see the plight of Jerusalem. She has been ransacked, and left desolate in shame. Her people have been enslaved by the enemy. There is no rest for their eyes, nor bread for their stomach. They are reaping the destruction of the sins they had sown. Jeremiah knows it is just, but he is also one of them: “You have brought the day you announced; now let them be as I am ... for my groans are many, and my heart is faint” (1:21-22).

It is an honest view of things. The futility of creation and the injustice of our world are ultimately products of the fall. We are products of the fall, and some of our suffering is the Lord’s discipline. Our sin is ever before us, and we cannot say we deserve to be spared.

In the second chapter of Lamentations, “The Lord has become like an enemy ... he has multiplied in the daughter of Judah mourning and lamentation” (2:5).

The Apostle Paul asked the rhetorical question: “If God is for us, then who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31). But what about when it feels like God is against us? Then who could be for us, and how could it possibly matter? It is an unbearable thought, one that prompted Jeremiah to question God: “With whom have you dealt thus?” (2:20). In other words, why must we suffer as no one has ever suffered? It was a desperate interrogation met only by deafening silence.

In chapter three, Jeremiah has lost all hope, the fount of words and tears bone dry (3:16-18). But then, “having poured all of himself out in lament, he finds in his emptiness a greater hope than he could have imagined: the surprising hope of *hesed*” (Michael Card). Cherish this oasis in the wilderness of Lamentations: “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’ The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him” (3:20-25). None of us would choose exile, but Jeremiah says, “It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD” (3:26).

Lent is a season of waiting, and it is hard to engage these heavy themes week after week. We are not accustomed to this kind of burden. Our soul is impatient for Easter, but Jeremiah says we need to sit in our lament for a while. Waiting, even when we don’t feel God’s presence, has a way of teaching us this important truth: “The Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men” (3:31-33).

We must learn this first-hand, so that we will “not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Hebrews 12:5-6).

REFLECTION

1. *What are you waiting for?*
2. *How is God using that to draw you near to himself?*

Closing Prayer

Where are you, O God? We are lost in the night; have you cast us from your presence? Temptations surround us; their masks grin through the darkness. We run from them, but which way should we go? Where can we hide when all lies in shadow? Have mercy on us, O God. Our eyes are swollen from tears; our bones are cold with fear; our souls have been broken—do you not hear, Lord? Save us! According to your steadfast love, answer us! Do not hide your face, but draw near and redeem us!

[WSB]

Call to Worship

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth! Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing! Know that the Lord, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name! For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

[PSALM 100]

Confession

O Lord, do not rebuke us in your anger or discipline us in your wrath. For your arrows have pierced us, and your hand has come down upon us. Our bodies waste away because of our sin; our guilt overwhelms us. We confess our iniquity; we are troubled by our sin. O Lord, do not forsake us; be not far from us, O God. Forgive our sin, and make us new, that we might have peace with you, peace with each other, and peace within ourselves.

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

“But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let the one who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything out, and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! Pray that it may not happen in winter. For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be. And if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days. And then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘Look, there he is!’ do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand.

[MARK 13:14-23]

DEVOTIONAL

We are past the halfway mark in Lamentations. Jeremiah has been revived by the remembrance of God’s *hesed*. His situation has not changed, but his outlook has. God will show up eventually, because that is what he does. He cannot deny himself. He will not forsake his people.

Having seen the light of God's mercy, Jeremiah turns his eye back to the desolate city. It is a pile of ashes where once a glorious fire was ablaze. Those who never gave a second thought to their next meal are stealing from the mouths of children. The wealthy are impoverished, the beautiful disfigured, and the compassionate show no mercy.

The final chapter is an extended plea that the Lord "remember." It is not that God has forgotten or is unaware. Memory is not the issue, but rather presence and power. Jeremiah is asking the Lord to look and see their plight in hope that he will do something about it.

Recall Israel's captivity in Egypt: "During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew" (Exodus 2:23-25). The text does not say what God knew. It simply shows us God burning in a bush, calling Moses to deliver his people. God knew what he had to do, because he remembered what he had promised to do.

What follows Jeremiah's plea for the Lord to remember is a detailed list of what he hopes the Lord will not forget: "they are orphans; they are weary; they are bearing the punishment for their father's sins; their women have been ravished; their princes crucified. All joy is gone. All dancing has turned into mourning. The rubble still smolders. The starving children still wail in the night" (Card). Lament is a sacred space to name our disappointments and sorrows. In fact, the most common form of lament in Scripture is poetry. Provocative imagery, vivid language, passionate expression, this is the language of love and lament, of prophet and priest.

Jeremiah was torn between his love for his own people and his commitment to his God. God's own heart had been broken by his unfaithful people, and Jeremiah could do nothing but fill that abyss with his tears. His life points us to our ultimate hope, the Great prophet and High priest, Christ Jesus our Lord. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). Jeremiah proclaimed the coming judgment of God. Jesus bore the weight of God's judgment in our place. His blood speaks a better word" (Hebrews 12:24).

When Jesus stood in that awful gap between God and his people, the curtain of the temple was torn asunder. The presence and power of God was made available to all who would come in faith. Their mourning would be turned to laughing. "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18).

REFLECTION

1. *What do you want the Lord to see in your life, in your town, and in our world?*
2. *What promises do you want to remind him of?*

Closing Prayer

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death, lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken. But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

[PSALM 13]

Call to Worship

The Lord works righteousness and justice for all who are oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.

[PSALM 103:6-13]

Confession

O God, from ages past no ear has heard, and no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. But we have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. Yet you, O Lord, are our Father; we are the clay, and you are the potter; we are the work of your hand. Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord, and do not remember our sin forever. Restore us, we pray, through the grace of our Lord Jesus, in whom we place our hope and trust. Amen.

[BASED ON ISAIAH 64]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

“But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

[MARK 13:24-31]

DEVOTIONAL

On any given Sunday, we worship next to people who are struggling. They are going through the motions of the service, but inside they are confused or hurting or even angry with God. The music is upbeat. The message is well meant, but does not address the depth of loss they feel. The masses are happy, so it seems.

It is one thing to lament in the privacy of our own home or mind, but it takes a different kind of courage and faith to lament with and for another. Michael Card comments, “We’re afraid of other people’s pain. Like Job’s friends, we’re afraid when we don’t have answers. Job doesn’t get any answers for his sufferings, but he gets God.” To enter into someone’s suffering, and to lament with them, is to seek God with them.

Unfortunately, Card is right. We are uneasy with pain and sorrow. Eugene Peterson weighs in: “Why are so many Christians embarrassed by tears, uneasy in the presence of sorrow, unpracticed in the language of lament? It certainly is not a biblical heritage, for virtually all our ancestors in the faith were thoroughly ‘acquainted with grief.’ And our Savior was, as everyone knows, ‘a Man of Sorrow.’”

His answer: “For at least one reason why people are uncomfortable with tears and the sight of suffering is that it is a blasphemous assault on their precariously maintained American spirituality of the pursuit of happiness. It is a lot easier to keep the American faith if they don’t have to look into the face of suffering, if they don’t have to listen to our laments, if they don’t have to deal with our tears.”

In the same way that our failure to lament cuts us off from the heart of God, it also cuts us off from each other. If we are to love one another as Jesus commanded, we must learn to “weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15).

Much of contemporary Christianity has sought to insulate itself from the real, broken world. If we’re not careful, we’ll lose touch with reality. King Solomon says it this way: “It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure” (Ecc 7:2-4).

Feasting and laughter and pleasure are not wrong, but trying to insulate your life with these things is not really life. It’s a bubble. You need to enter the pain of the world around you because the fall is your reality—“death is the destiny of every man.” Take this to heart and you will be wise. Pretend that Christianity is safety from sorrow and you will be a fool.

The way of Christian fellowship is empathy, which means we must not assume that everyone around us is fine. In our conversations, we must listen for complaints and cries and help them become laments. In our gathered worship, we must acknowledge the hurting and leave room for struggle and silence. In our counsel, we must pray with and over and for the hurting. This is essential to authentic Christian faith: Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).

REFLECTION

1. *Who is the Lord bringing to your mind today?*
2. *How can you move toward them with empathy?*

Closing Prayer

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

[PSALM 42:1-5]

Call to Worship

Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south. Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way till they reached a city to dwell in. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man! For he satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good things. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man!

[PSALM 107:1-9, 15]

Confession

God of love, it is your will that we should love you with heart, soul, mind, strength, and our neighbor as ourselves, but we are not sufficient for these things. We confess that our affections continually turn away from you: from purity to lust, from freedom to slavery, from compassion to indifference, from fullness to emptiness. Have mercy on us. Order our lives by your holy Word, and make your commandments the joy of our hearts. Conform us to the image of your loving Son, Jesus, that we may shine before the world to your glory. Amen.

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

“But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning— lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.”

[MARK 13:32-37]

DEVOTIONAL

The deepest longing of our soul is the all-satisfying *hesed* of God—not in the abstract, but first-hand knowledge and experience, a *tasting* of God’s *hesed*. Have you been delivered by the hand of God, tasted his mercy, seen his power, heard his word, felt his presence? The degree to which we have known the presence and power of God is the degree to which we get a sense for what it meant that Jesus was the Son of God, and

how devastating it must have been to bear the judgment of God against sin. All lament leads us to Jesus, in whom our sorrow and pain finds ultimate identification and hope.

The apex of bewilderment and spiritual chaos for Jesus was on the cross. The physical pain was excruciating, yet it was nothing compared to the shock and horror of being forsaken by the Father. The wrath of God was poured out on Jesus, the whole weight of the world's guilt bearing down on his shoulders. He felt the pain and loss of humanity. He internalized our anger and shame. He, who knew no sin, became sin (2 Corinthians 5:17).

In that moment, he took up the lament of King David: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). When he said this he not only took our sin upon himself, but also voiced all our laments. For underlying all our laments are two questions: "God, where are you?" and, "God, if you love me, then why?" For the first time in all of eternity, Jesus felt the absence of the Father's presence and the uncertainty of his love. God could not look upon the sin that Jesus became.

Why did it have to be this way? If Jesus was God's answer to ages of laments, how did he end up in the most lamentable position of all?

One approach to the question is to consider why so many ultimately rejected him, even his own people (John 1:11). They had expectations about what it would mean for God to answer their prayers and solve their problems. The disciples, too, regularly stumbled over their expectations. They hoped the Messiah would conquer the Romans and vindicate Israel. Instead, he predicted the destruction of the temple and died for the Romans. They wanted the Messiah to give them answers. Jesus gave himself. He predicted his own destruction, and then endured it in order to conquer our real enemies: Satan, sin, and death. Jesus did not take away lamenting. He took it up. Having endured the cross, he secured for us the one thing we need more than solutions: the presence of God.

"Lament is the path that takes us to the place where we discover that there is no complete answer to pain and suffering, only Presence" (Card).

REFLECTION

1. *Spend some time meditating on the suffering that Jesus endured.*
2. *How would the presence of God be more satisfying to you than answers from God?*

Closing Prayer

So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom. Return, O Lord! How long? Have pity on your servants! Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, and for as many years as we have seen evil. Let your work be shown to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!

[PSALM 90:12-17]

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT

The Lord Jesus was born under the law and perfectly fulfilled it. He endured most grievous torments in his soul and most painful sufferings in his body; he was crucified, died, and was buried; he remained under the power of death, yet his body did not undergo decay; and he arose from the dead on the third day with the same body in which he had suffered. In this body he ascended into heaven, where he sits at the right hand of his Father, making intercession, and he shall return to judge men and angels at the end of the age. The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself—which he through the eternal Spirit once offered up to God—has fully satisfied the justice of his Father. He purchased not only reconciliation but also an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven for all whom the Father has given to him.

[WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH CH. 8]



Christ hath risen! Hallelujah!
Blessed morn of life and light!
Lo, the grave is rent asunder,
Death is conquered through His might.

Christ is risen! Hallelujah!
Gladness fills the world today;
From the tomb that could not hold Him,
See, the stone is rolled away!

Christ hath risen! Hallelujah!
Friends of Jesus, dry your tears;
Through the veil of gloom and darkness,
Lo, the Son of God appears!

Christ hath risen! Hallelujah!
He hath risen, as He said;
He is now the King of glory,
And our great exalted Head.

[FANNY CROSBY]

Week Five

o o o

SACRIFICE

Call to Worship

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

[ISAIAH 6:1-7]

Confession

O God, in creation you fashion us in your image, in Christ you reveal to us your love, through the Holy Spirit you welcome us into the fellowship of believers; we bow in gratitude before you. We constantly distort your image, but still you restore it. We daily betray your love, but still you extend it. We often disrupt fellowship, but still you bless it. Come unto us at this time and in this place, O Lord, that your image in us might be revealed, your love for us returned, and our fellowship in Christ renewed. Amen.

[VOV]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him, for they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people." And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. There were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." And they scolded her. But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

[MARK 14:1-9]

DEVOTIONAL

Shortly after sin had entered the world and God had pronounced judgment on sin, we read the following in Genesis 3:21: “And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.”

God looked at their clothes and said, “*Nope. That’s not going to work.*” The clothes that Adam and Eve had made for themselves were not adequate covering to face the new fallen world in which they were now living. Remember when they first sinned? Sin opened their eyes, but not in a good way. Sin laid them bare, left them feeling exposed. For the first time, they realized they were naked. So, they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths, single-piece garments. And ever since, the human race has engaged in an enterprise of self-covering that always falls short.

God knew that Adam and Eve needed something more substantial for covering. They needed something made by his hands, not their own. When we read Genesis 3:21, it is apparent that some animals died in order that the man and woman could be sufficiently clothed. This is the first hint of substitutionary atonement that we see in the Bible. “Substitutionary atonement” is just a fancy way of saying that an innocent one died so that a guilty one could be covered. You see, covering sin is not simple, quick, and easy (like grabbing some leaves off a tree and sewing them together). Covering sin is costly, painful ... bloody. Sin produces suffering and death, so the cost of covering sin involves suffering and death. It involves sacrifice.

Did Adam and Eve think they could just sweep things under the rug, tidy up the disastrous mess they had made without any cost, without any price being paid? Do we think that? When we try to cover our own sin, we are engaging in a futile self-salvation project. We are essentially saying, “I can atone for my own sin.” But this is a gross under-estimation of both the breadth and depth of sin’s devastation.

The death of the animals in Genesis 3 is the first biblical hint that atonement requires sacrifice. It points us forward to the ultimate sacrifice. Jesus Christ suffered and bled and died so that we could be adequately clothed—clothed in his righteousness. The blood of Jesus is our atonement, our covering. Just like Adam and Eve, we can’t cover our own sin. God must do that, and he has made that possible with the costly sacrifice of his own Son. In light of this: “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness” (Is. 61:10).

REFLECTION

1. *What are some of your fig leaves (false coverings)? These are just things you and I use to try to make ourselves look okay or feel okay about ourselves (good works, talents and abilities, religious duty and discipline, performance at work).*
2. *God calls us to put our faith in the covering that he alone provides. He calls us to faith in Christ. The bloody death of Jesus is our only hope. What would it look like for you to believe that today when you are tempted to “self-cover”?*

Closing Prayer

Everlasting Creator-Father, I bless thee for the everlasting covenant, for the appointment of a Mediator. I rejoice that he failed not, nor was discouraged, but accomplished the work thou gavest him to do; and said on the cross, 'It is finished.' I exult in the thought that thy justice is satisfied, thy truth established, thy law magnified, and a foundation is laid for my hope. I look to a present and personal interest in Christ and say, Surely he has borne my griefs, carried my sorrows, won my peace, healed my soul. Justified by his blood I am saved by his life, Glorifying in his cross I bow to his scepter, Having his Spirit I possess his mind. Lord, grant that my religion may not be occasional and partial, but universal, influential, effective, and may I always continue in thy words as well as thy works, so that I may reach my end in peace.

[VOV]

Call to Worship

The Mighty One, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth. Our God comes; he does not keep silence; before him is a devouring fire, around him a mighty tempest. He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people: "Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!" The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge!

[PSALM 50:1-6]

Confession

O God, in gracious love you promise to care for the creatures of earth; in steadfast love you keep your promise. But we, who so quickly embrace your covenant, just as quickly betray it; we, from whom you desire worship, too often offer only scorn. For making and then keeping your promise in the greatness of your mercy, we sing your praise, Lord; and for accepting and then spurning your covenant in the greatness of our sin, we ask your forgiveness. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him. And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him, "Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?" And he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there prepare for us." And the disciples set out and went to the city and found it just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover. And when it was evening, he came with the twelve. And as they were reclining at table and eating, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." They began to be sorrowful and to say to him one after another, "Is it I?" He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born."

[MARK 14:10-21]

DEVOTIONAL

Philippians 2 says this of Jesus Christ: “He made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death” (2:7-8) Not only was it a sacrifice for God the Son to take on human flesh, you might say that Jesus’ entire life was marked by sacrifice—giving up his rights and spending himself for the sake of others. From the beginning of his life, his feet were always walking toward the ultimate sacrifice of death on a brutal Roman cross. This brings a question to mind: Why is sacrifice so central to God’s plan of redemption and reconciliation? Why couldn’t God just forgive people of their sins without sacrifice?

If you think about what it means to bring about reconciliation in a human relationship, you can see how sacrifice is always part of the process. Let’s say I offend you or hurt you in some way. If we are to reconcile our relationship, you will necessarily have to sacrifice. It will cost you something to forgive me, because you will have to absorb the pain of the offense. You will have to sacrifice your right to be angry and move toward me with forgiveness. But I will have to sacrifice too. I will have to lay my pride on the sacrificial altar if I am going to move toward you with confession and repentance. The bottom line is that without sacrifice there is no reconciliation. There is only hardness of heart and death of relationship.

In a very similar way, we must sacrifice in order to move toward God with confession and repentance. We must come to the end of ourselves, killing any sense of pride and self-righteousness. But we are not the ones who move first. It is not our sacrifice that saves us. God’s plan of redemption is primarily about his sacrifice, not ours.

Redemption is a term of value, so there must be a cost involved. To redeem means to buy back, to regain possession of something in exchange for payment. Because we are created in the image of God and he loves us, he considered us worth the cost of redemption. However, the full cost of redeeming a human being is staggering. What does it cost to buy a person back from the realm of sin and death, from the reign of Satan? The cost is commensurate with the destruction that sin, death, and Satan have brought to humanity. The cost is beyond our ability to pay. No amount of sacrifice on our part would enable us to cover the cost. Thankfully, the full cost fell on Jesus. All of the curses of the Fall, most notably our sin and the resulting death, were placed on Christ. His sacrifice makes our reconciliation with God possible. Thanks be to God!

REFLECTION

1. *Is there anyone in your life with whom you need to reconcile? If they are in the wrong, what will it cost you to forgive them? If you are in the wrong, what will it cost you to ask their forgiveness? Chances are, this cost pales in comparison to what it cost Jesus to buy your forgiveness.*
2. *Spend a few moments thanking God for the sacrifice of his Son to buy your redemption. Thank him for paying for specific sins for which you could never have paid.*

Closing Prayer

Send your Spirit among us, O God, as we meditate on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Prepare our minds to hear your Word. Move our hearts to accept what we hear. Purify our will to obey in joy and faith. This we pray through Christ, our Savior. Amen.

[WSB]

Call to Worship

The Lord who calls us to worship today is the same Jesus who refused the temptation to worship the evil one. Rather than receive the glorious kingdoms of this world, he endured the shame of the cross, and today is Lord of lords and King of kings. Now are gathered in him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, glory and power. With the saints of all ages we say, “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”

[BASED ON COLOSSIANS 2:3; REVELATION 5:12]

Confession

God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we are your covenant people—one church, drawn from all nations. Our citizenship is in heaven. Yet we confess, O Lord, that we sometimes lose sight of your kingdom and its ways. We confess that we sometimes live more as citizens of our own land than as citizens of your kingdom. By your truth you call all peoples to account. Forgive us for losing our distinctiveness. Focus us on the cross and on the salvation you give through him who is the Lord and King and Judge of us all, Jesus, the Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. And Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away, for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” Peter said to him, “Even though they all fall away, I will not.” And Jesus said to him, “Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.” But he said emphatically, “If I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And they all said the same.

[MARK 14:22-31]

DEVOTIONAL

Can we know for sure that God keeps his promises? Everyone knows how easy it is to make a verbal promise, but then waffle if it becomes too difficult to keep. Could this ever happen with God?

In Genesis, God made a series of promises to Abraham: He promised to give Abraham many descendants and make him into a great nation, to bless him and make his name great, and to bless all the families of the earth through him. He also promised to give the descendants of Abraham a particular land. But Abraham was unsure. His circumstances didn't indicate that God's promises could actually come to fruition. So, in Genesis 15, Abraham asked God some questions: "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless," and, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess [the land]" (15:2)?

In answer to these questions, God did something that seems strange to us in our cultural and historical context. He had Abraham sacrifice some animals, cut them in half, and then lay the pieces of the animals across from each other. Then Abraham fell into a deep sleep, and a smoking fire pot and flaming torch passed between the pieces. This ceremony, common in the ancient Near East, was called "cutting a covenant." Two parties entering into a binding agreement or covenant with one another would cut an animal in pieces and pass between the pieces to inaugurate the covenant. The ceremony signified that the two parties were promising to fulfill the terms of the covenant. If they failed to keep the promises of the covenant, they were saying, "May we become like this animal." It's like they were saying, "I promise. Cross my heart and hope to die." The sacrificial ceremony was literally a pledge of one's life to keep the promises of the covenant.

When the smoking fire pot and flaming torch (which were symbols of God's presence) passed between the pieces of dead animals, God himself was assuming responsibility to make sure that all the promises of the covenant were kept. Abraham was asleep, completely passive, while God initiated and ratified the covenant. O. Palmer Robertson writes, "The solemn ceremony of self-malediction provides the Lord's reply [to Abraham's questions]: 'I promise. I solemnly commit myself as Almighty God. Death may be necessary. But the promises of the covenant shall be fulfilled!'"

It's a staggering thought! God was saying, "May I be torn to pieces like these animals if the covenant between me and Abraham's descendants is broken." The terms of the covenant would end up being broken—but not by God.

Abraham's descendants would be unfaithful to God and his covenant. But, God kept his promise. He had sworn on his life to bless Abraham. So, the blessing for Abraham and his descendants (which includes us as Christians) was made possible by the curse of death that fell on Jesus. In Jesus, God the Son took on flesh, and his flesh was torn apart in order to keep his covenant promises to Abraham (and us). Jesus, the covenant-keeper, sacrificially offered himself for us: "Take, eat; this is my body. Drink of this cup, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26-28). The blood of Jesus, the sacrificial Lamb of God, is our assurance that God keeps his promises. What better assurance could we ever have?

REFLECTION

1. *What promises of God (which you have in Christ) are you struggling to believe? How can the blood of Christ give you assurance that God keeps his promises to his children?*
2. *Spend a few moments praising God that he is a covenant-keeper and that he has fulfilled all the provisions of the covenant that binds you in everlasting relationship with him.*

Closing Prayer

O Christ, by remaining faithful till death, you show us the road to greater love. O Christ, by taking the burden of sin upon yourself, you reveal to us the way of generosity. O Christ, by praying for those who crucified you, you lead us to forgive without counting the cost. O Christ, by opening paradise to the repentant thief, you awaken hope in us. O Christ, come and help our weak faith. O Christ, create a pure heart in us; renew and strengthen our spirit. O Christ, your Word is near; may it live within us and protect us always. Amen.

[WSB]

Call to Worship

Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy! For the Lord, the Most High, is to be feared, a great king over all the earth. He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet. He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves. Selah God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet. Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises to our King, sing praises! For God is the King of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm! God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne. The princes of the peoples gather as the people of the God of Abraham. For the shields of the earth belong to God; he is highly exalted!

[PSALM 47]

Confession

Merciful God, we have not loved you with all our heart and mind and strength and soul. Lord, have mercy. We have not loved our neighbors as you have taught us. Christ, have mercy. We are indifferent to the saving grace of your Word and life. Lord, have mercy. Forgive and heal us by your steadfast love made known to us in the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And they went to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch." And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." And he came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy, and they did not know what to answer him. And he came the third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."

[MARK 14:32-42]

DEVOTIONAL

"[God] said [to Abraham], "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains

of which I shall tell you.” So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him” (Genesis 22:2-3).

It's hard to imagine the complexity of emotions Abraham must have had as he made his way up Mount Moriah, the place where God had commanded him to sacrifice his beloved son. Isaac was his only child, the one he had waited decades for, the one whom God had promised and then miraculously provided. Isaac was a physical sign of God's goodness and faithfulness to keep his covenant with Abraham. He represented all the dreams and aspirations of Abraham's heart—Isaac was Abraham's treasure. There was a lot at stake.

We don't know exactly what Abraham was feeling, but we do know how he responded. Instead of arguing with God, he immediately began preparing for the sacrifice. His response was obedience: he “saddled his donkey,” “cut wood for the burnt offering,” and began making his way up the mountain.

This isn't like the man in Jesus' parable who found a treasure in a field and sold everything he had to buy the field. That man knew what he stood to gain. We don't mind sacrifice if we know there is a good reason or reward. However, it seems Abraham had neither of these, just a mysterious faith that he and the boy would come back together from the altar (22:5).

When they came to the altar, Abraham carefully laid out the wood, then bound his son and placed him on the wood. And just as he was taking the knife to slaughter his son, God interceded:

“But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son” (22:11-13).

To believe God means to trust beyond reason and reward that he is good, and that what he demands he also provides. It is in this sense that Abraham believed God, and so was willing to obey God, even to the point of offering up his only son.

God honors our obedience and worship by providing what we really want and desperately need: a substitutionary sacrifice. Abraham did not withhold his only son from God; “[God] did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all” (Rom 8:32). Isaac was the promised seed of Abraham through whom God would bless the nations; Jesus was the promised seed of Adam through whom God would bring redemption to all peoples throughout history. Isaac carried the wood on his back up to the altar to be sacrificed; Jesus carried his own cross on the road to Calvary where he would be

crucified. Isaac was laid upon the altar in anticipation of his death through his father's own hand; Jesus was slain upon the altar and cut-off from his Father. A substitutionary lamb was provided for Isaac, but Jesus was the substitutionary lamb provided for us all.

Jesus is the greater and perfect sacrifice who empowers our obedience and worship.

REFLECTION

1. *What is your treasure, the thing you cherish and protect and want to control?*
2. *What would it look like for you to "give" that to God?*
3. *Can you trust his goodness and provision for you?*

Closing Prayer

O God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, All that were ever saved were saved by thee, and will through eternity exclaim, 'Not unto us, but unto thy name give glory for thy mercy and truth's sake.' Thou hast chosen to transact all thy concerns with us through a Mediator in whom all fullness dwells and who is exalted to be Prince and Saviour. To him we look, on him we depend, through him we are justified. May we derive relief from his sufferings without ceasing to abhor sin, or to long after holiness; feel the double efficacy of his blood, tranquillizing and cleansing our consciences; delight in his service as well as in his sacrifice.

[VOV]

Call to Worship

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

[PSALM 46]

Confession

Merciful God, we meet each other today at the foot of the cross, as inhabitants of one world. We wait with each other as those who inflict wounds on one another: be merciful to us. As those who deny justice to others: be merciful to us. As those who put our trust in power: be merciful to us. As those who are greedy: be merciful to us. As those who put others on trial: be merciful to us. As those who refuse to receive: be merciful to us. As those who are afraid of the world's torment: be merciful to us. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man. Seize him and lead him away under guard." And when he came, he went up to him at once and said, "Rabbi!" And he kissed him. And they laid hands on him and seized him. But one of those who stood by drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. And Jesus said to them, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. But let the Scriptures be fulfilled." And they all left him and fled. And a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body. And they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked.

[MARK 14:43-52]

DEVOTIONAL

It is so easy to feel righteous about sacrifice. When we “sacrifice” by tithing, or abstaining from sex or alcohol or food, or giving our time to help others, we feel pretty good about ourselves. We might not say it this way, but perhaps we even feel like we have earned some good graces with God. We present these things to God in our minds like we are making a case for why we deserve to be forgiven, or blessed, or noticed. However, this type of thinking prevents us from giving God the sacrifice he desires—after all, our money, our bodies, and our time all belong to him already; is it really so generous to give a small portion back? That is more stewardship than sacrifice.

It will not do to say to God, “Yes, I have sinned, but look what good I have done! Look what I have sacrificed!” God desires a different kind of sacrifice, one that encompasses our very being. In King David’s famous confession concerning his adultery and murder and cover up, he comes clean with God. No excuses, just full disclosure and ownership. No ritual ceremony, just impassioned prayer. This is what people do when they have come to the end of themselves. They bring absolutely nothing to the table, and count on God to be everything to them.

But why didn’t David bring this to the altar of ritual worship? He needed forgiveness, and the means of atonement in his day was the blood of an animal. He explains: “For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:16-17).

Just as “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4), nothing we sacrifice for God will “tip the scales in our favor” or satisfy his holiness. God alone blots out all our iniquities and restores to us the joy of our salvation (51:9,12). David’s point was not that sacrifices would no longer be made (they would), but simply that a sacrifice in and of itself counts for nothing apart from the heart of the one who offers it.

God desires our whole heart, and the only way to give yourself completely is to let go of the notion that any part of your heart or your spirit or your life is good apart from him. When we stop trying to justify ourselves before God, when we allow ourselves to see the scope of our sin, when we understand our total depravity, our hearts will break as David’s did. We will cease striving for a righteousness of our own, stop covering up our unrighteousness, and look only to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died “once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18).

REFLECTION

1. *What makes you feel like you are doing okay with God?*
2. *How have you judged those around you that do not make the same kind of sacrifices you make for God?*

3. *What would it take for you to bring nothing to the table (a broken and contrite heart)?*

Closing Prayer

Almighty God, giver of every good and perfect gift, teach us to render to you all that we have and all that we are, that we may praise you, not with our lips only, but with our whole lives, turning the duties, the sorrows, and the joys of all our days into a living sacrifice to you, through our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

[WSB]

Call to Worship

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers. Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. He will receive blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob. Selah Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle! Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory!

[PSALM 24]

Confession

Almighty and merciful God, we confess to You that too often we approach You out of duty and obligation rather than genuine love and affection for Your presence. Forgive us for uttering songs of praise to You without being transformed by the truths that we are singing. Forgive us for muttering prayers of adoration to You without depending upon Your love and grace. And forgive us for acting as though You are pleased with our show, pretense, and religious activities, when we do not love our neighbor. You take no pleasure in these worthless offerings, they are an abomination to You. You will hide Your eyes from us, and You will not listen. We confess that we seek comfort and isolation rather than moving toward people, like You have moved toward us. We humbly ask that You would teach us to do what is truly good; that we would seek justice and correct oppression. We pray that we would love seeing things made right in this world because You have first made us right through the cross of Christ. Amen.

[BASED ON ISAIAH 1:10-17]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And they led Jesus to the high priest. And all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together. And Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire. Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" Yet even about this their testimony did not agree. And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer to make?"

What is it that these men testify against you?” But he remained silent and made no answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” And Jesus said, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” And the high priest tore his garments and said, “What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?” And they all condemned him as deserving death. And some began to spit on him and to cover his face and to strike him, saying to him, “Prophesy!” And the guards received him with blows.

[MARK 14:53-65]

DEVOTIONAL

We live in a culture obsessed with self-improvement. We want to change our job, our body, our house, our habits, and hobbies. We even want to “improve” the people around us. When it comes to opportunity and options for change, our day is unparalleled in history. The problem is that we also live in an age of unparalleled convenience. I can shoot a video on my phone and send it to someone a thousand miles away, all within minutes. I can take a pill and lose weight while I sleep, allegedly. Without any work of preparation, I can eat nearly whenever and whatever I want. Privileges like these have cultivated unrealistic expectations and unwarranted impatience. We cannot escape the effects of our technological age.

The Bible offers an entirely different norm for change, which is more profound and deliberate. It promises holistic change, but not all at once, and not without sacrifice. In Romans 12, after Paul has laid out the theology of the gospel, he exhorts his readers to take action, to let the gospel change them, if you will: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Romans 12:1).

The way we take action is to present the entirety of who we are to God “as a living sacrifice” to him. This is a peculiar phrase. The allusion to Old Testament sacrifice is clear, but what is being sacrificed on *that* altar dies. So what are we to make of this “living sacrifice?”

On one hand, personal growth is sacrificial. We do not need to atone for our sins (Jesus is the final sacrifice for sin), but we do have to put to death our selfish ambition and our desire to be in control. So much of our motive for change is to secure ourselves by our own means. We want to change our bodies to secure a good image, acquire wealth to secure comfort, and gain power to secure our happiness. All of that must be put to death.

But that is only part of what Paul is saying here. Our worship is sacrificial, but it is also living: “If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13). In other words, our sacrifice of worship is to live for God, to present the members of our body to God as “instruments of righteousness” (Romans 6:13). This is possible because “he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also [give life to our] mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in [us]” (Romans 8:11). Because Jesus offered up his body on the cross to secure our salvation forever, we can offer up our entire life to God

as a continual act of worship.

The norm in our culture is to sacrifice whatever we have to get what we want. The way of true sanctification is to sacrifice everything we want because of what we already have in Christ. This is the heart of Lent. We are decluttering our lives, inside and out, testing the values and habits and desires that have become our acceptable norm. We are making room in our heart and mind to consider what Jesus gave up for us, and it is changing us. It's not all at once, because that would rob us of the joy we experience in knowing the one who changes us.

REFLECTION

1. *What kinds of things do you want to change about yourself and your life?*
2. *What would it look like to offer these things to God in worship?*
3. *How will pursuing change help you seek God above all else?*

Closing Prayer

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we, your unworthy servants, give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all whom you have made. We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life, but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory throughout all ages. Amen.

[WSB]

SIXTH SUNDAY OF LENT: PALM SUNDAY

By his resurrection Christ broke apart the gates of death and opened to us the way of life, announced victory to the women and apostles and brought salvation to the whole world, annihilated the power of death and renewed the entire creation, gave us the promise of resurrection so that we might rise with him in new life. We proclaim and affirm that, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, “Death is swallowed up in victory.” And so we cry out: “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

[FROM THE WCF 20.1; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:55-57]



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

In Christ alone, who took on flesh
Fullness of God in helpless babe!
This gift of love and righteousness
Scorned by the ones He came to save
Till on that cross as Jesus died
The wrath of God was satisfied
For ev'ry sin on Him was laid—
Here in the death of Christ I live

There in the ground His body lay
Light of the world by darkness slain
Then bursting forth in glorious Day
Up from the grave He rose again
And as He stands in victory
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me
For I am His and He is mine—
Bought with the precious blood of Christ

No guilt in life, no fear in death—
This is the pow'r of Christ in me;
From life's first cry to final breath,
Jesus commands my destiny.
No pow'r of hell, no scheme of man,
Can ever pluck me from His hand;
Till He returns or calls me home—
Here in the pow'r of Christ I'll stand.

[KEITH GETTY AND STUART TOWNEND]

Week Six

o o o

DEATH

Call to Worship

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

[ISAIAH 25:6-9]

Confession

O Lord, we confess our hands are not clean, our hearts are not pure. Forgive our capricious discipleship and keep our faith constant, O Lord. Lead us always to a deeper experience of your love. Enliven us by the familiar but always new story of shame and triumph, suffering and hope, that this week reveals. Mold us to the ways of the Servant whose life we honor. In the name of Christ, our Lord, Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

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

[MARK 14:66-72]

DEVOTIONAL

Few things are more negative than "death." Death is seen as the end of something—the end of life, bringing with it much defeat and bitterness. Death is to be avoided at all costs.

But the Bible, at times, tells a different story:

“You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies” (1 Cor. 15:36).

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24).

Musician Jon Foreman echoes this same upside-down thinking when he sings, “For a seed to give birth to life, first it must die.” We see this every year, all around us as the season of autumn approaches. The leaves change and the flowers fade as the cold grip of death takes hold of them yet again. Old things are dying to bring about new life. It is a strange cycle of mourning and rejoicing that makes up our days. Death brings life, or it at least has that potential.

In many ways, this is the very journey of Lent: death to life. Just as the food we eat must first die in order to sustain our life, so the old self (apart from Christ) must die daily to give birth to the new self. We put to death our self-centeredness and we are raised to life in Jesus. We deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. Death brings life.

Death is a looming and scary thing. But the love of God toward us in Christ compels us not to be afraid of death and what it will cost us. God held nothing back, but rather, gave up his own Son for us. Surely he will also return to us life abundantly. And that abundant life is this: gaining Jesus, being with and following him. The process of dying to ourselves and our own agenda helps us to locate our treasure (life, joy, purpose) in Jesus. Lent reminds us that true life is found in Jesus.

When the seed of God – Jesus – fell into the ground and died, he became not just our creator but our redeemer and our seed of life. As we die to ourselves we get more of him and in turn more of who we are created to be. When you truly grasp the death of Jesus, when the truth and beauty of all that Jesus gave up for you sinks into your life, you will joyfully give up all you have and are to follow him.

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

[ISAAC WATTS]

REFLECTION

1. *What attitudes, desires, and tendencies toward self-centeredness are present in your life that you need to put to death?*
2. *In what areas of your life are you unwilling to give up control in order to follow Jesus?*

3. *What would God have you do this passion week in order to prepare the way for the joy of resurrection that awaits you on Sunday?*

Closing Prayer

You are holy, O God of majesty, and blessed is Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. As one of us, he knew our joys and sorrows and our struggles with temptation. He was like us in every way except sin. In him we see what you created us to be. Though blameless, he suffered willingly for our sin. Though innocent, he accepted death for the guilty. On the cross he offered himself, a perfect sacrifice, for the life of the world. By his suffering and death, he freed us from sin and death. Risen from the grave, he leads us to the joy of new life. Through Christ, all glory and honor are yours, almighty Father, with the Holy Spirit in the holy church, now and forever. Amen.

[WSB]

Call to Worship

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

[COLOSSIANS 1:15-20]

Confession

Like the people who greeted Jesus as he entered Jerusalem and then later pronounced “Crucify him,” we are fickle people who often deny Christ in our thoughts, words, and deeds. Remembering the events of Jesus’ last week helps us see ourselves for what we are: sinners in need of a Savior, a Savior—praise God—we have in Christ. In honesty and hope, we confess now our sins to God.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And as soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. And they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate. And Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” And he answered him, “You have said so.” And the chief priests accused him of many things. And Pilate again asked him, “Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you.” But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed. Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked. And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas. And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he usually did for them. And he answered them, saying, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered him up. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead. And Pilate again said to them, “Then what shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?” And they cried out again, “Crucify him.” And Pilate said to them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him.” So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.

[MARK 15:1-15]

DEVOTIONAL

The aim during the Lenten season is to identify with Jesus in the wilderness, and to follow him, in some way, through his suffering and persecution and sacrifice. The difficulty in following Jesus, of course, is that the path leads to the cross.

Nevertheless, we try—try to meditate and pray, try to give up certain comforts and pleasures to focus our attention, try to add other things to live more wisely, try to repent of consumerism and take in more of the Bible, more of our relationships, more of serving others ... we press on and try.

But even in our best efforts, failure is there to greet us. Even in moments of success, failure lurks.

Six weeks is a long time to pay attention to something. Losing steam comes easily. There are moments when Lent is forgotten altogether, and thoughts begin to creep in, “Lent is just an observance. Jesus doesn’t really care if I slack here or there, does he? I don’t want to be legalistic, you know.” We drift toward the kind of carefree attitude that is not about enjoying freedom, but about indulging the flesh.

Then there are other moments – usually when feelings of guilt sink in for indulging the flesh – when more of a performance driven attitude takes over. We recommit ourselves to our goals, which is not a bad thing, but it often is not about identifying with Jesus. It becomes about our righteousness. We have to do this right.

The constant threat of these two things – license and legalism – is always present in our lives, devilishly waiting to get us off course. Neither of these produces the kind of repentance and humility that gets to the heart of Jesus. Repentance, humility, suffering, lament, and sacrifice do not come naturally. Indulgence and self-righteousness do.

Lent is not hard because we are forgetful or because six weeks is a long time. Lent is hard because we do not want to die. Lent is about death, and we tend to avoid death. But the way of Jesus leads to the cross. “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

All of our shortcomings related to Lent are but a microcosm of our ragged and duplicitous selves. We are far more sinful than anything we are willing to admit here. Indeed, far worse than we know or could even imagine. But the grace of God in Christ Jesus is far more lovely and powerful than we have ever dreamed.

Lent is pushing us toward Easter, cultivating a longing for it deep in our hearts. Not a longing to go back to our old ways, but a longing for a Savior—one who lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died.

REFLECTION

1. *How have you drifted into license and/or legalism during this season of Lent?*
2. *Where have feelings of guilt and/or self-righteousness crept in?*

Closing Prayer

Holy God, you have opened our ears to hear your Word and our lips to proclaim your truth: open our eyes this day to see in the cross the revelation of your love; through Jesus the crucified, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, be honor and praise, now and forever. Amen.

[WSB]

Call to Worship

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

[HEBREWS 1:1-4]

Confession

Eternal God, whose covenant with us is never broken: We confess that we have failed to fulfill your will for us. We betray our neighbors, desert our friends, and run in fear when we should be loyal. Though you have bound yourself to us, we have not bound ourselves to you. God, have mercy on us weak and willful people. Lead us once again to your table, and unite us to Christ, who is the bread of life and the vine from which we grow in grace. To Christ be praise forever. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And the soldiers led him away inside the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters), and they called together the whole battalion. And they clothed him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on him. And they began to salute him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they were striking his head with a reed and spitting on him and kneeling down in homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him.

[MARK 15:16-20]

DEVOTIONAL

Meditating on death, at its very core, is morbid and depressing. We mourn, weep, and lament death, sure—but what is the point of taking a week (at some level six weeks) to meditate and reflect deeply on it? Is that necessary or helpful? Wouldn't it be better to keep things positive?

For the Christian, death is not exclusively negative or bad news because we have a much bigger view of the grand story. Death isn't the end; it is a subplot that gives way to glory of resurrection. Death is no longer a bitter pill to swallow; it has been swallowed up in the victory, it has lost its sting (1 Corinthians 15:55). Death is the harbinger of good news

for the person who is shaped by God's story. **Meditating on death should always be a means toward understanding the grander story of the gospel.**

Amid this grander story, the reality of death confronts and challenges us—it reminds us that life is frail and fleeting, and it beckons us to examine our daily life.

To be a Christian means to have located your identity, your worth, your value in Jesus—he has become your treasure. A life well lived is one that treasures Christ above all (Philippians 3:7-8). Death, therefore, must serve as a constant reminder of where to place our treasure:

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21).

A life well lived is one that keeps the impending nature and finality of death in view because death causes us to examine what we are treasuring. **Meditating on death should always be a means toward gaining an eternal perspective that results in treasuring Christ more deeply.**

Above all, though, **meditating on death should always be a means toward understanding and receiving the grace of God through Christ.** Death is a direct result of the fall, as sin entered into our reality. Our world – and our own lives – are filled with death and decay because of the power and presence of sin.

We are nearing the end of this Lenten journey. And for this journey to become truly real to you, you must come face to face with the depth of sin that is present in your heart and life. You have to see yourself for who you really are: a sinner fully deserving of God's just and holy wrath (Romans 3). We have to see ourselves how God sees us because it is only as we believe what God says about us that we will be able to believe what God has done for us. God has given you his only begotten Son, our true Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. God has given you his best to redeem you. That is what God has done for us!

God does not ignore our sin, he atones for it. He does not look past who we are, he redeems us. And it is his great love for us that empowers our redemption: “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10). Because of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, we are accepted by God, we are saints in the kingdom of God.

It is only as we believe in the depth of our sin that we can truly understand and believe in the overwhelming grace, mercy, and love of God. And this is the gospel: God's grace and mercy through the sufficient sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is so much deeper and greater than what we see in our own hearts. Praise Jesus!

REFLECTION

1. *Think back on the past seven days and spend some time confessing your specific sin before God.*
2. *Now reflect on the truth that Jesus went to the cross and died for those very sins. Receive God's forgiveness in Christ, worshiping him for his grace and mercy.*

Closing Prayer

Lead us, O God, in the way of Christ. Give us courage to take up our cross and, in full reliance upon your grace, to follow him. Help us to love you above all else and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, demonstrating that love in deed and word by the power of your Spirit. Give us strength to serve you faithfully until the promised day of resurrection, when, with the redeemed of all the ages, we will feast with you at your table in glory. Through Christ, all glory and honor are yours, almighty Father, with the Holy Spirit in the holy church, now and forever. Amen.

[WSB]

* Day 38: Maundy Thursday

Call to Worship

I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad. Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together! I sought the Lord, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!

[PSALM 34:1-4, 8]

Confession

Lord Jesus, like Judas, we have betrayed you; like Peter, we have denied you; and like the other disciples, we have forsaken you. Yet you remain faithful to us unto death, even death on a cross. We plead for your forgiveness and mercy. And we ask that you strengthen us so that we do not turn aside but follow you to the very end—for the final victory belongs to you.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. And it was the third hour when they crucified him. And the inscription of the charge against him read, “The King of the Jews.” And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!” So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.” Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

[MARK 15:21-32]

DEVOTIONAL

On Maundy Thursday we remember the last evening Jesus shared with his disciples in the upper room before his arrest and crucifixion. The name “Maundy Thursday” comes from the Latin *mandatum novum*, referring to the “new commandment” Jesus taught his disciples. In John 13, Jesus says, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (13:34-35). But the

disciples do not fully comprehend how deeply Jesus has loved them.

In these last words to his disciples, Jesus is defining what it means to love him. Five times Jesus said that love for him was connected to obeying his commands. And five times he said that his command is that we love each other as he has loved us. The point is unmistakable: our commitment to and love for Jesus is expressed by our love for one another. We are not only united with God in Christ; we are also bound together in Christ, for better or for worse. We married into a family—the family of God. But like the disciples, we do not fully comprehend how deeply Jesus has loved us.

Take in the deep love of God for you through the person of Jesus:

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 3:1, 4:9-10).

“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6-8).

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35-39).

Jesus lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died, so that God can adopt us into his family. He sends the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (Gal. 4:6) God gives us the thing we most desperately need—himself.

God’s love for us is most powerfully displayed in the death of Jesus on the cross. Love is defined at the cross of Jesus. To the degree that you are able to comprehend and soak in the love of Jesus for you, to the degree that it sinks deep into your fabric—this is the degree to which you will be empowered to carry out the new commandment that Jesus gave to us.

REFLECTION

1. Ask God to reveal to you the ways in which you do not fully comprehend his love for you. Where are you plagued by unbelief?
2. Spend a few minutes meditating on the three verses above.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you, for the honor of your name. Amen.

[WSB]

* Day 39: Good Friday

Call to Worship

Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

[ISAIAH 53:1-6]

Confession

Gracious God, having heard your Word, we thankfully remember the life of our Lord Jesus Christ on this earth. Yet we also acknowledge our failure to respond earnestly and faithfully to his witness. We often mistake Jesus for a mere earthly king, friendly companion, or problem-solver, failing to see him as the ruler of all creation. We do not appreciate the depth of his passion and sacrifice on the cross, failing to acknowledge him as our way of salvation. Even in this Lenten season, we have not walked faithfully in the way of Jesus Christ. Forgive us, we pray, and bring us ever more fully into the joy of union with Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And some of the bystanders hearing it said, “Behold, he is calling Elijah.” And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.” And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. When he was in Galilee, they followed him and ministered to him, and there were also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem.

[MARK 15:33-41]

DEVOTIONAL

Today is called Good Friday, which is not really good because “good” is too neutral a term. The events of Good Friday are the ultimate paradox—at once atrocious and wonderful, scandalous and beautiful, the worst kind of hate and the best kind of love. On this day we were convicted and pardoned, condemned and freed, cursed and blessed.

It was the darkest day. Many who had followed Jesus up to now fled from the events of Friday. And those who stayed to watch wept in horror: the phony trial, the mob that cried out for the blood of the man who was unbending in the weight of their demands and expectations. The brutal beating, the savagery of the soldiers, the grueling walk through the city he had entered to cheers just five days before. Finally, the nails pounded into flesh, the tortured body slouched over, the naked man died as his enemies jeered.

To his disciples – those that had forsaken everything in order to follow Jesus – this day was anything but good. This man, in whom they had put all of their hopes, was hanging dead on a tree. This was the death of their faith, the crushing of all their hopes for a new kingdom, and the end of all they believed in. Or so it seemed.

As his followers laid Jesus in the tomb on that same dark day, Easter Sunday lied in wait for them, but on Friday they couldn’t see it. They couldn’t see the defeat of death, the glory of the resurrection, or the advancement of God’s kingdom. They couldn’t see the whole story. There was no way around Good Friday, only the way through—through pain and death and burial.

It is the same for us; we cannot get around this day. We must go through the pain and death and burial to get to the resurrection. We must go through the darkness of Good Friday to get to the light of Easter.

God is a God of light: darkness cannot survive in his presence. We, who have dark hearts full of sin, should tremble at this fact. But Jesus, who was completely good, cloaked himself in the darkness of our sin and stood under the wrath of God for us. On the cross, he was destroyed and cut off from his Father. It was to have been our fate. On the first Good Friday, in the midst of our darkest hour, God did not cut us off. Jesus Christ, our true light, plunged himself into the darkness so that we might live in the light.

We can go through the darkness of this day because Jesus went through it before us. He is saving us and bringing about our everlasting joy, in a way only God could have chosen. Easter is not far away!

REFLECTION

1. *Take some time to reflect on the darkness of that first Good Friday. Think about what the disciples must have been experiencing that day.*
2. *Read back over Isaiah 53:1-6, reflecting on Jesus suffering and death.*

Closing Prayer

Holy God, you have opened our ears to hear your Word and our lips to proclaim your truth: open our eyes this day to see in the cross the revelation of your love; through Jesus the crucified, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, be honor and praise, now and forever. Amen.

[WSB]

Call to Worship

King Jesus comes, King Jesus, Son of God, Son of Man, Messiah. Hail! King Jesus, King of all! Recall the words of the Scriptures: "A great crowd who had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying, 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!'" In praise we adore you, King Jesus. Enter our hearts today as you entered Jerusalem long ago, and lead us by faith in the way everlasting. Amen.

[BASED ON JOHN 12:13]

Confession

Loving God, you rode a donkey and came in peace, humbled yourself and gave yourself for us. We confess our lack of humility. As you entered Jerusalem, the crowds shouted "Hosanna: 'Save us now!'" On Good Friday they shouted "Crucify!" We confess our praise is often empty. We sing "Hosanna," but cry "Crucify." As the crowd laid their palms in front of you, you took no glory for yourself. We confess that we want to be accepted and take the easy way. We do not stay true to your will. Forgive us, Lord, and help us to follow in the way of obedience. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph. And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.

[MARK 15:42-47]

DEVOTIONAL

Tomorrow is a celebration. Tomorrow is also the acknowledgement of the "already, but not yet" tension of the gospel. "Already, but not yet" is a phrase that theologians often use to describe the reality of the current age we live in.

On the one hand, the kingdom of God has already come in the person of Jesus. This is

Good News! As the incarnate God-man, he died on the cross so that through his death and resurrection he might destroy Satan, sin, and death (Heb. 2:14).

On the other hand, the perfect kingdom toward which he pointed awaits his personal return to earth. Until then, we experience the tension of living between the “already, but not yet” aspects of the kingdom of God.

Easter is a celebration of this beautiful tension:

There is real life right now for those who trust in Christ.

- » We have new hearts (2 Cor. 5:17)
- » We have been made alive with Christ (Eph. 2:5)
- » We have received a spirit of adoption (Rom. 8:15-16)

But there is more to come that has not yet been fully realized.

- » We will have transformed bodies, not just hearts (2 Cor. 15:50-55)
- » We will be resurrected like Christ (Rom. 6:5)
- » We will experience the fullness of being adopted by God (Rom. 8:23)

[LISTS ABOVE FROM JUSTIN HOLCOMB]

The salvation that God brings is here! It is finished, and it is coming. Our hope is in Jesus who accomplished for us the “already, and yet to come.” Jesus, through his death, has already delivered his people from slavery to sin. Jesus, through his resurrection, has already conquered death, our worst enemy. But Jesus has not yet allowed us to experience a world without sin, death, and brokenness. He has not yet established his kingdom in full. His promise is to come back and do so.

Until then, we walk by faith in him. We look in hope to his coming, knowing that God does not fail to deliver on his promises. Because he was faithful in the already, we can trust that he will be faithful in the not yet. Jesus has inaugurated the reign of God so that the age to come has invaded the present age. One day, however, at the appointed time, the present age will finally give way to the fullness and completeness of the rule of God in Christ. He will usher in his kingdom in full—a new earth where only righteousness dwells. A land of promise—where there is life, abundance, satisfaction, delight, and rest.

“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:3-4).

REFLECTION

1. *How have you seen God work in your heart and mind through this journey of Lent?*
2. *In what areas of your life do you most long to experience greater transformation through the victory of Easter?*

Closing Prayer

Giver of life, we wait with you to offer the hope that comes from the cross to earth's darkest places. Where pain is deep and affection is denied: let love break through. Where justice is destroyed, let sensitivity to right spring up. Where hope is crucified, let faith persist. Where peace has no chance, let passion live on. Where truth is trampled underfoot, let the struggle continue. Where fear paralyzes, let forgiveness break through. Eternal God, reach into the silent darkness of our souls with the radiance of the cross. O you who are the bearer of all pain, have mercy on us. Giver of life, have mercy on us. Merciful God, have mercy on us. Amen.

[WSB]

EASTER SUNDAY

When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. And he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you." And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

[MARK 16:1-8]



Christ, the Lord, is risen today, Alleluia!
Sons of men and angels say, Alleluia!
Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia!
Sing, ye heav'ns, and earth, reply, Alleluia!

Love's redeeming work is done, Alleluia!
Fought the fight, the battle won, Alleluia!
Death in vain forbids him rise, Alleluia!
Christ has opened paradise, Alleluia!

Lives again our glorious King, Alleluia!
Where, O death, is now thy sting? Alleluia!
Once He died, our souls to save, Alleluia!
Where thy victory, O grave? Alleluia!

Soar we now where Christ has led, Alleluia!
Following our exalted Head, Alleluia!
Made like Him, like Him we rise, Alleluia!
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!

Hail, the Lord of earth and heav'n, Alleluia!
Praise to Thee by both be giv'n, Alleluia!
Thee we greet triumphant now, Alleluia!
Hail, the Resurrection Thou, Alleluia!

[CHARLES WESLEY]

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JOURNEY TO THE CROSS

READINGS AND DEVOTIONS FOR LENT

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