



TAKE UP THE
CROSS

A Devotional for Lent



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Take Up the Cross: A Devotional for Lent

A thorough contemplation of the cross, of Christ's sacrificial work in our behalf, should be an essential experience of every Christian every year. So central are these themes to the Christian life that we must consciously pause to reflect upon them—and to yield ourselves more completely to God's transforming presence in the process. Too often, however, this does not happen. Many in the church today neglect Lent, perhaps because it has not the glamor and glitz of Advent. I fear this is a gross oversight, so (as a pitifully small attempt to remedy this) I have prepared a short devotional for individuals or families with older children.

Each day includes a reading from the Old and New Testaments, followed by a short devotional to help spur reflection on these grand themes of Scripture, and then a few questions for personal reflection or corporate discussion. Each week proceeds through a new topic that will help prepare our hearts for Christ's passion, death and resurrection. I have included a weekly verse for memorization related to the week's topic. I pray this will be a time for individuals and families to grow closer to God (and to each other) as we fix our eyes on the crucified Christ and worship God in the splendor of his holiness and love.

SOLI DEO GLORIA.

WEEK

01

Preparing Our Hearts

DAY
01

Ash Wednesday

Old Testament: Joel 2:12-15
New Testament: Mark 8:31-34

DEVOTIONAL

To follow hard after Christ requires the total denial of self. Taking up one's cross requires nothing short of the breaking of our will, the purpose for which Romans made the condemned carry their crosses. Though Christians have long embraced the cross as a symbol of God's love and our salvation, we should not overlook the horrifying reality of the cross for those living in the first century. It represented the most effective and gruesome form of capital punishment, reserved for only the worst offenders. These are hard words Jesus has for us. And yet this is the nature of following him. Lent provides us the opportunity to crucify self in an intentional fashion. Sadly, the Lenten season often becomes instead little more than a spiritualized diet. Make no mistake: Christ's words involve "not the denial of something to the self, but the denial of the self itself" (R.T. France). This is the moment not to give up chocolate or soda, but to give up all that we cling to, yielding ourselves wholly to God. As we approach the cross of Christ, let us prepare our hearts, crucifying the self and seeking God's grace. "Rend your hearts and not your garments," especially knowing that what was a mere possibility for the people to whom Joel ministered is for us our sure and certain blessing: "Who knows? He may turn and have pity."

REFLECTION

Hymn: "Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken"

Memory Verse: Mark 8:34

1. *Are you ready to crucify your self-will and seek God fully?*
2. *In what areas of your life would you like to see God move during Lent? Is there anything you need to forsake to see him move in that way?*

DAY
02

Thursday

Old Testament: Psalm 51:17
New Testament: Colossians 2:23-3:10

DEVOTIONAL

God does not value our religious shows. He has had enough of self-righteous pretention. As David well knew, the sacrifice God desires is a broken and contrite heart. This heart recognizes that our sacrifices—our religious rites—have no saving power. We can plead naught but God's grace and thus bow before him humbly. In considering what we plan to "give up" for Lent, let us remember first that it was God who gave his Son up for us. And, as Paul's words to the church in Colosse remind us, our human regulations—our religious asceticism—have no value apart from a heart broken before and yielded to God. Let us then set our mind on the things above this Lenten season, striving to put on the new self not to impress God or earn his favor, but because we have been raised with Christ by the free and gracious gift of God.

REFLECTION

1. *On what sorts of religious performances do you find yourself tempted to rely for God's approval, rather than trusting in the free grace of God?*
2. *How can you offer God the only sacrifice he desires, that of a broken heart and contrite spirit? Do it.*

DAY

03

Friday

Old Testament: Psalm 139:23-24

New Testament: 1 Timothy 4:7-8

DEVOTIONAL

That God saves us by grace alone through faith alone does not absolve us of our responsibility to pursue holiness. David asked that God would search him and know his heart to see if any offensive way be found within him. He desired to walk in the way everlasting, and to do that, he knew he needed to cast aside his sin and give himself to holiness. The Lenten season offers us a fine time to ask God to search us too. And when God reveals our wickedness to us, we must train ourselves in godliness that—by his grace and by his Spirit at work within us—we might grow in Christ-likeness. With the broken and contrite heart God accepts, take this Lenten season to practice those disciplines which God has ordained to draw nearer to him: prayer and study, silence and solitude, fasting, journaling, and the like. Take the time and energy necessary to prepare your heart genuinely to contemplate the cross of Christ and its implications in your life.

REFLECTION

1. *What spiritual disciplines—what the Reformers called “means of grace”—should you consider taking up during Lent? (E.g., prayer, study, journaling, fasting, solitude and silence)*
2. *Ask God to search you and know your heart, to reveal any hidden sins you might be unaware of.*

DAY

04

Saturday

Old Testament: Ezra 9:5-8

New Testament: Galatians 6:7-9

DEVOTIONAL

Ezra’s prayer reveals a heart conscious of its sin and humiliated before a holy and righteous God. Have our sins not reached higher than our heads—indeed, to the very heights of heaven? Surely they have. Israel had experienced the consequences of their sins many times before, as Ezra well knew. It was he who led the captives back from their exile to Babylon after God scattered his people among the nations as punishment for their sin.

While Christ bore the full brunt of God’s wrath on the hill of Calvary, this does not mean we can sin with impunity. God will not be mocked. Those who seek only to gratify the flesh will reap only destruction. But those who seek only to please God, imperfect as they are, will reap the abundant life Christ offers. Let us not grow weary of doing good, then. Let us rather, with a spirit of confession and repentance like Ezra’s, pursue holiness and his will for our lives as we mortify the flesh and yield ourselves to his gracious Spirit.

REFLECTION

1. *What sins take up the most space in your “sin pile”? Take some time to confess them now.*
2. *In what ways are you reaping destruction because you have sown to please the flesh? How can you sow to please the Spirit instead? Commit to doing this good—not to grow weary in doing it—that you might reap a harvest of eternal life.*

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WEEK
02

Recognizing Our Sin

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first
SUN
DAY

Sunday

Old Testament: Psalm 90:7-12

New Testament: Romans 1:18-25

DEVOTIONAL

In much of modern evangelicalism, plagued as it is by clichéd sentimentalism and the gospel of self-esteem, we spend little time contemplating the fierceness of God’s wrath against sin—and sinners. But the cross makes little sense apart from a recognition of the myriad ways we have offended a holy God. Our days are brief and troubled because we live them under God’s wrath. And this wrath has been revealed against all of us, godless and wicked men and women who have exchanged the glory of our God for a base lie. Of course, this is not the end of the story. But Christ’s majestic sacrifice will appear as little more than foolishness if we do not rightly comprehend our plight apart from him. The Lenten season should surely be a time of reflection on and confession of our sin that we might better apprehend the wonder of his love.

REFLECTION

Hymn: “Come, Ye Sinners Poor and Needy”

Memory Verse: 1 John 1:9

1. *Do you understand God’s fierce (and justified) anger at your sin, or do you find yourself drawn to sentimental and wholly inaccurate portraits of God?*
2. *If we do not understand God’s wrath rightly, how will that distort our appreciation of his grace?*

DAY
05

Monday

Old Testament: Genesis 3:1-6

New Testament: Romans 5:12-14

DEVOTIONAL

In order to recognize our sin, we must admit to our sinful nature. Sin entered the world through one man, Adam, and since then we have all been born under sin's specter. Because Adam served as the "head" of the human race, his sin affects us all. To give an imperfect analogy, when a monarch declares war on another country, he involves all the citizens of his country in that war. In the same way, when Adam declared "war" on God's will for his life, eating of the forbidden fruit and vaingloriously seeking to be like God, we all became enemies of our loving Lord. Adam imputed his sin to us, and now we are all born sinners. That is, we are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners. It is a part of our human nature. But praise be to God, for—as we shall see in the coming weeks—he is making all things new, even our sinful hearts!

REFLECTION

1. *Do you believe we are born sinful, or do you think we are clean slates until we choose to sin? (Consider not just the testimony of Scripture, but experience too: Do we need to teach children gratitude or ingratitude? Selfishness or love?)*
2. *When did you first become conscious of your sinful nature, expressed in actual sin?*

DAY
06

Tuesday

Old Testament: Genesis 3:17-19

New Testament: Romans 6:6-12

DEVOTIONAL

Sin brings death. When pronouncing the curse on Adam for his sin, God declared that those who sprang from dust would there return. That which had been created to be incorruptible sank into corruption and decay, and all of creation with him. As Christians, though, we experience a different death. As Christ died for us, so we die to sin—the body of sin crucified with Christ that we might no longer be slaves to sin. By our sin, we die; by Christ's becoming sin, death dies—and we are raised to new life in him. The Lenten season offers us the opportunity to continue Christ's mortifying work. That is, we can now, by our new life in Christ, work to put to death the sin in our lives that we might better live for him and his glory.

REFLECTION

1. *What sin would you like to mortify—to put to death—during Lent?*
2. *How will you draw on the power of the Spirit to do this? (It will only happen by God's power; we cannot kill sin in our own strength.)*

DAY
07

Wednesday

Old Testament: Genesis 6:5-6

New Testament: Romans 3:10-18

DEVOTIONAL

I suspect few verses so capture the human condition as Genesis 6:5. In my own life I have seen that every inclination of my heart is pure evil when I am not surrendered to God. Is my Father's pain any less great today when he sees his child wandering from his perfect path? As Paul makes clear, the pervasive wickedness that led God to destroy the earth in Noah's day has not abated. No one seeks God. All have turned away. There is no one righteous. The superlative nature of these statements startles even the most hardened cynic. How has God borne with us so long? Why has he tolerated our upstart rebellion? The blackness of our sin sets the pure brightness of God's undeserved love in sharp relief. The more sinful are we, the more glorious is his grace. We know enough of our wickedness to see, then, that the depths of his love truly prove unsearchable!

REFLECTION

1. *How have you seen the evil inclinations of your own heart? Of your culture?*
2. *Do you agree with Paul when he says that no one seeks God, no one does good? Why or why not?*

DAY
08

Thursday

Old Testament: Jeremiah 13:23

New Testament: Galatians 5:16-21

DEVOTIONAL

I have never yet seen a leopard capable of changing his spots. Neither have I ever seen a man make himself righteous through feeble human effort. We are experts in sin, trained in the habits of evil. Our sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit: illicit sexual pleasure, insatiable greed, power-hungry ambition. Scanning any day's newspaper headlines assures us that these desires have free rein in much of the world still. As one theologian noted, human depravity is the only empirical doctrine. Few can dispute the total corruption of body, mind, and spirit, given as we are to unrelenting, self-serving wickedness. Even those who deny God's existence recognize that something has gone badly wrong. And what of our own lives? Do they reflect surrender to the transforming work of the Spirit within us? Or are we experts in sin still—and growing more accustomed to our evil every day?

REFLECTION

1. *Have you ever tried to change in your own strength, rather than depending on God to change your heart? What was the result?*
2. *Are there areas of your life where you are becoming even more an expert in sin, or do you see transformation as you surrender to the work of God's Spirit in your life? Be honest.*

DAY
09

Friday

Old Testament: Psalm 51:3-6
New Testament: Ephesians 2:1-3

DEVOTIONAL

Few verses in all Scripture surprise me so much as David's declaration that he has sinned against God only. Surely he sinned against Bathsheba in raping her! Or against her husband Uriah, whom he first cuckolded before sending him to his unmerited death—murder, we must call it. And yet, no matter how greatly we have offended our neighbors, it is but a shadow compared to the greatness of the offense we have given the Holy One of Israel—so pale a shadow, indeed, that we could almost ignore it altogether and speak only of the latter. From the time of our conception we have been sinners, and our sin is always before us. No wonder Paul describes us as objects of God's wrath by nature, dead in our transgressions and sins, subservient to a corrupt world and a corrupting prince. Our judgment is just, our damnation deserved. Whence salvation, then? Only from a gracious and compassionate God.

REFLECTION

1. Think through some sins you have committed recently. Though they may involve other people, in what sense are they against God, and God only?
2. Paul says we all have followed the world, the devil, and our own corrupt desires. Where do you struggle with following one or all of those rather than God?
3. Do you believe you deserve God's wrath by your very nature? Why or why not?

DAY
10

Saturday

Old Testament: Isaiah 6:1-6
New Testament: 1 John 1:8-10

DEVOTIONAL

Having contemplated our impressive sin for a week now, we are apt to cry out with Isaiah, "Woe to me! I am ruined!" Our lips are unclean, too impure to speak the precious truths of the gospel; our hands stained with the blood of Christ, too tainted to serve so great a Master; our hearts corrupted by our own sinful desires, too perverse to worship a spotless Lamb. In the presence of him who is holy, holy, holy, we can do little more than collapse in a heap of pitiful disgrace. But God is the lifter of our heads, the One who cleanses us. If we would but be faithful to confess our sin, he will be faithful to forgive us (wondrous truth!) and to purify us from every unrighteousness. This Lenten season, before lifting our eyes to see the coming redemption, let us bow our heads and confess our sin to our merciful Savior.

REFLECTION

1. How do you relate to Isaiah's woeful lament? If you were standing before your holy God right now, what part of yourself would you declare unclean? (E.g., your lips/ speech, your hands/actions, your mind/thoughts)
2. Have you felt discouraged this week as you've considered the depths of sin in your life, or do you feel encouraged, seeing his wondrous love shine out all the brighter against this bleak backdrop?

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WEEK
03

Seeing Our Redemption

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SUN
DAY

Sunday

Old Testament: Psalm 130:1-8

New Testament: Ephesians 1:3-10

DEVOTIONAL

Sin will not have the last word. Yes, if God kept a record of sins, we would all perish under the weight of his wrath. But with him there is forgiveness. We may place our hope in him because he will redeem us from all our sins. On this side of Calvary, of course, the wait is over. Our eyes have seen the coming redemption. Indeed, God had planned our salvation from eternity past. Because of his great love alone, he chose us to be adopted as his sons and daughters to the praise of his glorious grace. Through the blood of Christ we have redemption; we have the forgiveness for which the psalmist longed. In light of the cross of Christ, the fulfillment of all that the psalmist expected, we have still more reason to put our hope in God. We are not left in our sins; we are redeemed by a God of unflinching love.

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REFLECTION

Hymn: “And Can It Be”

Memory Verse: Psalm 130:7

1. *The psalmist says God is feared because with him there is forgiveness. How does his forgiveness—protecting us from the storm of his just wrath—lead to our fearing (living in reverential awe of) him?*
2. *What part of our identity in Christ—being blessed, chosen, loved, adopted, redeemed, forgiven—is hardest for you to believe? Why do you think that is?*

DAY

11

Monday

Old Testament: Exodus 34:5-7

New Testament: John 3:16

DEVOTIONAL

The emphatic word in John's famous declaration is "so." The height and depth, length and breadth of God's love overwhelms. He loved the world—in John's thought, the place of rebellion against God—so profoundly that he would sacrifice that which is most precious to him for the sake of wretched, wicked humanity. And this not just to rescue us from damnation, but to share with us the incomparable riches of resurrection life even now! Truly did God declare his glorious character, then, when he proclaimed before Moses: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness." But will we respond as Moses did when we behold his character? Will we bow to the ground and worship? May it be so.

REFLECTION

1. *What emotions are stirred up in you as you read just how much God loves sinners like us?*
2. *Spend some time worshiping God for his glorious character.*

DAY

12

Tuesday

Old Testament: Genesis 3:15

New Testament: Romans 5:15-17

DEVOTIONAL

Adam's rebellion, as we saw last week, resulted in the imputation of his sin to all of us. But even then God was preparing his people for the imputation of Christ's righteousness. When pronouncing the curse on the serpent, God revealed his plan of redemption: he would put enmity between the serpent's seed and the woman's seed. Though the serpent would strike at the Son of Adam's heel, Christ would strike his head. Only one would be a lethal blow. Our salvation was promised just moments after our rebellion. Judgment followed Adam's one sin, but the one gift of God will bring justification, the righteousness of God which we greatly need. Those who receive the abundant provision of God's grace will hear the stunning declaration, "Righteous!" when standing before the throne of judgment. To him be glory forever and ever!

REFLECTION

1. *What confidence or hope does it give you to know that God announced our salvation just moments after our fall?*
2. *How do you want to respond to being called righteous in Christ when you are profoundly, wretchedly guilty?*

DAY **Wednesday**

13

Old Testament: Jeremiah 31:31-34
New Testament: Galatians 3:6-9

DEVOTIONAL

Abraham, the father of Israel, heard the blessed promise that through him all nations would be blessed. Paul goes so far as to call this the gospel itself, announced in advance to the man of faith. Those who share his faith share his heritage and ultimately share in the promise. God first declared his intention to rescue sinful humanity in his curse upon the serpent, but with Abraham we reach a decisive new moment in salvation history. This redemption would come through one man and the nation that would spring from him. Though this nation, Israel, entered into several covenants with God, the prophet Jeremiah assured them that a new covenant was yet to come. Those who enter this covenant by faith would experience personal knowledge of God, without need of a human mediator, the law written on our hearts by the presence of God's Spirit.

REFLECTION

1. *The wonder of the new covenant is that we can all know God personally, without needing to come through a priest. How are you cultivating that sort of intimacy with God? What more could you do?*
2. *How is your faith increasing or decreasing these days? What can you do to strengthen it?*

DAY **Thursday**

14

Old Testament: Isaiah 52:7-10
New Testament: Luke 2:25-32

DEVOTIONAL

Isaiah saw the coming redemption, knew the moment would come when the Lord would return to Zion. This is the good news brought by the blessed messenger. God would bring his reign not just to the nation Israel but to all the earth. His kingdom would come, his will would be done on earth as surely as it is done in heaven, and he would invite his people to reign with him. Simeon knew this and, upon seeing the consolation of Israel, burst into his joyful song. The Lord had indeed returned to Zion, not as a mighty military general, but as a humble baby. Of course, this small child, born to die that we might live, would be a light to all people: the Lord laying bare his holy arm—the wondrous working of his plan of redemption—in the sight of all nations.

REFLECTION

1. *What makes the feet of those who bring good news so beautiful?*
2. *If this is such good news, what can you do this week to share it with someone who needs to hear it?*

DAY

15

Friday

Old Testament: Ezekiel 36:25-27

New Testament: John 1:29-34

DEVOTIONAL

The working of his plan of redemption involves the pouring out of his Spirit on all people. The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world comes not just to cancel our debt but to provide us with a wondrous gift: the Holy Spirit. John came baptizing with water. As Ezekiel had prophesied centuries before, this baptism involves cleansing from our sin. We express our repentance, and God is faithful to purify us. Jesus, however, comes to baptize us with his Holy Spirit. He does this that we might have completely new hearts, completely new spirits, by transforming us inwardly by his very presence. He writes his law on our hearts and moves us to follow his decrees. As believers, we are the new community of God, spiritual Israel. This community is marked by God's Spirit, sealed for his glory—the Spirit our guarantee and deposit of future hope. But the Spirit descended first upon Jesus, marking him as our Messiah, revealed by John's ministry, the Chosen One of God. He must become greater in our lives this Lenten season; we must become less.

REFLECTION

1. *How would you like to see Jesus become greater in your life?*
2. *What can you do today to lay hold of the Spirit's power for your life and transformation?*

DAY

16

Saturday

Old Testament: Psalm 51:1-2, 10-12

New Testament: 2 Corinthians 5:17

DEVOTIONAL

We must not conceive of salvation as just justification, Christ bearing the penalty of our sins, dying in our place that we might not experience the fullness of God's wrath. Of course this matters infinitely much, but salvation is much more than just canceling our guilt. God intends to do more than merely rescue us from damnation. He intends to recreate us altogether—and all of creation with us. That is, those whom God has saved will not end up in heaven ultimately, though this seems to be the popular vision. No, we will reign with Christ in the New Jerusalem, the place where the new heavens and the new earth unite under the gracious, loving rule of the perfect Monarch. God intends to make all things new. And he begins with the human heart. Once saved—once rescued from damnation by the blood of Christ—God begins the process of remaking us, giving us the pure hearts and steadfast spirits for which David asked God. We become new creations in Christ.

REFLECTION

1. *Do you settle for justification in the Christian life? That is, has Christianity become little more than “fire insurance”—your “ticket out of hell”—for you? Or are you eagerly desiring sanctification too?*
2. *Where is God making you new even now?*

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WEEK
04

Approaching the Cross

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SUN
DAY

Sunday

Old Testament: Psalm 103:1-5

New Testament: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

DEVOTIONAL

The Corinthian church had little understanding of the cross. Despite Paul’s having laid the only foundation imaginable, Christ crucified, they had fallen into a theology of easy glory, of triumph without suffering. As a result, they lived as proud, fractious, selfish people—all traits antithetical to the theology of the cross. Thus, in his wide-ranging letter, Paul commences by establishing the centrality of the cross for all Christian living. He would not have them impressed or dazzled by his rhetorical abilities; rather, he would have them amazed solely by the demonstration of the Spirit’s power, which in context clearly refers to the salvation of the sinner, the recreation of the heart. Much of modern evangelicalism falls into Corinthian errors: following celebrities rather than Christ, the triumphalism of the prosperity gospel, the self-centeredness of the gospel of self-esteem. Thus, in this Lenten season, we would do well to know nothing but Christ and him crucified, to make the cross and the Savior who hung upon it the center of all our reflection and worship. For it was at Calvary, of course, that God forgave us our sins, healed our broken bodies, redeemed and crowned us, satisfied us with grace for every need.

REFLECTION

Hymn: “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”

Memory Verse: Philippians 3:7

1. *On what foundation (other than Christ and him crucified) are you tempted to build your life? Security? Achievement? Relationships? Why do you think that is?*
2. *How will you bring the cross back to the center of your thinking and living when you sense you’ve begun to move away from it?*

DAY
17

Monday

Old Testament: Psalm 8:1-9

New Testament: Philippians 2:5-11

DEVOTIONAL

It has always struck me as odd that the church spends such impressive energy on the Advent season, while often forgoing much weighty reflection during Lent. I suspect this has more to do with our love of Mammon than any profound theological error. Nevertheless, we must recognize that Christmas matters not at all without Good Friday and Easter. That is, the incarnation matters because of the death, resurrection, and exaltation of the incarnate Christ—and not in isolation from these decisive moments in salvation history. Paul makes this much clear in his majestic hymn celebrating the Word become flesh. Jesus did not cling to his deity. He made himself nothing and took the form of a servant. He clothed himself in human frailty, humbled himself, and died in our stead. The real Christmas tree is, of course, the cross of Christ. The child came to die. Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place. In the end, we will glorify his name—every one of us. As Hebrews makes clear, Christ became for a little while lower than the angels, living here among humanity. For this, God crowned him with glory and honor. Let us do likewise.

REFLECTION

1. Sing your favorite Christmas carol, one that is rich in the theology of Christ's incarnation—and the purpose for which he came.
2. What can you do to develop a Christ-like, humble, selfless attitude toward others?

DAY
18

Tuesday

Old Testament: Genesis 15:6

New Testament: Ephesians 2:4-10

DEVOTIONAL

The cross preaches our hopeless inadequacy. Apart from God we can do nothing to save ourselves. We were dead in our transgressions, and the dead do not come to life by their own power. This explains the centrality of faith to the Christian walk. Too often we emphasize the subject of our faith: “I need more faith,” or “I don't have enough faith for that.” We should instead emphasize the object of our faith. He is perfectly able to meet our every need. His grace is enough. Faith (and its surest expression, prayer) simply acknowledges that what we cannot do he has done for us. This is the legacy of Abraham's life. He could not, in his own strength and power, produce an heir, the child of the promise, from whom would spring a great nation, through which all nations on earth would be blessed. But God could—and Abraham believed that. In what do we trust? Do we listen to our circumstances? to our emotions? Do we put our confidence in the flesh—ours or another's? Or do we believe, as Abraham did, that God is supremely sufficient? He has proved mighty to save in our lives. What further display do we need?

REFLECTION

1. Do you struggle with emphasizing the subject of your faith rather than the Object? How can you keep your eyes fixed on him instead?
2. What do you listen to when you stop believing God's promises? Circumstances? Self? Emotions? Gurus?

DAY

19

Wednesday

Old Testament: Genesis 22:1-14

New Testament: Mark 1:9-11

DEVOTIONAL

Faith manifests itself in obedience. Those who believe in him, who believe that his Word expresses reality more certainly than our dim eyes would otherwise apprehend, take him at his word and do as he says. Abraham did as much. God had promised that through Isaac his offspring would be reckoned. How this promise could square with the command to sacrifice Isaac must have tested Abraham severely. Perhaps, as Hebrews has it, Abraham figured that God could raise his dead son. In any case, though he did not have full understanding, he believed God and offered Isaac as a sacrifice. Of course, the story does not end here. God sends an angel to stay Abraham's hand, and then provides the sacrifice—a ram caught in the thicket instead. We should easily be able to surrender ourselves to the God who provides the Lamb. When God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, he described him as, “your son, your only son, whom you love.” These words should still ring in our ears when we come to the story of Christ. As the voice from heaven boomed at Jesus' baptism, this was God's Son—his only Son, I might add—whom he loved. Here is the Lamb God provides as the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of all humanity. God did not keep his Son from us. How could we keep anything from him? Let us yield ourselves to him, surrender our every earthly treasure, as surely as Abraham did.

REFLECTION

1. Are you willing to surrender everything to God? Why or why not?
2. How do you feel when you understand God surrendered his dearest treasure—his only Son, whom he loved—for us?

DAY

20

Thursday

Old Testament: Deuteronomy 27:26

New Testament: Galatians 3:10-14

DEVOTIONAL

From the days of Adam, humanity has lived under a curse. By failing to uphold God's standards for our lives, we have cut ourselves off from fellowship with him, as Adam and Eve did when they hid from God in the garden. The law reminds us of this curse, promising that anyone who does not keep the whole law is cursed. What a blow this delivers to our self-righteousness! We cannot keep God's law; we cannot make ourselves righteous by our works; we cannot justify ourselves. Enter Christ. Christ redeems us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. He is hung upon the tree, proving that this crucified Messiah has indeed been damned by God. (Of course, his resurrection two days later shows he has been vindicated by God as well.) But from what curse does Christ redeem us precisely? At Calvary Christ conquers the powers of sin and death in our lives, to be sure, but that is not Paul's point here. On the cross, Christ redeems us from the futility of works righteousness, from having to save ourselves. We may rest in his grace, rest from our abortive efforts to curry his favor. The righteous will live by faith. And by faith we receive the Holy Spirit who empowers us to live sanctified, righteous lives.

REFLECTION

1. We all try to justify ourselves if we're not consciously looking to the cross. Where do you see this tendency in your life?
2. How can you live by faith—and not the futility of works righteousness—today?

DAY
21

Friday

Old Testament: Numbers 21:4-8

New Testament: John 3:13-15

DEVOTIONAL

The Israelites began to complain in the desert yet again, forsaking both gratitude for God's past deliverance and faith in God's future redemption. They justly deserve God's wrath and he sends it in the form of venomous snakes. After Moses' intercession, God offers them new (physical) life as an act of grace. Any who look upon the bronze snake will be saved. Centuries later another would be physically lifted up onto a pole. And again, any who looked upon him would be granted new (spiritual) life as an act of grace. Of course, there are differences between the snake and the Christ. During Hezekiah's reign the snake had to be destroyed because it had become an object of idolatry. But Christ can never be worshiped idolatrously because he is God. Thus, those who look upon him as he hangs on the cross must believe in him in order to receive the resurrection life he offers in this present darkness. Tellingly, John uses the phrase "lifted up" to speak not only of Christ's being physically lifted onto the cross, but also his being exalted to the highest place. Thus, the one who came from heaven will return to heaven, return to the glory he had with the Father before his incarnation, by being lifted up as the sacrifice of atonement. Upon this gracious Redeemer we look with faith and worship.

REFLECTION

1. Do you struggle with complaining like the Israelites? Confess your ingratitude for God's past work and lack of faith in his promised future work.
2. How will you "look upon" Christ in faith and worship today?

DAY
22

Saturday

Old Testament: Isaiah 53:1-3

New Testament: Philippians 3:7-11

DEVOTIONAL

The only passage that gives us any hint as to Christ's appearance tells us simply that we would not have thought much of him had we seen him. He was despised and rejected by men, well acquainted with the sufferings and sorrows of this world. And few believed his message—few do even now. Yet eight centuries later, Paul says he considers all else in this world naught when compared to knowing this "unimpressive" man. To gain the righteousness that comes by faith in Christ instead, Paul would consider all else as refuse to be discarded. To experience the power of the resurrection, the inbreaking of God's kingdom into the world, Paul would cast his earthly treasure aside. His earthly treasure he describes in the previous verse: "As for legalistic righteousness, faultless." The cross demolishes all our pretensions to holiness. We, like Paul, consider Christ everything while considering ourselves as nothing. We are those from whom others should hide their faces; we despise ourselves and hold ourselves in low esteem. To him belong instead all glory and honor.

REFLECTION

1. What would it mean for you truly to consider everything else in your life as rubbish compared to knowing Christ more?
2. Do you have any pretensions to holiness—to earning God's favor on your own merit? How does the cross shatter that for you?

WEEK
05

Understanding the Sacrifice

fourth
SUN
DAY

Sunday

Old Testament: Leviticus 17:11

New Testament: Romans 3:21-26, 5:7-11

DEVOTIONAL

There is no truth more foundational to the Christian life than the justification of the sinner. Indeed, Martin Luther thought justification the doctrine upon which the Church would stand or fall. God must oppose sin, must become wrathful when he encounters it, else he would cease to be holy and thus cease to be God. Thus, in order to satisfy his justice and display the wonder of his gracious love, he must have a sacrifice of atonement. Christ is that perfect sacrifice. The life is in his blood. As a man, he can bear humanity's curse; as God, he can pay the infinite penalty. At Calvary God pours out the full measure of his wrath on Christ Jesus, propitiating himself, turning away his wrath from humanity; but at Calvary God pours out the full measure of his love as well, reconciling sinful humanity to himself. Occasionally someone will lay down their lives for the sake of a good man. But God's love is so great that he does it for wretches like us. We have been justified by his blood; we have been saved from God's wrath by his death; we have been granted new life through his resurrection. Surely that is cause for rejoicing!

REFLECTION

Hymn: "O Sacred Head Now Wounded"

Memory Verse: 2 Corinthians 5:21

1. Do you think of Calvary as only the fullest display of God's love, which it is, or also the fullest display of his holiness (and thus wrath), which it also is?
2. Jesus laid down his life for you, even though you are a sinner in rebellion against him. What does this truth stir in you?

DAY
23

Monday

Old Testament: Genesis 3:21

New Testament: Hebrews 9:22-26

DEVOTIONAL

Though many have tried to do away with propitiation, the notion that God requires blood to appease his wrath, Scripture will not allow for it. I suspect our squeamishness comes less from a supposedly enlightened take on modern religion than from a failure to reckon fully with our sin. We are bad enough that we must die for our sins. But God has been making a way for us—from the very beginning. Just moments after the Fall comes the first sacrifice. Adam and Eve have grown vulnerable and ashamed in their sin, forsaking the childlike innocence they should have known before God. So God, in his great mercy, makes clothes for them from animal skins. Here already we see God fulfilling his promise that the woman's Seed would defeat the enemy of God: it will happen by sacrifice, by his atoning death. By Christ's spilt blood we have the forgiveness of sins. He has made atonement not in the earthly tabernacle—where Aaron sprinkled blood on the Day of Atonement—but in the heavenly. He has purified heaven, satisfying God's wrath against us, making heaven and earth fit to come together once more as they were in the beginning.

REFLECTION

1. *Have you reckoned fully with your sin? Do you believe your sin is serious enough that it merits your eternal punishment apart from Christ?*
2. *Why is propitiation such an important doctrine for us to understand for our daily walk with God?*

DAY
24

Tuesday

Old Testament: Isaiah 1:18-26

New Testament: 1 John 1:7

DEVOTIONAL

God does not send Christ as propitiation for our sins merely to cancel our debt and declare us legally righteous, important though that is. He also desires to purify us from all unrighteousness, to cleanse us from the guilt and defilement of sin. All who have sinned (and that is all of us) carry with them the stain of sin. Many suffer from chronically guilty consciences; many cannot fathom that God could forgive their sin, horrifying as it is, and welcome them back into his fellowship. But when we recognize our sin, confess it before a holy God, and seek his forgiveness, he is faithful to cleanse us. God is in the purifying business. He takes our scarlet souls, tinged with iniquity, and bleaches them white. He purifies us as gold, removing our dross and impurities. He is making for himself a people fit to reign with him in the New Jerusalem, a righteous and faithful people. Confess your sin and experience the perfect cleansing that Christ alone offers.

REFLECTION

1. *Do you struggle with guilt over past sins? How does today's truth help you?*
2. *Are you faithful to confess your sins regularly? Take some time to do so now.*
3. *How do you see God at work purifying you now?*

DAY
25

Wednesday

Old Testament: Leviticus 16:21-22

New Testament: 2 Corinthians 5:21

DEVOTIONAL

I can imagine few religious moments more satisfying in the time before Christ than seeing your sin carried off into the wilderness, knowing that God counted it against you no more. This was the wonder of the scapegoat. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest selected two goats. One died as a propitiatory sacrifice. But the other had the sins of the community confessed over him, transferred to him, and then bore that sin into the desert, far away from God's chosen people. Christ died as our propitiatory sacrifice, of course; but he also served as our scapegoat. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. God offered the perfect Christ, the one who had no acquaintance with sin, to be sin—to carry the sins of all humanity away into the wilderness—that in him we might become the very righteousness of God, that we might experience the inbreaking of God's power into the world as he sets all things right through Jesus Christ. The joy that the Israelites knew but once a year should be ours at every moment.

REFLECTION

1. *What would it feel like to see your sins carried far away from you into the wilderness, never to return? Do you feel that emotion when you consider the cross?*
2. *In this beautiful exchange, Jesus takes our (spotty) performance record on himself, and gives us his (perfect) performance record, so that God sees Christ's righteousness in us. How does that truth transform how you relate to God?*

DAY
26

Thursday

Old Testament: Exodus 16:1-8

New Testament: John 6:50-58

DEVOTIONAL

The Israelites had some cause for concern in the desert, though their sinful complaining against the Lord proved they had understood little of the God who had brought them out of Egypt. They were in the desert, after all, and food for a nation is hard to come by at Sinai. Without food, without God's gracious provision, they could not live. Death would come speedily and painfully. Our spiritual condition is no different today. Jesus is in fact the real Bread from heaven—not manna. He provides life to all those who believe in him. This explains why Jesus' flesh is real food and his blood is real drink: it accomplishes what food and drink should accomplish ideally. But this spiritual food has better lifegiving properties than mere food and drink, as Christ remains in us permanently. He can provide eternal resurrection life for his believers because he indwells his people and invites them to live in him forever. He who feeds on this bread will certainly know life in all its fullness.

REFLECTION

1. *How can you "feed" on Christ today, receiving life and nourishment from him?*
2. *How does Christ satisfy us more permanently, enduringly, than anything this world has to offer (food, drink, sex, things, etc.)?*

DAY 27 Friday

Old Testament: Leviticus 1:3-9
New Testament: 1 Peter 1:18-21

DEVOTIONAL

The Old Testament sacrificial system could not address the fundamental problem of sin. It could only foreshadow the true sacrifice who was yet to come. The burnt offering was the holiest of the sacrifices described in Leviticus, and the whole of the animal—a male without defect—was offered to God. But even this holy offering could not make real restitution for sin. The sacrifice had to be repeated endlessly. Our redemption, however, does not come through the blood of bulls. It comes through the blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. In Christ we have the fulfillment of all that the Jewish cultic system pointed to. Here, at last, God has perfectly redeemed his people from slavery not to Egypt, but to sin; not with perishable things such as silver and gold, but with the incorruptible, precious blood of the One and Only. He has at last been revealed for our sakes, that we might put our faith and hope in our incomparable God.

REFLECTION

1. *How much do you think you are worth? What would you offer as a ransom for yourself?*
2. *God has set your value at the blood of his Son. How does that truth minister to your heart?*
3. *How have today's passages increased your faith and hope in God?*

DAY 28 Saturday

Old Testament: Exodus 30:11-13
New Testament: 1 Timothy 2:5-6

DEVOTIONAL

We owe our lives wholly to God. Because he has redeemed us at great cost to himself and without merit on our part, we belong to him. God had brought his people out of Egypt to be a chosen people, a royal nation, for the praise of his glory. However, when taking the census, before crossing over into the Promised Land, every Israelite had to pay a ransom for his life. They owed him a great debt—their very lives—but he accepts a half shekel instead to make atonement for their lives. How could we ever repay the debt we owe God? We cannot. But by his grace, we do not need to. He has paid it himself. The one mediator between God and man, Christ Jesus our Lord, came to earth to give himself as a ransom for all of us. We give ourselves wholly to God, then, not because we must, for Christ has paid the debt, but because we want to, for we have never known love like this. We offer ourselves as living sacrifices to him, seeking to please him in ways like those Paul suggests in the rest of the chapter, not because it is our duty, but because we love him—and the lover always seeks to delight the beloved.

REFLECTION

1. *Do you want to offer yourself wholly, surrender yourself completely, to God? Why or why not?*
2. *Do you falsely believe you need to repay God for what he has done, or are you resting joyfully in knowing that you don't need to, that you offer yourself freely as an expression of love and gratitude?*

WEEK
06

Worshiping the Lamb

fifth
SUN
DAY

Sunday

Old Testament: Daniel 7:13-14

New Testament: Revelation 5:11-14

DEVOTIONAL

The cross, as we saw last week, is not the place of Christ’s defeat: it is his victory over the powers of sin and death, and his exaltation to the highest place as he is “lifted up” in our hearts and lives, and in the eyes of all the universe. This one like a son of man receives from the Ancient of Days an everlasting dominion and an indestructible kingdom. But he does not receive it in spite of the cross; he receives it because of the cross. The cherubim and seraphim who fall before him and worship him ceaselessly do so because he is the Lamb who was slain. He is worthy because of his sacrificial death, his humble, self-crucifying love, to receive all honor, all glory, all praise—and that from all people and spiritual powers. And surely we—in light of the redemption, salvation, restoration we have experienced in him because of his death—will join in this song. Our greatest desire should be that the worshipful declaration of the old hymn be true at every moment in our lives: “If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus ‘tis now.” He is worthy of our love—our unabashed adoration. Let us offer it to him.

REFLECTION

Hymn: “My Jesus, I Love Thee”

Memory Verse: Colossians 1:22

1. How does Christ’s suffering prior to his exaltation challenge your view of the world, especially as it relates to pain and suffering?
2. Are you willing to suffer on the road to glory? Why or why not?

DAY
29

Monday

Old Testament: Lamentations 3:19-27

New Testament: Colossians 1:15-23

DEVOTIONAL

God's wondrous purpose in human history is to bring all things together under the headship of Christ, who is worthy of our eternal devotion. Thus, as Paul makes clear in his letter to the church in Colosse, God has made Christ supreme. He is supreme in creation, as all things were created by him and for him, and in him all things hold together; and he is supreme in redemption, because God chose to reconcile all things to himself through Christ, through his sacrificial death on the cross. This is the hope of the gospel: we who were once far off, alienated from God, have been brought near by his blood—no longer at enmity, but now at peace with God. Or, to use the language of Lamentations, we have put aside our affliction and bitterness and embraced instead the hope of God's unfailing compassion. His faithfulness is unflagging, his mercy new every morning, his goodness to those who wait for him assured. Truly, then, it is good to wait quietly for his salvation, for the experience of Christ's supremacy worked out in our lives.

REFLECTION

1. *How does it comfort you to know that God's mercies are new every morning? Do you believe you need fresh mercies each day?*
2. *If Christ is supreme in everything, he should be supreme in our devotion especially. Is he supreme in your heart? How do you know?*

DAY
30

Tuesday

Old Testament: Jeremiah 31:3

New Testament: Galatians 2:20

DEVOTIONAL

God's ultimate purpose in history is to glorify himself, as the whole tenor of Scripture makes clear. But the demonstration of his love to his people is not contrary to this end: it is part and parcel of his project, as those to whom he shows his love glorify him for their experience of his grace and mercy. In worshiping the Lamb, we do well to remember the greatness of his love for us. He has loved his people with an everlasting love. His unfailing love for Israel led him to bring her back from captivity, to restore his people in Zion, and—ultimately—to send Messiah to her, that through Israel all might receive the blessing of the new covenant. That is love, especially in light of Israel's repeated rebellion. Are we so different? Are our personal histories any less saw-toothed than Israel's? Surely not. We know ourselves well enough to know how deep the sin is in our lives, how tainted our hearts are by wickedness and rebellion. But we have known more profoundly than Israel during Jeremiah's ministry the depth of God's everlasting love. No wonder Paul cannot restrain himself from speaking of God's love for him in the midst of profound, even difficult, theological reflection. To experience union with Christ, to have died to the law with him, to be raised to new life in him—that is marvelous. And it happened because he loved me. Because he gave himself up for me. To him belongs all glory and honor—indeed, my very life.

REFLECTION

1. *Think through your personal history. Do you see spiritual ups and downs? Are you surprised God was faithful despite your faithlessness?*
2. *He loved you. Gave himself up for you. How do you respond to a truth as unbelievable as that?*

DAY
31

Wednesday

Old Testament: Psalm 105:1-4

New Testament: 1 John 3:1-5

DEVOTIONAL

The psalmists rightfully enjoin God's people to declare his praise. We are to sing to him, glory in his name, tell of his wonderful deeds, make his righteous acts known among the nations. He has done so much for us that our hearts must necessarily rejoice. And that rejoicing overflows into praise and proclamation: declaring God's goodness and mercy to him and to a watching world in desperate need of him. Of course, when we remember the wonders God has done, chief among them must be our salvation. No physical miracle compares in awesomeness and power to the conversion of a sinner, brought to repentance by the patient grace of a loving God. While justification—forgiving our sins and declaring us righteous before the throne of judgment—is the foundational blessing of the New Testament, the supreme blessing is adoption. This explains John's effusion in the middle of his first letter. It is a wonder indeed, the depths of which we will ponder with ever-increasing praise through all eternity, that our Sovereign King should call us his children. We deserve damnation; he gives us instead the dear love of a father, delighting in his children. Surely this wonderful deed we will share with the lost and broken.

REFLECTION

1. *What makes adoption the supreme blessing of the new covenant?*
2. *Is worship your lifestyle, or an activity you engage in on Sunday mornings only? What is the difference between the two?*

DAY
32

Thursday

Old Testament: Psalm 100:1-5

New Testament: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

DEVOTIONAL

I suppose it should strike us as interesting that the writers of Scripture can so boldly command us to be joyful always. Joy seems so dependent upon our circumstances: how can someone suffering loss or trial rejoice? And yet the writers do command this of us, and often. The psalmist invites us to shout for joy, to worship him with gladness, to come before him with joyful songs—and all this without condition. It is God's expectation for all Christians. Of course, the psalmist doesn't stop with the commands to rejoice. He gives the cause for rejoicing in the very next statement: we rejoice because we know that our Lord is, in fact, God. And better still, he knows us. He made us, and we are his. We are his sheep. He is our gracious, tender, loving Shepherd. His goodness, his faithfulness, his covenant loyalty and unfailing love will go with us all our days. Is this not cause for rejoicing? There is no trial so daunting, no affliction so severe, no loss so great that it overcomes the message of the cross. In light of God's grace, in light of Christ's sacrificial death, we have no reason to complain, to begrudge him our circumstances, to listen to our emotions and not his still small voice. He knows us. He loves us. We can pray to him at all times. We will be with him eternally. To rejoice, to give thanks in light of these truths seems not only possible, but impossible not to do.

REFLECTION

1. *Do you rejoice always? Why or why not?*
2. *How does the cross allow us to rejoice even in the midst of very real sorrow?*

DAY
33

Friday

Old Testament: Micah 6:6-8
New Testament: Romans 12:1-2

DEVOTIONAL

We sometimes reduce worship to singing songs of praise. While this is important, and commanded in Scripture, it hardly does justice to the notion of worship that the biblical writers sought to give us. Paul lays it out for us: our spiritual act of worship is not merely singing, but offering our whole selves to him as living sacrifices (wondrous paradox!). In view of God’s mercy—in light of the precious truths of the gospel Paul has laid out for the Roman church in the first eleven chapters—surely we would seek to bring God more than a few songs one morning a week! As Isaac Watts wrote long ago, “Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small; love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.” He has been everything for us; we ought to give him everything we have in return. Micah’s famous oracle makes the same point. God does not desire our pious religious shows. The ceremonies, bereft of the surrendered life, grow wearisome. God has shown us what he desires from us as our acts of worship. We must humble ourselves before him and follow his decrees; we must humble ourselves before others and extend his love and mercy to all around us. That is our spiritual act of worship.

REFLECTION

1. How can you (or do you) offer yourself continually as a living sacrifice as your act of worship?
2. The trouble with living sacrifices is that they’re wont to crawl off the altar. Where do you see that happening in your spiritual life?
3. What can you do today to humble yourself, love mercy, and do justice?

DAY
34

Saturday

Old Testament: Psalm 126:3
New Testament: Romans 11:33-36

DEVOTIONAL

Frequently, when addressing the central truths of the gospel, when recounting the marvelous deeds of our marvelous Lord and Savior, the biblical writers burst forth in uncontainable praise. Paul has just proved God’s faithfulness to his people throughout the centuries, has shown how impressive is the wisdom of God’s plan of redemption. He has been treating nuanced theological points with care and precision. But this is not for him dry theology (as if the study of God could ever be dry!). He has seen too clearly the depths and riches of God’s wisdom and his joy bubbles over in effusive praise. To him be the glory, Paul insists, for he alone possesses such infinite understanding and redemptive creativity. The psalmist likewise overflows with praise, reflecting upon God’s rescue of Israel from captivity and faithfulness to his chosen people. I must confess these words are my favorite in all of Scripture, because they so completely sum up the Christian condition. Who among us has not cause to say, “The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy”?

REFLECTION

1. Burst forth in uncontainable praise. Really. Spend some time marveling before the awesomeness of God, the splendor of his holiness.
2. What good things has God done for you? How are you expressing your joy?



WEEK
07



Remembering the Passion

Rather than proceeding topically through Christ's passion, we will proceed chronologically. We will be reading through the whole of his "last" week in Mark's gospel, to see the progression from the triumphal entry to his resurrection. The devotional readings will be longer as a result, but well worth the additional time. Though the Last Supper and Christ's prayer in Gethsemane happen on the same day, I have broken them into two days, as they merit careful attention. Thus, we will study the Last Supper on Wednesday and Gethsemane on Thursday.

If this presents a problem, simply break up an earlier day into two days and then have an extended time (or two times) of reflection on Maundy Thursday. I have suggested "Crown Him with Many Crowns" as the hymn for the week, though individuals and families may well want to sing some of the hymns focusing on the cross on Good Friday especially. Alternatively, families might consider learning "Lord, Through This Holy Week of Our Salvation" this week, and then begin learning "Crown Him with Many Crowns" for the first week of the Easter season.

sixth
SUN
DAY

Palm Sunday

Old Testament: Psalm 118:25-29; Zechariah 9:9-10

New Testament: Mark 11:1-25

DEVOTIONAL

The Christ of Israel approaches Jerusalem as his passion draws near. With surprising boldness, he sends his disciples before him to prepare his transport. But as Israel's true king, he knows he will receive whatever he needs to accomplish his purpose. Riding into the city of David on a donkey, he preaches his silent message of peace. He will not be the political liberator, the conquering general many expect Messiah to be; he will be the one who brings God's peace to God's people. Though Mark does not explicitly acknowledge the fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy (as other gospel writers do), the message is clear. The time for rejoicing has arrived, for the King has come—and with him comes peace, reconciliation between God and man. The crowd that gathers speaks better than they know: crying out, “Hosanna” (“Lord, save us!”), they expect only salvation from Roman oppressors. But Christ brings salvation from our very sins, the promise of resurrection, the hope of glory. Yes, the Lord has done this for us—the Christ has come in the name of the Lord, brought redemption for his people—and it is marvelous in our eyes. Rejoice, O people of God!

REFLECTION

Hymn: “Crown Him with Many Crowns”

Memory Verse: Isaiah 53:5

1. *The Israelites had a limited view of the Savior. What about you?*
2. *Are you settling for a truncated salvation, or are you longing for the fulness of peace God offers you in Christ our Savior?*

DAY
35

Monday

Old Testament: Isaiah 5:1-7

New Testament: Mark 11:27-12:44

DEVOTIONAL

Having cursed the fig tree yesterday as an enacted parable teaching the spiritual barrenness and subsequent judgment of Jerusalem, Christ today enters into a series of disputes with her leaders. Isaiah had preached a similar message centuries before, comparing Israel to a vineyard that produces only bad grapes. Looking for justice, God found only bloodshed; seeking righteousness, he heard only cries of distress. As a result, God declared his judgment on Israel, sending her away to captivity. But he promised to bring her back again, to restore to her the joy of his salvation. That day has come. Sadly, the spiritual leaders of the nation failed to apprehend it. Instead of welcoming the Son, they mock him, beat him, and kill him—hoping to maintain their flimsy power over the failing vineyard. But God will not be stopped. Jesus is not just David's son: he is David's Lord, and his enemies will soon be put under his feet. To the righteous, though—to those who love the Lord their God and love their neighbors, men and women like the widow who gave her all to the King of kings—he will prove the God of the living, promising to raise us from the dead to new life in him.

REFLECTION

1. *We all, like the Pharisees, want to keep God under our control. Where do you see this tendency in your own life?*
2. *How can you emulate the widow who gave her all to God?*

DAY
36

Tuesday

Old Testament: Daniel 12:1-4
New Testament: Mark 13:1-37

DEVOTIONAL

The end is near for the Christ, for the Suffering Servant who will soon give his life for his people as a ransom for many. But that is not the end of the story. Jesus gives us a small window into the true end, after God has vindicated him by raising him from the dead, after he has come again in power and judgment. The Suffering Servant is also the Lord of history, the one to whom an everlasting dominion is given. He will come again in the clouds and he will gather his people to himself. He will establish his reign on earth as in heaven, and the two will at last be united in the perfect harmony of the New Jerusalem. Those who have died will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. We can make two mistakes in looking ahead to this moment. First, we can be overzealous, reading into every natural and political happening the coming of the end. However, Jesus has warned that these signs—earthquakes and wars—are not the end; they are merely signs of the beginning of birth pangs. We must not be deceived and follow after everyone who cries out, “Look! There is the Christ!” But second, we can just as easily fall into a sinful slumber, living like the servants who should have kept watch but lived instead as if their master would never return. We must keep watch, be on our guard, live like our King is coming back. For, while we do not know when he will return, we know he will.

REFLECTION

1. *How does knowing the end of history encourage you to persevere no matter the current state of history?*
2. *At your worst, would you fall into an overzealous view of the end, or a sinful slumber? Why do you think that is?*

DAY
37

Wednesday

Old Testament: Exodus 12:1-13
New Testament: Mark 14:1-26

DEVOTIONAL

At the time of the Passover, Jesus shared his final meal with his disciples—and in so doing, invested this old tradition with profound new meaning. What had been a reminder of the covenant at Sinai, the time when God rescued his people out of Egypt and brought them into new life in the Promised Land, now becomes the sign of the new covenant. The old covenant had been sealed with the blood of bulls and lambs; this new covenant will be sealed with the blood of Christ himself, the very Lamb of God. His flesh would be broken, and our lives would be healed. His blood would pour out, and our lives would fill up with the presence of God. He would die that we might have life. We share this meal still today when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper—and in a very real sense, we share it still with him. This is one of the moments when heaven and earth—so often separate in our minds and lives—come together. Here we not only remember Christ’s death, but we also look forward to the celebration of the wedding feast when heaven and earth join at last. In so doing, we receive grace to press on, to serve this humble King who served us all by his life and death.

REFLECTION

1. *How does Jesus nourish you spiritually when you take the Lord’s Supper?*
2. *Has the Lord’s Supper become boring ritual for you, or do you experience heaven and earth coming together at the table? Do you look backward to the cross and forward to the wedding feast when you take it?*

DAY
38

Maundy Thursday

Old Testament: Psalm 41:7-9
New Testament: Mark 14:27-72

DEVOTIONAL

Few moments so completely reveal the humanity and divinity of Christ as Gethsemane. Here, as the full weight of the task before him falls on him like a press crushing the ooze of oil from olives, Christ cries out to his Father. His soul is overwhelmed to the point of death, so great is the distress he experiences when reflecting upon the cross. To die for his people, I suspect, would cause him little trouble; to experience the excruciating torment of crucifixion more—but even still could he face it with courage and conviction for the joy set before him. But to be forsaken by God, his Father, with whom he has experienced perfect, unbroken fellowship since before time—that breaks his heart and catches his will. What comfort did he find as he cried out to God? To experience the reassuring presence of his Father one night, only to be cursed and damned the next morning, what solace would that be? And yet . . . he submits his will to the Father's. In perfect surrender he prayed words that remain unequalled in human history, that represent the heart of Christian discipleship, of a life surrendered wholly to God: "Yet not what I will, but what you will." Will we pray likewise this Lenten season?

REFLECTION

1. Compare your prayer life to Christ's prayer in Gethsemane. What similarities or differences do you see?
2. Are you able to pray, "Yet not what I will, but what you will," today and every day?

DAY
39

Good Friday

Old Testament: Isaiah 53:4-9; Psalm 22:1-31
New Testament: Mark 15:1-41

DEVOTIONAL

Who could ever write a devotional for Good Friday? The horror and majesty of the cross defy expression in simple words, forbid shallow reflection. The words are stamped indelibly across all of human history—and our own lives as well: "And they crucified him." Your King. Your Savior. The Light of the world. God made flesh. The one at whose name all will bend the knee, by whose name all must be saved. The one to whom all glory and honor are due forsook all that was rightfully his and embraced all that was rightfully mine. Like Rembrandt in *Raising of the Cross*, we must paint ourselves into this scene, lest we miss our part. If you are looking for yourself, look no further than Barabbas. Barabbas, whose name ironically means "son of Abba," awaits execution for insurrection. He has committed the crime, sedition, for which the Romans will shortly crucify the innocent Christ. And yet he receives freedom, reprieve—grace—when Pilate grants him the amnesty that should have been given Jesus. He walks away as Christ ascends the dusty hill of Calvary. He runs home to the open arms of his family as Christ cries out to a deaf heaven, to a Father who has forsaken and damned him. He gets a second chance because Christ was given none. The blows hammered upon Jesus' back were meant for him. The nails should have held him on that tree. The grave should have embraced him. Instead it could not hold Jesus. Here is the message of the cross: what you and I and Barabbas should have suffered, Christ suffered instead. He died for our sins. By his wounds are we healed. What should we do with a love like that?

REFLECTION

1. Paint yourself into the crucifixion scene. What part did you play in the death of Christ? Feel the anguish that comes with recognizing this painful truth.
2. What will you do with this beautiful exchange? How will you take up your cross knowing he took up the cross for you?

DAY
40

Saturday

Old Testament: Zechariah 12:10

New Testament: Mark 15:42-47

DEVOTIONAL

In a sense, there is little to say on this Holy Saturday. Christ has been laid in the tomb, we look upon and mourn the One we have pierced, and we wait—wait with silent expectation for the time when God will make all things right again. But in another sense, there is much to say. For, if you think about it, in many ways we live in between the cross and the resurrection. That is, we live in the time between God’s defeat of the powers of sin and death in the world through Christ’s sacrificial death and resurrection, and God’s final victory over those same powers—when those who believe in Christ will be raised to eternal, bodily life in him, free of the destruction and decay that plague this present darkness. Our victory has been won, but our final vindication awaits. How should we live in this Holy Saturday of our lives? I find it interesting that Paul, in his first letter to the church in Corinth, seems to paint this very picture. He opens in the first few chapters with a profound reflection on the implications of the cross for our lives. And he closes, in the fifteenth chapter, with an extended, majestic treatment of the wonder and importance of the resurrection. What stands between? Love. In light of Christ’s past work in our behalf, in light of the coming recreation of the heavens and earth, God calls us to love. To love him by living holy lives surrendered to his glory, redeemed as we are from slavery to sin. To love others as a sign, a symbol, of the future wholeness we will know when we see him, no longer as through a glass darkly, but face to face. (What wonder, this!) “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

REFLECTION

1. What are the challenges of living between the first and second comings of Christ? How does the cross equip us to face those challenges?
2. Evaluate your life on the basis of 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a. None of us loves as Christ did, so where are you falling short of the standard? Ask God to help you grow in this area.

easter
SUN
DAY

Easter Sunday

Old Testament: Isaiah 53:10-12; Daniel 7:14

New Testament: Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:13-35;
John 20:1-9; 1 Corinthians 15:20-28

DEVOTIONAL

As Easter marks the beginning of the Easter season (surprising, I know), our Lenten devotional draws to a close. In moving to the next stage of the Christian calendar, we would do well to remember the great change in attitude the switch should bring. I quote in extenso from the excellent treatment of this subject by N.T. Wright in his book *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*:

[I]f Lent is a time to give things up, Easter ought to be a time to take things up. Champagne for breakfast again—well, of course. Christian holiness was never meant to be merely negative. Of course, you have to weed the garden from time to time; sometimes the ground ivy may need serious digging before you can get it out. That’s Lent for you. But you don’t want simply to turn the garden back into a neat bed of blank earth. Easter is the time to sow new seeds and to plant out a few cuttings. If Calvary means putting to death things in your life that need killing off if you are to flourish as a Christian and as a truly human being, then Easter should mean planting, watering, and training up things in your life (personal and corporate) that ought to be blossoming, filling the garden with color and perfume, and in due course bearing fruit. The forty days of the Easter season, until the ascension, ought to be a time to balance out Lent by taking something up, some new task or venture, something wholesome and fruitful and outgoing and self-giving. You may be able to do it only for six weeks, just as you may be able to go without beer or tobacco only for the six weeks of Lent. But if you really make a start on it, it might give you a sniff of new possibilities, new hopes, new ventures you never dreamed of. It might bring something of Easter into your innermost life. It might help you wake up in a whole new way. And that’s what Easter is all about.

REFLECTION

1. What have you “weeded” from the garden of your heart during Lent?
2. What do you want to “plant” during this Easter season? Make a plan. Tell someone what your plan is.

To God be the
glory in this and
every season!

AMEN.
