

# The Journey

GOD'S WORD FOR DAILY LIVING



JANUARY – APRIL 2022



Bible Reading Fellowship

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**Eternal God,**

**Your word is always a light for our way;  
Open our eyes and enlighten our spirit that we  
may understand your truth in all its power and ho-  
liness.**

**Give us courage to allow it to transform our lives  
and enable us to grow more and more into the im-  
age of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.**

**Amen**

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*The Journey* is a daily Bible reading program which covers the Bible every five years. Each month addresses a book of the Bible or a Scripture theme.

Each day's reading consists of a 10-15 verse Bible passage followed by clear, helpful commentary. A reflection and discussion question and applicable prayer are also included. The passage of Scripture should be read just before studying *The Journey* commentary.

The following features make *The Journey* unique:

1. Commentary on Scripture to aid in better understanding the passage (as distinguished from devotional material based upon Scripture)
2. Presented in a relational way (i.e., what does this say about how God wants me to live?)
3. Easily adapted to group study (the "Reflection and Discussion" questions at the end of each lesson can be used for group discussion)
4. Special readings for Advent and Lent

We sincerely hope that you will find this resource a valuable companion on your "journey" through productive Bible reading for many years to come.

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The Bible Reading Fellowship was founded in Winter Park, Florida in 1971 as a non-profit, non-denominational ministry, with the primary purpose of bringing people into a greater knowledge of God through systematic reading of the Bible. BRF encourages and facilitates Bible reading for Christian growth by creating, publishing, and distributing Bible commentaries and related materials including *The Journey* and *Good News Daily*.

The Bible Reading Fellowship is committed to the Church's classic teaching that the Bible is the inspired word of God and contains all things necessary for salvation.

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# The Acts of the Apostles

## Chapters 1-8

Saturday, January 1

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**Read: Luke 2:15-21**

### Holy Name

Our passage for today consists of five verses (15-20) which serve as a prelude to the one that is of special importance to us on this special day: “And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”

Each Jewish boy was circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. The ceremony was so sacred that it could even be carried out on the Sabbath when the law prohibited almost every act that was not absolutely necessary. It was at this time that a boy received his name.

Today, a person’s name is little more than a personal label, a means of identification. In Bible times, the case was almost the opposite; name meant everything. Consider, for instance, how particular God was to name chosen individuals (e.g. Genesis 17:5, 15, 19; Luke 1:31), and how solemnly He revealed His own name (Exodus 3:13-15, 33:19 and 34:5-6). In Scripture, the concept of “name” is of immense significance.

Of special significance to us is that it is God Himself who names Jesus (through the angel Gabriel, 1:31), and that Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, meaning “the Lord saves.”

*R&D Should we attach more significance to the naming of children today? Why or why not?*

*Prayer: Lord, the name that means most to me is that I am a child of God.*

*“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink.”* Matthew 25:35

The God of the Bible is not primarily interested in our “evangelism” programs or in our “small groups” or even in our “piety.” He is evidently not really even very interested in religion. But he is passionately interested in people, people in pain—all kinds of pain, things like hunger, cold, sickness, and poverty—as well as in our experiences of sin, anxiety, and lostness! As a matter of fact, Jesus said that he was going to be so immersed in people’s pain and hunger and loneliness that we will meet him personally as we contact the hungry, thirsty, or sick person.

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**Monday, January 3**

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**Read: Acts 1:1-3**

**Eyewitness Evidence**

Flipping through the television channels, I stopped to watch an extremely attractive woman standing behind a podium in the midst of a presentation. Her demeanor and dress told me immediately that this was a religious program. With slides and drawings and in a perfectly modulated speaking voice, the woman was presenting a case for the missing years in the life of Jesus, the years between 12 and 30. I watched fascinated as she devised an elaborate set of theories to support, I soon suspected, a picture of Jesus upon which she had already decided. She manipulated her evidence skillfully to describe a journey of Jesus into the Far East, a journey, she supposed, that was full of further teachings and the mysticism of that area. After 20 minutes I reluctantly left her, wondering how she would finally make her pitch to the audience for financial support.

William Willimon, in a commentary on Acts wrote, “In a time when there is great skepticism about our ability to recover any reliable facts about ‘the historical Jesus’ and diverse theologies of this or that attempt to enlist a fancifully reconstructed Jesus to back up their ideologies, we do well to consider the importance of Luke’s stress upon eyewitnesses as reliable bearers of the ‘facts’.”

It is so easy to stray from the truth. Luke’s introduction to his writings, Luke and Acts, emphasizes an “orderly account” which



leads readers to “know the truth”. His determination was to use as his sources only “those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word” (Luke 1:1-4).

*R&D From what sources have you drawn your understanding of Jesus Christ? How can you know that what you believe is the truth?*

*Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for the faithfulness of Luke in presenting us with truth.*

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## Tuesday, January 4

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**Read: Acts 1:8**

### The Power Source

A renewal prayer reads, “Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your spirit and we shall be created and we shall renew the face of the earth.”

To renew the face of the earth with the gospel of God’s saving love is the focus of the book of the Acts. The Holy Spirit...the apostles...power...witness...these are the keys to understanding the book of Acts. The apostles were given what seemed to be an impossible mission to evangelize the world for Christ but they were also promised specific power so that they might accomplish their mission.

Born in the 1930s and living in a rural agricultural area of Minnesota, I remember well the advent of the Rural Electrification Administration. Dependent upon kerosene lamps to light our homes and windmills to pump water for cattle, the sudden coming of electric lines into our area with their miraculous source of power for light for buildings and energy to run machines was a revolutionizing event. All a farm family had to do to experience a new way of life was to connect into the power.

The book of Acts takes us deep inside the early church as described to us by Luke. Throughout this book, we see the work of the early church empowered; the right person at the right time is raised up in power to carry forth the gospel of good news. All of this power came as the apostles were connected to the power source of the Holy Spirit. Many writers suggest that a more appropriate name for this book would be the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

R&D *In what ways can you identify the power of the Holy Spirit working in your life?*

Prayer: *Blessed Lord, make us extension cords of Your power through the Holy Spirit.*

**Wednesday, January 5**

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**Read: Acts 1:1-5**

### **Preparation for Power I**

The first condition for receiving power was that of knowing Christ and believing in him. The infant Christian Church was called to be a society of witnesses (1:8). Knowing Jesus was an absolute essential for such an undertaking. Believers needed to know who he was and to understand what his work meant. They needed to be able to tell the story of Jesus.

Their preparation for power began when they answered the call to be his disciples and continued as they witnessed his ministry, death, and resurrection. During the 40 days before his ascension, Jesus continued to prepare his disciples (vv.2-3; Luke 24:27).

Even in this period of preparation for power, the Holy Spirit was active. Lloyd Ogilvie wrote, "No one seeks God unless God is already at work within them."

It is at the point of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord that the Holy Spirit enervates our lives. We are drawn to Christ by the Holy Spirit, we learn about him through the action of the Spirit, he becomes real and present to us in the power of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:12-13). It is only through the Holy Spirit that we are able to witness by sharing with others what Jesus Christ means in our lives. Jesus taught, "When the Spirit of truth comes...he will glorify me" (John 16:12ff).

R&D *How well prepared are you to tell the story of Jesus to another? What can you do to further prepare yourself?*

Prayer: *I know the story of your life in me, Lord Jesus; that is the story I am privileged to tell.*

## Thursday, January 6

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**Read: Matthew 2:1-12**

### Epiphany

We celebrate Epiphany in commemoration of the coming of the Magi, the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles in Bethlehem.

Bethlehem was a small town with a long history. It was located six miles south of Jerusalem and stood on a high (2,500 feet) limestone ridge. It was here that Jacob buried Rachel and set up a memorial to mark her grave (Genesis 35:20, 48:7). It was here that Ruth lived with Boaz (Ruth 1:22); and, from Jerusalem, Ruth could see her native land of Moab across the Jordan valley.

Above all, Bethlehem was the home of David (1 Samuel 16:1, 17:12, 20:6). It was to David's city that the Jews expected David's greater Son to be born. Here, God's Anointed One would come into the world, as the chief priests and scribes informed Herod (v.5).

The Magi were men skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science. Their coming to Bethlehem is not some quaint legend that has been attached to the gospel. It is just the sort of thing that would have happened in the ancient world. People had discovered that they could not build the golden age without God, and the whole world was awaiting the "someone" who would change the world forever. And he did.

R&D *In what ways does God manifest Himself today?*

Prayer: *Lord Christ, make yourself known in our world today through those of us who follow you.*

## Friday, January 7

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**Read: Acts 1:1-8**

### Preparation for Power II

The second step to receive power was that of obedience (vv.4-5). Obedience was not something new being asked of the apostles (John 14:15). The obedience which Jesus commanded at this particular time in the birth of the new community was twofold. The first command concerned time and place. It was merely "Wait...here in Jerusalem until I have told you through the Spirit what comes next."

The second command concerned a further reorientation of thinking (vv.6-8). The apostles were asked to give up their own agenda and take upon themselves the agenda Christ would set out for them.

The question concerning the restoration of the kingdom was full of old feelings of pride and nationalism, full of old understandings of what the coming of the Messiah would mean. The Jews believed that when the Messiah came he would make Israel supreme among the kingdoms on earth. Even now the apostles wondered if Jesus would restore a political kingdom. Old thought patterns and hopes still prevailed.

Power was dependent upon putting aside the old ways of thinking. Power was dependent upon being obedient to Christ's agenda. Power was dependent upon allowing the Holy Spirit to remold them into new creatures. This aspect of the nature of the power which comes from the Holy Spirit is especially pertinent to our lives today. We are filled with our own agendas. We have long lists of the things that we want God to do for us. Power, however, comes to us as we become obedient and allow Christ to fulfill his plan for us...and his plan for the world through us.

*R&D What part does obedience play in your relationship with Christ? What avenues do you use to learn his will for you?*

*Prayer: It is prayer, Bible study, worship, and serving others that forms the basis of my relationship with you, Lord Jesus. It is through the inner guidance of the Holy Spirit that I know how to follow though.*

## **Saturday, January 8**

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**Read: Acts 1:9-11**

### **Risen Lord**

Scripture is very reticent about describing the ascension, using six verses in all, three here in Acts. We are given the bare fact that it happened. It is one of the mysteries of the faith.

The ascension was the final act in the earthly ministry of Jesus. He had done everything that he had come to do and he left the earth to take his rightful place. He had come from God. He left to go back to God.

What did the ascension mean to the apostles? It brought a finality, a definite end to the resurrection appearances. Jesus would not appear again in physical form. The apostles must stop waiting for further appearances and go on to the next phase of their lives—the work which Jesus had given them to do.

The ascension also brought a greater understanding of the person of Jesus. The disciples understood that, because of his life and death, he was exalted, accorded the right hand of God. Jesus was worthy not only of their love but of their worship. The ascension brought the disciples to the point where they could wait in obedience and trust. They already believed; now they had the promise of power, the promise of the continuing presence of Jesus in spiritual form (John 16:7).

While the ascension has cosmic dimensions, it is also a highly personal event. The ascension brings me to my knees for I understand that Jesus is God and worthy...no, more than worthy...he is the only possible object of my adoration and worship. As ascended Lord, he prays for me (Hebrews 4:14-16), he intercedes for me (Hebrews 7:25), and he will come again to take me to himself (John 14:3). Further, he has sent his Holy Spirit to be with me now to empower me in all areas of my life. He is with me and wants to be with us all always and forever.

R&D *What does the ascension of Jesus mean to you?*

Prayer: *When you were on earth, Lord Christ, you were limited by time and space. By your ascension, you overcame that obstacle. Now you are with us through the Holy Spirit everywhere and forever.*

## **Sunday, January 9**

## **Sabbath Time**

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*Jesus said to him a third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"*  
John 21:17

The concrete helping of people where they live is the sacrament—the outward and visible sign—of the passionate love of Jesus I had been hoarding in my own heart. The call I felt to love him had led me at last to consider meeting him, where he works, in the pain of other people.

**Read: Acts 1:12-14**

**Preparation for Power**

In facing an international crisis as Americans and Christians, we struggled to see what was moral and right and how to take a stand. Our bishop, in addressing the morality of war for Christians, urged us all to pray, for “it is not the only thing we can do but it is the best thing we can do.” Rather than being the court of last resort, prayer is the first and assured way to power in all of life.

Returning from the awesome experience of the ascension, the disciples of Jesus “devoted themselves to prayer” (1:14). They were zealous, ardent in their pursuit of prayer. Had they done anything else it would have been surprising. They had seen with their own eyes the power of prayer in the life of Jesus, when he healed (Mark 7:32-35), when he needed strength (Mark 1:35-39), when he sought guidance (Luke 6:12-13). They also had the assurance of his teaching concerning the power from their own prayers: “Ask and it shall be given you” (Matthew 7:7-11; Luke 18:1-8).

Prayer brought the power to be a community to some very unlikely people at this early stage of life together. “With one accord,” with one mind and spirit, they prayed. These were persons who had differed sharply about Jesus in the past: his disciples and his family. These were persons of different standing in society: men and women. These were persons who had all abandoned Jesus but to greater or lesser degrees. In prayer, however, they were able to put aside all of those differences and become one. In their first task, to find a replacement for Judas, in that unity, they again prayed, seeking the guidance of Jesus.

Power to forget and forgive the past, power to be a community, guidance in undertaking a task, power for patience and obedience, these things must have been a part of their prayers. Permeating all of these must have been the praise and thanksgiving for the person of Jesus (Philippians 4:4-7).

*R&D What are the things for which you pray? Does this example of the disciples speak to you in any way about your prayers?*

Prayer: *Prayer is our relationship with You, Lord; and nothing is more important than that relationship.*

**Tuesday, January 11**

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**Read: Acts 1:15-26**

### **The Waiting Church**

A kaleidoscopic picture of the concerns of the young church appears in this vignette described by Luke. (1) We see the church relying on the insights of the Old Testament Scripture to help them understand their present situation. (2) We see the community steeped in the foundation of the law and tradition from the past but already breaking boundaries. (3) We see the emergence of leadership for the church, leadership shaped and empowered by forgiveness.

The agony of Judas was the sorrow of the community; Judas was lost by his own free choice (v.25). In Judas' actions, Peter sees the fulfillment of Scripture (v.20; Psalm 69:25; Psalm 109:8).

Tradition's bonds are found in the importance of the numbers 120 and 12. One hundred and twenty males were necessary in order to found a synagogue with its own council. Twelve, also, was too important a number to be abandoned. As there were 12 tribes in the nation of Israel so now there must be 12 apostles in the new Israel, the Christian Church. Jesus chose 12 disciples for his inner band and promised them special duties (Luke 22:29f). Yet, as important as the law and traditions of the past remained, barriers were already beginning to tumble as Mary and the women who followed Jesus were included in the list of those in the church (v.14).

An amazing picture is completed in the contrast presented between Judas and Peter. Both had tried to manipulate Jesus. Both had denied Jesus. Both had realized their terrible mistake. Judas, his own master to the end, killed himself. Peter, repentant and forgiven, saw the resurrected Christ and went on to become the leader and spokesman for the early church.

R&D *Where can you find yourself in this many-faceted picture of the early church?*

Prayer: *In our own congregations today, Lord Jesus, we see an amazing variety of people, but ones who love you as Savior and Lord. Bind us together that we may truly be the Body of Christ.*

## Wednesday, January 12

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**Read: Acts 2:1-4**

### The Empowerment

“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire,” prophesied John the Baptist (Luke 3:16). “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,” promised the resurrected Jesus (Acts 1:8). Promised power awaited the disciples. The disciples were prepared. They were in the right place at the right time in the right spirit. They were open, receptive, waiting, obedient, in community...and God acted to empower His church.

Later those who shared this indescribable experience described it as best they could. It had been an experience of wind and fire that had caused them to praise God in other tongues.

John MacNaughton once imagined what the experience was like in these words, “They were filled, they were permeated...as the leaven or the yeast fills and permeates a lump of dough...as the heat from the sun on the Texas coast fills the body and permeates it with warmth...as the love that you feel for another person fills you, fills your soul so that you must respond to that person in some way...so the Holy Spirit permeated, filled the disciples. They were brought under a gracious, loving, caressing kind of control by an agent, a person outside of themselves.”

This was the moment of empowerment which Jesus had promised. This was the moment of enablement, special power for a special purpose so that they might be his witnesses.

*R&D Outward symbols (wind and fire) helped the disciples recognize the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. How do you recognize the Holy Spirit in your life?*

*Prayer: Come Holy Spirit, fill the heart of your people and kindle in us the fire of your love.*

## Thursday, January 13

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**Read: Acts 2:1-13**

### A Ready Audience

“I’ll be home for Christmas,” promises the perennially popular Christmas song. The song endures because it embraces hopes and



longings common to all persons. We all desire to share the feelings of love and belonging to family and faith during one of the most important days of the year. Similar emotions are recalled by a scene in the musical play “Fiddler on the Roof” which contains the phrase, “Next year, in Jerusalem.” Those words summed up the feelings of the Jews of the Diaspora, those Jews scattered and living in other countries throughout the world. The words symbolize the hope and longing to be in Jerusalem to celebrate the high holy days of their faith.

Pentecost was the second great feast of the Jewish calendar, held in early June. It fell seven weeks (50 days) after Passover (“Pentecost,” Greek for 50). It was also called the Feast of Weeks (Exodus 34:22; Deuteronomy 16:10) and celebrated both the beginning of the barley harvest and the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai.

This particular Pentecost pilgrimage provided the opportunity to many Jews for a new encounter with God. They saw God working in a new way as the apostles began to praise God “in other tongues” (v.4). The Jews reacted in a variety of ways—some amazed, some puzzled, some skeptical, some disbelieving. Many had their hearts and minds readied by the Holy Spirit to hear the first Christian sermon, the new revelation of God.

*R&D How ready are you to see or hear a new revelation of God through the Holy Spirit in your life?*

*Prayer: Show me, Lord God, the new thing that You have for me today.*

## **Friday, January 14**

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**Read: Acts 2:14-43**

### **The Message**

The comedian Steve Martin, at one time in his career, played a character whose signature line proclaimed, “I’m a wild and crazy guy!” The line embodied a person who was energetic, enthusiastic, not bound by ordinary conventions, and who was received by a variety of reactions from others. It is very possible that on the day of Pentecost, Peter and the other apostles were perceived at first glance as “wild and crazy guys.” From the upper room, they streamed out into the street, into the middle of the great throng of temple goers,

where they became the focus of the crowd. Their wildly enthusiastic behavior with its loud speaking in tongues brought reactions which ran the gamut from amazement to puzzlement to genuine questioning to dismissal as drunkenness.

The message of the disciples, spoken by Peter, is also “wild and crazy” (Romans 1:18-25). Moved by the Holy Spirit, Peter proclaims that the disciples have the message of salvation. His sermon is simple. He knows his audience. He knows the message he is to preach. He knows what he has witnessed. He knows Jesus. The big, rugged fisherman enters the center stage of history with the first Christian sermon to the world.

Using Old Testament prophecy, Peter explains that the people have just witnessed the visible presence of the Holy Spirit (vv.14-17). He comes directly to the point of his message which is the offer of God’s salvation (v.22). He proclaims that Jesus of Nazareth is the vehicle chosen by God through whom to offer His salvation to all; Jesus is the answer (v.22).

Peter recounts the life and miracles of Jesus. He reminds them of the death of Jesus by crucifixion and then makes the incredible claim that Jesus was resurrected from the dead (v.24). He offers three proofs of the resurrection: (1) the proof of prophecy (vv.25-31, 34-35), (2) the proof of eyewitness (v.32) and (3) the proof offered by the coming of the Holy Spirit revealed by the external phenomena which these listeners have just witnessed (v.33). Peter closes his sermon by appealing personally to every person within his hearing and offering them salvation (vv.37-41).

*R&D Listen to Peter’s sermon as though for the first time. What do you think would have been your reaction to this first Christian sermon?*

*Prayer: When we think of the dramatic change the Holy Spirit brought forth in the life of Peter, Lord, it gives hope to us all.*

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## Saturday, January 15

**Read: Acts 2:42-47**

### Winsome Christians

William Barclay often uses the old-fashioned word “winsome” to describe the life of the early Christians. It is a word that means “winning or engaging or charming.” It suggests that these

people were attractive to others. In a brief paragraph which covers a period of several months, perhaps as much as a year, Luke gives us eight descriptive characteristics of life in the early church.

(1) The early church was a community of learners, hungry to know more about Jesus (v.42). Hunger to know Jesus better, hunger to know more about him, is a universal feeling of those who have committed themselves to Christ. (2) It was a community of fellowship (v.42). Touching people's basic need for love, this body of persons expressed caring, sharing love, grieving, upholding concern, empowering strength to each other (Romans 12:9-21). (3) It was a community of worship (v.42). The breaking of bread was both a regular meal and a sacramental meal where they remembered the words and spirit of Jesus (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). They prayed together, drawing strength from each others' prayers and answers to prayer. (4) It was a community with a sense of wonder and reverence (v.43). Believers carried with them a remembrance of the cross, the cost of forgiveness, an awesome knowledge of what the righteous God had done for them.

(5) It was a community of power (v.43). There was no hesitation to ask for and then to use the promised and present power of the Holy Spirit. Miracles of healing were a regular part of the church's ministry. (6) It was a community of sharing (vv.44-45). One of the greatest miracles was that they all desired to share their material possessions with others within the fellowship. (7) It was a community of witness (v.47). The motivation for living was different in that people lived to praise God. Such lives provoked attention. They had a drawing power that attracted others to them and through them to Christ. One of the ways that believers witnessed to the power of Christ within their lives was by the way they lived their lives...and it saved others. (8) They were a growing community. Others saw them, wanted what they had and joined them.

Such a summary may sit in judgment upon our own church life. How many of these elements of the early church does our church community exhibit? Found short in the weighing as we all will be, our impulse is to try harder. However, the message of Acts is that it was not in trying harder but in and through the power of the Holy

Spirit that the young church was energized and driven. “Come, Holy Spirit.”

R&D *How attractive to others is the example of your church? How winsome is your own Christian example?*

Prayer: *Shape us and mold us, Lord, into the church You want us to be.*

## **Sunday, January 16**

## **Sabbath Time**

*“But whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”* John 4:14

After I had made a serious and specific commitment of my life to God, there was a change in the way I experienced the people and familiar sights and sounds around me. There was a sense of newness. It was like smelling the moist earth after a spring rain. I enjoyed the ordinary things of life more—like tasting food and seeing sunsets. And I was engulfed with a wave of gratitude because I felt as if I were a child who’d found out he was “loved by the teacher.”

## **Monday, January 17**

### **Read: Acts 3:1-10**

### **A Place of Beauty**

An old maxim proclaims, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”...but the Beautiful Gate was genuinely beautiful. It was one of the nine gates that led from the Court of the Gentiles into the temple. It owed its name to its delicate and wondrous workmanship in Corinthian bronze and was thought to be more valuable than the gates decorated with silver or gold. Through this gate, and then through the Court of Women, Peter and John would pass into the Court of Israel. There they would pray while, in the adjoining area of the Court of Priests, the priests would offer the evening sacrifice. That was their custom.

In contrast to the beauty of the gate, just outside lay the needy people—many people begging, all in need, the poor and destitute, the paralyzed or lame or blind. It was the custom of many of these beggars to return to the same place each day. They chose the temple as a site to beg because the religious Jew believed that blessing is found in helping the unfortunate.

Among the beggars was a 40-year-old man who had been lame from birth. Luke's ancient medical term indicates that the socket of the heel and ankle was malformed, and he had never been able to walk. Fortunate enough to be brought daily by his friends to the temple, he earned enough to live from day to day. Seeing Peter and John passing by, he asked for money.

In words which have survived through many centuries because of their foundational truth, Peter and John gave not what was asked for but what was needed! "Silver and gold have I none but such as I have give I thee. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise up and walk" (v.6). In the wonderful serendipity which accompanies the power of the Holy Spirit, the lame man was healed. The Beautiful Gate became a place of beauty indeed, for it was the place where human need was met. "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do" (John 14:12).

*R&D In what ways do you meet the spoken or unspoken needs of people around you?*

*Prayer: Lord, one thing that exists around us every day is the opportunity to meet the needs of someone else, regardless of what those needs may be. Help us to be conscious of those needs and responsive to them.*

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## Tuesday, January 18

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**Read: Acts 3:11-26**

### The Name

"What's in a name?" a writer asks. "A rose by any other name will smell as sweet," he adds. The truth is that names are very important and that our name, in part, summarizes who we are. In the Bible a man's name stands for his character, represents the person. All of the authority and power of a person, the essential self, are conveyed in a name in Scripture.

Peter's second sermon uses the same themes of the crucified, resurrected, exalted Jesus but with a different emphasis. "The object of the address is to emphasize the power of the name of Jesus. The miracle wrought by Peter and John is a conclusive proof that he is still a living power, able to bring, not only a future deliverance but a present salvation into the world" (Foakes Jackson). Word of the healing of the lame man spread through the temple and a crowd

gathered. Evening prayers forgotten, the excited crowd followed Peter and John and the healed man outside the temple proper onto Solomon's portico, a magnificent colonnade on the east side of the great court of the temple. Claiming no personal credit for the healing (vv.12-16), Peter and John saw and seized the opportunity to witness to Jesus (vv.17-26).

How did the miracle happen to the lame man? Peter's answer is that it happened through the name of Jesus. How can miracles happen in my life? The witness of Scripture is that inwardly and outwardly, I can be made whole through the name of Jesus. "Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it" (John 14:13).

R&D *Reflect upon the name of Jesus.*

Prayer: *Jesus, name above all names, it is for you that we live and move and have our being.*

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## Wednesday, January 19

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**Read: Acts 4:1-22**

### Opposition Begins

A popular western song was built around the words "Walk in faith, trust in love." This might well have been the theme of the early Christians. To walk in faith and trust in love was easy to do in the utopian days which followed the resurrection and the ascension. The freshness of their sense of power in the Holy Spirit after Pentecost prompted believers to spread that faith and love to many others around them. Everything seemed to fall into place.

However, storm clouds were gathering on the not-too-distant horizon. In their euphoria, some early Christians forgot Jesus' words of warning, "A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you" (John 15:20).

The first swift and angry strike of persecution came in the midst of success. A good deed done, a lame man healed, witness to the resurrection bringing 5,000 to the salvation given in the name of Jesus, and all within the confines of the temple, annoyed and angered the religious rulers. The Sadducees lashed out at the apostles.

The Sadducees were the religious political party which ruled the temple, controlled the Sanhedrin, and who had established a working relationship with the Roman Empire. Further, they did

not believe in resurrection. These were some of the persons who had caused the death of Jesus and who had assumed that with his death, his movement was ended. They had endured the action of the apostles for a time...but no longer! They ordered Peter and John arrested and then speedily brought before the council.

“Where do you get the authority to do what you are doing?” (v.7) is the question of the council. True to the promise of Jesus (Matthew 10:16-20), Peter was given words to speak: “The very person whom you rejected is the vehicle which is uniting us to God and bringing us salvation. He is the only way” (vv.11-12).

The popularity of the apostles with the people tied the hands of the authorities. Their only recourse at the moment was intimidation. With a warning not to speak further about Jesus, they let the apostles go free.

*R&D How do you react when you are put in a difficult position because of your faith in Jesus?*

*Prayer: Embolden us, Lord Jesus, to speak your truth in the most difficult of circumstances.*

## Thursday, January 20

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**Read: Acts 4:23-31**

### **Power to Face Persecution**

During the 1980s the Polish labor unions faced terrible opposition from the government. They found the source of their strength to withstand the persecution they faced in their loyalty to each other. That loyalty was all they had. Their movement was called “Solidarity.”

The response of the young Christian community to the persecution of Peter and John was also to band even closer together. They drew strength from each other. The Christian community, however, had another source of strength. Their response to the threat of the established religious community was to pray. Through their prayer they received power for further work and witness.

An outline of the prayer of the gathered church is instructive for any Christian’s prayer life in any generation. (1) The believers acknowledged God as sovereign, above all others, supreme (v.24). (2) They found in the Scripture a passage which spoke to their own

situation (vv.25-28). (3) They prayed very specifically for their own needs (v.29). (4) They asked for the power of God to make them equal to the situation and task they were facing (v.30). (5) They were aware that God heard and answered their prayers (v.31).

Again, the focus is on the theme of power. Woven throughout Acts is the fulfilled promise of Jesus that the Holy Spirit would bring power. We can find renewed strength in knowing that Jesus' promise is not just for 2,000 years ago but also for you and me today. We can live our lives with power. We can face new challenges with power. We can undertake new tasks with power. As the trained Olympic athlete's body puts forth the needed adrenaline to help him/her just when needed, so too will we be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit as we live for Jesus and as we attempt to accomplish great things for him.

*R&D Do you trust the promise of Jesus for power? How can you live into his promise of power today?*

*Prayer: Blessed Holy Spirit, guide me today to show the power of your love to those around me.*

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## Friday, January 21

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**Read: Acts 4:32—5:11**

### Challenge Within

The story is told of a man who complained to his priest, "It's getting to be just one continuous give, give, give." His priest said to him, "You have just given one of the best descriptions of Christianity that I have ever heard."

Sharing boldly from their material possessions with others who had need was a part of the Christian community from the beginning (Acts 2:44-45). Such behavior found its impetus in the many teachings of Jesus on possessions (Matthew 25:31ff). One person who committed himself wholly to giving was Joseph. As Jesus gave Simon (Peter) a new name at a crucial point of his discipleship (Matthew 16:13ff), the apostles gave Joseph a new name. They called him Barnabas, "Son of encouragement," a name which continued to describe and define his future ministry.

In sharp contrast to Barnabas, Luke then tells the story of Ananias and Sapphira in harsh, uncompromising terms. It is a story



of soap-opera dimensions, full of covetousness, deception, intrigue, and unfaithfulness. Two others in the church (the first use of the word “church” is found in Acts 5:11) watched the example of Barnabas and coveted the acceptance and position which he achieved through his generosity. They decided to travel the same road to position in the church but without paying the cost. They conspired to sell land, give a partial sum, yet claim it as the whole.

As Peter accepted the gift for the community, through the gift of spiritual insight he recognized the lie of Ananias and Sapphira. In lying to the apostles and attempting to deceive the community about the gift of property, Ananias lied to God (5:3-4). When the deceivers were confronted with their lies and unfaithfulness both died.

Before following our inclination to ignore this difficult story, we might consider the motivations for our own actions in the light of two teachings of Jesus, one on our need for position (Matthew 6:1-4), and one on our attitude towards our possessions (Matthew 6:19-21, 24).

*R&D How would you describe the hold your material possessions have on you? Why do you give of your money to others?*

*Prayer: All we have is Yours, Lord God, and we are grateful that You allow us to share what You give us with others.*

## **Saturday, January 22**

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**Read: Acts 5:12-40**

### **Challenge Without**

The comic Rodney Dangerfield joked, “My wife’s jealousy is getting ridiculous. The other day she looked at my calendar and wanted to know who May was.” We laugh at such an unexpected punch line—so stupid! But jealousy is not a stupid emotion; rather, it is a very dangerous one. Seeing the increasing success of the gospel, the Sadducees became increasingly jealous (Acts 2:17). They saw the apostles undermining their authority, their position and receiving popularity and acclaim which they thought were rightfully theirs. Their resulting jealousy ignited a second confrontation with the apostles. A summary paragraph (vv.12-16) reveals the reasons for the jealousy of the religious establishment. The power present in the apostles through the Holy Spirit brought about further numerous

and widespread miracles. Such power initiated awe and favor among all the people and it enabled great growth in the church, numbers of both men and women.

The world's opposition did not diminish with the success of the gospel but rather increased it. With renewed determination the religious establishment attempted to put the commotion about Jesus to rest. They arrested the 12 apostles and put them in prison. Miraculously released (v.19), the apostles continued to preach. When finally found and brought before the council, the apostles were charged with disobeying the council and with accusing the Jews of murder. Their answer of witness and their claim of the Holy Spirit further enraged the council (v.33).

God's continual use of unlikely sources and servants to serve His own purposes is seen once again. Gamaliel, one of the Jews' most famous and influential teachers, a Pharisee, argued for and secured the release of the apostles (vv.34-39). Gamaliel was another angel (messenger or agent of God) in this event.

For the first time the Sanhedrin's opposition to the church drew blood as the apostles felt the sting of the whip across their bare backs. Surely they drew strength from Jesus' words, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10). The apostles experienced joy through suffering, an enigma to all except those who have experienced it (1 Peter 1:6-9).

*R&D How does the church speak out today for Christ on unpopular subjects? How do you react to the possibility of suffering for Christ's sake?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, a missionary in a country where people are being persecuted and even martyred because of faith in you, has said, "Don't pray for our protection; pray for our strength."*

**Sunday, January 23**

**Sabbath Time**

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*And he appointed twelve, to be with him.* Mark 3:14

Carlyle Marney used to explain that people who love God and love us go with us in an imaginary balcony on the inside wall of our minds. And they cheer us on to be loving and like Christ when we are out in the world alone and tempted to cop out. Our small group became my first live balcony people. And it became very im-

portant to me to have a group to be accountable to if the inner gates of unselfish and passionate loving were to stay open when I was away from my Christian friends.

## Monday, January 24

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**Read: Acts 6:1-7**

### **New Leadership**

“Another day, another problem” is the pessimist’s attitude towards life. “Another problem, another opportunity” is the view of the optimist. The rapid growth brought to the young church by the Holy Spirit caused problems. There was a need for new leadership and more organization. The young church discovered that growth brings change, but the spirit-filled community was ready to move and change in order to remain obedient to the Spirit.

Within the fellowship of the church were all kinds of Jews. There were the Hebrews, those Jews who had always lived within Palestine and who spoke Aramaic. There were the Hellenists, the Jews of the Diaspora who lived scattered throughout the Middle East and who spoke Greek.

The church found a fertile ground for converts among the many Jewish women who had lived their lives in other countries and emigrated to Jerusalem when their husbands died. Many of these women were poor. The Hellenists complained that these widows were not getting their fair share of the “daily distribution,” the food or money given by the church to those in need. As the synagogues had taken care of members who were in need, so the church assumed that social responsibility for the needs of individuals within the community. With the increasing workload, the apostles were not able to oversee the relief work and complaints ensued.

The apostles’ decision was that new leaders would be chosen to oversee the welfare work of the church. They set down moral and spiritual qualifications and left the choice of the new leaders to the people. Seven men were chosen, all bearing Greek names, indicating they were from the Hellenistic segment of the church and also suggesting the openness and generosity of spirit within the church. Prominently listed were the names of Stephen and Philip. Then the apostles prayed and laid hands upon them, setting them aside for special tasks and ministry within the church.

Leadership arose within the church in response to need. That leadership was chosen both from below and above. It was chosen by the people; it was also a gift from God (Ephesians 4:8-11). God blessed the action of the church with continued growth even among their enemies (v.7).

*R&D What needed change do you see within the attitudes and structures of your church?*

*Prayer: Help us to know, Gracious Lord, the ministries to which You call each of us, and give us the wisdom and strength to carry them out.*

## **Tuesday, January 25**

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**Read: Acts 6:8-15**

### **Stephen: Introduced**

Were we to choose a text for Stephen, it might well be this from Paul who saw and heard him: “For God knew his own before ever they were, and also ordained that they should be shaped to the likeness of his Son” (Romans 8:29). Among the seven who were chosen for special ministry was one “full of grace and power” (v.10). So full of the Spirit of Christ was Stephen that he is sometimes described as the man with the shining face.

The response which a Christ-filled life brings is always two-fold, positive and negative. It may attract and draw others to want to be like the attractive one. But for those who reject it, it becomes a source of judgment and, from them, it draws both hostility and persecution. Stephen experienced both of those reactions.

Stephen’s ministry could not be confined to the distribution of alms but became a channel for miracles. His witness was so powerful that it could not be defeated in argument or speech. Respect and admiration were his from some, but these same attributes also led to envy and rejection from others. Bruised egos from those who opposed him led to hatred and the desire to be rid of him.

In echoes of the trial of Jesus, Stephen is brought before the council and the same high priest. The charges against him center around speaking against the temple and the law, the two foundation blocks of the Jewish religion (vv.13-14).

Jesus taught about himself, “I tell you something greater than the temple is here” (Matthew 12:6). Jesus consistently ignored the

Sabbath laws when a greater good was at stake (Mark 3:1-6). In his words and in his ministry, Jesus demonstrated that a new order, a new relationship, a new covenant with God had come into being. It was this fuller understanding of Jesus which Stephen preached. False witnesses twisted Stephen's words as they twisted the words of Jesus.

R&D *What is there about your Christian life that attracts or offends others?*

Prayer: *Let your light so shine through your people that they see you, Lord Jesus.*

## Wednesday, January 26

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**Read: Acts 7:1-22, 30-34, 44-50**

### **Stephen: Witness I**

A number of years ago J.B. Phillips wrote a book entitled *Your God Is Too Small*. Such a title describes the fatal flaw in the thinking of the Jewish hierarchy. They had limited God through seeing Him as present only to them, to their race, and most visibly present in Jerusalem and in the worship carried out in the temple.

Stephen uses the vehicle of the 2,000-year-history of the Jews to testify to the new age which the coming of Christ has brought about. His speech is a defense of Christianity as God's appointed way of worship. There are two major themes in his speech. (1) The presence of God is not restricted to any one land or to any material building. (2) Throughout all their history, the Jews had rejected God's chosen messengers.

Stephen's speech before the council is the longest speech in Acts, indicating its pivotal importance. Up to this point in Acts, Luke pictures the crowds as wondering, sometimes ignorant, but often receptive. Now, in echoes reminiscent of the crowd's response to Jesus, they have become hostile and antagonistic (Acts 6:12).

Stephen reminds his listeners of the omniscience of God as he describes God's appearance and presence to Abraham and Joseph and Moses. God was present with Abraham in Mesopotamia and in Haran before Abraham came to Palestine (vv.2-8). God was present with Joseph in Egypt after he had been sold into slavery (vv.9-16). God was present with Moses in Egypt and in the wilderness (vv.17-44).

Stephen's point is that the Jews were better off in the wilderness and in the early days when the people carried a tent of witness from place to place (vv.44-45). God was with them and not limited to any place. A mistake was made when David and Solomon insisted on building the temple...for God does not live in houses that people build but rather is found in every place, in every land, with those who do God's will wherever they may be (vv.46-50).

*R&D To what extent do you limit God's presence to certain people or places or events?*

*Prayer: Thank You, Lord God, that You are with us always and everywhere through Your Holy Spirit within us.*

### **Thursday, January 27**

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**Read: Acts 7:23-29, 35-43, 51-53**

#### **Stephen: Witness II**

The second theme found throughout Stephen's speech is that the Jews had forever rejected God's messengers. He pictures the causes of that rejection as ranging from not understanding, to refusal to obey, to turning to other gods, to stubbornness, to being uncircumcised in heart, to not being in right relationship or covenant with God. In his attention to Stephen's speech, Luke is readying the reader to begin to see the witness of Christ move out from Jerusalem and from the Jews to other places and other people.

Stephen reminds his listeners that throughout Jewish history those who had come to speak for God had found the people unwilling to listen. Joseph's dream infuriated his brothers and led to their decision to sell him into slavery (v.9). Moses had twice been rejected by his people, once in Egypt (vv.23-29) and again in the wilderness (vv.35-43) as the people demanded a more comfortable and familiar God symbolized by the golden calf. All of the prophets had met persecution and rejection. Finally, the "Righteous One," long foretold and expected, appeared, "whom you have now betrayed and murdered" (vv.51-52).

Rejection of God's messengers is a threat to our relationship with God. There are times when we refuse to hear those whom He sends to speak to us. There are parts of our lives that we close off from Him. Whatever messenger God sends to speak to us, be it an-

other person, a passage of Scripture, a book, a sermon, some flashing insight which warns us of what we are doing, that messenger can be and sometimes is rejected. We can be and sometimes are as blind and deaf to the Holy Spirit as the council was on that day when he spoke through Stephen.

R&D *What steps can you take to make yourself ready to hear the messengers God sends to you?*

Prayer: *I want to be in a close prayer relationship with You, Lord God, that I will not miss or misinterpret any message You have for me.*

## Friday, January 28

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**Read: Acts 7:54-60**

### **Stephen: Complete Witness**

Angered though the members of the council were by Stephen's frontal attack upon them as he enumerated their failings, he might still have been beaten or imprisoned and allowed to live. Yet one thing remained in Stephen's witness. Granted a glorious vision of Jesus, his voice rang out in power, "Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God" (v.56). This was the absolute revealed truth to Stephen but to the Sanhedrin it was pure blasphemy.

Instantaneous mob rule decreed death. In order that they might shed no blood in their sacred city, they dragged him to the edge of the city, cast him into the pit for stoning and, finding the witnesses needed, carried out his death.

Stephen? He saw Jesus standing to welcome him into fellowship with him. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he endured pain and death not only with extraordinary courage but with an incomparable beauty. He prayed for himself, not that he would be delivered but that he would be with Christ. Mirroring his Lord, he prayed also for those who were filled with self-righteous hate (Luke 23:34). Stephen died, but is alive, welcomed into fellowship by his Lord who rose to greet him.

This episode is painful to read. It fills us with sorrow and regret. We struggle against a good, beautiful, innocent, giving life cut short. Yet Stephen's life is of inestimable value in that his death

speaks to us in a way that nothing else could. He left for us a powerful legacy.

Stephen's legacy is one of unsurpassed courage and unflinching commitment to Jesus Christ. Warren Wiersbe writes, "God does not call all of us to be martyrs, but he does call us to be 'living sacrifices' (Romans 12:1-2). In some respects, it may be harder to live for Christ than to die for him." We do not face the physical persecution which Stephen faced but we do meet challenges and temptations every day which require Stephen-like courage and commitment in order to be faithful to Jesus. In all that we are and all that we have Jesus asks us to honor him.

*R&D Do people hear you talk about Jesus Christ as they heard Stephen talk? If not, why not?*

*Prayer: Give us opportunities, dear Lord, to tell others what your life means in our lives.*

## **Saturday, January 29**

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**Read: Acts 8:1-3**

### **Persecution**

One person in particular opposed Stephen. This man was a rising star among the Jewish hierarchy (Galatians 1:14). Born in Tarsus (Acts 22:3), a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37), a Pharisee (Acts 26:4-5) a student of the most eminent of teachers, Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), this man was not satisfied to be second to anyone. He also frequented the synagogue of the Freedmen where many of his fellow Cilicians attended. His shadow fell and brooded over the life of Stephen (Acts 7:58; 8:1). He consented to Stephen's death. The man was Saul of Tarsus.

The church began as a purely Jewish institution. Approximately five years after the resurrection, Jerusalem was still the church's major center. With the death of Stephen, bad times descended upon the young church. This first stiff opposition of the Sadducees and Pharisees brought an end to the popularity which the church had enjoyed with the majority of the Jewish people.

The death of Stephen was a catalyst for hostility. Suddenly it was dangerous to be a disciple. It may have been too dangerous even to claim the body of Stephen. As an act of piety, devout Jews



took Stephen's body and buried it. The environs of Jerusalem became too frightening, too hostile for many disciples and they left for the surrounding areas of Judea and Samaria. The apostles stayed. Either the goodwill of the people still extended to them or their sense of duty would not allow them to leave. Some suggest that it was the Hellenistic element in the young church of which Stephen was a leader which bore the major force of the persecution.

Persecution forced the second stage of witness (Acts 1:8). The disciples scattered and wherever they went they took the gospel.

Augustine said, "The Church owes Paul to the prayers of Stephen." If Stephen had impressed Saul, Saul did his very best to wipe the martyr's blood from his mind. His passionate intensity for the Law of Moses drove him to a deep hatred for this new faith which threatened his ancestral traditions. His single-minded loyalty to the "law" led him to ravage the disciples as a wild beast tears at the carcass of its prey. He later described this period, "I persecuted the church violently and tried to destroy it" (Galatians 1:13).

R&D *Wherein do the life and death of Stephen impact your life?*

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord Jesus, that most of us do not face the dangers that faced Stephen and the other early disciples, but help us to have equal courage.*

**Sunday, January 30**

**Sabbath Time**

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*He took him up in his arms and blessed God.* Luke 2:28

Simeon took Mary's little One into his arms with infinite content. He held to his heart, he handled and touched the Word of God. All the whole wonder of the Gospel that would become explicit in the unfolding of that little life, beginning now the pilgrimage to the Cross, was implicit to his understanding soul. He heard what the angels heard when the Babe of Bethlehem gave his first human cry. He held in his arms the divine beauty. All discerning of true beauty is part of the pilgrimage to God. Wherever the ear of the musician hears the authentic beauty, wherever the eye of the artist sees it, wherever the soul of a lover finds the correspondence of true comradeship, there is this power we are thinking of to discern reality in the midst of life.

Andrew, SDC, in *Simeon's Song*

**Read: Acts 8:4-13**

### **The Real Miracle**

How often it is that God calls us to do the very thing that we do not want to do! How often we see the problems of life as obstacles and not as opportunities!

Forced to run for his life from Jerusalem by the severity of the persecution of the Christians led by Saul, Philip traveled north to Samaria. To the Jew, Samaria was the “pits,” the last place they would choose to be, for the enmity between Jew and Samaritan ran generations deep. The Jew regarded the Samaritan as racially and religiously inferior.

Hundreds of years earlier (632 BC) the Assyrians had conquered the 10 northern tribes of Israel. They had deported many of the Jews to foreign countries and imported non-Jews to Israel, who intermarried with the remaining Jews. The Samaritans were the resulting race. They believed in Israel’s God, followed the Law of Moses and looked for the coming of the Messiah. They had their own temple and their own priesthood; but, in Jewish thinking, they were half-breeds. Living in the Samaritan city in which Philip settled was a man who displayed some of the same powers that he himself possessed, a man named Simon, a magician. Magicians were not uncommon in the ancient world and Simon was one of the best. So clever was he that when he characterized himself to the Samaritans as “great,” they believed him and attributed his power to God.

In spite of Simon’s popularity, when Philip followed the example of the apostles in a preaching and healing ministry, many men and women believed and became Christians. Even Simon heard the good news of the love of God in Jesus and believed and was baptized (v.13). Philip was able to lead the Samaritans beyond the miracles—Simon’s and his own—to see the real miracle of salvation in Jesus Christ and a new relationship with God. Someone wrote, “Missionaries (and that means each and every Christian) must also be theologians because everyone’s idea of good news is not necessarily the good news of Christ.” Obedient to the Holy Spirit, Philip led the Samaritans to the real good news.

R&D *What obstacle in your life can be used as an opportunity to serve Christ?*

Prayer: *We are offered many choices in life, Lord Jesus, but the only choice that matters is the choice of you as our Savior and Lord.*

**Tuesday, February 1**

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**Read: Acts 8:14-25**

### **The Samaritan Pentecost**

The atmosphere fairly crackles with unusual things; things out of the ordinary are happening. There is what Simon the magician sees as “magic” in the air.

The church in Jerusalem has heard the news of Philip’s preaching of the gospel in Samaria and of the glorious results. In their role as “supervisors” of the faith during the early years of the Christian mission, Peter and John traveled to Samaria to see what had occurred. In what is the most difficult passage in Acts to interpret (vv.15-17), the apostles bring to the Samaritans a special empowerment of the Holy Spirit. In tones suggestive of the great day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, visible external manifestations of the presence of the Holy Spirit permeate throughout the Samaritan church.

Some see this event as a fulfillment of Jesus’ promise to Peter, “On this rock I will build my church” (Matthew 16:17-19). Peter was used by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. He is used by the Holy Spirit in a Pentecost experience of the Samaritans. He will be used by the Holy Spirit in a Pentecost experience of the Gentiles (Acts 10). Sensing broader implications, others see this incident as the time when two parts of the church are joined together into one “body” (Ephesians 2:14-16). This is the time of the acceptance of the Samaritans into the church by the recognized leaders of the Jewish church. This is the time when the “door of faith” (Acts 14:27) is opened to the Samaritans (v.25).

Simon viewed the manifestations of the Holy Spirit in this event as magic. He saw an opportunity to reclaim his lost authority and prestige. He offered to pay for the power which he believed belonged to Peter and John. So imbued was he with his own false magic, he did not recognize the truth of the Spirit. He saw Peter possessing the power of the Spirit rather than the Spirit’s power possessing

Peter. He saw the power of the Spirit as something to manipulate, a genie to do his bidding, rather than a power to be obeyed.

Peter recognized the uncommitted state of Simon, chastised him harshly and urged him to repent. Simon, unwilling or unable to pray, asked that Peter use his greater power to protect him. Later legends reveal Simon's tragedy, for they portray him as a persistent foe of Christianity.

*R&D How do you view the Holy Spirit in your life? Are you ever tempted to manipulate him? To see him only in the miraculous?*

*Prayer: Holy Spirit of God, you are manifested in marvelous works but also in the quiet voice of guidance to the Christian who has a listening heart.*

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## Wednesday, February 2

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**Read: Acts 8:26-40**

### The Evangelist

A renewal hymn seems to describe the experience that motivated the life of Philip: "That's how it is with God's love, once you've experienced it: You spread his love to everyone, you want to pass it on."

Philip was led onward by the Spirit. Told to go, he went and on a desert road he encountered a man from Ethiopia. In this encounter we see the broadening of the embrace of Christianity. It moved from Jews exclusively to embrace Samaritans. Now it moves to embrace Gentiles, God-fearers or proselytes. God-fearers were that large group of Gentiles who, strongly attracted to Judaism, studied the Old Testament, worshipped in the court of the Gentiles but who had not become Jews.

The Ethiopian was a powerful and important man, the state treasurer and a minister to Candace, queen mother and ruler of the country. When Philip came upon him, he was reading aloud from Isaiah 53, the great prophecy of the suffering Servant of the Lord which had found its fulfillment in the sacrifice and death of Jesus. The Ethiopian welcomed Philip into his oxen drawn cart and so began this memorable encounter.

This incident dramatizes four major themes. (1) There is divine leadership in the spread of God's message. As God called Philip,

so He calls and leads us in all our work for Him. He asks of us our obedience and our enthusiasm.

(2) God prepares His people to receive Him. The Ethiopian was reading the Scripture. We do not by our own efforts convert anyone, but we are asked to be channels of God's grace and love to hearts eager to hear of Him. (3) True witness focuses only on the good news of Jesus Christ who has come to save the lost, he who came to bring the good news of God's amazing grace and love for us. (4) The gospel has a wonderful universality. The good news of Christ is for all people, in all places, at all times. We do not judge who should hear or even how mission should be done. Evangelism is a matter of an attitude which takes advantage of all opportunities to share Christ with anyone.

*R&D As you examine your own efforts to be a witness for Christ, how does the example of Philip speak to you?*

*Prayer: Lord, we pray not only for the courage to share our faith, but also for opportunities to do so.*





# Proverbs

Thursday, February 3

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**Read: Proverbs 6:16-19**

## Seven Faces

Defining evil isn't easy. Deep down, many of us see evil as that which makes us uncomfortable or gets in our way.

What does God say? Proverbs defines evil as that which "God hates" and finds "detestable."

First, "a proud eye." An eye blinded by self (narcissism). I see me, not you; you matter only insofar as you impact on me. I remember learning this eye during a year in New York City, except there it was a "fearful eye." Same result: you disappear.

Second, "a false tongue." Lies kill more surely than bullets. Adultery kills a marriage. Deception kills a friendship. False rumors kill a community.

Third, "hands that shed innocent blood." Hear the prophet Amos crying against Israel: "They grind the heads of the poor into the earth" (Amos 2:7).

Fourth, "a heart that forges thoughts of mischief." All hearts stray from time to time, but Proverbs depicts a heart that works at straying, that turns unbidden lust, for example, into plan and thereby into action.

Fifth, "feet that run swiftly to do evil." What began in the eye now engages the whole body. Evil isn't so simple as a lewd thought; it's the whole person in motion, acting, deciding, intending—misusing those finest gifts that God reserved for humanity.

Sixth, "a false witness telling a pack of lies." The Ninth Commandment doesn't strike home until you've experienced false witnessing. I've been there. It's utter helplessness. Jesus was there when his accusers laid lies before Pilate. What could he do?

Seventh, “one who stirs up quarrels between brothers.” Remember Cain and Abel (Genesis 4). Brothers instinctively fight. But deliberately to exploit that potential is evil.

R&D *Be honest now, and find yourself in these seven faces of evil.*

Prayer: *Lord, help me to be a person who faces the world around me with the face of love and not of evil.*

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## Friday, February 4

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### Read: Proverbs 13:1-5

#### Responsibility

Evil is a choice from within. Thus, says Proverbs, the “treacherous” choose to make “violence (their) meat and drink.” Given free will, the “wicked” choose behavior that is “foul and deceitful.” Redeeming a lost soul begins in insisting that the sinner accept responsibility for his choices. Would God have punished Adam and Eve so severely if they hadn’t tried to hide and to shift blame to another (Genesis 3)?

That sounds like common sense. Why, then, when evil produces a victim, do we so often blame the victims for what befalls them? Blaming the rape victim, for instance, has become standard practice in defending her assailant. We blame the unemployed for not having jobs.

Similarly, why do we name as evil the misfortune that comes from random chance? When Jesus’ disciples, for instance, met a man who had been blind from birth, they asked, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents?” The disciples sought someone to blame for a condition they found unacceptable. More recently, the worldwide epidemics have brought forth such blame-seeking.

We want, it seems, a world without consequences, a world without God. If evil is nothing more than bad luck, then my choices don’t matter. If the victim conspires in his or her downfall, then my behavior as victimizer isn’t so weighty.

But, says Proverbs, “Those who plot evil delude themselves” (Proverbs 12:20). Our choices do have consequences. Evil trees bear evil fruit, says Jesus. And the unworthy tree is cut down and thrown onto the fire (Matthew 7:17-20).



R&D *Beginning with the “Not me” of childhood and continuing to the present day, where have you sought to evade accountability for your choices?*

Prayer: *Forgiving God, contrition always improves our condition.*

## Saturday, February 5

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**Read: Proverbs 2:9-19**

### Seduction

If evil were an ugly and uninviting phenomenon, perhaps fewer would pursue it. But, in fact, some people “rejoice in doing evil” (v.14), because evil is so very seductive.

To portray the seductiveness of evil, Proverbs employs an image that might jar us today but spoke clearly to an earlier age. The writer talks of the “adulteress,” “the loose woman with her seductive words” who has chosen a path running “downhill towards death” and would lure the foolish man onto it. In chapter 7, the author describes a “foolish lad” who meets a prostitute “lying in wait” for him. She lures him with words of piety and pleasure. “Like a simple fool he followed her,” not knowing that “he was risking his life, until the arrow pierced his vitals.”

When you sift through the evil-woman language, you hear a bedrock truth: evil sometimes tastes good. As the author says in 18:8, “A gossip’s whispers are savory morsels.” Witness the way Satan tried to undermine the ministry of Jesus. He offered Jesus the world’s most sought-after treasures: magic, wealth, and power. Look how little it took to turn Judas Iscariot to evil: the very thing most people spend their lives seeking, namely, money.

In her landmark study of evil, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt speaks of the “banality of evil.” Evil is common, everyday. Evil wears a nice face, speaks with an alluring voice. Not a vulgar monster breathing sulfur, but a civilized person with sweetly outstretched hand. Is it any wonder that we get confused?

R&D *Using images that reflect your world, what pleasing faces do you see evil wearing?*

Prayer: *Give me a discerning heart, Lord, to perceive evil even when it is disguised in a pleasing manner.*

*Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts.*

Psalm 139:23

There are as many specific ways to express the love that God gives us as there are people who try. But there is a process that seems to come with wanting to be a committed Christian that helps determine the particular shape “loving the world” will take for each of us. The process has to do with wanting to know the truth about ourselves. When we know who we really are behind our facades, we can love people in ways which are more natural for us—and thus more honest and effective.

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**Monday, February 7**

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**Read: Proverbs 18:1-8**

**Contagious**

Evil is contagious. For one thing, evil isn't content to corrode the one person. Evil flows outward, like a “gushing torrent” that sweeps into the lives of those nearby. That is to say, evil is relational. Thus, “When the stupid man talks, contention follows.” Reason: the stupid man's words get heard and, once heard, have impact. Or in the imagery of eating, the “savory morsels” disseminated by the gossip are “gulped down into the inner man” of the listener.

Do all eat these “morsels”? No, “a wise man is cautious and turns his back on evil,” says Proverbs, whereas “the stupid is heedless and falls headlong” (14:16). The character of the listener or bystander comes into play. Just as a healthy body can resist infection, so a healthy spirit can resist the contagion of evil.

Modern experience shows clearly that we cannot isolate ourselves from evil. It gushes around us, rides airwaves into our homes, and offers its savoriness at every corner. We have two challenges. One is to attend to our strength of character and take the coming contest seriously. After all, says Proverbs, “Evil men cringe before the good, wicked men at the righteous man's door” (14:19). We can hardly avoid answering the doors of life, but we can have inner strength as we respond to the bell.

Our second challenge is to acknowledge evil systems, especially those in which we find ourselves. Health requires wisdom.

R&D *Put your right brain to work: draw the human system(s) in which you live. Now, where's the evil?*

Prayer: *We are all part of systems, Lord—family, work, neighborhood, clubs, politics, etc.—that can have their evil element. Enhance our wisdom to discern and resist the evil within while rejoicing in the good.*

**Tuesday, February 8**

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**Read: Proverbs 28:1-28**

### **Pursuit of Wealth**

Pursuit of wealth makes one susceptible to evil. That's a hard truth for anyone to hear, but is especially difficult in a culture where pursuit of wealth is ranked among the highest goods. Perhaps we uniquely can understand why Jesus devoted so much of his teaching to the hazards of wealth.

As you read chapter 28, catch the rhythm: the good and the wicked behave differently. The violent start quarrels; the wise settle them. The evil oppress the poor and praise each other; the good fight back. The wicked grow rich at others' expense; the good are generous. The wicked and good come to different ends, too. The hardhearted court misfortune, the rogue will fail, the idle sink, and the greedy suffer. The good prosper in the end.

At the center of these teachings is the knotty matter of wealth. Danger, suggests Proverbs, lies in craving wealth. Wealth itself seems neutral. "The honest shall inherit a fortune," says the author (v.10). "A man of steady character will enjoy many blessings" (v.20). What draws us away from God is pursuing wealth in a hardhearted and grasping manner.

Thus, when Satan offered Jesus boundless wealth, our Lord focused not on the wealth itself, but on the cost of pursuing it: "You shall do homage to the Lord your God and worship him alone" (Luke 3:8). You must not "serve" wealth, he said (Luke 16:13). To Pharisees "who loved money," Jesus told the disturbing story of the rich man who suffers eternal torment (Luke 16:14-31). To a young man who could not relinquish his wealth, Jesus expressed great sorrow: "How hard it will be for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:23).

R&D *Where does pursuing wealth lie in your system of values? (One clue: look where your time goes.)*

Prayer: *Lord Christ, you are life; you should always be our main pursuit.*

## Wednesday, February 9

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**Read: Proverbs 20:22**

### Deliverance

Just one verse today, but read it carefully and take it to heart: “Do not think to repay evil for evil, wait for the Lord to deliver you.”

How different our lives would be—on the world stage, in our families—if we allowed God to redress wrong, rather than pursuing the satisfaction of vengeance ourselves. But the cry of Lamech is rooted deep in the human soul: “I kill a young man for wounding me, a young man for a blow. Cain may be avenged seven times, but Lamech seventy-seven” (Genesis 4:23-24). The soul of God, on the other hand, vibrates differently. One day Peter asked Jesus, “Lord, how often am I to forgive my brother if he goes on wronging me? As many as seven times?” Jesus replied, “I do not say seven times; I say seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:21-22).

Turning to evil deeds doesn’t deliver us from evil. It simply mires us more deeply. Look at the way God Himself repented after the flood, and vowed never again to do evil as a way of punishing evil (Genesis 9). Look at how Jesus chastised his disciple for cutting off the ear of a soldier, saying, “All who take the sword die by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus repealed the ancient law of retaliation: eye for eye, tooth for tooth. “What I tell you is this: Do not set yourself against the man who wrongs you.” Do not even hate your enemy, he said. “Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors” (Matthew 5:38-44).

Not repaying evil for evil requires that we wait for God to act. It’s hard for us to give up control, but God is to be trusted. As we’ll see in the next days’ lessons, evil won’t go unpunished. God sees to that. Our own efforts to punish evil simply get in God’s way.

R&D *Examine yourself: What feeling surges within you when you experience evil?*

Prayer: *Help us to learn, dear Lord, that forgiveness frees us of having to keep score.*

## Thursday, February 10

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**Read: Proverbs 11:1-9**

### The Wicked

What happens to the wicked? Why do they often seem to win? Just wait, suggests Proverbs. It's only a matter of time until "the wicked are brought down by their wickedness" (v.5). That's lesson one in why we should trust in God to handle the wicked. According to the common-sense wisdom of Proverbs, "rogues are balked by their own perversity" and "trapped in their own greed."

Chapter 10 offers some examples. In the end, the wicked's earnings do nothing for them (v.16). Their fears "will overtake them" (v.24). Their lives will be short and filled with hopelessness (vv.27-28). They will have no "refuge" (v.29). Their "subversive tongue will be rooted out" (v.31). The righteous, on the other hand, will find their desires granted, their foundations "eternal," their hopes full and their lives long (vv.24-30).

Why? Because wickedness contains the seed of its own downfall; righteousness contains seeds of victory. "The wicked are destroyed by their own words; the words of the good man are his salvation" (12:6). "The wicked man is trapped by his own falsehoods, but the righteous comes safe through trouble" (12:13). "No mischief will befall the righteous, but wicked men get their fill of adversity" (12:21).

When? Proverbs doesn't need an afterlife of sulfurous fire in order to visualize evil's self-destruction. The author sees evil's downfall happening here and now. Separation from God happens now, as when "the Lord detests a liar" (12:22). Deceit's tangled web happens now (12:26). Inner despair happens now (v.23). The wicked may seem to be winning, but in God's higher reality "wickedness brings sinners to grief" (13:6).

*R&D Read in the Gospels about Judas Iscariot for a case study in evil's self-destruction.*

Prayer: *Help me not to judge others, Lord God; You will do so in ways I cannot imagine.*

**Read: Proverbs 11:19-31**

**Punishment**

“Depend upon it,” says Proverbs: “an evil man shall not escape punishment.” That punishment will take many forms, but few, if any, of them will be public spectacles of God smiting the wicked. Rather, Proverbs suggests a relentless unravelling of the wicked person’s world.

Take the miser, for example. “He who withholds his grain is cursed by the people, but he who sells his corn is blessed” (v.26). Similarly, the good find favor among people, but the evil don’t (v.27). “A warped mind is despised” by other people (12:8). The wicked, in other words, get cut off by the community; isolation becomes their punishment.

Another punishment: Normal human relations become distorted, as when “a fool becomes slave to a wise man” (v.29). Another: “Wicked men get their fill of adversity” (12:21). Another: “Laziness (leads) to forced labor” (12:24). The principle seems to be this: pursuit of evil undoes the normal goodness of life. In a sense, all sinners simply repeat the Adam and Eve story, in which paradise was the norm until they sinned (Genesis 2-3).

Proverbs rarely waxes this philosophical, but the suggestion is that God’s creation has an underlying logic. That logic is a well-spring from which only the good may drink. “A man’s heart may be full of schemes, but the Lord’s purpose will prevail” (19:21). Thus, the wicked are doomed to failure. “A man’s whole conduct may be pure in his own eyes, but the Lord fixes a standard for the spirit of man” (16:2). Only the pursuit of righteousness enables one to live a healthy life.

R&D *Looking at the world around you (better yet, your own life), can you see punishment of this sort at work?*

Prayer: *Father God, Your word rules. I take it for granted that You will deal with those of us who need to be dealt with.*

**Read: Proverbs 22:22-23**

**Victims**

What about the victims of evil? “The Lord,” says Proverbs, “will take up their cause” (v.23).

Evil, especially injustice, seems to bring forth the goodness of God. For example, Proverbs warns the reader against cheating the defenseless: “Do not move the ancient boundary-stone or encroach on the land of orphans: they have a powerful guardian who will take up their cause against you” (23:10-11). So attuned is God to injustice that He will stop being angry with a wicked man if He sees someone gloating over the wicked man’s misfortune (24:16-18).

God’s goodness at work clearly motivated Jesus. When he made his dramatic self-disclosure to his townsfolk in Nazareth, he quoted Isaiah and portrayed himself as one “sent to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to let the broken victims go free” (Luke 4:18). What else would God’s Messiah do? he seemed to say. That’s what God does: take up the victim’s cause.

We have come full circle. This study of evil began by asserting that deciding against evil opens the door to wisdom and, thus, to goodness. We now see why: rejecting evil aligns one with God, because that’s where God is, too, rejecting evil and fighting evil. Neutrality, it seems, is an illusion. Evil and good are at war; God is at work. We face constant choices in our lives, choices that draw us into the realm of evil or into the realm of God.

That reality may put more responsibility on our shoulders than we wish to bear, but it’s true to the book of Proverbs and to the ministry of Jesus. If we wish to receive the kingdom of God, then we have some hard choices to make.

R&D *Write a “proverb” about evil. To a child or loved one, write a “proverb” that expresses your understanding of the problem of evil.*

Prayer: *There are few things more important than our plea, Lord God, that You deliver us from evil.*

*“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”* John 8:31-32

I have always defended myself against criticism. I was terribly afraid of it for years. I suppose my fear was that I would find out that what I did or was would be proven to be foolish, ignorant, or in some other way unacceptable to me. Then I'd be in hopeless despair—if even I didn't approve of me. But, when I felt loved by God, just as I was, with no guarantees to change, my reactions over the months and years has been to want to find out where my life and work are out of line with God's purposes. And since I believe He has made me with certain gifts and natural inclinations, I want to find out those behaviors I have developed which hide my true self and which I use neurotically to win people's love. I want to discover my faults and hang-ups because I want to change my unreal and sinful behaviors to please the One who loves me and is saving me from separation and death.





# The Plan of God

Monday, February 14

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**Read: Exodus 1:1-5**

## Introduction

Exodus, from which most of our commentary for the month will be drawn, is in many ways one of the most important and interesting books in the Old Testament. It tells us of how God freed His people from Egypt and bound them to Himself by a covenant. We are shown how this relationship with God shaped the people's understanding of His plan for them, and how God dealt with them in their obedience and disobedience. Finally, through it, we encounter the symbolism of the Tabernacle, which finds its New Testament expression in the Letter to the Hebrews, a picture of how we are to approach the worship of God.

Exodus deals seriously with the fact that Israel's faith rests on historic revelation. It assumes that that faith is grounded in and illustrated by particular historic occurrences. Therefore, embedded in Exodus are memories of the actual events and circumstances through which the Israelites saw the clear revelation of God and, as a result, became His people.

During this month we will be on a journey, a journey in which God's plan for humankind begins to be revealed. We will travel with God's Chosen People as they obey and disobey God's plan for them. We will see reflected in their lives the best and worst of ours.

R&D *What is God's plan for humankind?*

Prayer: *Lord, help us to undertake this study with wonder and insight as though we had never looked at it previously so that we may, once again, understand Your plan.*

**Read: Exodus 1:6-22**

**God's People in Peril**

We read about a nation in peril, a whole people faced with the threat of annihilation. But, the story that is about to unfold is concerned with much more than the fate of a particular nation; the larger story in the background is the story of the whole purpose and plan of God. What happens to the descendants of the patriarchs is inextricably bound up with the word, the promise and plan of God. The promise was that through this people God would one day bring blessing to all peoples, to all mankind (Genesis 12:1-3). We must read Exodus in the context of Genesis.

The drama opens with the determination and ruthless power of Pharaoh pitted against the seemingly puny and ridiculously futile resistance of the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah. But we are quickly given to understand that behind the visible actors on the stage there is an invisible actor who is moving to accomplish his own purpose and plan. Two lives lived out of allegiance to God and under His gracious favor will find that the power of a pharaoh, literally a god on earth, is not so certain to prevail as appearances would suggest.

Surely there is a word of comfort and hope for us in this. There is nothing in the text to suggest that Shiphrah and Puah were motivated by some lofty notion that they were to be the saviors of God's plan. They simply did what "the fear of God" seemed to require of them. They understood that the pharaohs of this world are not the power with which we must ultimately reckon.

*R&D What keeps you going when there is little visible evidence to contradict your impression that the wrong side is winning?*

*Prayer: Help us always to keep in mind, in the midst of turmoil, that a Loving God reigns.*

Wednesday, February 16

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**Read: Exodus 2:1-10**

### **Pharaoh Defied**

A whole people is under the threat of annihilation, the sentence of death. Our focus of attention narrows to a single family, a single newborn child. We are given to understand that somehow the fate of a doomed people is tied to the fate of this child. There is no need to make this explicit. A fragile ark of reeds floating on the waters of the Nile contains the hope that the wrath of Pharaoh will not prevail, and that against all odds a deliverance will somehow be effected. The tiny baby drawn out of the waters to safety by a seeming miracle of chance, suggests to us that over against the purpose of Pharaoh there is another purpose and plan unfolding.

Indeed, when we go to the New Testament, we are assured that the courage of Moses' parents was more than courage; it was faith—a course of action taken with an eye to unseen realities (Hebrews 11:23). They were certain that it was worth it to defy Pharaoh's edict because they understood that the last word belonged to a greater king than Pharaoh. Thus, they became instruments through which a great salvation was wrought.

How is it with us? Are we instruments of God's salvation? The Scriptures assure us that our world is under sentence of death. A child born to be our deliverer has been sent. God wants to use our faith/faithfulness to bring freedom and deliverance to the world around us.

*R&D Do you think that the heroes of the faith you have known personally were conscious of being in any way extraordinary?*

*Prayer: It is a wonder of Your world, Lord, that simple, humble people can be led to do world-changing works without, perhaps, their even knowing it.*

Thursday, February 17

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**Read: Exodus 3:1-15**

### **A Revelation and Commissioning**

The unseen actor in the drama now moves front and center. Moses is called out of a forty-year exile in the wilderness and com-

missioned to lead his people out of slavery to freedom and a land of promise. God's self-disclosure on this occasion is filled with the mysterious, seeming to conceal as much as it reveals. We see a God of wonders in a consuming fire who by sovereign choice does not consume what would, in the natural course of events, be quickly destroyed by His presence. (A foretaste of what is to come: a holy God dwelling in the midst of a sinful people.) We see a God who presents Himself as already known by His promise and faithfulness to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He hears the groans of His people, He sees their affliction, and He remembers His promise. He also expects Moses and His people to remember.

We are presented with a God who names Himself, the biblical way of disclosing the secret on one's character. The mysterious name which He gives may be variously translated as: "I have 'been', 'am', 'will be' who I have been. Perhaps this is best taken as an assurance; 'As I have been and am, so I will be. My words and acts will continue to be one and the same'" (Bernard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*).

The initiative in all this is with God, but human response is still essential. God has spoken, called, revealed Himself, His promise, and His faithfulness. The plan of salvation will go forward only as Moses responds in trust and obedience.

R&D *Do you relate to Moses' request for a little clearer revelation, a more secure guarantee from God? What is the issue here?*

Prayer: *Through the further revelation of Your Plan, Lord God, we now have the Holy Spirit with us to guide us in ways that, perhaps, Moses did not. We are grateful.*

## Friday, February 18

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**Read: Exodus 5:22-6:8**

### I Am YAHWEH

The thrice repeated phrase, "I am the LORD" (literally YAHWEH) dominates this passage. Moses has complained that God is a "do-nothing" God—all talk and no action. (Perhaps you can relate to that complaint.) In response God declares His purpose, about to be fulfilled in a mighty act of redemption. His response is framed by the repeated declaration of the name by which He is henceforth to be

known. There is more in this than the mere giving of information. It is an act of self-disclosure, revealing God's essential character, and it contains God's guarantee, His oath if you will (cf. Ezekiel 20:5), that He will be true to all His promises. His name and His deeds will be one and the same.

The God of the Fathers, known to them as El Shaddai (God Almighty), will now establish His new name by a series of acts: their deliverance from bondage, their adoption as His covenant people, their inheritance of the land promised to their fathers. All of this they are to understand as being contained in the declaration, "I am the LORD," I am YAHWEH.

One thing that stands out here is that the God of Scripture grants His people permission to hold Him to His commitment to be true to His name. At the end of the Bible we read about a rider on a white horse whose name is "Faithful and True" (Revelation 19:11). In all of His self-disclosure, from beginning to end, this is the name by which He is determined to be known.

*R&D In what circumstances do you find it difficult to ask God to be true to His name? What does it mean to you that He will be faithful and true?*

*Prayer: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by Thy name.*

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## Saturday, February 19

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**Read: Exodus 12:1-14**

### Memorial Feast

A great deliverance is about to be wrought. In a series of plagues, the gods of Egypt have been judged and exposed as completely impotent. The whole land now lies under threat of the deadliest plague of all. God's people are to be shielded under the sign of the blood of a spotless lamb.

The feast is to be a memorial feast, a grateful remembrance of deliverance from bondage. At the same time there is a forward-looking aspect to all this, a note of anticipation. They are to eat "with loins girded, sandals on their feet and staff in hand." The meal is to be nourishment for a hard journey that still lies ahead. The fullness of their redemption still lies in the future, between the present moment and the land of God's promise and God's rest. There are yet "many dangers, toils and snares."

So it was for them, and so it is for us. We are a people of memory and hope. Small wonder that the writers of the New Testament look so frequently to Passover when they are seeking to understand and explain the nature of the redemption wrought for us in Jesus Christ. “Christ our passover has been sacrificed for us...let us keep the feast.” Thereby, we are nourished and strengthened for the pilgrimage yet ahead.

R&D *In your own experience of Holy Communion, which aspect tends to predominate, thanksgiving or preparation for hardship?*

Prayer: *Help us to rejoice in Your gracious goodness, Father God, and trust our future into Your hands.*

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**Sunday, February 20****Sabbath Time**

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*Love is patient and kind.* 1 Corinthians 13:4

Some of the things I am learning about the forms of Christian loving are not nearly as dramatic as I would have expected them to be. Some things I already knew, like the fact that listening with genuine interest is received by the one being heard as perhaps one of the deepest experiences of being loved. And regardless of what kind of loving help you may be bringing—from food to emergency medical care or spiritual counseling—a listening attitude is the foundation for all other loving and helping.

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**Monday, February 21**

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**Read: Exodus 14:1-30**

**Out of the Jaws of Death**

The deliverance of Israel through the waters of the sea is remembered throughout Scripture as the event by which God brought His people into being. Here the radical discontinuity of the old life and the new comes sharply into focus. Having left Egypt as a band of fleeing slaves, Israel emerged from the sea as a people united by songs of praise to God (chapter 15).

The dominant note here is that of grace. When their backs were to the wall and there was no way out, when hope seemed hopeless, God provided a way of escape. By His will, His power and His intervention, the great rescue was accomplished.

If we regard Israel's experience at the Red Sea as a test of faith, it must be said that the test was completely failed. The text makes it abundantly clear that the people failed to believe right up to the moment of deliverance. In no sense was Israel's salvation dependent upon her faith, yet a faithful response was called forth and demanded. Salvation was an accomplished reality by God's will, yet only by faith and obedient following in the wilderness could the promised inheritance be claimed.

The language of this great redemption story is one that finds its clearest New Testament echo in the language of the sacraments, especially that of baptism. In every baptism the church celebrates and proclaims our deliverance from death to life, and summons us to respond in faith, to appropriate that which God has secured.

*R&D How do you react when you find yourself in situations where God is your only hope? Recount personal experiences of this kind that you look back to as faith-awakening in character.*

*Prayer: It is in looking back, Lord, that I can often see the miracle that was not obvious to me at the time. Thank You for being there for me even when I did not know it.*

## **Tuesday, February 22**

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**Read: Exodus 16:1-15**

### **Bread from Heaven**

The motif of murmuring runs throughout Israel's pilgrimage. Each new hardship seems to provoke immediate amnesia about the bondage of their former life, and a pining for the "good old days" back in Egypt when there was bread aplenty. The people's complaint is couched as an accusation against Moses and Aaron, but the text makes it abundantly clear that God Himself is the real target of their dissatisfaction. They want more secure guarantees that YAHWEH will make good on His pledge to bring them safely home to the Promised Land.

Israel's attempt to put God on trial is turned around. With the gift of supernatural bread it is they who are put to the test, not God. Each day they must gather bread sufficient for that day only—"that I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions" (v.4c). It is not the faithfulness of God that is at issue

here, but rather the faith of Israel. The wilderness is to be a school of faith for the people of God. There they must learn the hard lesson that their security rests on nothing more and nothing less than the character of their God, who keeps faith with them and keeps His promise. (“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word which proceeds out of the mouth of God” Deuteronomy 8:3.)

A gracious God still leads His people into that place where the alternative to turning back is simply faith—the readiness to act on His word.

R&D *Why do you think it is so easy to forget God’s past faithfulness? What are the “means of grace” that fortify us against this tendency to quickly waver when circumstances test us?*

Prayer: *Strengthen us against our wayward hearts, O God.*

### Wednesday, February 23

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**Read: Exodus 17:1-7**

#### **Water from the Rock**

The theme of murmuring continues. How could a God who allows His people to experience this thirst truly have their best interests at heart? Surely this can only mean that He has deserted them. Once again God is on trial and is judged a failure by all reasonable standards of what any decent God should be expected to do.

The whole point of the story appears to turn on the surprising patience and graciousness of YAHWEH as He condescends to these contentious and ungrateful people, providing water where none was available. We would be far less surprised to read that God called it quits with them then and there.

Both the Old and New Testaments comment on this story in the context of a sober warning. In Psalm 95 we are reminded that the hardness of Israel’s heart eventually resulted in their being cut off from the blessing that could have been theirs. In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul reminds us that our kinship with Israel is closer than we like to admit. We too have been on the receiving end of great privilege in spiritual terms, but none of this is guaranteed to produce a faithful response. All this was written down for our warning and instruction: “Let anyone who thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:1-12).



“Is the Lord in our midst or not?” We still raise the question—a question that is answered only as we learn obediently to follow Him into and through the wilderness.

*R&D When did you last feel that God had deserted you? What kind of “evidence” would cure you once and for all from the tendency to feel this way?*

*Prayer: If we think You have separated Yourself from us, Lord God, who moved?*

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## Thursday, February 24

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**Read: Exodus 19:1-9**

### On Eagles’ Wings

A sense of momentous occasion is created here. Israel has been brought “on eagles’ wings” to a destination long foreseen, in accordance with no purpose and plan of her own, but solely by the purpose and plan of God. She has been brought not so much to a place, Mt. Sinai, as to a person: “I...brought you to myself.” Here she will be summoned into a very particular kind of relationship called a covenant. The covenant is offered and made possible on the basis of what God has already done, His mighty acts of deliverance. It will become effective, however, only where there is a faithful response—only if and as the people “hearken” to God’s voice.

God’s purpose is to create a unique people, set apart from all other peoples. Yet it is by no means for their benefit alone that He does this. It is rather because His care and concern extend to the whole of His creation: “For all the earth is mine.” The calling of God’s covenant people is not so much to privilege as to service and mission. They are to be “a kingdom of priests,” leading all people to acknowledge and worship the one true God. Their manner of life is to be such as reflects the holiness of the covenant God, bearing witness in every way to the reality of God.

For us, those who name Jesus Christ as our Lord, it can be no different. “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, that you should show forth the praise of Him who has called you out of darkness” (1 Peter 2:9).

R&D *In your own experience how well does the church in our time reflect this understanding of its reason for being?*

Prayer: *You call us to action, Lord Jesus, to do the things you did when you were on earth.*

**Friday, February 25**

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**Read: Exodus 20:1-17**

### **A Redeemed People**

The familiar commandments are introduced by a prologue, “I am YAHWEH your God who brought you...out...of bondage.” We are given to understand that what follows is to be seen as integrally related to God’s self-disclosure in the redemption that has already been wrought. By sheer grace, with no prior demands or conditions, God has brought them out of slavery.

But their new freedom involves far more than a great escape. They are set free in order that they may lead a very particular way of life, a way of life that will mark them off as the people God has made His very own. With the Ten Commandments God begins to spell out His will for His people. His right and authority to do this is established by His gracious act of deliverance.

The commandments are usually read as both prescriptive and proscriptive, rules for what we must do and must not do. But it is also possible to understand them as descriptive, a picture of how God’s people will think and behave when they have entered by faith into the fullness of redemption. A redeemed people will be recognizable by a manner of life that gives God the supremacy that is His by right, and that seeks always to serve the good of the neighbor. The commandments are a summary description of how our relationship to God and to each other is to be shaped and remolded by God’s grace.

R&D *Which commandment or commandments seem to run most strongly against the spirit of our age, i.e., most difficult to honor both in the letter and in the spirit?*

Prayer: *Help us to be a people whose love for one another is infectious to those around us.*

**Read: Exodus 22:20-26**

### **God of the Defenseless**

These verses deal with various forms of oppression against the weak and powerless members of society. The stranger (outsider) was in a vulnerable position because he lacked the protection of belonging to an established clan within the larger community. The orphan and widow were exploitable because they lacked the protection of parents and husband. It is a consistent characteristic of the Mosaic laws, and indeed of the whole Old Testament, to show a particularly strong concern for the potential victims of oppression.

What stands out with these prohibitions is the grounds that are cited in their support. To begin with, the memory of their former life, when they themselves were exiles in a strange land, should move Israel to be compassionate with all strangers (v.20). Secondly, to oppress a fellow member of the community is to wrong one whom God has claimed as His own (“my people,” v.24). Finally, it is the nature of their God to be compassionate, with the unstated corollary that God’s people must reflect His character (v.26).

God is the God of the defenseless, the hopeless, and the helpless. He fully expects that He will become known as such by the way that His people, those who name Him as their God, conduct themselves in relationship to those who in any way fit this description. Any church that fails to reflect this side of God’s character is guilty of more than lack of compassion. Such a church brings discredit on God Himself.

*R&D How well do you think God’s reputation as a compassionate defender of the helpless has been faring recently at the hands of His people?*

*Prayer: Thank You, Lord, that these Old Testament lessons remind us of who we are and how You want us to live.*

**Sunday, February 27**

**Sabbath Time**

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*In thy presence there is fulness of joy. Psalm 16:11*

I discovered a simple truth that turned out to be one of the cornerstones for trying to communicate God’s love: our very presence in a troubled or broken person’s life can bring amazing and

effective love and help—whether or not we know what to say or even what we are doing as God’s helpers.

## Monday, February 28

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**Read: Exodus 24:1-18**

### **Eating and Drinking**

“They beheld God, and ate and drank” (v.11b). What a startling juxtaposition of ideas! The God who is a consuming and devouring fire presents Himself at the table fellowship of His people—and they are not consumed.

The people have responded to God’s invitation to enter into covenant with Him. They have made a commitment to walk the way of holiness, to live a life that reflects His glory (“we will be obedient,” v.7). The covenant is now sealed with a blood sacrifice (redemption is costly) and ratified with a eucharistic feast in God’s presence. The unbridgeable chasm between a holy God and a sinful people is bridged by God’s initiative and gracious intervention. As they feast in His presence, they are bound together in a fellowship of rescued slaves by a common allegiance. And, in the context of this feast, they are granted a vision of God’s glory, a glimpse of splendor and surpassing beauty that defies description.

And so it is for us here and now in a reality even more glorious than that which they experienced. Then and there it was a matter of certain representatives only being permitted to share in a communion feast between God and man. Now, under the new covenant, all God’s people are invited to the feast. All may sit at table with the Lord of glory and taste of the heavenly realities which are a promised inheritance. All may have a vision of God’s glory.

*R&D Why do you suppose that we often lose our sense of wonder and astonishment at what is offered to us in Holy Communion?*

*Prayer: You provide a close and loving relationship with us, Lord God, and we still stray. Guide us from distractions and help us to stay focused on You.*

**Read: Exodus 32:1-19**

**Apostasy and Intercession**

The themes of the story are universal, and ever-present throughout the rest of Scripture: (1) apostasy—before the ink on the covenant dries, the people are already being unfaithful; (2) idolatry—the craving for a god that can be fabricated and is subject to control; (3) the threat of judgment—God’s people are doomed from the beginning if the viability of the covenant depends upon them; (4) the mediator—the one who stands in the breach pleading God’s promises, inviting God to find a way to overcome His people’s guilt, to be both “a righteous God and a Savior” (Isaiah 45:21).

We must not fail to notice that this apostasy takes place under the guise of the worship of the true God. A “feast to the Lord” is proclaimed. Idolatry is seldom a matter of open treason, publicly calling it quits with God. It is much more likely to be a matter of our human attempt to worship Him by means of our representation of who He is. We would not claim the right to replace God, but only to represent Him.

God’s response to His people’s unfaithfulness is strangely paradoxical. (Both Jewish and Christian interpreters have noted this; cf. B. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*.) On the one hand, the people’s guilt is not to be excused or mitigated in any way. He would be fully justified in carrying out the severest punishment. But then, curiously, He conditions the threat on Moses’ agreement. “Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them” (v.10). The door for intercession is left open. He must find a way to restore the covenant breakers.

R&D *In what way or ways are you most tempted to reshape God to your own liking?*

Prayer: *Gracious God, in the depths of our greatest sins You are still willing to forgive us.*

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**Note:** The Plan of God will continue on April 18, following the Lenten study.

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# Reconciliation

## Lenten Study

Ash Wednesday, March 2

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**Read: Mark 1:15**

### Introduction

For most of us, Lent is the primary time during the year when we do some serious self-examination. Therefore, Lenten Bible study should aid us in that process. This year, we will look at our responsibility to be reconciled to God and to others, and we will consider what is expected of us by way of the ministry of reconciliation to which all Christians are called.

From the time of the fall, God has been trying to make it clear that He wants to be in relationship with people. Through Moses and the prophets, He constantly sought to get that message across to His chosen people. In the fullness of time, He sent His only Son to live and die for us, that we might be in relationship with Him. God's message has always been one of reconciliation.

Theologically, reconciliation is rooted in the idea of restoration, the ending of conflict, and the establishing of peace between parties. According to the dictionary, reconciliation is restoring to friendship. God wants to have that sort of relationship with people, He wants people to be friends to one another, and He makes us ambassadors of the ministry of reconciliation: helping other people to come into that sort of relationship with Him.

For Lent, there are nine studies on the subject "Reconciliation Between People," followed by ten each on "Reconciliation Between God and People," "Making Reconciliation Known," and "The Ministry of Reconciliation."

R&D *What does reconciliation mean to you?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, our relationship with you and with each other begins with repentance, something not to forget as we begin this Lenten journey.*

**Read: Genesis 13:1-11**

### Neighbors

We live in a neighborhood, not just on a street or in a city, but in a neighborhood. Recently an out-of-town friend called needing a place to stay, and as we already had guests visiting, we called a neighbor to see if she could give our friend a place to stay, although we knew that she would be out of town on that particular night. She said: “It’s all God’s anyway. You don’t need to ask—just come on in and use it.”

We sometimes fall under the mistaken notion that those things that we call our own are ours. Our neighbor reminded us of the Christian understanding of possession and stewardship. Abram and Lot were staying together “but the land could not support them while they stayed together for their possessions were so great” (v.6). Their relationship broke down because “quarreling arose” between their herdsmen.

Abram understood the principle of which our neighbor reminded us: it’s all God’s anyway. He understood that the problem would not go away. He believed that God’s providence was big enough to take care of two successful ranches. He resisted the temptation to make himself the more powerful and instead sought God’s way of humility and generosity.

Offering Lot the best—“Is not the whole land before you?”—he helped Lot to see that God was big enough to provide for both, and that generosity and humility could bring reconciliation. “Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the Lord.” This is the land which Lot chose because he believed that Abram was sincere in his offer for reconciliation.

It is easy to let our possessions become the focus of our attention when conflict arises. Abram believed that there was something greater at work than quarreling herdsmen. He believed that an opportunity for glorifying God was present; and, by acting with generous humility, God would honor both parties in their labor. Godly neighbors are indeed good neighbors.



R&D *Consider a situation in your life where godly generosity and humility would bring reconciliation.*

Prayer: *You are willing to go before us in those difficult situations in which You call us to follow.*

**Friday, March 4**

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**Read: Genesis 16:1-6**

### **Impatience**

When I was in grade school a teacher once told me to take the time to do my work right the first time. “If you can’t find the time to do it right the first time, how will you find the time to correct it?” she asked.

Abram and Sarai had a promise from God, the promise of a child and descendants as great as the stars in heaven (15:5). But Abram and Sarai grew impatient, and their haste led to disaster. While they should have been content to be “pregnant with anticipation,” they desired to be pregnant. They had not learned to get it right the first time.

The result was predictably disastrous. Hagar “began to despise” Sarai; Sarai grew angry with Abram; Abram got fed up with both of them; and through one act of haste, the children of Abraham, both Jew and Arab, have been in turmoil from that day.

Having gone through two pregnancies with her, I have heard my wife say on more than one occasion: “When will this be over?” Waiting on the Lord is necessary in all situations. This passage illustrates the danger in making hasty decisions. Sadly, there was never reconciliation between Hagar and the family for whom she had sacrificed so much. Abram and Sarai eventually “laughed” when Isaac was born, but one wonders if that laughter might have been richer, fuller if they had simply waited.

In the end, we understand as Christians that God will bring peace to the world through the reconciling work of Jesus Christ. But how much pain has the world suffered as the result of one moment of impatience by two people with a promise from God? Our actions do indeed have eternal significance.

R&D *How has an impatient heart or hasty decision brought difficulty to your life?*

Prayer: *How often have we been on the verge of saying, “Lord, give me patience...and give it to me right now”?*

## Saturday, March 5

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**Read: Genesis 27:41-45**

### “Breaks”

Some people get all the breaks. From time to time we all feel that way about another person, and this is exactly how Esau felt about Jacob. Jacob bribed his brother into giving him his birthright and then tricked their father into giving him his blessing. Esau’s rage toward his brother is understandable; but let’s face it, he was probably just as mad at his own poor judgment and shortsightedness.

Jacob was one who got all the breaks, but not without a price. When Esau’s grudge turned to murderous thoughts, it was the brother with everything who was sent packing. He ran from his brother; he eventually had to run from his uncle (chapter 31); and reconciliation between Esau and Jacob seemed impossible. But God specializes in the impossible.

The problem in this situation is really common. There are those whose lives seem to be so “blessed” that everything they do seems to work. But, as with Jacob, a life built on deceit and trickery is about as stable as a house built on sand. Jacob had so built his life on his charm and ability to get his own way that he became isolated from almost every person who had ever been important to him. The impossible had to happen.

When confronted with the probability of meeting his brother (chapter 32), knowing how they had parted company, Jacob reached the moment when he was able to learn to trust God rather than his own resources. He wrestles with God and would forever bear the pain of this battle, yet in defeat God allowed him to prevail. Jacob discovered that reconciliation is the fruit of trusting God for peace between people rather than trusting our human resources. Reconciliation came between brothers only after the “winner” got his relationship with God in order.

R&D *How have you been hurt by another person's deceit and trickery? Are you willing to trust God to bring that person to a place wherein reconciliation is possible?*

Prayer: *Help us, Lord, to see beyond our selfish pains to reach the joyous point of reconciliation.*

## **Sunday, March 6**

## **Sabbath Time**

*You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.* James 2:24

I began to see that there was nothing wrong with enjoying the response from persons I'm loving and helping, as long as that's not the purpose of my efforts. I realized that what I had been condemning, perhaps rightly, was lovingly helping people solely to be thought of as a good person. Doing this had been a part of my attempt to buy love. But I also saw that during the time I had reacted and criticized my dear mother for "playing to the crowd," I had often not been helping people at all as I insisted on my "pure motives." I decided it is better to love people with impure motives than to keep yourself spotless regarding your motives, and not help anyone.

## **Monday, March 7**

**Read: John 17:6-12, 20-23**

### **Prejudice**

I heard a song recently and the chorus caused me to understand the principle of reconciliation in this passage. The chorus said: "Don't tell them Jesus loves them 'till you're ready to love them too."

There is a temptation that every Christian struggles with, a temptation to be out of relationship with unbelievers. How can we tell them Jesus loves them until we are ready to love them? "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that they may be one" (vv.21-22). Jesus prays that we will be one with those who are not yet in the fellowship of believers.

Several years ago, I attended a worship service in a large inner-city congregation. I had my eyes closed during the prayers of the people, and suddenly my nostrils were filled with the smell of a dirty human body. I opened my eyes and saw a street person who had slipped into the pew next to me. He smiled, I smiled and we

both prayed. I was very aware of being out of relationship with the man with whom I was sharing a pew, because he was so very different from those with whom I usually worship, and I felt uncomfortable. “Don’t tell them Jesus loves them ‘till you’re ready to love them too.” At the passing of the peace, he stretched out his hand first and said: “I don’t want to miss the soup downstairs; see you for the meal.” That day the small piece of bread and sip of wine seemed like the feast that we proclaim it to be. “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (v.23).

Reconciliation with the persons with whom we share God’s creation is not an option; it is a necessity if the kingdom of God is to be established and God’s peace is to reign.

*R&D With what group or individual do you need to reconcile in order that they might see Christ’s love at work in your life and theirs?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, help us to see you...of the potential of you...in the eyes of everyone.*

## **Tuesday, March 8**

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**Read: Ephesians 2:11-22**

### **Bigotry**

Religious bigotry is always difficult to change. Only Christ can overcome such division. Division between groups of believers has existed in the church since apostolic times. As a priest, I never cease to be amazed at the walls of division erected in the church, and the stumbling blocks fellow Christians create for one another. Paul struggled with the hostile division between Jew and Gentile which threatened the fabric of unity which Jesus died to create.

Today division between believers is sadly very common. When we look at the church, we see division between East and West, Protestant and Catholic, evangelical, liberal, charismatic, Anglo-Catholic—the list goes on and on. Most denominations seem to be controlled by “special interest” Christians rather than by our unity in Christ.

Paul was calling for something which was beyond any idea of unity than those early Christians could have conceived. Paul was obedient to the Lord by upholding the law of love and reminding all

believers that God looks at us and sees the blood of Christ, not our outward appearance or church alliance, and this is how we are to see one another. Division in the church is abhorrent to God, because we are “no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (vv.19-20).

Reconciliation within the church is not an option, for it is the foundation on which the church was laid. In Jesus we are being “built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (v.22).

*R&D How can Christians differ and yet remain in communion with one another?*

*Prayer: Lord Christ, I thank you that, through Bible study and prayer groups with people of other denominations, I have found unity in you.*

## Wednesday, March 9

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**Read: Galatians 3:26-29**

### Differences

One of the most difficult characteristics of God is God’s apparent blindness to the differences between people that we, as sinful humans, so easily identify. I was watching Sesame Street with our children recently, and there was a segment in which two of the characters were discussing the ways in which they were alike and the ways in which they were different. They each had two eyes, two ears, two hands, but one had blue fur while the other had orange “skin”; one had no teeth, while the other had two large fangs. In the end they decided that they were more alike than they were different, and yet each was happy to have been uniquely made.

Paul knew something of people and, in his life, he had allowed the mind of Christ to be formed in his mind. The extensive travels of this former “Pharisee of Pharisees” were a great opportunity to learn about people, and Paul had come to understand that every person, every culture, every congregation has its own unique personality; and yet, like those characters on Sesame Street, they had more that was alike than was different.

As sinful people we tend to focus on our differences. We set standards of membership which are not based on the scriptural teaching of our Lord. Reconciliation is possible only when we accept the common ground all Christians share, the ground which is at the foot of the cross.

Our common life comes from our full adoption as children of God through Jesus Christ. “All of you who were baptized into Christ, have clothed yourselves with Christ” (v.27). We are all wearing the same outward appearance if we are baptized into Christ. We do not cease to have our unique and God-given inward qualities, but our “clothed selves” are the result of our faith in Christ Jesus. We have received the spiritual clothing of the King of kings and Lord of lords. We dwell on common ground with all Christians at the foot of the cross. Reconciliation between believers requires keeping our eyes on Jesus and not on the unique qualities which each Christian has.

*R&D Is your outward expression consistent with your “royal heritage”? Do you look for people’s “spiritual clothing” or at their physical clothing? How do these judgments affect our common life in Jesus Christ?*

*Prayer: Blind us to our differences, Lord Jesus, and awaken us to opportunities to reach out to others.*

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## Thursday, March 10

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**Read: Colossians 3:1-14**

### **Ambassadors**

We live in a world where it is easy to have consistently inconsistent beliefs and actions. As Christians we must resist this temptation and allow our actions to be consistent with our beliefs. This may put us in conflict with our earthly loyalties and may even put us at odds with “truths” that we have always held as dear. For example, we may find that our Christian belief system puts us at odds with the beliefs of the political party with which we had always been aligned, or that our Christian beliefs do not permit us to indulge ourselves in activities which we used to find perfectly acceptable.

Who we are in Jesus Christ is of eternal value and significance. If our Christian behavior is not consistent with the beliefs of Christianity, then what distinguishes a Christian as a Christian? “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. Put to death,

therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature” (vv.2, 5). Our actions are not the means to our salvation, but they are the sign of our salvation. If there is not an outward and visible sign of this inward and spiritual grace, the world and other Christians will see this inconsistency, and our witness will be less than it should be. We will be out of relationship with the world and with the body of believers because our life will be an inconsistent Christian witness.

The life we live is the only one we have in which to glorify Christ. In all that we do, in our homes, in our churches, in our Bible studies, in our schools, in our jobs, in our friendships, we are ambassadors (reconcilers) for Christ. We are called to holiness, not by our own ability or strength to perfect ourselves, but by receiving the overwhelming gift of God’s desire to bring us to perfection. In receiving this gift, reconciliation will be the desire of our heart in all relationships.

*R&D Ask yourself tonight, “What did I do today that only a Christian would do?”*

*Prayer: We are here for a purpose, Lord Christ, to bring the world to you.*

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## Friday, March 11

**Read: Acts 2:36-47**

### **Bold Proclamation**

“When the people heard this they were cut to the heart” (v.37). Peter’s sermon to the Jews gathered in Jerusalem was as piercing as the nails they had caused to be pounded into the Savior’s flesh. A mere 53 days following the crucifixion, Peter proclaims the gospel to thousands, many of whom were probably present on Good Friday and called for Jesus’ crucifixion. Three thousand lives were transformed that day in one of the greatest works of reconciliation ever seen.

Not only were these people who had crucified Jesus (v.36) reconciled to God, they also were reconciled to the apostles and all believers. This miraculous conversion of the thousands from a “corrupt generation” (v.40) took place because Peter received the empowering gift of the Holy Spirit and called those who had murdered Jesus, and threatened his own life, into reconciliation. “Repent and

be baptized” (v.38), Peter tells them, and in so doing he laid down his life for those of whom he was fearful.

As Christians we too are called to a bold proclamation of the reconciling love of God. Sometimes it will be to those who have harmed us or a loved one in some significant way. Peter not only pointed out their sin, but he also gave them the only way out of that sin—Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

For most of us, Peter’s boldness seems impossible, but Peter had just been empowered by the Holy Spirit as he had never before been empowered. His boldness is really just the expression of God’s working in him to do greater things than he could ask or imagine.

An equally great work of the Holy Spirit happened in the lives of the three thousand new believers. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (v.42). Those who had once called for his crucifixion were now devoted members of the body of believers in Jesus Christ. They were reconciled to God and to one another because one Christian boldly and lovingly called them into reconciliation.

*R&D To what extent are you willing to hear a call to be reconciled to someone you have harmed?*

*Prayer: If we only listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit within us, our opportunities for reconciliation are multiplied greatly.*

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## Saturday, March 12

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**Read: Matthew 18:1-20**

### Division

I was once in the procession at a church convention and noticed many clergy letting others process before them. I realized they just wanted to be close to the back, near the bishop. A friend commented to me: “Have you noticed that the church is the only place where people rush to get to the back of the line?” Spiritual pride and seeking special honor in the body creates division.

When the disciples wanted to know who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus showed them a child. In very graphic words he then told them to rid their lives of anything which might prevent them from living in childlike reverence to God. But Jesus knew that children sometimes quarrel with one another, so in verses



15-17 he restates the letter of the law about dealing with conflict. “This is what the law allows you to do, go one to one, take some witnesses, go before the whole assembly,” etc. (vv.15-17). But as Jesus always did, he raised the law to the law of love. He concludes by saying that he cannot be present with us if we are not in right relationship with one another. “I tell you the truth that if two of you on earth agree (live reconciled lives) about anything you ask for, it will be done for you. For where two or three come together in my name, I am with them” (vv.19-20).

When we allow division to exist in the church, we keep ourselves out of relationship with Jesus. Agreement with one another is not just a way to keep the peace, it is the only way to keep peace! Spiritual pride and seeking honor always lead to broken relationships. We are called to be in agreement with one another if we want Jesus to be in our midst.

R&D *What are you willing to sacrifice to be in agreement with all Christians?*

Prayer: *Humble us of pride, O Lord, especially spiritual pride.*

## **Sunday, March 13**

## **Sabbath Time**

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*But the Lord answered her, “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things.”* Luke 10:41

I knew how to pull out all the stops and work for Christ. In fact, I’d almost worn myself and my family out with my compulsive working and enormous energy. Until I tried to commit my life to God, I was sort of like a snaking fire hose loose on the sidewalk, knocking people down with the undisciplined stream of energy swishing one way and then another. In Christ, the energy was becoming focused.

## **Monday, March 14**

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**Read: Genesis 3:1-19**

### **Death**

In the beginning the sin of pride and rebellion first erupted in humankind as Adam and Eve, who being tempted to be like God by the most cunning and subtle of all creatures, chose to believe the lie of the serpent over the commandment of God.

Chief among the consequences of their action was death. Certainly physical death, but more significantly, spiritual death—a permanent separation from God during a lifetime and beyond for eternity. This critical consequence is mysteriously passed on to all who are born of the seed of man. It is removed only by Jesus (not born of man but of the Holy Spirit), who became the Paschal Lamb sacrifice for the original sin of man and sins of the world.

The first glimmer of the gospel of God's reconciliation with man comes when He says the seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. The seed of the woman is Jesus. Satan, who once held the power of death, was defeated at the cross when Jesus overcame sin and death. Victory!

At the same moment that the God of justice cursed man—"from dust you are and to dust you shall return"—He provided in His infinite love the way to everlasting life with Him now and evermore.

A new covenant of reconciliation has been established. Reconciliation is needed when relationships are broken. Our broken relationship with our Father, God, and our broken relationships with our fellow human beings are all healed through God's provision of His Son, whose shed blood sacrifice for our sin brings new life and restoration.

*R&D How have you been tempted in a subtile way and found personal reconciliation with God the Father?*

*Prayer: Temptation is always around us, Lord Jesus; thank you for giving us an escape.*

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**Tuesday, March 15**

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**Read: Psalm 5:1-8**

### **What God Hates**

Try to feel the intensity of the psalmist in his morning prayer as he sighs and cries out for help from the one he knows as King, Lord, and God.

This brings to mind the question of how often we pray at the beginning of each day with the kind of intensity and sincere earnestness which pours from a humble heart that knows God. Or do our

prayers generate from a self-centered need to use God for our own purposes?

Can we agree with the psalmist that God does hate, and that the nature of God will not allow the wicked to dwell with Him, nor the arrogant to stand in His presence; and that God hates “all who do wrong” and abhors the deceitful?

Psalm 55:21 (NRSV) describes a deceitful person as one who has “speech smoother than butter, but with a heart set on war; with words that were softer than oil, but in fact were drawn swords.” Deceitful people live false lives, deceiving through perfecting a performance. (“You make the cup clean on the outside but your inward part is full of wickedness” Luke 11:39.)

Proverbs 6:16 adds more to the list. God hates haughty eyes, hands that shed innocent blood, hearts that devise wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, false witnesses that pour out lies, and people who stir up discord.

Yet, this Almighty One who abounds in mercy is always present to receive the repentant and reveal the straight paths of right living as we wait for His direction with willing, expectant hearts and patient endurance.

*R&D How many of the things that God hates have affected you personally and how have you responded?*

*Prayer: Lord, You hate many things that people do, but Your deep desire is their reconciliation with You.*

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## Wednesday, March 16

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**Read: Isaiah 6:1-8**

### Holiness

Isaiah’s commission for his prophetic ministry is one of the most dramatic in the Bible. His vision, the worship of God by angelic beings (“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory”) is an example many of us follow in our worship services.

We, too, join the angelic beings in worshipping God for who He is by nature—holy. Holy means He is not like anything created. He is totally separate and apart from the created order. His holiness

has been defined as “the deepest mystery of His being, the wondrous union of His righteousness and His Love.”

Because of His righteousness He cannot be in the presence of sin. Isaiah understood this once he grasped God’s holiness. His first reaction was to feel ruined, undone, falling apart. Then he realized that he was but a man, not God, but only God’s creation. Then of all the offenses against the righteousness of God that he could have confessed, he chose “unclean lips.” It is with the lips that we speak our lies and deceptions, attack the character of others and exalt ourselves as God. Our lips are used to convey what is really in our hearts.

But God in His love takes away Isaiah’s guilt and atones for his sin. He does the same for us in Jesus. God in His holy love treats His enemies as if they are not enemies at all. That is reconciliation.

*R&D When you think of the nature of God, what reactions do you have?*

*Prayer: God, when I survey my life, it amazes me that You can forgive so much. Thank You, Lord.*

## Thursday, March 17

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**Read: Luke 5:1-11**

### Obedience

Being reconciled with God through hearing the word of God, seeing miracles, confessing and repenting of sin, prophetically being told what the future holds, giving up all and following in faith is ideal. Jesus, though, knew the difficulty.

As described in the parable of the sower—where soil is likened to a person’s heart—the word of God falls on all soil, but if the heart is hard the person will not understand. Satan takes away the seeds of reconciliation. If the heart is shallow and rocky, the message received with joy at first will not root; when trouble or persecution ensue, enthusiasm fades and despair comes. A heart of thistles takes in the seed but worldly cares and longing for money choke it out. The good soil in the heart of Peter, James, and John listened and understood. Immediately each gave up all to be a disciple.

Hearing a teaching by Jesus led Peter to be obedient to Jesus’ command. That obedience enabled Peter to see a miracle. The fact that Jesus can do what man’s striving cannot accomplish brought

Peter to his knees, recognizing Christ as Lord and himself a sinner. Reconciliation had begun. Faith in Jesus supplanted Peter's faith in himself, enabling him to give up everything. How often we pause in our Christian walk for a season returning to an existence of striving on our own, thereby missing a miracle because of disobedience and unrepentance.

R&D *What is the thing holding you back from being more fully a disciple of Jesus?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you are life; all else is just details.*

## Friday, March 18

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**Read: 2 Corinthians 5:11-15**

### Resting

Conceivably, God could have gone about the process of reconciling mankind to Himself in other ways. For example, he could have sent Jesus just to be our teacher or example. By following Jesus' teachings, we could possibly have earned some measure of reconciliation with God. Gratefully, He did not choose such a method. Just think of the effort we would have to make to earn our way into a relationship with God. When have you loved others enough?

The teachings and the example of Jesus are important but not as a basis of reconciliation with God. God took the initiative in bringing about reconciliation only through the cross. One could follow Christ's teachings and example and never be reconciled to God. The first step is to accept Jesus as the entirely righteous one, the sinless Lamb of God, who at Calvary took and endured the punishment we deserved, namely separation from God, so that we could be made righteous. We are made righteous because the shed blood of Jesus has covered our sins. God sees us through His Son. We rest in that reality.

Man, created on the sixth day, was meant to live in God's rest, the seventh day. With the fall we lost the opportunity to rest in God. But now, because of what God has done through Christ, we have been restored to our original position. We can rest in God.

Jesus' teachings are our guide to whether we are resting. When we take control of our lives away from God, we lose what God provides—peace and joy, and a life without fear, anxiety and worry.

R&D *What circumstances take control of you that cause you to cease from resting in God?*

Prayer: *In a life faced with so many alternatives, Lord Christ, help us to know deep within us that there is no alternative to you.*

**Saturday, March 19**

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**Read: Colossians 1:15-23**

### **Middleman**

Jesus is referred to as “firstborn over all creation.” That does not mean, as the Jehovah’s Witnesses claim, that God the Father pre-existed the Son. That view was condemned by the church as heresy centuries ago. The “firstborn” to the Israelites related to preferential status, authority, sovereignty, responsibility, and the right of succession. When the word is used figuratively as it is applied to Jesus here, it implies an excellence, a certain preferential status and closeness to the Father.

Once I had a Christian say to me, “Why should I include Jesus in my prayers when I can go straight to the ‘chairman of the board’ (the Father) and avoid the middleman?” Let’s look at this “middleman.” Scripture says the Father and Son are one. Jesus is in the Father and the Father in him. Prior to coming to earth as a visual image of an invisible God, Jesus was with God when all the world was created and through Him all things were made. By Jesus all the heavens were created, visible and invisible, along with all powers and authority.

When Jesus was sacrificed as the Lamb of God for the sins of everyone, he rose as the firstborn from the dead having supremacy over everything. He is the head of the Church of all believers. Obviously, this is no middleman in the Father’s eyes nor should he be in ours. By Jesus’ blood God has reconciled you and me to Himself. God gave His best, His Number One! Second best was never an option.

R&D *Reflect on where you give second best when you should give your best. At home? The office? Church? Environment?*

Prayer: *Gracious Father, You gave Yourself to us in Your Son so that we might better know You as You really are. We are grateful.*

**Sunday, March 20**

**Sabbath Time**

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*“If any man come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”* Luke 9:23

Father William McNamara helped me when he pointed out that all spiritual emotions and high resolves die unless they are nourished. When we luxuriate in the status quo our lives get ruined. As he put it, “Most lives are not ruined through wickedness, but through the gradual gathering of grease and scum when not stirred by sacrifice.”

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**Monday, March 21**

**Read: Romans 5:1-11**

### **Rejoice**

The operative word in this reading is “rejoice” (joy), which comes through reconciliation or peace with God through the one and only way, Jesus the Christ.

As Andrew Murray expressed in *Abide in Christ*, “Abiding fully in Christ is a life of exquisite, overflowing happiness. As Christ gets more completion of the soul, it enters into the joy of the Lord... joy is the essential characteristic of the life of the believer who fully abides in Christ.” Therefore, if joy is not full in the life of a Christian, one must question, “Is Jesus full in that life?”

Jesus wants his joy to remain in us so that our joy may be complete and full. Perfect joy can come only through the only one who possesses it. Christian joy is superlative to all circumstances. A paramount example is Jesus, “who for the joy set before him endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2).

Most definitely we shall walk through physical and emotional valleys; but the steadfastness and strength of the Spirit within rejoicing in our Lord will make unspeakable joy flow more abundantly than tears, penetrate more piercingly than pain, motivate more strongly than despair, and give us more completely a hope in our sufferings—thereby building strong Christian character.

The immature spiritual roller-coaster ride ends when the character of the soul has matured through suffering and is governed

by the Spirit. Then the joy of the Lord will be the strength essential in a fallen and broken world.

R&D *In what ways have pain and suffering molded you into the likeness of Christ?*

Prayer: *The experiences of life in you, Lord Jesus, shape the fullness of our joy.*

**Tuesday, March 22**

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**Read: Ephesians 1:1-10**

### **Somebody**

Human beings continue the historic, desperate search in all directions to discover who they are. This leads to lust for power to control situations and people; desire for possessions for appearance sake; people pleasing, as in enablers, rescuers, codependents, and performers; and seeking direction from the misguided.

Erupting through a state of bewilderment, this passage becomes for us a laser beam of light into our dark atmosphere of wandering lostness. The great God of the universe, the creator of the heavens, the earth and all that lies within, says that sinful man reconciled to Him through the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ, is a saint!

The Almighty, the King of kings and Lord of lords says you are a *somebody*, a special somebody whom He chose before the beginning of the world. Not only are you chosen and an adoptive child of the all-powerful God of all, but you have been blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing. You now have power, the kind that overcomes evil. All your needs are now supplied by His riches and glory. And your desire now is only to please God, not people. As Oswald Chambers said in *My Utmost for His Highest*, "A saint is never consciously a saint; a saint is consciously dependent on God." Our experiences should line up with our position as saints.

A person's search for identity should end when he is reconciled with God. Identification with Jesus brings blessings of unconditional love and acceptance, lavishing on us all wisdom and understanding, and life eternal.

Important psalms on the subject are Psalms 91 and 139.



R&D *Compare that which you sought prior to reconciliation with God with what you seek now.*

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, nothing compares to the abundance of Your love.*

## Wednesday, March 23

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**Read: Hebrews 2:1-9**

### Grace

The author of the letter to the Hebrews emphasizes the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus as the revealer and mediator of God's reconciliation with people. He is writing to Jewish Christians who are wavering in their commitment and are tempted to return to Judaism with its law and sacrifices.

This lesson is pertinent to those today who have accepted Christ and feel a need to return to self-inflicted laws of "should not, have to, and ought not," which in ignorance is thought to be needed addendum to the proper Christian lifestyle.

Salvation through grace is all-sufficient. We need not add more to nor take anything away from what God has done in Jesus Christ. The reader is warned that if violating the law had serious consequences, then how much greater the consequences would be of turning from God's method of reconciling man to Himself. Nothing in this supreme act is lacking; and this method has been confirmed through signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to His will.

Once we have been reconciled with God through Jesus, we need never again go back to "trying to do the best we can." Through submission to the all-sufficient one, all things are done through His strength and power. The law is now a desire to do the will of God, not an order of oppression. The Holy Spirit of our Lord perpetually directs and guides us into all truth. We are set free from the chains of dos and don'ts of the past, thus enabling us to walk in the future paths of right living (righteousness) with Jesus leading us.

R&D *When have you slipped and wanted to return to self-made laws?*

Prayer: *Holy Spirit, keep us on track for we are wont to go astray.*

**Thursday, March 24**

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**Read: Romans 8:1-17**

### **Spirit of Life**

Two powerful forces or laws that are at work in the universe are the law of sin and death and the law of the Spirit of life. Just as the law of gravity has to be overcome to send a rocket into space, so the law of sin and death can be overcome by a more powerful force, the law of the Spirit of life. When reconciled with God we receive this new power, the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Christ. The defeated ones become overcomers!

Jesus did not talk much about right or wrong. He spoke more about life and death. He said he is “life.” Not that he has it; he *is* it. If we want the power of the Spirit of life, we must choose Jesus, the life, into our life. Then the indwelling Christ (the vine) will produce through us (the branches) the fruit of his life which are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and a self controlled by the Spirit.

Is this new life principle for special Christians or for all Christians? Romans 8:9 (NEB) says, “If a man does not possess the Spirit of Christ, he is no Christian.” Are there two kinds of Christians? Those with the Spirit and those without? No!

Those reconciled with God, though, face a choice: whether to live a life controlled by the Spirit of life or the law of sin and death. Many choose the latter and live defeated lives as Christians. God has a better way. It comes through submission to the power of Christ within, who can defeat the power of sin and death.

*R&D Under what circumstances are you more likely to live under the law of sin and death rather than under the law of the Spirit of life?*

*Prayer: Thank You, Lord God, for this simple truth: Jesus frees us.*

**Friday, March 25**

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**Read: Matthew 11:7-19**

### **Friend**

John the Baptist “sang a dirge” (v.17) of repentance for the religious establishment who did not pick up the refrain. Jesus “played the flute” of God’s healing and saving love but the same people re-

fused to dance with the “Lord of the dance.” John’s spiritual discipline of fasting was rejected as evil by the leadership which was committed to maintaining the status quo of their world. Jesus’ celebration of God’s forgiving love was slandered as gluttony and drunkenness by the same people for the same reason.

What a terrible trap for them and for us to be unwilling either to mourn our sins and the suffering of the world, or to rejoice with the Savior! That state of spiritual paralysis causes the self-righteous to dismiss Jesus as “a friend of tax collectors and ‘sinners.’” Here we find the key to the passage and to our relationship with the Lord Jesus as his disciples and messengers.

Jesus’ work was to befriend those who suffered from the curse of being cut off from the synagogue and thus being excluded from God’s family. God Himself sought them out to love them. Is not this, and the changed lives that responded to Jesus’ love, the “results” (v.19, NIV) of God’s wisdom? Jesus reconciled to God the people who didn’t know God’s love. He did it by his personal presence and witness. Even at the risk of being tagged a friend of the “wrong” kind of people, should not you and I be doing the same, seeking out as Jesus did?

*R&D How could you show an imprisoned criminal God’s love?*

*Prayer: Open our eyes, Lord Jesus, to see those in need of your love all around us every day.*

## **Saturday, March 26**

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**Read: Matthew 28:16-20**

### **Go**

The current period of our cultural and intellectual life has been influenced by a growing range of philosophies, spiritualities, and so-called religions. They promise varying degrees of personal power and fulfillment. They are nothing new, really, just a revival of various ancient and persistent pagan ideas and practices centering on the individual person’s temptation to be as a god.

In our last lesson, we read about John the Baptist announcing the authentic coming age of the kingdom of God as a “forcefully advancing” (Matthew 11:12, NIV) reality. In today’s passage, Jesus inaugurates that new age as a present entity and experience with the

Great Commission to the remaining eleven disciples after the suicide of Judas.

Rather than give them some esoteric methods of meditation or occult practice, the risen Christ first calls them into his living presence which is a call to worship him (even with their doubts!), and then proceeds to command them to an active life of faithful witness (made disciples), faithful obedience (baptism), and faithful growth (teaching) in the new life of the age of the kingdom of God. It is a complete program of relationship with the one, true God which makes clear that we are to share what we have received if our faith is authentic. Jesus promises you and me that he will be with us if we are part of his mission of sharing the “good news” in our personal relationships with other people.

R&D *Are you faithful to worship Jesus even in the midst of doubts?*

Prayer: *You have given us the authentic, Blessed Lord. Help us never to accept anything else.*

**Sunday, March 27**

**Sabbath Time**

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*“Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing.”* Isaiah 43:18-19a

Paradoxically, even the most adventurous of us still fear change. People who have been faced with freezing to death tell us they experience a cozy, warm feeling that seduces them into inactivity. To survive, a person must shake off this comfortable feeling, move his arms and legs and change positions frequently. Movement is every bit as essential to our mental and spiritual life. We must help each other shake off the comfortable things that lead to death. To stay alive we must be people on the move, alert to the exciting opportunities to change.

**Monday, March 28**

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**Luke: 24:36-49**

**Opened Minds**

The mystery, or deepest truth of reality, is that Jesus lives in a new order that we simply cannot comprehend. Our sense-oriented perception or even our abstract reasoning cannot describe or analyze the new creation of what God has done! But we can receive what

Jesus wants to give us—his peace. In that life-changing grace of harmony with God we can then go on to the next gift that is both so exciting and essential—to have our minds opened.

Jesus teaches us through the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus speaks to us through the ministry of the church. None of us has an immediate, direct revelation of the whole gospel truth in the moment of our conversion or baptism. Like the first disciples and Paul, we need a continuous relationship of being a student (disciple) of God's Word in order to be effective witnesses. We give our minds to the Lord in order for our understanding to be enlarged, deepened, corrected, and enlightened with saving truth and complete faith.

As the church is led by the Holy Spirit to remember (recall into the present) the mighty works of God as recorded in the Scriptures, we are guided into authentic interpretation by the experience of the early church as it was led by the same Holy Spirit. We call it tradition, the handover of that treasure which is the saving truth. We then can apply the gospel by again depending upon the Holy Spirit to guide our decisions in the holy wisdom which can only come from God.

*R&D Review what ways you have sought to grow in understanding the Scriptures and ask yourself if you know more of Jesus now than last year. Five years ago?*

*Prayer: Equip us, O Lord, for the opportunities to grow in ourselves and show to others.*

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**Tuesday, March 29**

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**Read: John 15:1-17**

### **Branches and Fruit**

As a child growing up in northern Missouri, I enjoyed the fresh fruits of the earth from apple and cherry trees as well as blackberry bushes. My wife enjoyed peaches from her native Colorado. What kind of fruit does the Father enjoy from us who have been made part of His family, the church? In this powerful passage Jesus gave us the last of his seven "I am" statements that reveal his nature and identity. He is the "true vine" which means that he is everything that Israel lacked in faithfulness and holiness. As the baptized and

believing members of the Body of Christ, we bear fruit as we remain in him.

One essential way to remain in Jesus is never to cease studying and praying his words, i.e., the Scriptures. Another way is to have a meek or teachable spirit that seeks to obey our captain of the faith. As we are faithful to Jesus' words and will, he will lovingly prune us to bear more fruit. He will give us the grace to grow out of our immaturity and selfishness.

The command of Jesus is for us to love as he loves us, i.e., to seek out the lost, the sin-sick, and the broken and to call them our friends, just as he calls us the same! The fruit that shall last is nothing other than our faithful, mature, obedient witness to the saving love of Jesus. We make that witness in what we do and what we say to others. We show love by "laying down our lives" through the painful decision to risk being vulnerable by sharing our faith and experience of God's love in Christ.

R&D *Who around you at home or at work needs to hear the "good news" from you?*

Prayer: *Let us not hide our faith nor shy away from opportunities to share your love with others.*

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## Wednesday, March 30

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### **Read: Romans 10:1-15**

#### **Life in God**

The modern virtues are preached with vigor: self-confidence, peace of mind, positive thinking, name-it-and-claim-it-by-imagining! Corporations and individual people spend a lot of money getting training just for these things. Yet, that which is the only thing eternally significant—life in God—is given to us through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. We couldn't afford to pay the price. Only Jesus could offer his own godly love and holiness to reconcile or justify us.

As Paul explains salvation in this difficult text, we see that the problem of sin is universal. It is the original toxic waste that pollutes human life and creation whenever we touch it. The reality of our choosing our own will and way over against God's is that we thereby choose to be hostile to our creator and Lord. It is we who are angry at God, not the other way around. God's "wrath" is indeed His sepa-

ration from the contamination of our evil, but it is we who reject the love of the living God. But God's grace is greater than our sin.

Jesus' act of reconciling love not only gives to the baptized faithful the new life of justification, but it also offers that same new relationship with God to everyone willing to receive it. As we stand and rejoice in this wonderful love of God, the "overflow" of His grace to the many is through us, by our acts and words of reconciliation to those who are estranged from God. Our ministry is to be the "Immigration and Naturalization Service" for God's kingdom, not to keep anyone out, but to seek and bring in those still alienated.

R&D *Who is unacceptable to our gracious God?*

Prayer: *Teach us Your hospitality, Father God, that we may be a more welcoming people.*

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### Thursday, March 31

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**Read: 1 Corinthians 9:1-2, 16-27**

### Compelling Freedom

The poignant and enigmatic questions by Paul in the beginning of this chapter should be set to a lovely tune for a Christian song. It could be the song of every baptized and faithful believer, for we are all called by God and His church to share in the apostolate of being a witness for Christ Jesus. Those who believe because of our life and words are the seal upon our active love as Jesus' disciples and messengers.

We are not to brag about the number of souls we have "bagged" for God, for, again like Paul, we are "compelled" to share our experience and love of God. How shall we conduct our ministry of freely giving away the invaluable treasure of the gospel? Some charged that Paul acted like a chameleon, changing the color of his religion to reflect whatever group with whom he was sharing the "good news." He did not compromise the gospel, but he didn't hesitate to abstain from anything that would bring offense to his hearers. His goal was not to win their approval for himself, but to place no impediments to the hearing of God's saving love! He was not without principle. His goal and his ethic were the same: "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some."

Our blessed freedom in the Holy Spirit is to be free from the restricting bonds of self-protection and self-promotion so that we are free to serve the will of God to share His glad message in whatever way best conveys the perfect love of our Savior. Now, that's a happy and healthy compulsion!

*R&D Have you ever refrained from drinking alcohol or profanity or ceremonial rigidity in order to claim common ground with someone else for the sake of their hearing the gospel?*

*Prayer: It is as we "meet people where they are" that we are best able to convey your good news, Lord Jesus.*

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## Friday, April 1

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**Read: Ephesians 4:17—5:2**

### Construction Materials

We are told that nature abhors a vacuum. This is true for us as a universal spiritual reality as well. When we put on our baptismal garment, be it a family heirloom as a baby, or our best suit as an adult, we are acting out the clothing of our whole self with the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ. But that doesn't complete our wardrobe. Every now and then, my wife and I will take inventory of our closets and select clothes to give to a Christian agency for the poor. Many people do this. Paul is teaching us that we need to clean out the closets of our habits in order to imitate or reproduce the love of God that we see in Jesus. We are still people with all the strong feelings of any human being. Baptism and faith don't change our molecular or personality structure. Growth in grace is indeed a partnership with the Holy Spirit.

Are we willing to undergo the training, the discipline, and the growth in order to become more godly, more Christ-like? Do we see bitterness, rage, sinful anger, brawling, slander or any malice in Jesus? Remember, what others see in us is what they know of our Lord! We can practice the behavior of kindness, compassion, and forgiveness as we use all the means of grace in worship, small group accountability, spiritual direction, etc. Our goal is to build up others for their benefit. As we meet the needs of other people, so they will know more of the wonderful love of God that promises new life now and forever.



*R&D Lent is a strong reminder to keep up a regular schedule of spiritual house-cleaning. Have you included in self-examination by the standards of God's love and law all your relationships, behavior, and language? What evidence is there that you have built up others?*

*Prayer: As we examine ourselves this Lent, Lord, let us not forget those around us who need our love.*

## **Saturday, April 2**

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**Read: Philippians 2:1-16a**

### **Friendship in the Spirit**

I'm conscious of two congregations that go by the name Church of Reconciliation. Note that it's not "the" reconciliation, but congregations committed to be reconciling in the love of God. This is an important dimension of our life in Christ. Not only important, but essential to our salvation.

To be "united with Christ" and have "fellowship with the Spirit" means our will and our actions are to be governed by the canon set forth here by Paul. He is merely reflecting and applying the teaching of Jesus. We who are called into the colony of the kingdom of God called the church cannot live as if the world was correct in looking out for Number One. Our point of reference is totally different. To be in Christ and in his Spirit is to practice being "like-minded," which is not agreement on all issues of faith and order in the church, but means to be of the same intention, to serve Christ by loving each other and all those God sends our way.

Our model is Jesus himself. Whatever our station in life, offices in the church, ministries, spiritual gifts, etc., they are nothing compared to the glory of God that Jesus took off in order to be God incarnate, the fullness of God present among us as one of us. Our witness begins by bending our knee in worship and praise and confessing with our speech the truth of Jesus. We do this both in creed and conversation. By seeking to be reconciling believers, we "hold out the word of life" as friends to all for the sake of Christ.

*R&D Would inquirers be attracted to your church because of the quality of the fellowship they find there? Explain.*

Prayer: *Will they know we are Christians by our love, Lord Jesus?*

**Sunday, April 3**

**Sabbath Time**

*“Pray then like this: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.”* Matthew 6:9-10

Do you know what your father would have done in a particular circumstance? I have asked dozens of people this. And almost without exception, they’ve said they know pretty well what their parent would do. I asked them how they could possibly know—it has been years since they were children, and their father is not even with them now. And yet they are almost all sure of what their human father’s will would be. When I asked how they knew, they said they knew his will because they had lived with him for years, they’d watched him, and listened to what he said on all kinds of subjects. And they’d watched him in relationships with other people.

**Monday, April 4**

**Read: Philemon 1-16**

### **A Full Understanding**

This is one of the most charming of all the letters of Paul. With the easy affection and humor that genuine friends share with each other, no matter how distant they may be from each other, Paul calls upon Philemon to be a friend to his runaway slave, Onesimus. Paul well knows that the law allowed, even mandated, the most severe punishment for a runaway slave.

The fear on the part of the Roman Empire is clearly reflected in the movie *Spartacus*, for such rebellion was dangerous to the order of the state. But Paul calls upon a higher claim, that of Christian friendship. He is confident that the faith shared with Philemon, and now with Onesimus as well, will unite all three of them in the common bond of God’s love.

Note the significance of verse 6 in the *New International Version*: “I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.” In other words, Paul is telling us that our growth into the full joy and light of Christian faith is dependent on our willing and active sharing of it by being a friend in Christ to all.

If you feel stuck in a rut as far as your relationship with God is concerned, then look at the level of activity in your sharing your faith. If your gauge needles are low, then the key to this Lent, to the coming Easter celebration, and to your joy and usefulness in the Lord, is in the decision to be actively sharing what God has given you—His friendship.

*R&D What do you need to do today to begin actively sharing your faith as a friend in Christ?*

*Prayer: Help us never to forget, Lord God, that You are our best friend and one with whom we should share everything.*

## **Tuesday, April 5**

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**Read: James 2:14-26**

### **The Other Side of the Coin**

James reminds us that Abraham was called “God’s friend” because of his willingness to act out his faith in the living God. He was willing to trust God with what was the most important part of his life, his son. The other side of the coin of justification by faith is the test of faith—active love of God expressed by what we do. There is a central spiritual truth in the heart of this teaching—the unity of God’s grace. To illustrate this part of our relationship with God is the very nature of sacramental life—the outward and visible not only represents God’s love and grace, but actually conveys it as well.

By the same token, we cannot separate our worship from our witness, nor keep our money apart from our ministry as baptized believers. In the same way, faith and friendship are one in the work of the Holy Spirit. Real friendship seeks to meet the needs of the befriended. To be a reconciler in the name of Christ is to be an active friend with those who are brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ, and with those God is calling into that fellowship through our witness.

I claim John Wesley’s personal motto as part of my rule of life: “Believe, love, and obey.” Ask God for the grace to trust Him so we can hope in Him and act out His revealed will in our personal relationships day by day. We are God’s friend with Abraham as we befriend the lost and lonely in this world.

R&D *Test your faith by the measure of its concrete activity on behalf of others: what have you done to show, share, and grow your faith by active love for others?*

Prayer: *It is by the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the grace of God's love that we can be effective for you, Lord Jesus. May we not fail.*

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## Wednesday, April 6

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**Read: 2 Corinthians 5:16-21**

### **Ministry of Reconciliation**

Three terms seem to leap out at us from this passage: “a new creation,” “the ministry of reconciliation” and “ambassadors for Christ.” Let us look at the meaning of each.

Am I the same old me who existed before I invited Christ into my life? Am I the same old me who entered into the Lenten season several weeks ago? Paul says that if anyone is in Christ that person is a new creation; and, if we take our faith seriously so that we are constantly growing in our understanding of what being in Christ really means, we are continuously being created anew.

And for what purpose? That we may carry on Christ's ministry of reconciliation, the ministry he has given to us (v.18). The Bible is a record of God's desire to be in relationship with people. That is what reconciliation is all about. Since the fall, God has been seeking the restoration of friendship with people. In Christ He has made the ultimate connection between humankind and Himself. It is our ministry to make that message known.

And how are we equipped to do it? As ambassadors. We are not puny, powerless people out begging the world to accept Christ. We are Christ's ambassadors, his authorized and empowered representatives, with credentials to proclaim his reconciling love to a very needy world. It is a mind-boggling ministry indeed, and one to which each of us is called.

R&D *In what ways do you serve as an ambassador for Christ in his ministry of reconciliation?*

Prayer: *What a privilege (and responsibility) it is to be your ambassador, Lord Christ. Help me to represent you in an effective way to the world around me.*

**Read: Matthew 25:31-46**

### **Servanthood**

Serving others is serving Christ. This is the servanthood theme of the Matthew passage. Those who are blessed are those who have served the least ones (v.40). The servant fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the homeless, clothed the naked, and visited those in prison.

To illustrate this servanthood, I have two separate and true stories of women I shall name Rebecca and Diane. Rebecca was a woman of ill repute. She was even the madam of the house of ill repute. Upon encountering the saving grace of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:21), her life was reformed. She renounced her life of prostitution. She desired to serve God in gratitude for her life's redemption. She would collect leftover food from various places—day-old bread and cake from the bakeries and unused food from restaurants—and take it to downtown New York City. She set up a table in front of the bus station and distributed the food. As the number of people increased, more tables and food were needed. A small act of servanthood grew into a large ministry of servanthood.

Diane was a maidservant. She had very little monetarily to give to her Lord and the work of the church. However, she had a real desire to serve. She took home the daily newspaper from her workplace and started praying intensely for those imprisoned, for those who were sick, for those who were in trauma or tragedy. It didn't matter to her whether she knew them or the outcome. She prayed as a servant of God.

*R&D Discuss people you know whose lives exemplify servanthood ministry.*

*Prayer: Thank you, Lord Christ, for giving us the sacred work of serving others in your name.*

**Friday, April 8**

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**Read: Luke 4:33-44**

### **Healed to Serve**

Illnesses affect many of us each year. No one likes to be sick or have a fever. We all want to be well! We have too much to do to be ill. The main question to be asked in this passage is why are we healed? Is it to make us feel good or to have a happy time? God wants us healed in order that we can serve Him.

Simon's mother-in-law had a high fever. Jesus stood over her, rebuked the fever, and it left. She immediately got up and waited on her guests. The very first act she did was to serve others.

The gospel is full of Jesus healing people. He wants a kingdom of God here on earth in which his people are whole of body, soul, and spirit. He wants a kingdom in which people love and serve each other. He wants a kingdom in which people serve those not in the kingdom. To do that we need to be well or whole—salvation is wholeness. Jesus came that we might have salvation. As a people, we are sick—body, soul, and spirit. As a Christian we can, with Jesus, intercede for God's people, asking them to be healed in order that they might serve Him.

*R&D How have you seen people healed to serve?*

*Prayer: May Your healing power be made known to a greater extent in our day, Gracious God.*

**Saturday, April 9**

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**Read: Luke 22:14-20**

### **Come and Believe**

Jesus says that he is the bread of life. Whoever comes to him will not go hungry and whoever believes in him will not be thirsty (John 6:35-36). We spend a lot of money and time in order to keep ourselves from being hungry and thirsty. Yet Jesus promises us that if we come to him, we will never be hungry or thirsty. "Come" and "believe" are the words for us to hold to as we go about our daily life and work. "Come" and "believe" are the words we hold to as we feed the poor and pray for the sick. "Come" and "believe" are the words we hold to as we aid the needy and listen to the pain of many.

After Holy Communion is over in our church, the priest lays the chalice on its side so that the congregation can see that it is empty. This is symbolic of the fact that the body and blood of Jesus has been poured out for us and in us. We then can go forth as his people to be his body and blood poured out for others. “The worship is ended, the service has begun.” Just as God reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, we can, because of Jesus Christ, bring God’s reconciling grace to others.

*R&D How do you bring God’s reconciling grace to others?*

*Prayer: Holy God, You are within us through Your Holy Spirit. When we go forth, that Holy Spirit is with us and in us to do through us what You would have us do.*

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## **Sunday, April 10**

## **Sabbath Time**

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*Beloved, let us love one another. 1 John 4:7*

I remember once at a ministers’ conference I was attending as a layman, there was a meditation on the person of Christ. One of the ministers said, out of the silence in a kind of awe, “I wonder how it would feel to love people the way Jesus loved them?”—implying that there would be a glorious religious experience involved. A period of silence followed, and finally an older minister said, “Well, I don’t think you’d ever know. Because if you were loving people the way Jesus loved them, you wouldn’t be thinking about how you were feeling. You’d be totally absorbed in the other person’s problem.”

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## **Monday, April 11**

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**Read: Luke 22:24-34**

### **Who Is the Greatest?**

It’s hard to imagine that this dispute arose among the disciples on the evening of the Last Supper. According to Luke it arose after the disciples had shared the Passover meal with their master and after he had announced that one of them would betray him.

No one desires to be at fault. Each disciple was saying, “Surely not I” (Mark 14:19). Even Peter protested the most saying, “Lord, I am prepared to face imprisonment and death itself because I’m so faithful!” One would rather hear about how great one is rather than one’s faults.

Jesus took the conversation to a new level of understanding by saying that the greatest among you must be the servant. Jesus points to himself as one who sits at the table, for we all know that those who sit at the table are greater than those who wait on the table. Yet, Jesus says, “I am in the midst of you as one who serves you.”

This is truly the example of Christian servanthood. No matter who we are or where we are, or what we do, we are the servants of the Lord. A business executive can get coffee for a secretary; a husband can change a diaper; a teacher can run an errand; and the list goes on. We do what we do because we love Jesus Christ. We are reconciled to God in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20-21). Because of that reconciliation, we ask to serve Christ by serving humankind!

*R&D How does your life reflect the servanthood of Jesus?*

*Prayer: You have made it clear, Lord Jesus, that it is in serving others that we serve you.*

**Tuesday, April 12**

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**Read: John 13:31-37**

### **Love One Another**

Jesus has a new commandment for us. We are to love one another. He then goes on to say that we're to love one another as he has loved us. That's the difficult part of the statement. He loved us enough to lay down his life for us. As we are learning how to lay our lives down for others, he walks with us and sustains us. Here is a story of how God helped Rachel lay her life down for Jane.

Jane was about to have a baby. Jane wanted Rachel, a mature and recognized church leader, to be one of the godparents for her child when it was born. Rachel felt in a trap. She already had many godchildren. She didn't like Jane, but was embarrassed because she felt that, as a Christian, she should like Jane. She didn't want to be a godmother because she felt Jane would impose on her and take advantage of the relationship. Rachel prayed and prayed. Two separate answers came to her. A church leader said, “What would Jesus do?” A preacher in a sermon said, “Scripture says to love your enemies; anyone can love their friends; even the pagans love others, according to Paul.” Rachel prayed and struggled more. She finally told the Lord she would be a godmother if it were a girl since she had no daugh-



ters. She hoped it would be a boy. Jane indeed did have a girl and she named her Rachel. Rachel was devastated! She looked to the Lord and said, “Thank you, Lord, for helping me lay down my life. It was hard, but nothing compared to your crucifixion.”

To love one another means to lay our life down for other people—Christians and non-Christians alike. This is the servant ministry of bringing God’s love to the world. He will sustain us. The world will know we are His disciples because of this love.

*R&D How has the Lord helped you lay down your life for another?*

*Prayer: I’ve sometimes wondered, Lord, if I would run in front of a car to push a child to safety or into a burning building to rescue a person crying for help. I’ll never know the answer to those questions. But I do know that I am being called upon to show love to those in need around me all day every day.*

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## Wednesday, April 13

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**Read: John 13:1-17**

### Foot-washing

Have you ever washed someone’s feet? It is a humbling experience. Even to allow someone else to kneel before you and to wash your feet is humbling. To kneel before another person and wash his or her feet epitomizes the servant ministry. This is the point Jesus was trying to get across to his disciples. Here Jesus is putting into practice his teaching on who is the greatest (Luke 22:24-34). On an even deeper level, Jesus is trying to convey the depth of the necessity of his laying down his life for God’s people.

To this end he told Peter, “I have to wash your feet so that you can be part of me.” Jesus says, “I am the teacher and I set the example. If I wash your feet, then you must wash each other’s feet.”

This suggests what we are to do for each other—literally and figuratively. We remember that in Jesus’ day the people wore sandals. Their feet were dirty and rough from walking. To wash their feet was more than a gesture of hospitality. It was servanthood. It is servanthood for us also. In some churches on Maundy Thursday in Holy Week, church members wash one another’s feet as a symbol of this servanthood. In day-to-day living, we as Christians participate in this servanthood in a variety of ways.

R&D *How can I wash someone else's feet?*

Prayer: *We can "wash one another's feet" when we take time, Lord, to listen to their issues with a concerned and understanding heart.*

**Thursday, April 14**

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**Read: Exodus 12:1-14**

### **Maundy Thursday**

When Ralph's mother was dying, she said to him, "Ralph, I want you to go to church every Sunday." Those were her parting words to him. They held great power because, as a result, Ralph has been going to church ever since then.

On the night before Jesus died, he had a Passover meal with his disciples, and he told them three things he wanted them to do. (1) He told them to participate in partaking of Holy Communion, his body and blood. (2) He told them to wash each other's feet. (3) He told them to love one another as he had loved them. These words hold great power for us.

We in the church preach, teach, and work at loving one another. The liturgical churches are more faithful in participating frequently in Holy Communion, and the nonliturgical churches are more faithful in participating in foot-washing. We name the day we celebrate the Passover meal of Jesus Maundy Thursday because Maundy means command. "The title for Thursday in Holy Week derives through Old French Mantle from the Latin *mandatum novum*, a new commandment" (*The Westminster Dictionary of Worship*). Jesus commanded us to do these three things on the night before he died. He made these commands at the ritual Passover feast which the Lord God had commanded Moses and Aaron to do.

R&D *How do these commands have power and authority over you? How are you fulfilling them?*

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord Christ, for the commands you have given us in remembrance of your sacrifice on our behalf.*

**Read: Luke 23:26-46**

### **Good Friday**

The way of the cross is the way of true servanthood. It is the way in which we respond to the reconciling love of God. In this passage we see the groundwork and structure for a life of servanthood—the way of the cross. A closer look at Simon of Cyrene, the repentant thief, and Jesus Christ will reveal the way. We will look at these three in reverse order.

First, Jesus is the reconciling love of God. God loves us, the world, so much that He sent Jesus his Son to die for our sins (John 3:16). Jesus took the form of a servant and obediently died on the cross (Philippians 2:7-8).

Second, the repentant thief asks to be remembered when Jesus is in his reign. Jesus responds by saying yes: “I assure you this day you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43, NAB). Jesus can promise that because his own death opens the way to salvation—ultimate reconciliation.

Third, Simon of Cyrene, was “pressed into service.” Cyrene, modern Tripoli, was far from Jerusalem. Simon was undoubtedly a Jew who was fulfilling a lifelong ambition to eat one Passover in Jerusalem. At the moment the Roman centurion chose him to carry Jesus’ cross, it was probably a bitter experience for him. His great joy at being in Jerusalem was crushed in the humiliation of being forced to carry a cross for a common criminal. But many believe that references to a Rufus in Mark 15:21 and Romans 16:13 show that the servant cross-bearer became a person of honor in the Christian Church.

Thus, in the way of the cross we see Jesus whose death gave us salvation. Our reconciliation comes through accepting that salvation, being repentant like the thief and then being obedient like Simon of Cyrene.

*R&D How did you accept the salvation of Jesus? How has repentance and obedience to Jesus caused you to be his disciple?*

Prayer: *May we this day be especially conscious of your love for us, Lord Jesus. What more could you have done for us than this? Praise you, Blessed Lord.*

## Holy Saturday, April 16

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**Read: John 19:31-42**

### The Tomb

Walking with the Lord is joyful and victorious. However, we can become weary being his servant. We feel as if we are trapped in a tomb. Nothing is happening. It seems dark. Paul understood this weariness and wrote in Galatians 6:9, “Let us not grow weary of doing good; if we do not relax our efforts, in due time we shall reap our harvest” (NAB). We can rest our weariness with Jesus through meditating this Holy Saturday on Jesus in the tomb.

Meditate on this passage of Jesus’ being taken down from the cross. Picture yourself with him. Experience the costly spices and perfumed oils soothing your tired and irritable body. Imagine being carefully clothed in linen. Think about the beautiful garden in which the tomb resides.

Then meditate on the release of whatever holds you in the tomb—weariness—weariness enhanced or caused by fear, resentment, anxiety, hatred or whatever. When we are the Lord’s servant, the Lord doesn’t want bondages to inhibit our ministry for him. The more we work for him, the more we are aware of our own frailties and the more he sets us free to be unencumbered servants.

Take time to do this meditation. You will find yourself released, relaxed, and ready to celebrate the resurrection tomorrow and to reap the harvest in the coming months as Christ’s ambassador in his ministry of reconciliation.

R&D *What circumstance makes you feel as if you are in a tomb?*

Prayer: *Waiting, Lord, is often the hardest thing to do. We await your direction in our lives that we may be Easter people, full of joy and promise to serve you through others in the days ahead.*

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*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.* James 1:27

We forget or repress the fact that in the midst of their greatest days Christ's helpers were only "praying and then taking educated guesses" about what God's will was much of the time. So I think most of us will wait forever if we are waiting for a glorious religious feeling to guide us into significant places to help. I find I must commit myself to Christ, try to determine what God's will is for me, and then risk moving in the direction I come up with.

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**Note:** The Plan of God study now continues from March 1.

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### **Monday, April 18**

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**Read: Exodus 33:12-23**

#### **A Glimpse of Glory**

Once again, the theme of the faithful mediator who wrestles with God on behalf of Israel is in the forefront. There is a tone of high emotional intensity throughout, as Moses pleads with YAHWEH to find a way to remain faithful to His covenant promise, despite all the disobedience of His people. Israel's idolatry has shattered the covenant. The presence of a holy God in the midst of His people now represents a threat to their very existence. Yet Moses, the mediator, steadfastly throws God's promise back to His face, until he has secured the assurance of a restoration and a renewed covenant.

In preparation for the renewal of the covenant relationship, God yields to Moses' plea for a fresh vision of His glory. Standing in the cleft of a rock and shielded by God's hand, he is permitted a brief glimpse of the back side of God. This, we are given to understand, is as much of God's glory as any mere human can safely endure.

This partial concession to Moses' request is accompanied by the promise, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and I will proclaim the name YAHWEH before you." (Note that God's goodness and God's glory are equated.) Here is the true foundation for establishing a restored relationship, a new beginning. Of course, as Christians we believe that the ultimate disclosure of God's goodness,

and indeed all His attributes, have been given us in that one whose light “has shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God” (2 Corinthians 4:6).

*R&D How would you compare, or contrast, the picture of God that comes through in this passage with popular conceptions of who God is and how He may be approached?*

*Prayer: Through the example of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit, we thank You, Lord God, for Your intimate approachability by all of us who love You.*

**Tuesday, April 19**

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**Read: Exodus 34:1-10**

### **The Broken Covenant Renewed**

The narrative which began with the story of the golden calf now reaches its climax. The covenant, which was shattered, apparently beyond all repair, is now restored. God Himself will write on fresh tablets of stone the same words as were written on the first tablets. The instructions given and preparations described are very much as they were on the first occasion. A second chance, a fresh beginning, is being offered.

As the divine name and attributes are pronounced, Moses can only prostrate himself in worship. Here indeed is a wonder to provoke silence and stammering astonishment. A great divide has been crossed between the people who so confidently asserted, “All that YAHWEH has spoken we will do” (24:7) and the apostasy of the golden calf. God’s people will never be able to imagine that they have been singled out on the basis of some special merit, but will henceforth be able to look back only on a miracle of grace. Against all possibility God has found a way to be true to His work and promise, to continue to dwell in the midst of this “stiff-necked people.”

This miracle takes place not only for the sake of God’s people, but for the sake of all nations, “that they may see how awesome is the Lord’s work.”

And so it is! A redeemed people are God’s principal witness to His presence and reality in the world.

R&D *In what ways do God's people today provide a witness to His awesome work?*

Prayer: *In a world of doubt, Lord, help us to be a shining light of Your redeeming work.*

**Wednesday, April 20**

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**Read: Leviticus 16:1-22**

### **Atonement**

At the climax and center of Israel's sacrificial ritual stood the Day of Atonement, a solemn fast day which was a powerful reminder that their sin cut them off from access to God's presence. Only the high priest, on this one day of the year, could enter the holy of holies, and then not without the blood of an atoning sacrifice. Annual repetition of this procedure kept fresh the knowledge that a final and fully sufficient atonement was yet to be made.

In the meantime, while they waited for the fulfillment of all that was foreshadowed in this ritual they were to be instructed by its faithful observance. Here they could learn something about the costliness of atonement (sacrificial death), and about the mercy of the God who, in spite of His holy revulsion against sin, is determined to bridge the chasm that separates them from Himself. Here they could learn that sin must be finally dealt with by being carried away into the realm of death. Here they could learn to see sin as God sees it.

We, for our part, are privileged to live in the age of fulfillment. Jesus Christ, our "great high priest," has entered "once for all" into the holy of holies, having poured out for us the "blood that cleanses from all sin." On him has been laid the sins of the world... and for any and all who would have it so, they have been carried away, "as far as the east is from the west."

R&D *Do you think the message of this text is easy or hard to accept? Why?*

Prayer: *May we never take lightly Your forgiveness, Lord God, that Your Son provided for us through his most precious death on our behalf.*

**Thursday, April 21**

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**Read: Leviticus 18:1-5; 19:1-2, 9-18**

**“Be Holy”**

Two things stand out here: the solemn proclamation, “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy,” and the repeated refrain, “I am the Lord (your God).” The standards shaping the lives of God’s people are not to be derived from the world around but solely from the character and will of the one who has entered into covenant with them, declaring “you shall be my people and I will be your God.” The whole of their lives, both in the ethical and the ritual dimension, must be a reflection of who God is. Indeed, obedience to God’s laws is to be the source of life itself: “By doing which a man shall live.” Of course, the unstated corollary is that living outside God’s law is a journey into death.

God’s people are to be known by traits such as compassion for the poor and the powerless, faithfulness to their word, a passion for justice, the willingness to forego the joy of revenge, and the readiness to serve one’s neighbor. Why? Because in this way the God who has named them His people, and named Himself their God, is honored and made visible and real to the world around. The distinction between God’s people and the world, with its values and behaviors, must be vivid and distinct. Whenever the people of God fade too easily into the background of the surrounding culture, we may be sure that their relationship with God is in need of renewal.

*R&D How sharply does the Christian community of which you are a part stand out from the world around? Where does it need to do better?*

*Prayer: I pray, Lord, that the world will know we are Christians by our love.*

**Friday, April 22**

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**Read: Leviticus 25:1-17**

**Jubilee**

Every seventh year in Israel’s calendar was to be a sabbatical year during which the land would be permitted to lie fallow, and the unattended growth left for the poor to glean. God’s people were thereby reminded that they possessed the land only as a trust under



God; indeed, that nothing they had was anything less than God's gift. The gratitude prompted by this realization was to move them to generosity.

Every fiftieth year (the culmination of seven sabbaticals), was to be proclaimed a jubilee. This was to be a year of liberty to all captives, the remission of all debts, the return of all property to its original owners, a year of homecoming. It was to be a year of great thanksgiving and of the exercise of faith in the God who provides for all our needs. It was to be a year of fresh beginning and all things made new, a year of jubilee.

Small wonder that the image of jubilee has worked its way into songs of praise and worship, especially spirituals that express the longing for heaven. But the Christian gospel is news about more than a coming jubilee in a life beyond this world; it proclaims that even now, in the midst of this life, there can be a taste and experience of the jubilee that will be ours at the consummation of all things. This is what Jesus proclaimed in his inaugural sermon in his hometown synagogue: "good news to the poor, release to captives...liberty for the oppressed...the year of the Lord's favor."

*R&D To what extent do you think that our churches are islands of the coming jubilee?*

*Prayer: How, Lord, can we bless someone with a jubilee experience today?*

**Saturday, April 23**

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**Read: Numbers 11:4-6, 18-23, 31-34**

**Judgment**

Once again, the faith that God is leading His people to a better land, that manna in the wilderness is better than the luxury and abundance of Egypt, begins to waver. Surely a God who really cared for them would not impose such hardships. Gratitude for God's provision in the wilderness is replaced by resentment and complaining. All God's past mercies are quickly forgotten in their sense of just grievance, their perception that somehow they are being cheated and shortchanged.

YAHWEH's response to this ingratitude is to promise the meat they have demanded, and in overwhelming abundance. But in this

case the answer to their prayer would come as a judgment. It is intriguing to note that the meal they were about to eat was to be regarded as a sacred meal in some sense. In preparation they were required to make themselves ritually clean, to “consecrate themselves.” Perhaps the implicit lesson is that the reception of God’s gift with an ungrateful heart brings a curse rather than a blessing.

The Scriptures elsewhere do not hesitate to remind us that the fulfillment of our desires can sometimes bring an unexpected and most unwelcome result. The psalm writers on several occasions hark back to this event as one in which God gave His people what they craved, but along with it sent His judgment (Psalm 78:27ff, 106:13ff). Be careful what you pray for!

*R&D What prayers offered up during your own pilgrimage are you now grateful were not granted?*

*Prayer: May our prayers always be from the heart and not motivated by selfish entitlement.*

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## **Sunday, April 24**

## **Sabbath Time**

*Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a guide to my path.* Psalm 119:105

If we are humble and obedient and just walk down the road ahead trying to be sensitive to God and other persons, we may help them find solutions to their problems and also a new kind of wholeness. Over the years when I’ve tried to live this way, I have found myself miraculously at the right place at the precise time to meet someone God has ready to come to him for help. Of course, this may be coincidence, but the coincidences increase remarkably when I am aware of people more than my programs.

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## **Monday, April 25**

**Read: Numbers 11:16-17, 26-30**

### **Eldad and Medad**

Eldad and Medad are not exactly household names, even among the biblically literate. Yet they are worth remembering. They represent a foreshadowing and foretaste of a glorious reality that is God’s ultimate purpose for all His people.

When Moses was discouraged, frustrated, and overwhelmed with the burden of leadership, the Lord’s instructions were that he

should appoint 70 elders who would be endowed with the same spirit that had been given to him, and who would thereby be equipped to share with him in the work of leadership and ministry to God's people. When the report comes to Moses that two of these new deputies are not exercising their new gift in the authorized place and circumstance, Joshua (perhaps out of a desire to see Moses' unique role protected) suggests that this activity should be immediately squelched. But the immediate retort, "Would that all God's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them," is a hope and dream that eventually becomes a prophecy (Joel 2:28-29).

The Christian gospel proclaims the fulfillment of that hope and prophecy. The same Spirit that rested upon and empowered Jesus our deliverer, and Moses, is now poured into the hearts of all believers, equipping them for works of ministry, to be prophets, spokesmen for God. We must beware lest we should in any way squelch that Spirit.

*R&D Why do you think that the Holy Spirit's power in God's people is not more clearly in evidence today?*

*Prayer: Lord Christ, you call all of your people into the ministry you carried out here on earth. Give us the incentive to find our gifts for ministry and put them into effective use.*

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**Tuesday, April 26**

**Read: Numbers 12:1-15**

**Man of Meekness**

Moses is here set forth as a man of supreme meekness. That this should be mentioned as a mark in his favor sets the Scriptures in stark contrast with pagan writers of that time, where meekness is rarely if ever commended. The pagans were impressed with the man of assertiveness who wasted no time in defending his rights when they were threatened.

The man of meekness in biblical terms is the man who is willing patiently to endure personal injury and unjust accusation, leaving personal vindication in God's hands so that he may devote himself un-distractedly and faithfully to God's call and commission.

With the meek God can have face-to-face open converse. With the meek at His service God can accomplish His purposes in the world.

Small wonder that God moves so quickly and decisively to vindicate Moses when his position as leader is challenged. The people of God must understand that Moses' lack of concern to defend or advance his personal status is precisely what uniquely sets him apart for the leadership he is called to exercise.

When we go to the New Testament, we discover that Jesus Christ is the man of meekness, par excellence (Matthew 11:28-30). As his disciples we are summoned to "learn of him," and as those who have received his Spirit, we are to look for the fruit of meekness (Galatians 5:22-23).

*R&D Can you tell about examples in your own life of individuals who have exemplified this unusual combination of strength and meekness?*

Prayer: *"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."*

### Wednesday, April 27

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**Read: Numbers 13:1-2, 25—14:4**

#### Fear

We are confronted with a story of disaster on the very edge of joy and fulfillment. In the struggle between fear and faith, it is fear that wins out. On the side of faith, the people have the memory of God's deliverance and protection in the past, along with His promise that this is "the land which I give to the people of Israel." On the side of fear, they are confronted by very tangible realities like fortified cities and a race of giants who make them feel as small as grasshoppers. The memory and promise fade quickly into oblivion in the face of these more present and visible realities. They quickly decide that leaving Egypt was a venture ill-conceived from the outset, and that a hasty return must immediately be arranged.

Our first instinct may be to be uncomprehendingly scornful of this loss of nerve at the critical moment. How could they so quickly begin to behave as though all that God had done for them had never happened? And yet, more sober reflection may reveal to us that this is in fact all too typical of God's people in every age. We may even come to share Paul's insight that "all this was written down for our instruction, and therefore let him who thinks that he stands,

take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:11-12). Only a closer and deeper acquaintance with the Lord who personally guarantees the victory, if we will only trust Him, can protect us from this kind of spiritual disaster.

*R&D What remedy would you recommend to a friend whose faith is beginning to crumble in the face of mounting fears?*

*Prayer: Courage is a word that to talk about is much easier than demonstrating it. Help us, Lord God, to be bold when it is needful, relying on You for our strength.*

**Thursday, April 28**

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**Read: Numbers 14:16-45**

### **Irretrievable Loss**

The rest of Scripture looks back to this passage as one of dreadful warning about a real possibility in human life. The time of opportunity can pass us by. There is such a thing as irretrievable loss. This is not a welcome thought or a popular message, but it is nevertheless inescapable.

To be sure, the purpose and plan of God cannot be thwarted by human unfaithfulness. God will raise up a holy nation to reflect His glory and bring them into a land of promise and rest; but we can finally exclude ourselves from participation in that by failure to act on God’s word. There comes a time when the train is leaving the station and the opportunity to get on board slips away from us. For the generation that perished in the wilderness, repeated refusal to trust God on the basis of what they had witnessed of His glory resulted in the loss of the blessing that could have been theirs.

The psalmist pleads with any and all who will hear, “O that today you would harken to his voice” (Psalm 95). In the New Testament the writer to the Hebrews picks up the refrain, “Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts...but exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’, that none of you may be hardened” (Hebrews 3:7,13).

Are we hearing God’s voice now? Then the opportunity to respond is still open.

R&D *When, in your life, do you think God may have been exasperated or grieved at your hardness of heart?*

Prayer: *May we be in such close relationship with You, Lord God, that we will hear the call of Your voice to do or not do the possibilities before us, nor miss the opportunities You give us to serve You.*

**Friday, April 29**

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**Read: Numbers 22:1-6, 13-35**

### **A Jackass Speaks**

A modern reader is likely to be troubled by questions such as: “Why does God seem to keep changing His mind on the issue of permission and approval for Balaam’s cooperation with Balak?” and, “How could a true prophet of God be as questionable a character as Balaam appears to be?”. But, in fact, what changes is neither God’s purpose (to bless Israel) nor His opinion of Balaam’s self-serving duplicity as worthy of His divine anger. Rather, what we see is a God who can work His purposes regardless of changing human circumstance. So far as the second question is concerned, the Scriptures tell of more than one instance where an individual acts as a true prophet at one moment and as an absolute scoundrel the next (John 11:49-52).

The fatal flaw in Balaam’s character is revealed in the words “what more” (v.19). If he had truly meant the high-sounding words of verse 18 (“for a house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the Lord”), then verse 19 is a non sequitur. God has already made it perfectly clear what His will is.

Of course, Balaam is hardly the first person in the world’s history to try to have it both ways with God, to pretend that his heart is completely bent on the doing of God’s will when in reality he is seeking all along to bend God’s will to his own. The New Testament does not hesitate to warn us against “the way of Balaam” (2 Peter 2:15, 16). The real jackass in the story is the one with two legs.

R&D *In what area of your life are you most tempted to seek to bend God’s will to suit your own?*

Prayer: *Remove all deceit from me, Lord, that I may be true to You.*

**Read: Numbers 25:1-11**

### **Jealous for God**

Once again Israel had provoked God's anger by open and flagrant idolatry. Consorting with the cult prostitutes of the surrounding peoples was an act of spiritual harlotry—disloyalty to the God whose unfailing commitment and loyalty to them was ever that of a faithful husband. The offence was a capital offence because at stake was their very existence as God's people.

As the people are weeping in sorrow, a man swaggers up with a Midianite woman on his arm, and Phinehas, wild with a sense of outrage and grief, runs them both through with a spear.

The biblical word for this kind of devotion to God's honor is "zeal," sometimes called jealousy for God. The Bible commends this quality as our appropriate response to God's single-minded and jealous devotion to us. The violence of this story may shock us (who among us would recommend such measures as a form of church discipline?) yet we are clearly given to understand that our passion to defend the honor of our God should not be any less than was that of Phinehas.

Jesus, in the New Testament, is described as a man consumed with zeal for God (John 2:17). How about us? Does a similar passionate concern for God's glory possess us? Would it not be true to say that this quality is too often conspicuous only by its absence? Are we not called to repent of this lack of zeal?

*R&D What do you think is needed to restore and strengthen the zeal of God's people?*

*Prayer: Our devotion to You, Lord God, should be as limitless as Your love is for us.*

# Reflections