TAKE UP THE CROSS

A Devotional for Lent

FAMILY EDITION

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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 the Lenten season, 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 families with younger 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. Each week proceeds through a new topic that will help prepare our hearts for Christ's passion, death and resurrection. I have also included a weekly verse for memorization related to the week's topic. As Sundays will be the time to create a visual aid for the memory verse and learn the week's hymn, I have included other activities only for the remainder of the week. These are meant to be suggestions only, and families should adapt or modify the ideas to the needs of their children specifically. 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

Each year in December we spend a lot of time and energy getting ready for Christmas. We decorate the house, sing special songs, and prepare our hearts to celebrate Jesus' birth. In the same way, Lent is a special time of year. While we don't tend to decorate quite as much, we still sing special songs, learn certain stories, and prepare our hearts to remember Jesus' death and resurrection. Every day we're going to read a passage from the Old Testament and a passage from the New Testament that will help us understand what Jesus did for us when he died on the cross. Each week we will try to learn a verse by memory together. We will also learn a new song each week. We are doing this because we want to listen to what Jesus said in Mark 8:34. When he tells us to take up our cross, it means we need to push to the side what we want for our lives, and instead do and be what he wants for us. Jesus sacrificed himself for our sake by dying on the cross for our sins, so we sacrifice ourselves for his sake, to show him how much we love him, by offering ourselves to him completely. We deny ourselves and follow after him. Lent is a time for us to take up our cross and follow him, so let's get started!

ACTIVITY

Hymn: "Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken"
Memory Verse: Mark 8:34

Children as young as two can and should memorize Scripture—and often teaching our children God's Word encourages us to memorize more faithfully than we otherwise would! Each Sunday, families can enjoy creating a visual aid for the memory verse together, engaging children of all ages. Especially when younger children are present, the visual aids should help make the abstract concrete (for example, using a heart for the word "love," or a picture of two siblings sharing for the word "kindness"). For families with older children, using skits or hand motions can also aid the memory process. Be creative and have fun! I have also included a hymn for each week. Children learn much through song, so these hymns of old will help communicate God's truth in catching ways. Families might consider singing the same song each day during the week, so that all learn the words well, or adding in other songs if the hymns are already well known.

DAY 02

Thursday

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

DEVOTIONAL

Some people like to pretend that they don't really need Jesus, that they can make God love them by doing so many good things. But God knows better. He doesn't want us to pretend that we are good when we are not. We all make mistakes. We are selfish when we should be loving or mean when we should be kind. Sometimes we tell lies instead of the truth. So what does God want from us during Lent? Not to pretend that we are better than we are, no, but simply to admit that we need him. In Psalm 51:17, David says that the sacrifices God wants are a broken heart and a contrite spirit. A "contrite spirit" is what you have when you feel sorry that you did something wrong. After you're mean to your brother or sister, for example, you might feel bad, say you're sorry, and give them a hug to show them you love them and still want to be close to them. That is the sacrifice God wants from us.

ACTIVITY

Have your children cut out paper hearts of a decent size. Then, as a symbol of our brokenness before God (sorrowful because of our sin, sorry for our disobedience), tear the heart in two down the middle. Use masking tape to put the heart back together, making a cross over the tear to show that God accepts us, welcomes us back as his friends, when we come to him humbly and receive the free and gracious gift of the cross.

DAY 03

Friday

Old Testament: Psalm 139:23-24
New Testament: 1 Timothy 4:7-8

DEVOTIONAL

David knew he sinned and messed up a lot. In fact, he was pretty sure that he didn't even know how often he messed up, so he asked God to search his heart—to see if there was any hidden sin in his heart that he needed to confess. He wanted God to do this because deep down he wanted to be changed. He didn't want to sin anymore. No, he wanted to follow God all the time, and to do that, he needed to know where he needed to be changed. Paul tells us that we should train ourselves to be godly. He says we should practice following God. We can't do it on our own, but with God's help—with the Spirit working in our hearts—we can become more like Jesus. So David was asking God to show him where he needed to practice more with the Spirit's help!

ACTIVITY

Take this time to discuss what "practicing" godliness looks like. Discuss some of the spiritual disciplines with your children and how they help us to pursue holiness through the sanctifying power of the Spirit. The specific disciplines you discuss will depend heavily on the age of your children. But even the youngest children would benefit from a discussion of the importance of prayer and Bible study. Older children might be ready to discuss disciplines such as fasting, silence and solitude, meditation, or journaling. You could also have a good discussion about "hidden sins" in your children's lives, since you may know better than they where they struggle! With very small children, perhaps a fun game of hide-and-seek would illustrate this idea well.

DAY 04

Saturday

Old Testament: Ezra 9:5-8
New Testament: Galatians 6:7-9

DEVOTIONAL

When Ezra prayed for Israel, he showed how deeply sorry he was for his sins and the sins of his people. He said their sins were so many that they reached all the way up to the heavens—past the moon and into the stars! And Ezra knew very well how serious their sin was, because he was the one who led God's people back to Israel after God had sent them far away to Babylon as punishment for their sins. He knew what Paul would say later, that we reap what we sow. If we "plant" sin, we will "harvest" punishment and pain. Sin always leads to destruction in the end. But if we "plant" godliness, we will "harvest" eternal life—the blessings of God in this life and in Heaven. So let us not grow tired of doing good, with God's help and for his glory!

ACTIVITY

To help make Ezra's prayer come alive for children, make a "sin pile"—with the goal of having it reach over their heads! Families might use pillows or sofa cushions, or—if slightly more daring—a collection of newspapers. Families with older children might consider naming sins as they make the pile (for example, a newspaper wad represents the sin of gossip).

WEEK

02

Recognizing Our Sin

first
SUN
DAY

Sunday

Old Testament: Psalm 90:7-12
New Testament: Romans 1:18-25

DEVOTIONAL

It's always hard to hear it, but God is very angry with our sin—and he is right to be! God created us, so we are his. He is our king, and we should obey him always. But we don't. We break his laws, and things start to go bad for us. Life is difficult because we choose not to listen to God, even though he is our Creator, our King, even our Father! When you don't listen to your parents, you could get badly hurt. For example, if you touch the hot stove right after your dad tells you not to, you will get burned, and your dad will be frustrated that you didn't listen to him. This is what happens when we don't listen to God. Our lives don't work the way they are supposed to, and God is angry because we aren't listening to him. We don't like to talk about this, but we will never understand how much God loves us, or why Jesus had to die for us, unless we understand his anger first. We need to hear the bad news of sin before we can understand the good news of grace.

ACTIVITY

Hymn: "Come, Ye Sinners Poor and Needy"
Memory Verse: 1 John 1:9

For tips on memorizing Scripture and the value of singing hymns with small children, see Ash Wednesday.

DAY 05

Monday

Old Testament: Genesis 3:1-6
New Testament: Romans 5:12-14

DEVOTIONAL

If your mom or dad got a new job in a different state, the whole family would move to that new place. Why? Because your parents are the head of the household, so where they go, you go too. Well, Adam was our first parent. In a sense, he is everybody's dad—even your parents' and your grandparents' dad! So when he "moved" somewhere, we all had to move with him. Where did Adam move? He moved from God's presence into sin. He chose to disobey God, and so became a sinner. Because he is our dad—the "head" of the whole human race—he made us sinners too. So now everybody—you, your parents, your neighbors, your pastor—is born in a "new place," sin. We are all born sinners now, and so every one of us sins as we grow up.

ACTIVITY

Have some fun with magnets. Place a sheet of paper between a magnet and a paper clip. Move the magnet around the paper, and watch as the paper clip moves too. Use this activity to teach your children the notion of imputation. What happens to the magnet happens to the paper clip too. In the same way, when something "happens" to Adam (he chooses to sin), it happens for us too.

DAY 06

Tuesday

Old Testament: Genesis 3:17-19
New Testament: Romans 6:6-12

DEVOTIONAL

Sin brings death. Part of the curse of sin is that everybody has to die. We were never supposed to die. We were supposed to live forever with God. That's the bad news. But the good news is that those who admit they are sinners and trust in Jesus don't have to die in the same way. You see, Jesus died for us—he took the punishment for our sin—so we don't have to die forever anymore. We are raised to new life when we trust in Jesus, just like Jesus was raised from the dead on Easter. But Paul says we still die when we trust Jesus: we die to sin. We are "dead to sin" now—we don't pay attention to our sinful desires, we don't want to sin like we used to—because we know how good it is to live with Jesus instead!

ACTIVITY

At an age-appropriate level, discuss the issue of mortification (putting sin to death in the Spirit). Encourage older children to identify a particular sin in their lives and then discuss strategies for overcoming it in the power of the Spirit. With younger children, the discussion will, of course, be more limited. It may simply be a time to teach them what sin is, what some common sins are, and how God works in our lives to help us stop sinning. With smaller children, consider acting out what it means to be dead to sin and alive to God. Have them pretend to sin (lie, be mean, etc.), then shout, "Dead to sin!" and have them stop what they are doing. Shout, "Alive to God!" and have them follow what God would have them do instead (tell the truth, be kind, etc.) It is simple, but effective.

DAY 07

Wednesday

Old Testament: Genesis 6:5-6
New Testament: Romans 3:10-18

DEVOTIONAL

When God looked at the earth back in Noah's time, he saw that the people there seemed to want to do only bad things all the time. It made God very sad that he had made people who would reject him so completely. When Paul wrote to the Christians living in Rome, he said that not much has changed. We are all still sinners. No one does only good things. No one seeks God. What will God do with people like us? How long will he put up with people who reject him and refuse to follow him? It is only when we see how dark our sin is that we can fully understand how brilliant and bright his love for us is.

ACTIVITY

Despite the clear teaching of Romans 3:10-18, there persists the impression—especially among children—that some "heroes" of the faith were without sin. Talk through characters from Scripture especially (such as Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, and Peter) who were great men of God—but who also stumbled and fell often enough. Depending on the age of your children, you might consider talking through sins in your own life too, in order to drive home the point: all have sinned. You might also turn a flashlight on in a bright room to see what little difference it makes. Then turn the same flashlight on in a pitch-black room and see what difference it makes. It is only when we see how "dark" our hearts are that we can fully appreciate how "bright" the light of God's love is!

DAY 08

Thursday

Old Testament: Jeremiah 13:23
New Testament: Galatians 5:16-21

DEVOTIONAL

I have never yet seen a leopard who could change his spots. I don't think he could ever figure it out. I've never figured out how to change the color of my eyes. I might be able to cover the color with contacts or glasses, but my eyes are still my eyes. In the same way, I've never seen anyone who can change their own hearts. They might be able to cover over a few sins by doing a few good things, but the heart is still the heart. We are sinners, and there is nothing we can do to change that.

But God—the same God who made the leopard, who made me, who decided what color my eyes would be—he could change my heart, just as surely as he could change the leopard's spots.

ACTIVITY

Find a printable coloring page of a leopard and have your children color it, paying particular attention to the arrangement of the spots. Then ask the children if their leopards can change their spots. Certainly not. Neither can we stop disobeying God unless he works in us to redeem us, to save us from our sin.

DAY 09

Friday

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

DEVOTIONAL

David had sinned badly, and he knew it. He had kidnapped somebody else's wife, a woman named Bathsheba. And when that man, Uriah, was about to find out, he had him killed. He was a murderer, and he knew it. So he prayed to God for forgiveness. But right near the start of his prayer he says something amazing: he says that he sinned against God, and God only. Wait, that can't be right! Hadn't he sinned against Bathsheba? Hadn't he sinned against Uriah? Well, sure he had. But David knew that his sin against God was so great, that it almost felt like he had sinned against God only. He knew that he was dead in his sins, just like Paul would tell the Christians living in Ephesus a thousand years later, and that he deserved God's fierce anger at his sin, just like we do now. If this is who we are, what hope do we have? Our only hope is God's love for us—a love greater even than our sin.

ACTIVITY

Discuss with your children how all sin is ultimately against God. Use examples relevant to their lives. For example, how is treating your brother or sister rudely sinning against God? How is lying sinning against God?

DAY 10

Saturday

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

DEVOTIONAL

We've been talking about how sinful we are for a whole week now, and it can start to feel very discouraging. We may want to cry out with the prophet Isaiah, "Woe to me! I am ruined!" and fall down before this God who is holy, holy, holy. But God is the One who lifts us up. If we admit when we sin and tell him how very sorry we are, he is faithful to forgive us and to cleanse us, to wash away the dirt and filth of our sin. That is very good news indeed!

ACTIVITY

At the end of this week, when we have spent so much time examining our sinful tendencies, it would seem worthwhile to have an extended time of confession. Help your children (especially if they are younger) identify at least one way they have sinned recently. Then take them through a prayer of confession: acknowledging their sin, asking for his forgiveness, repenting, receiving his cleansing, and worship.

If you have very small children, a simple object lesson might help them understand God's cleansing work. Write a list of sins on a whiteboard. Confess them aloud. Then, with much fanfare, erase them as you confess. In the same way, when we confess, God wipes our sin away!

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

Remember how last week we talked a lot about how sinful we are, and it just wasn't much fun? Here's the good news. Sin isn't the end of the story. Sin doesn't get to have the last word. If God kept a record of sins, David says, we'd be in big trouble. If he kept track of everything we did wrong, and that's all he remembered about us, we'd have no hope at all. But he doesn't, because with God there is forgiveness. That's what we're going to talk about this week. God loved his people so much that he chose us, adopted us to be his children. He redeems and forgives us. He does this because of his great love for us alone, so it is all for his glory alone. Let's praise him for his glorious grace!

ACTIVITY

Hymn: "And Can It Be"
Memory Verse: Psalm 130:7

For tips on memorizing Scripture and the value of singing hymns with small children, see Ash Wednesday.

DAY 11

Monday

Old Testament: Exodus 34:5-7
New Testament: John 3:16

DEVOTIONAL

How much does God love us? In one of the most famous verses in the Bible, John tells us that God loved us so much that he gave his only Son for us. He sacrificed what was most precious to him for the sake of us—even though we are sinners! He did this so that if we would trust in him completely, we could enjoy life with him now and forever. God really is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. Once we see how glorious God is, what can we do except what Moses did—bow down and worship him!

ACTIVITY

Make cutouts of your children's hands on several pieces of brightly colored paper. Wrap the cutout around in a cone shape so that it looks like a calla lily with fingers, leaving a small hole for the pipe cleaner at the base. Thread the green pipe cleaner through the hole as the stem of the flower. On the different "petals" (fingers), write one of the attributes of God given in the passage from Exodus. Display the bouquet as a reminder of God's great love for us.

DAY 12

Tuesday

Old Testament: Genesis 3:15
New Testament: Romans 5:15-17

DEVOTIONAL

We learned last week that Adam's sin made sinners of us all, since he is the "head" of the human family. (Remember the magnet and the paper clip?) That was very bad news. But God has very good news for us too. You see, Jesus came to be the new "head" of a new human family. When we believe in him, we become part of his new family. Then God sees all the good that he did when he lived on earth—what the Bible calls his perfect righteousness—and treats us as if we had done all that good, as if we had lived a perfect life! We see in the passage from Genesis that God promised this would be so just a short while after Adam first sinned. Right after Adam's sin, when he is explaining the curse of sin, he says one of Eve's children—Jesus—will crush the evil snake's head. God promised to save us right as we finished sinning! What amazing love!

ACTIVITY

Act out a trial scene before God's throne of judgment. Before Christ, the judge would cry out, "Guilty!" But now that Christ has come and taken our place, God declares us righteous instead. Ask them how they feel after each judgment is pronounced.
With older children, who better understand their own sin, discuss the wonder of God seeing Christ's righteousness in us even though we have sinned in so many ways.

DAY 13

Wednesday

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

DEVOTIONAL

Remember from yesterday that God promised Adam and Eve that a Savior was coming? That means a lot of people in Israel's history heard that promise and believed it. Abraham was one of them. When God told him that people from every nation would be blessed through him, he knew this was all part of God's great rescue plan. That Savior who would crush the evil snake's head would come from Abraham's family. That was the covenant—the promise—God made with Abraham. God made a few covenants with Israel: with Moses at Mt. Sinai, with David when he built his palace. But God also promised through his prophet Jeremiah that one day there would be a new covenant. Those who believe in God's promise, who trust Jesus, will get to know God personally, Jeremiah said. God's very Spirit would even live within them! That means they wouldn't need a priest anymore, because they could talk directly to God.

ACTIVITY

Explain to your children that before Christ, people came to God through a mediator, the priest. Play a quick game wherein one person acts as God, another as the mediator, and another as humanity. Have a "conversation" through the mediator to see how tedious it becomes. Now, have the mediator step aside, and let your children see how wonderful it is to be able to speak directly to God.

If you are looking for a little more to do, make small heart buttons with a drawing of a dove on them. Pin the button on your children's shirts above their hearts as a reminder of God's presence in their lives.

DAY 14

Thursday

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

DEVOTIONAL

Isaiah knew all about God's promises. He knew God had a great rescue plan to save not only Israel, but people from every nation. People from all over the world will recognize God is their King, and joyfully submit to his rule. That is the good news the messenger was bringing. Simeon knew this too, and so when he saw baby Jesus in the temple, he burst into his joyful song. He said that this tiny baby, born to die that we might live forever, would be a light to all people, not just Israel. God would enact his great rescue plan for all nations.

ACTIVITY

Have your children decorate a picture of shoes as extravagantly as possible. As they decorate them, discuss with them what it means when Isaiah says that the feet of those who bring good news are beautiful. How do they feel when someone brings good news? Of course, the best news of all is that God is coming to rescue his people.

DAY 15

Friday

Old Testament: Ezekiel 36:25-27
New Testament: John 1:29-34

DEVOTIONAL

When John the Baptist saw his cousin Jesus coming, he said he was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. How does Jesus take our sin away? The prophet Ezekiel tells us how. He says God will sprinkle us with water—just like John the Baptist baptized people with water—to cleanse us from our sin. He washes our sin away. But then Ezekiel says God will put his Spirit within us—just like Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit. You see, we need more than just one bath to wash away our sin. We need God himself living within us, making our hearts completely new, so that we can obey him—otherwise we'll fall right back into our sinful ways. What happens next is exactly what John says: Jesus must become greater, and we must become smaller. We let Jesus have more and more of our hearts as we trust him more and more.

ACTIVITY

Have your children act out Christ becoming greater in our lives as we become less. Choose one child or parent to be "Christ," and another to be us. Have the child try to become as large or as small as possible, respectively. Take turns. Afterwards, discuss some concrete ways you can make yourself smaller and Christ larger in your life.

DAY 16

Saturday

Old Testament: Psalm 51:1-2, 10-12
New Testament: 2 Corinthians 5:17

DEVOTIONAL

When God planned to rescue us from our sin, he didn't just want to take away the punishment for our sins. When we trust Jesus, he definitely does that—but he does so much more too. He forgives us our sins, but then he makes us something entirely new. We are born as sinners, sinful from the time God first formed us in the womb. But when we trust Jesus, God makes us new creations in Christ. The old (our sin) has gone, and the new has come. God gives us the pure hearts and willing spirits for which David prayed.

ACTIVITY

Teach children about the life cycle of a butterfly, especially that it begins as a caterpillar and then ends as a butterfly. Help them to see that we are like butterflies too. We begin as caterpillars—sinful from the time of our birth—but become new creations in Christ when God saves us. We are still the same person, just as the butterfly is the same caterpillar, but we have become something entirely new.

WEEK

04

Approaching the Cross

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Sunday

Old Testament: Psalm 103:1-5
New Testament: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

DEVOTIONAL

Paul had to write a very hard letter to God's people living in Corinth. When Paul had first gone there, he taught them about Jesus. He explained that Jesus had to die on a cross for us because we were sinners. Jesus took our place—took the punishment for our sins—so that we could take his place as God's dearly loved children. This is such wonderful news that when we believe it, our lives begin to change. We find ourselves becoming much more loving because we know how much God loves us. In fact, he even loved us when we weren't very lovely, when we were still sinning against him. That means we can love people even when they aren't very lovely, when they're mean or selfish or rude to us. But a strange thing happened after Paul left Corinth. The people there, who said they wanted to follow Jesus, had started to become mean and selfish and rude again. They had forgotten God's incredible love for them, and so they had stopped being loving toward each other. So Paul reminded them of Jesus on the cross. After all, that is where God forgave our sins, healed our broken bodies, redeemed and crowned us, satisfied us with grace for every need.

ACTIVITY

Hymn: "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"
Memory Verse: Philippians 3:7

For tips on memorizing Scripture and the value of singing hymns with small children, see Ash Wednesday.

DAY 17

Monday

Old Testament: Psalm 8:1-9
New Testament: Philippians 2:5-11

DEVOTIONAL

We make a really big deal out of Christmas. That's a good thing because Christmas is a really big deal. But here's the thing: Christmas only matters because of Good Friday and Easter (the holidays we're getting ready for during Lent). At Christmas we celebrate Jesus' birth. And what an amazing thing that God himself would come down as a tiny baby, wrapped in tiny baby clothes! But why did God come to live among us for a time? He came to die. That little baby knew that when he grew up, he would humble himself, act like a servant to all of us, and then die in our place. The real Christmas tree is the cross of Jesus Christ.

ACTIVITY

This would be a great day for a Christmas celebration, especially because it will catch your children off guard. Sing some Christmas carols, decorate a Christmas tree cutout, wear red and green—but most importantly, help your children connect Christmas and Passion Week, to see that the former only matters because of the latter.

DAY 18

Tuesday

Old Testament: Genesis 15:6
New Testament: Ephesians 2:4-10

DEVOTIONAL

Every time we look at a cross—and you probably have some hanging in your home or at your church—we should remember how completely hopeless we are. Without God's help we can do nothing to save ourselves. We were spiritually dead because of our sin, and the dead do not come back to life in their own power! God had to make us alive again with Jesus. God saves us by his grace, not by any good deeds we do to try to save ourselves. That is why faith is so important. Faith says, "I can't do it, so I need you to do it for me, God." That was Abraham's faith. He knew he couldn't have a son when he was so old. He knew he couldn't conquer the land God was going to give him, or make himself into a great nation all by himself. But God could do it, and Abraham trusted him. You can't save yourself but God can. Will you trust him to do it?

ACTIVITY

Faith can be a squishy topic. To add some concreteness to the abstract concept, discuss what it means to "walk by faith and not by sight." Our eyes often deceive us. Perhaps look at some optical illusions to prove this point. We can't trust what we see and perceive. Instead, we trust what God tells us is truth.

For older children, you might give the example of beauty. The world tells us that in order to be beautiful, we have to be thin, tall, perfectly proportioned, and the like. But God tells us we are beautiful simply because he made us in his image.

For younger children, you might simply discuss God's existence—which we cannot prove with our eyes, but by his Word.

DAY 19

Wednesday

Old Testament: Genesis 22:1-14
New Testament: Mark 1:9-11

DEVOTIONAL

Yesterday we learned that Abraham trusted God to do what he couldn't do. In today's story, Abraham gets to prove how much he trusts God. God asked him to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, whom he loved dearly. But God had promised to make Abraham into a great nation through Isaac. If Abraham sacrificed him, how could this happen? Abraham had to trust God, and showed he trusted God by being willing to offer his only son as a sacrifice. Hebrews tells us that maybe Abraham believed God could raise his son from the dead. Whatever the reason, he trusted God. And what happened next? An angel came and kept Abraham from sacrificing his only son, whom he loved. Then God provided a ram for Abraham to sacrifice instead. Of course, this ram reminds us of Jesus, the Lamb God provided as a sacrifice for our sins. Who is this Jesus? He is, as God says at Jesus' baptism, God's Son—his only Son—whom he loves. God did not ask Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, but instead, God himself offers his Son as a sacrifice for us. Once we see how much God has done for us, how easy it becomes to trust him, and to obey him when he calls us!

ACTIVITY

This topic certainly requires delicate treatment, as young children can become disturbed at the notion of Abraham offering his son as an offering. To help them understand what is happening, ask them how they would respond if God asked for something that means a lot to them—perhaps a favorite toy or stuffed animal. Help them to see that God has given us what was most precious to him, his own Son, Jesus Christ.

DAY 20

Thursday

Old Testament: Deuteronomy 27:26
New Testament: Galatians 3:10-14

DEVOTIONAL

From the time Adam and Eve first sinned, every human has lived under a curse—the curse of sin. You see, sin breaks things. It makes everything worse. Even good things turn sour when sin is in the mix. Most of all, sin separates us from God. It is like a wall that keeps us from knowing him, being with him, letting him love us. The law that God gave to Moses just reminds us of this curse. We can't keep the law, so we have to live under the curse. What are we going to do? That's where Jesus comes in. Jesus takes the curse away from us, puts it on his shoulders instead, and carries it to the cross. When we trust in Jesus, we don't have to live under a curse anymore. That means we are free from the curse of sin: we can start to live changed lives. We're free from the curse of death: we get to live with God forever. And we're free from the curse of the law: we don't have to save ourselves (which we can't do anyway), because God sent Jesus to save us.

ACTIVITY

Ask your children to touch their ears with their elbows. After watching them struggle for an amusing length, help them to see that trying to earn our salvation by our righteous deeds is equally impossible. Explain that instead we place our faith in Christ and can then rest from our fruitless attempts to win God's favor. To illustrate the point, touch their ears with your elbow. It takes an "outside" righteousness to please God, just as it takes an "outside" elbow to touch their ears.

DAY 21

Friday

Old Testament: Numbers 21:4-8
New Testament: John 3:13-15

DEVOTIONAL

The Israelites had done it again. Even though God had rescued them out of Israel—even though God had done incredible miracles right before their eyes—even though God provided them with food and water in the middle of the desert—they had started to complain again. So God sent poisonous snakes into the camp to punish them for their sin. (Even if it takes a while, sin always brings bad things into our lives, never good things.) So Moses prayed for them (again), to ask God to show them mercy (again). God told Moses to make a bronze snake and hang it on a pole. Then, if anybody was bitten by a snake, they could look at this bronze serpent and be healed. Thousands of years later, Jesus said that he was just like that bronze snake. He was going to be lifted onto a pole, just like that snake. And anybody who looked at him—believed in him, trusted in what he was doing on the cross—would be healed. That wicked serpent who tempted Adam and Eve in the garden has bitten all of us—we are all sinners. But we can all look to Jesus, and he will save us.

ACTIVITY

Have your children make a "bronze snake" as a reminder that Christ was lifted up for their sakes. Glue two popsicle sticks together in the shape of a cross. If you want, color or paint them bronze. Wind a pipe cleaner around the cross like a serpent, making the serpent's head by winding the pipe cleaner around in a small oval at the top. (If you are feeling particularly daring, you might add eyes and the slithery tongue to the pipe cleaner serpent.)

DAY 22

Saturday

Old Testament: Isaiah 53:1-3
New Testament: Philippians 3:7-11

DEVOTIONAL

Only one passage in the whole Bible tells us what Jesus looked like, and all it says is that Jesus looked pretty ordinary. There was nothing special about the way he looked, so we might not have noticed him if we'd passed him on the street. Maybe that's why people rejected him, didn't like him. Maybe they thought he didn't look cool enough to be somebody important. But Paul says he is Somebody, even if he looked like a nobody. Paul says that, if we start to know who Jesus really is, we will soon think he is more important than everything else in the whole world. Paul says he would throw away everything else he owned—his toys, his clothes, his books, his furniture—if he could just know Jesus more. Why does Paul think that? Because he knows that the only way we can know God, to experience his love and power, is through Jesus. When we trust in Jesus—this Somebody who looked like a nobody—we get the greatest treasure in the world, greater than the whole world: God himself.

ACTIVITY

Ask your children to guess what Jesus looked like. Taking care not to dismiss them, teach them that we really don't know what he looked like. But what matters most is that in God's eyes he was perfect. Ask them what they think God most looks for in a person's "appearance." Help them to see that God values humility, faith, and righteousness that comes through Christ.

WEEK

05

Understanding the Sacrifice

fourth
SUN
DAY

Sunday

Old Testament: Leviticus 17:11
New Testament: Romans 3:21-26, 5:7-11

DEVOTIONAL

How was God going to solve this problem? He had to punish sin, to show the full force of his anger at our rebellion against him, or else he wouldn't be holy. And if he wasn't holy, he wouldn't be God. But at the same time, he wanted to rescue his people, to show them mercy and grace, or else he wouldn't be loving. And if wasn't loving, he wouldn't be God. What was he going to do? He knew what he needed: a sacrifice of atonement. Someone who could take our place, take our punishment on himself, so that we could be "at one" (that's where the word "atonement" comes from) with God again. Jesus is that perfect sacrifice of at-one-ment. At the cross, God poured out the full fury of his anger at our sin, punishing Jesus for our rebellion; but at the cross, God also poured out the full measure of his love for us, bringing us back to him. God loved us so much that he did this for us even when we were sinners! Our life is in Jesus' blood.

ACTIVITY

Hymn: "O Sacred Head Now Wounded"
Memory Verse: 2 Corinthians 5:21

For tips on memorizing Scripture and the value of singing hymns with small children, see Ash Wednesday.

DAY 23

Monday

Old Testament: Genesis 3:21
New Testament: Hebrews 9:22-26

DEVOTIONAL

Blood is a little bit gross. You probably don't want to see it, and you might not even want to talk about it. But the Bible says that without blood, there can be no forgiveness of sins. We might not think our mistakes are that serious, but the Bible is clear that we have to die for our sins. Yikes! That's the bad news. The good news is that God has made another way for us—and he has been making a way for us from the very beginning. Right after Adam and Eve sinned, God made them clothes from animal skins to cover their shame and guilt. Of course, to make those clothes, some animals had to die. Blood had to be shed. But animal blood couldn't wash away our sin or bring us forgiveness. For that, we needed the blood of Jesus, offered in the heavenly temple. When he died on the cross, Jesus made us clean in God's eyes, and took away all of God's anger at our sin. Now, when we trust Jesus, we can live in God's presence again!

ACTIVITY

Have your children describe a time when they were very angry with someone who hurt or offended them. Ask them what it took to make them feel better, to reconcile with the friend or family member again. Tell them that our sin made God angry too (an excellent time to discuss his intrinsic holiness and inevitable wrath). Ask them what it would take to make God happy with us again. Teach them that by Christ's death, we can now be friends with him again through faith in Christ.

DAY 24

Tuesday

Old Testament: Isaiah 1:18-26
New Testament: 1 John 1:7

DEVOTIONAL

Jesus died on the cross to take away the punishment for our sin. But he died to do so much more than that too. You see, God doesn't just want to take away the penalty for our sin—he wants to break the power of sin in our lives too. He wants to make us pure again, washing away the dirt and grime that sin leaves on our spirits. When we recognize our sin and confess it to God, seeking his forgiveness, he is faithful to cleanse us. God takes our souls—stained a deep red with our sin—and bleaches them white again. He purifies us like gold, removing all the dirt and other blemishes, so that we sparkle for his glory.

ACTIVITY

Try the famous color-changing carnation experiment. Add 20-30 drops of food coloring to a cup of water. Place a freshly cut white carnation into the cup of water. Watch as the flower begins to change colors. (For added effect, try several different carnations in water of different colors.)

If you're able to prepare in advance, an even more impressive demonstration requires iodine, bleach, and water. Fill a glass with water, representing you or your children. Add a splash of iodine (sin), which will make the water polluted and black. Then, take a sponge soaked in bleach (Jesus), and dip it in the polluted water. The bleach will turn the water clear again, just as Jesus purifies us from our sin. You can cut the sponge in the shape of a cross for added effect.

DAY 25

Wednesday

Old Testament: Leviticus 16:21-22
New Testament: 2 Corinthians 5:21

DEVOTIONAL

On the Day of Atonement—the most important day for the Jewish people—the high priest for all Israel selected a very special goat, called a scapegoat. The high priest would hold his hands over the goat's head and confess all the sins of Israel, and then release the goat into the wilderness so Israel would never see him again. Why did he do this? It was meant to be a picture of what God does for us. It was as if all of Israel's sin were placed on that goat's back, and then he carried them away into the wilderness. How wonderful it must have felt to see your sin running far, far away from you! But this goat was just a picture. Jesus is our real scapegoat. He is the Lamb of God who actually takes away the sins of the world. Paul says that God made Jesus—who had never sinned—to be sin for us. Then, when he died on the cross, he took our sin away into the wilderness of death. Now, when God looks at his people who trust in him, he sees no sin, but only the sinless perfection of Jesus. What a wonderful feeling!

ACTIVITY

Choose one of your children to be the "scapegoat" for the family. Confess some sins over the child while placing your hands on his or her head. Then have him or her run into another room, taking our "sins" away. Discuss that Christ ultimately takes our sins away, so that we no longer need a scapegoat (as you welcome the child back into your company, of course!).

DAY 26

Thursday

Old Testament: Exodus 16:1-8
New Testament: John 6:50-58

DEVOTIONAL

I can understand why the Israelites had a hard time in the desert. Even though they had seen God do such amazing miracles to rescue them from Egypt, they were still wandering around in the desert. And, as you know, it can be pretty hard to find food and water in the desert. So they worried. But God knew what they needed, and he always provided for them. They didn't die in the desert because God gave them food and water. In a lot of ways, we live in a desert too—a spiritual desert. If God doesn't provide for us, we will die forever. But God always does provide. When Jesus came to earth he told his followers that he was the real Bread from heaven. Everyone who trusts in him receives real life from him, just like the life we receive from food and water. But this spiritual food is much better, because it keeps us alive forever.

ACTIVITY

Buy or bake a delicious loaf of bread to eat together as a family. As you eat, talk about how food sustains our lives. Then, teach your children how Christ sustains us spiritually (and physically) in the same way.

DAY 27

Friday

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

DEVOTIONAL

God taught the Israelites to offer sacrifices when they sinned, but there was a problem with all these sacrifices—lambs and goats and bulls. The problem was that they couldn't actually bring forgiveness. That's why they had to keep offering sacrifices, day after day, year after year. Our forgiveness doesn't come through the blood of bulls. It comes through the blood of Jesus, the lamb without any blemish of sin. All those animal sacrifices in the Old Testament were just a picture pointing forward to the true Sacrifice, Jesus. When Jesus comes, God redeems us—buys us back after we're captured by sin—not with silver or gold, but with the much more precious blood of his Son. That's why we put our faith and hope in God.

ACTIVITY

If your children were captured by pirates, how much would you pay to rescue them, to purchase their freedom? Have a light-hearted discussion of what you might give to buy them back. Now explain to your children that we all have been captured by sin. God wanted to buy our freedom, but he couldn't do it with just money. Instead, he sent his own Son to rescue us.

DAY 28

Saturday

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

DEVOTIONAL

Right after God rescues Israel from slavery in Egypt, he has them take a census. They count every person in Israel, and then God says that each and every one of them has to pay a ransom for his life. You see, Israel owed God a great debt—their very lives—because he had rescued them even when they didn't deserve it. We don't deserve to be rescued either, because of our sin, so how can we possibly repay the debt we owe God? We can't. But the good news is that we don't need to. God paid the debt for us. Jesus came to earth to give himself as the ransom for all of us. So when we give ourselves completely to God, following and worshiping him alone, we do so because we want to—because we love God who first loved us.

ACTIVITY

Have your children make a "bill," with all that we owe (especially our lives) written upon it. Then, using either a stamp or a bold red marker, stamp PAID IN FULL across the bill. Help your children to see this is what Christ accomplished for us on the cross.

WEEK

06

Worshiping the Lamb

fifth
SUN
DAY

Sunday

Old Testament: Daniel 7:13-14
New Testament: Revelation 5:11-14

DEVOTIONAL

It might look like Jesus was defeated when he died on the cross, like he somehow lost the battle. But really the cross is Jesus' victory over sin and death. God, the "Ancient of Days," gives Jesus, the Son of Man, an everlasting kingdom because of the cross. When the angels in Heaven give Jesus praise, they do so because of the cross. They worship him because he is the Lamb who was slain—who died on the cross. He deserves all honor, glory, and praise because he loved us enough to sacrifice himself for us. So let's join with the angels in praising him—the Lamb who was slain!

ACTIVITY

Hymn: "My Jesus, I Love Thee"
Memory Verse: Colossians 1:22

For tips on memorizing Scripture and the value of singing hymns with small children, see Ash Wednesday.

DAY 29

Monday

Old Testament: Lamentations 3:19-27
New Testament: Colossians 1:15-23

DEVOTIONAL

God's whole plan in all of history is to bring everything in the universe together under Jesus' rule. Paul tells God's people in Colosse that Jesus is supreme. He is the first, worthy of all praise and worship. He is supreme in creation, because he created all things, and all things were created for him. And he is supreme in salvation, because God fixes our broken relationship with him through Jesus. This is the hope of the gospel: even when we were running far away from God, he chased after us and brought us near again by Jesus' blood shed on the cross. Now we're no longer God's enemies, but his friends. How great his faithfulness that he would chase after us like that! How wonderful his mercy that he would rescue us from ourselves!

ACTIVITY

Have children decorate crowns to offer to Christ. As they decorate the crowns, discuss what it means that Christ is supreme in all the universe.

DAY 30

Tuesday

Old Testament: Jeremiah 31:3
New Testament: Galatians 2:20

DEVOTIONAL

God loves his people with an everlasting love, the prophet Jeremiah says. That's pretty incredible, because Israel didn't always love him back. In fact, there were a lot of times when Israel didn't seem to care about God at all. And still God loved them and kept on rescuing them. Are we any different? Doesn't it seem like sometimes we love God, but at other times we don't care much about him at all? And still God loves us and sent his Son to rescue us. He loves me. He gave himself up for me. Doesn't the thought just make you tremble with happiness?

ACTIVITY

Discuss with your children how Christ has loved us as a community and individuals. Help them to see especially that this love translates into his saving actions for the community (such as his bringing Israel back from captivity) and for us as individuals (such as drawing us to faith). Of course, it would be good to discuss how we respond by loving him as well—and how our love should translate into action too.

DAY 31

Wednesday

Old Testament: Psalm 105:1-4
New Testament: 1 John 3:1-5

DEVOTIONAL

When David and others wrote psalms, which are songs of praise to God, they kept telling people to sing about how good God is. We're supposed to glorify him, talk about all the wonderful things he has done. And of all the wonderful things he has done, what could be more wonderful than rescuing us from sin and death? The sweetest part of the gospel is what John talks about right in the middle of his letter: that God has adopted us as his children! Even when we didn't love God and disobeyed him, God loved us so much that he not only welcomed us back as friends, but even chose us to be his children. No wonder we sing for joy when we think of that!

ACTIVITY

Were I a bolder writer, I would encourage every family to consider adopting a child in desperate need—both as a picture of God's incomprehensible adoption of wretched sinners (like us) as his sons and daughters, and as an expression of every Christian's duty to those in need. But at least I might encourage a good discussion of adoption—what it means for a family, how the future for the adopted child changes irrevocably, the love that undergirds the process—so that children fully grasp what God has done for them.

DAY 32

Thursday

Old Testament: Psalm 100:1-5
New Testament: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

DEVOTIONAL

Shout for joy! Worship him with gladness! Sing joyful songs! Be joyful always! God must really want us to be happy all the time. But how can that be? Aren't there all sorts of reasons we should be sad? Maybe we're sick and don't feel well. Maybe a good friend had to move far away. Maybe someone made fun of us at school or church. How can we be happy at a time like that? In Psalm 100, God doesn't just tell us to be joyful. He also explains why we can be joyful even on hard days. He is our God. He made us, and we are his. We are like sheep, and he is the Shepherd who loves us and cares for us. He will always be good to us, faithful to us. He will love us forever. Those are good reasons to be happy even when there are reasons to be sad too. Jesus died for us so that we can live with God forever as his dearly loved children. There is no sadness in this world that can take away the joy we feel when we know that!

ACTIVITY

As a family, come up with a (lengthy) list of reasons to be joyful, regardless of passing circumstances or emotions. Help your children to focus especially on the cross (and the resurrection) as the source of our joy. Discuss why we can always be joyful, even when circumstances are legitimately hard, in light of the cross.

DAY 33

Friday

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

DEVOTIONAL

We've talked a lot about worshiping God this week. When we think about worship, we usually think about singing worship songs to God—and that's very important. (As we saw a few days ago, we're supposed to do that!) But worship is much more than that. Worship is a way of life. As Paul says to God's people living in Rome, our main act of worship is offering ourselves to God as living sacrifices. That's a funny phrase, living sacrifices. But it makes sense, because God doesn't ask us to die for him. After all, he already died for us. No, instead God asks us to live for him. That's how we worship him. The prophet Micah tells us what this looks like. We have to humble ourselves—to admit we are sinners who make lots of mistakes, who need Jesus to save us—and then live for him by loving others. That's how we worship him.

ACTIVITY

Construct a makeshift altar with sofa cushions or the like. Have all of the family members stand or sit on the altar as a symbol of our being living sacrifices offered to God. To deepen the discussion, have a parent or child step off the altar (as living sacrifices are wont to do). Explain what this looks like in our daily lives. Recommit to staying on the altar, and to helping each other do the same.

DAY 34

Saturday

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

DEVOTIONAL

One of the things I like most about the Bible—and I like a lot of things about it!—is how often the writers can't help but praise God. They'll be talking about something—how God is faithful to Israel even when he saves Gentiles, or what it feels like to come back from a faraway land—and then, all of a sudden, they start singing about how wonderful God is. I want to be like that. My very favorite verse in the whole Bible is the one we read today: "The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy." He has done so many great things for us, none greater than Jesus dying on the cross for us. How else can we respond except by joyfully praising him!

ACTIVITY

As we have spent so much time reflecting on the worship due the Lamb of God this week, it seems wise to take an extended time to worship him as a family. Certainly sing together, perhaps even some of the hymns you have learned so far, or other favorite songs of praise to him.

But also take a time to worship him in prayer—a neglected discipline, to be sure. Some families might consider making an "Alphabet of Praise," where family members worship God for some worthy attribute beginning with each successive letter of the alphabet (as the psalmist does in Psalm 145). In any case, simply declare his praise to them. Let it be the overflow of your grateful hearts.

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. Help your children, especially if they are very young, to learn the story as best they can. Also, 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
SUNDAY

Palm Sunday

Old Testament: Psalm 118:25-29; Zechariah 9:9-10
New Testament: Mark 11:1-25

DEVOTIONAL

Jesus enters Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday. He knows he will soon die for his people. Now, how do you think a king should enter his kingdom? Probably with a lot of fanfare on the fanciest horse in all the world. Not Jesus. He rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. You see, when a king came back from war, he would ride a war horse. But Jesus did not come to make war. He came to bring peace—peace between God and sinful, rebellious us. The people cry out, "Hosanna!" which means, "Lord, save us!" They want a military king. They want a king who will save them from their Roman oppressors. But Jesus has come to save us from a far greater enemy—our own sin! He has done this for us, and it is marvelous in our eyes indeed!

ACTIVITY

Hymn: "Crown Him with Many Crowns"
Memory Verse: Isaiah 53:5

For tips on memorizing Scripture and the value of singing hymns with small children, see Ash Wednesday. Parents should focus especially on making sure that your children understand as much of this week as possible. For small children, that may mean learning the central elements of the story. For older children, begin to discuss the significance of the key moments as well. Of course, acting out parts of the story (such as waving palm branches today) will do much to help teach these essential stories.

DAY
35

Monday

Old Testament: Isaiah 5:1-7
New Testament: Mark 11:27-12:44

DEVOTIONAL

Early in the week, Jesus talked a lot to the religious leaders in Jerusalem. The teachers of Israel thought they knew how to please God. They thought that if they could do enough good things, like praying loudly in front of other people or giving their money to the Temple, God would accept them. Maybe he wouldn't notice that they still had sin in their hearts. The problem is that they didn't really trust God. They didn't even think they needed God. They thought they could save themselves. They were like a vineyard where all the vines produced only bad grapes. God knew he needed to do something amazing to fix the vines, so he sent his very own Son. Unfortunately, the leaders didn't want to meet his Son. They just wanted to stay in charge of their little vineyard that only had bad grapes. So they beat up God's Son and eventually killed him. Their hearts were far from God. How different was the widow who gave everything she had to God! Even though she didn't have much, all she had was God's. She trusted God to care for her. She followed God because she trusted him to save her.

ACTIVITY

Teach your children about true discipleship—surrendering wholly to God. Discuss the example of the widow who gave everything she had to God. Remind them that people who look the most religious might still have hearts far from God, like the Pharisees and religious leaders. This woman, however, yielded herself completely to God—and Christ gave her as an example to his disciples of what it means to follow him.

DAY 36

Tuesday

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

DEVOTIONAL

The end is coming. Jesus knows he will die soon. But he also knows that isn't really the end. It's really the beginning of something entirely new. Then he gives us a picture of the real end, after God has raised him from the dead. At the real end, Jesus will come back to earth, but this time he won't come as a baby. No, he will come as the Lord of all, the King of everyone. He will establish a new forever kingdom, and his people will live with him in perfect joy and peace for all eternity. Now, how should we live until Jesus comes again? We need to be alert, because we do not know when he is coming. What if he comes back and finds us "asleep"—not following him, but disobeying him because we think we know best? We must keep watch! He is a good and loving King, so of course we want him to come back, and of course we want to follow him until he does!

ACTIVITY

Play a short game with your children. Have them pretend to sleep while you go away on a "trip." Try to sneak back into the room without their noticing. See if they are awake or not. Help them to see that, in the same way, Christ will return at a time we do not expect, so we must be always ready for him to come.

DAY 37

Wednesday

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

DEVOTIONAL

Every year the Jewish people celebrated the Passover. They remembered that amazing night when God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and promised them a new, wonderful land. The night before he died, Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples. But then he did something new. Rather than just remembering the covenant God had made with Israel—the promise to make them into a great nation—he told them about a new covenant for all people. This covenant wouldn't be sealed with the blood of lambs, like what happened at Passover. No, this covenant would be sealed with the blood of Jesus himself, the Lamb of God who takes away our sins. His body 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 remember this covenant today every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper.

ACTIVITY

Take this opportunity to explain the meaning of the Lord's Supper, not only as the remembrance of Christ's death (important though that is), but also as a moment when we experience the spiritual presence of Christ as well. Reading 1 Corinthians 11:23-29 together will help give understanding and gravity to the occasion. More daring families might consider having the Last Supper together, complete with lamb and other traditional dishes (and perhaps even costumes and roles!).

DAY 38

Maundy Thursday

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

DEVOTIONAL

Just before he is arrested and killed, Jesus prays to God his Father. He prays in a little grove of olive trees. Just as olives are crushed under a great stone to make olive oil, so Jesus feels crushed under the great weight of what he is about to do. He asks God if there is any other way, but he knows there isn't. So he submits to God's will. Why was Jesus so overwhelmed? He was about to die the horribly painful death of crucifixion, but I don't think that's what caused him such anguish. No, it was something much worse. His Father was going to forsake him. His Father, who had always loved him, and whom he loved so dearly, was going to treat him as if he had committed all the sins of all his people. How could he face his Father's fierce anger at our sin? He knew it would break him, and so it broke his heart. But he did it anyway. "Yet not what I will, but what you will." He did that for you and me. Can we pray the same prayer for him now?

ACTIVITY

Teach your children to pray, using Jesus' majestic words in Gethsemane as a model. Help them to see that much of prayer is asking God to change us, instead of asking him to change our circumstances. Perhaps consider praying the Lord's Prayer together too, especially when we ask that God's will would be done on earth as in heaven.

DAY 39

Good Friday

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

DEVOTIONAL

Jesus was sentenced to die as a criminal even though he was innocent. At the same time a criminal was set free even though he was guilty. His name was Barabbas. He was a murderer who had rebelled against Rome. Jesus is murdered for rebelling against Rome, even though he never did. A guilty man receives freedom—grace—while an innocent man suffers in his place. Barabbas runs home to the open arms of his family, while the Father punishes Jesus for Barabbas's and our sins. Barabbas is given a second chance because Jesus was given none. This is the message of the cross, the good news of the gospel: we are all Barabbas. Jesus died the death we deserved to die, so we could live forever in God's presence. He took our place so we could take his, as God's dearly loved children.

ACTIVITY

I highly recommend reading through the account of the crucifixion in all four gospels together. With younger children especially, help them to learn the story as well as they can. With older children, move into the significance of the moment, explaining the substitutionary nature of Christ's death. Explain to them what a substitute is (perhaps using sports as an example): a substitute comes to do what the original could not. We could not save ourselves, so Christ had to come and take our place.

DAY 40

Saturday

Old Testament: Zechariah 12:10
New Testament: Mark 15:42-47

DEVOTIONAL

It is Saturday, and Jesus lies dead in his grave. Tomorrow God will raise him from the dead, but today we wait. In some ways, this is how we live every day. Jesus has died (and risen again), has defeated sin and death at the cross. But we are still waiting for him to come again and fully trample sin and death under his feet at the end of time. How should we live while we wait? Paul gives us some idea in his first letter to God's people living in Corinth. He spends the first bit talking about Jesus' death, and the last little bit talking about Jesus' resurrection. What does he talk about in between? Love. God loved us so much that he sent his only Son to die for us, and now he calls us to love. To love him by living for him, following him, glorifying him. And to love others because, and in the same way, he loved us.

ACTIVITY

Discuss Paul's vision of love from 1 Corinthians 13. Help your children brainstorm ways they can demonstrate God's love to their family, friends, and other people in their lives. Try to be as specific as possible. Encourage one another to put it into practice this coming Easter season.

easter SUNDAY

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

Easter is the beginning of the Easter season, so our devotional for Lent draws to a close. But as we switch from one season to the next—just as winter gives way to spring—we should remember and talk about what changes in our attitude now. Lent is a somber time, a serious time. It is time for giving up. But Easter is a joyful time, a happy time. It is a time for taking up. We might think of it like this: Lent is a time for weeding the garden plot of our hearts. We pull out and uproot what shouldn't be there. But Easter is a time for planting new life in that same garden plot. It is a time for watering, for growth, for blossoming. As you celebrate the wonder of Jesus' resurrection, what will you plant this Easter season?

ACTIVITY

Help your children switch their attitude for the Easter season. First, celebrate Christ's resurrection. Your children should know this is a joyous time. Have a party! Laugh and sing and shout together. Then, figure out what good you are going to "plant" in your heart, weeded as it now is after Lent! You might consider planting some flowers together as a family as a reminder of what you discussed today.

To God be the glory in this and every season!

AMEN.