



# Knowing Jesus

## Lenten Study

### Day 1

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**Read: Matthew 3:1-17**

#### Knowing Jesus

Over the centuries, writers have described Jesus in a great many ways. He has been called a great prophet, a great teacher, a healer, and a miracle worker. Because of the enduring quality of his parables, he also has been described as a great storyteller.

Those who followed him, while they knew him in all these roles, grew beyond all that and began to see him, not for what he said or did, but for who he was. They came to know Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God. To be sure, all these lesser designations are accurate. He did prophesy. He did teach and heal and perform miracles. The significance of these, however, can be fully seen only by knowing him as his followers came to know him, as Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God. That knowledge and belief is the vital key through which everything he said and did can be properly understood. Without that knowledge and belief, nothing he said or did has anything more than passing value.

In this Lenten series, we will look at some of the things that Jesus said—that we may come to know him better. We hope to describe them in two ways. We will put his words in the context in which they were spoken and try, in our imperfect way, to understand them as he intended them to be understood. We will also try to see them in their eternal context as the words, not of a great teacher alone, but as the Christ who transcends time and space. Mostly, we will try to present these words as though Jesus were speaking them to us—for indeed, he is.

For us, and we hope for you, this will be a devotional exercise more than an intellectual one. We offer it in these forty days of Lent in the hope that it will contribute to preparing all of us to participate more fully in his resurrection.

*R&D When you picture Jesus in your imagination, what images most readily come to mind? Prophet? Miracles Worker? Teacher? Healer? Son of God? Other? What do you think draws you to your favorite image?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, we hear you as a prophet and teacher. We see you as a miracle worker and storyteller. Lead us, we pray, to worship you more fully as the Son of God, our Savior.*

### Day 2

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**Read: Luke 2:41-52**

#### A Little Child Shall Lead Them

The four Gospels record almost nothing about the childhood of Jesus. Luke, who was a personal friend to Mary, the mother of Jesus, gives us one brief glimpse. When Jesus was twelve years old, his family journeyed to Jerusalem, as they had every year, to celebrate the great Feast of the Passover. They came from Nazareth in a caravan of friends and neighbors and returned home in the same caravan. Going home, however, Jesus wasn't with them. He was such a

responsible boy his parents assumed he was with his cousins or friends in the caravan. But supper-time came and Jesus was not to be found. Quickly returning to Jerusalem, the two frantic parents searched everywhere for him but to no avail. Then on the third day, exhausted by their vain search, they were led to the Temple where they found him. He was discussing theology with the learned rabbis and doctors. You can almost hear the questions of his exasperated but deeply relieved parents. “Where have you been?” “We have looked all over for you.” “How could you do this to us?” To all of which Jesus replied, “*Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?*”

Clearly, Jesus was a spiritually precocious child, a spiritual genius in the making. And, while at this stage in his life, he did not know of his singular uniqueness as the “*only begotten Son of the Father,*” nor what his future would hold, he did know one thing: The answers to the deepest questions of life are sought most productively in the midst of the worshiping community. Jesus went to the Temple to explore and to learn and to interact with others who were exploring and learning as well. It was, in part, because he and his family were a regular part of a worshiping community that Jesus grew “*in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man.*” It is an example we all would do well to follow.

R&D *In what ways do you see your spiritual life growing in this Lenten season?*

Prayer: *O Holy Spirit, direct and inspire your church, and me as a part of it, to be that community of faith in which all can grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man. Amen*

### Day 3

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**Read: Matthew 4:1-11**

#### Following the Roadmap

It is said that the devil is in the details. It was at his baptism that Jesus first glimpsed his unique Sonship and his call to ministry. But what kind of ministry should it be? To seek answers, Jesus was sent on a 40-day spiritual retreat in the wilderness.

He was tempted to relieve the poverty and hunger of the world. “*...command that these stones be made bread.*” It was a real temptation since there was a vast gulf in the Roman Empire between the incredibly rich and the desperately poor. But filling people’s stomachs was not his aim. His aim was to fill people’s hearts with love for his Father and, thus, to change their behavior toward each other. So he said “no” to that.

He was tempted to perform public miracles and quickly gather a huge army of followers who could be molded into a powerful political and social force. “*If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down*” (from the pinnacles of the Temple). Think of all the people who would be impressed and would instantly become your followers! But it was changing the character of people permanently, and not just capturing their attention temporarily, that Jesus was after. Changing people’s characters would change the world. Capturing their attention would last only until the miracles stopped. So Jesus said no to that.

Finally, the devil promised him control over the nations of the world if he would just “*fall down and worship me.*” It was Jesus’ deepest and most insidious temptation. It tempted him to believe that the end he sought was so critical that the means he used to achieve it were secondary. But the value of the thing to be achieved never justifies using less than worthy means to achieve it. So, again, he said “no.”

Jesus rejected each of these potential avenues to power with a Bible verse on his tongue. Properly understood, the Bible gives us the authentic truth about God, the values that will endure,

and clear guidelines about how to live. In Jesus' time of temptation, the Hebrew Bible was his beacon of truth.

No trip is ever safe or sure if we don't have a reliable roadmap to get us there.

R&D *What resources do you turn to for guidance when you are faced with difficult temptations?*

Prayer: *O Holy Spirit, be near to me when temptations to stray from your ways begin to look attractive to me, and lead me to that better way you would have me go. I pray this through Jesus Christ, our Lord.*

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## Day 4

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**Read: Mark 1:9-15**

### **Announcing a New Kingdom**

When Neil Armstrong, the first man ever to walk on the surface of the moon, stepped out of his spacecraft, he said, "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." Decades later we remember these words because the first words a person speaks on any significant occasion are always very special.

The public ministry of Jesus was about to begin. He had been baptized by John the Baptist. He had heard a voice from heaven identifying him as "*my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.*" He has worked out the shape of his ministry in his temptations in the wilderness. Now it was time for him to begin his work. He began by proclaiming the core message of God: "*The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the Gospel.*"

Centuries before, his Father had initiated a bold ministry of reconciliation with the call of Abraham to found a new nation of people who would become, uniquely, God's people. Over 1800 years of patient shaping, this nation, imperfect as it would always be, had grown to become the human voice proclaiming God's message of repentance and salvation to the world. In the final act in this long drama of redemption God Himself would enter into His world and establish His Kingdom on earth. In the person and ministry of His Son Jesus the planting of the Kingdom of God could now be proclaimed. This Kingdom was not to be one of nobles and armies and the human domination of others. God's Kingdom would be a Kingdom of faith and love, a Kingdom of forgiveness and redemption, a Kingdom of service to others. Wherever Jesus was, that was where the Kingdom would be. The price of entrance into that Kingdom was the act of genuine repentance. From this point on, everything Jesus would say and do would be an elaboration on this fundamental core message. "Repent, believe in me as God's Son, and become a citizen of my Kingdom." That is still the call of Jesus to the world today.

R&D *What changes in your life do you think you would need to make in order for you to live as a citizen of God's Kingdom?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, in this Season of Lent, help me to see myself as you see me and increase in me the desire to repent. I believe in you as my Savior, and I want to live daily as a citizen of your Kingdom on earth.*

## Day 5

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**Read: Mark 2:1-12**

### The Great Surprise!

Almost from the beginning of his ministry, Jesus drew great crowds of people who came to hear him. On one early occasion, Jesus was teaching in a friend's house, and it was jam-packed. The ability of Jesus to heal was already well known and four men brought their paralyzed friend in the hope that Jesus might heal him. Not able to get in, they climbed to the roof, removed some of the clay tiles and, on a makeshift stretcher, lowered the paralyzed man before Jesus. And here is the first surprise. Instead of healing him, Jesus said, "*Son, your sins are forgiven.*" Everyone was startled and when questioned, Jesus delivered his second surprise. "*Which is easier to say, 'Son, your sins are forgiven', or to say 'Rise, take up your pallet and walk?'*" Then Jesus touched the paralytic and, at his command, the man picked up his bed and walked away.

Jesus understood better than we do that forgiveness which leads to a clean heart is more important to our health than healing that leads to a sturdy body. Building a healthy body helps us live an active life. Developing a forgiving and forgiven heart helps us live a rich and deeply satisfying life.

It is sometimes easier to nurse a broken body back to health than to nurse a broken relationship back to life. When we are sick or hurt, we are quick to put ourselves in the hands of the medical profession. We are often not so quick to put grievances and hurts and slights, real or imagined, in the hands of God and let them be healed. Sometimes it is not easy to say to another person, "Please forgive me" in the hope of hearing the response, "You are forgiven." Yet, as Jesus says, while healing may mend our bodies, it is forgiving and being forgiven that allows us to walk with others in newness of life.

*R&D Make a list of the two or three people you most need to forgive or from whom you most need to seek forgiveness. As a Lenten discipline, go to those people and invite them to join you in making it right.*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, as you forgave the paralytic, I pray you in your mercy will forgive me of my sins, known and unknown. And strengthen me, O Lord, to offer the same forgiveness to those who ask it of me.*

## Day 6

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**Read: John 2:1-11**

### Why Jesus Performed Miracles

Houdini was a great magician. He could free himself from virtually any kind of shackle that man could put on him. And he became famous for it. David Copperfield also is a great magician. Because the hand is quicker than the eye, he is able to do miraculous tricks that amaze his audiences both in theaters and on television. And he has become famous for it.

Jesus was able to perform miracles. He did them neither by contortions of the body nor by sleight of hand. He did them through the power of God that flowed in and through him. While he might have become famous for them, he chose not to allow that to happen. Jesus set the tone for all his miracles with the first one in Cana of Galilee. At a wedding, when the wine ran out before the reception ended, Jesus took six pots of water and transformed the water into wine, the best wine at the reception. It was his first miracle.

Actually it was two miracles. The changing of the water into wine was only one. The second miracle was that Jesus cared enough about the embarrassment of the bridal couple that he used his power to save them from it. The fact is that this concern for individual people is at the heart of all of Jesus' miracles. Jesus fed the 5000 with five loaves and two fish because people were hungry. Jesus healed the woman with an issue of blood for twelve years because she was suffering. Jesus healed the leper because he had become a social outcast. Jesus never sought fame as a miracle worker. He used his power of miracles principally to relieve suffering and pain.

It is sometimes difficult to think of Jesus as interested in us individually. The world is so big and we are so small. But when I wonder about that, I look at the miracles and why Jesus performed them. Then I know. He cares about you and me now just as he cared deeply about those people then. It was not his miracles that made him famous. Jesus became famous for his caring and love without limits. That has always been his best miracle of all.

*R&D Do you believe that miracles continue to happen in our day and age? Have you experienced or seen one of God's miracles in our generation?*

*Prayer: O Triune God, creator and sustainer of the universe, it is beyond my knowing how You can care for each of us individually, and care even for me. Yet, with all my heart I believe You do, and I thank You that You are a God of love without limit, shown to us by Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.*

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## Day 7

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**Read: Matthew 5:1-12**

### Blessedness, Part 1

There are times during the year when it seems appropriate to take stock of the good things in our lives. We follow the advice of the old gospel song, "Count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done." On our birthdays, it seems appropriate to be thankful for the gift of life and for all those persons who have been a blessing in our lives. Often at Thanksgiving services we will be urged to take the time to actually write out the things for which we are thankful. And the gratitude that we express as believers is given to the God in whom we believe. We recognize that all that is good in our lives comes from Him. He is the source of all blessings.

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Matthew has gathered together a collection of the teachings of Jesus. These are not teachings that Jesus taught only once, but his best-known teachings that he habitually taught. At the beginning of these teachings, Matthew has placed the Beatitudes, a title derived from the word "*blessed*" that appears in each characteristic of a disciple of Jesus.

These traits that are to be found in each believer are not a "pious hope of what shall be" but rather they "are congratulations on what is now" (William Barclay). To be "*poor in spirit*" or "*pure in heart*" is not something that we expect to be in the future but rather they are characteristics that describe the way we are to be *now*, present in us today and tomorrow. Although we cannot express them perfectly in our lives, these traits are indicators of those persons who choose to live in the kingdom of God.

The Beatitudes then become not some beautifully poetic description of the perfect disciple, but rather a mirror in which to see ourselves, a standard by which we can gauge our own faith.

R&D *As we read through the Beatitudes, what qualities do we find in our own lives? Which qualities are missing from our lives and what can we do about that lack?*

Prayer: *“Come, Thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing Thy grace! Streams of mercy never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.” Hymn 686. Gracious Father, I want to live among the blessed, to carry with me the blessedness that comes from You. Develop in me those traits that find favor with You.*

## Day 8

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**Read: Matthew 5:1-12**

### Blessedness, Part 2

We are very apt to praise God in our worship services for the things that we see as blessings in our lives. “Praise God from whom all blessings flow,” we sing. “All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above,” we sing. We think of the blessings of home and family and recovery from illness and of job security and living in this country, and we are truly thankful.

It is therefore startling when we look at the list of blessings of which Jesus speaks in the Beatitudes. George Buttrick described the Beatitudes as a “gauntlet flung down before the world’s accepted standards.” These are not things that we would ordinarily include on our thanksgiving lists.

This list includes: “*Blessed are the poor in spirit,*” those who feel their spiritual need and remember their dependence of God.... “*Blessed are those who mourn,*” those who are filled with sadness for their own sin and unworthiness and the sin in the world around them.... “*Blessed are the meek,*” those who have a sense of humility and live in reverent obedience towards God and with good will towards others.... “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,*” those who see the right way to live and have an intense desire to live that way themselves.... “*Blessed are the merciful,*” those who understand that they have received God’s mercy and behave towards others with sympathy and loving kindness.... “*Blessed are the pure in heart,*” those who are single-minded in their devotion to God.... “*Blessed are the peacemakers,*” those who are at peace with God and use every opportunity to bring peace between others.... “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake,*” those who suffer because they stand up for their faith and uphold God’s standards of truth and justice.

The joyfulness, the happiness, the fulfillment of self that comes to us as we open our lives to the possibility of living life this Beatitude way comes from our connectedness to God. We live with Him as the center of our being and we are blessed.

R&D *It is said that all of the qualities in the Beatitudes were found in the life of Jesus. Which ones do you see in his life that are particularly meaningful to you? Why do they attract you?*

Prayer: *We would live in Your kingdom, O Heavenly King, and we need the grace that You alone can give, to help us live a Beatitude life. Where we are strong, O God, we thank You, and where we are weak, we pray that You will strengthen and guide us so that we may be more like Your son, Jesus.*

## Day 9

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**Read: Matthew 6:25-33**

### First Things First

We live in a materialistic society that is obsessed with and anxious about doing the “in” things. I see this societal influence so clearly as I watch my granddaughter as she transitions from junior high school to high school. One day she was a little girl wearing little girl clothes, and then suddenly the clothes were different and bought from special shops. They needed to be the “in” things. Each season the newspaper prints articles that tout the newest fashions. And lest we think this is a women’s thing, we discover that men are exactly the same when it comes to cars or tools or electronic gadgets and gizmos.

Jesus found the same focus on the material world in his society. In one of his most memorable and beautiful teachings he began, *“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?”*

There are times in our lives when we find this teaching about anxiety almost impossible to follow. Any major upheaval in family life, a change in job, a marriage or divorce, a life-threatening illness, or a child going off to college, and we worry and become anxious. Jesus equates our anxiety with our lack of faith. He says that as God takes care of the natural world, the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, so also He will take care of us as well. He assures us that God knows what we need.

Henry Nouwen writes, “What counts is where our hearts are. When we worry, we have our hearts in the wrong place. Jesus asks us to move our hearts to the center, ‘his kingdom,’ where all other things fall into place.”

When we take those things that are sapping our strength and, in faith, turn them over to God and rely on His power within us to deal with them, they no longer become the focus of our lives. Faith in God releases us to deal with our problems in new and positive ways.

*R&D Where do you turn in the difficult periods of life to find the strength and direction for your problems? How do you do this?*

*Prayer: I am so often prone to anxiety, O Lord, and I know that it is a failure of my faith. “I believe; help my unbelief!” Help me to center my life on You and recognize that You will give me everything and anything that I truly need.*

## Day 10

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**Read: John 6:26-40**

### Bread of Life

Using the images of everyday life, Jesus revealed himself to those who would listen. In the great I AM passages, he laid claim to divinity by using the words God spoke to Moses on the mount of Horeb when calling him to be the deliverer of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. God identified Himself to Moses, *“I AM WHO I AM,”* (YHWH, Yahweh, Exodus 3:14). The name contained the very essence, the personhood of God. It described “his eternal power and unchanging character.” Now Jesus uses this name for himself and adds descriptive words: bread, light, alpha and omega, water, meek and lowly, resurrection and life, shepherd, door, vine, way and truth and life. This passage contains Jesus’ words: *“I AM the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not*

*hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.” “For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”*

In our affluent world where the local supermarket offers us foods from all over the world, bread is relegated to a lowly place. Our penchant for fad diets often eliminates bread entirely. It is only because we are so wealthy that we have lost sight of the value of bread. Yet all around the world, various cultures depend on their bread for sustenance. It is the thing that sustains life.

One memorable picture of the war in Bosnia was of a television crew that had shot pictures of a bakery that was still operating amidst war-damaged streets and buildings. When asked why they continued to work in such a dangerous area, the men working in the bakery responded, “Because without our bread, our people would starve to death.”

The great claim that Jesus is making is that he will sustain life. It is not an offer of physical food, but of spiritual food. *“The true bread from heaven”* is relationship with the Father. Jesus is saying that that relationship is available only through him. We can exist in this world without Christ, but true life is found only through him.

R&D *It is said that we are hungry and unsatisfied until we know God. Jesus makes God known to us. How do we find these ideas to be true in our own lives?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, help me to feed on you. Let your presence be the bread that sustains my spirit. Let it be as necessary and valuable to me as the physical bread that I eat at table.*

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## Day 11

**Read: Matthew 11:28-30**

### Custom-Made Yokes

When our younger son was in law school, the college paper interviewed some of the law students and asked them why they had chosen law as a profession. Our son answered, “I have watched my father serve other people whenever and wherever he can all his life, and I want to do the same with my life.” He had learned from his father. Jesus asks us to let him teach us: *“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me for I AM meek and lowly.”*

Jesus was a carpenter (Mark 6:3), and in his occupation he had made many yokes. The yoke was a wooden frame that had a cross piece and two bows which fitted around the necks of the animals. A good carpenter would make the bow to fit each ox individually so that it did not irritate or chafe. The yoke forced the animals to work together. When a young ox was being trained, it would be paired with an older animal to learn how and what to do.

For the Jew, the Law was described as a yoke that would lead and direct each person in God’s way. But the yoke of the law was heavy and almost unbearable. Jesus says, *“For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”* To be yoked with Jesus is not some obligation laid upon us, but a voluntary choice: *“take,”* he says. When we choose to take the yoke of faith, we receive the peace that he alone can give. We can then live and walk through life as Jesus lived and walked by placing God the Father at the center of our lives. We can then try to do what God wills and what is right in His sight. His yoke is a yoke of love.

When we have accepted the yoke of Christ and live in the gentleness and lowliness that is his, we find *“rest for your souls.”* All of the conflict and pride of spirit and selfishness and guilt that we carry disappears, and we can rest in his presence.



R&D *Someone said, "The yoke of Christ is easy because it is lined with love." Believing that Christ loves us, and choosing to take up his yoke and walk in tandem with him, does not relieve us of the difficult and worrisome periods of life. What does it give us to help us in these hard times?*

Prayer: *There have been many times in my life, O Lord, when I have felt over-burdened by life's circumstances. Weary and defeated, I have turned to You for help. And always, always, You have responded. You have helped me carry my burdens, and You have comforted my spirit. Thank You for letting me walk with You.*

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## Day 12

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**Read: John 8:12-20**

### A Light in the Darkness

Many years ago, our family visited the Carlsbad Caverns in Oklahoma. These huge caverns have been carved out over many centuries by the persistent flow of underground streams. On our tour, while we were deep inside the caves, the guide asked us to hold hands with each other. Then having warned us, he turned out the lights. I had never been in total darkness before, nor do I ever want to be again. Standing in total darkness, even for a few seconds, is a frightening experience.

The central conflict described in the Bible is the battle between the forces of darkness represented by Satan and all the forces of evil, and the forces of light represented by our God who, in the creation, said, "*Let there be light*" (Genesis 1:3). The prize for which the battle is waged is for the possession of the souls of men.

During his ministry, Jesus declared himself as a combatant in that battle. In one of his many confrontations with the Pharisees, Jesus said to them, "*I AM the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life.*"

The image of light fits the ministry of Jesus perfectly.

Light reveals, as Jesus reveals the true character of God and the true nature of how human life can and should be lived.

Light exposes, as the character and teachings of Jesus expose those places in our characters that fall short of the potential that our creator God has build into us.

Light warms, as Jesus warms our consciences to see what is morally right and be drawn to it.

Light comforts, as Jesus walks with us in our pains and sorrows and in our disappointments, holding us up so that we will not be destroyed.

Light protects, as our faith in Jesus protects us from giving in to temptation and the false attraction of sin.

We, who believe in Jesus as our Lord and Master, live in the light of his presence. Never again can the darkness overcome us.

R&D *Thinking about Jesus as the light of the world, what other characteristics of light can you think of to describe his ministry?*

Prayer: *O Lord Jesus, the Light of the world, shine beside me to light my path in this life and shine ahead of me to be a beacon for me into the next.*

## Day 13

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**Read: John 10:1-15**

### The Shepherd

Standing in our hotel room on one of the high hills of Jerusalem, we could look out the window and see the Kidron Valley and the hills beyond. Each morning, like clockwork, we could watch a modern-day shepherd leading his sheep from the hill beyond to the valley below. If we were in our room during the day, we could see him moving the sheep from one area to another, watching over them. And when evening fell, we could see him leading his flock back to the place from whence they came. It was an unforgettable experience for it recalled so vividly these words of Jesus: *“I AM the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me...and I lay down my life for the sheep.”*

Jesus was a great storyteller and to make his teachings real and easy to remember, he used images that were familiar to his listeners. It is said that one picture is worth a thousand words. Jesus drew pictures in the minds of his listeners. When he described himself as a shepherd, not one of his listeners was confused about what he meant. They knew what a shepherd was and did. The shepherd protected his sheep even at danger to his own life. He led his sheep to places of safety. He found food and calm water for them. He cared for them when they were hurt or sick. He took them to and from the sheepfold. He was familiar with every sheep in his flock and able to call each one by name.

We all want what Jesus is promising when he uses the picture of the shepherd to identify himself. We want someone who will save us from all want, who will supply our daily needs. We desire someone who will keep us safe and who will walk with us through the dangerous valleys. We all want to live life not marginally, but *“abundantly.”* We want someone who will attend to our hurts. Most of all, we want someone with whom we can have an intimate relationship, someone who knows us personally.

*R&D How does this offer of Jesus to be the shepherd of your life have an impact on your life? What parts of his promise are especially important to you?*

*Prayer: If you have memorized the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, repeat it today. If you have not memorized it, look it up and read it...several times.*

## Day 14

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

### Ask, Seek, Knock

Have there been times in your life when the problems facing you seemed insurmountable...when there was just nothing you could do to change circumstances or alleviate the predicament? Of course you have, and so have I. Twice in this past decade of my life I have heard a doctor tell me that I had a life-threatening illness. Once I was told that I had breast cancer. Once I was told that I had an incurable lung disease. In each circumstance there was nothing that I could do except to follow the course of treatment prescribed by the doctor.

Yet there *was* something else that I could do. I could turn to the One who cared for me beyond any other and depend upon Him for the strength and power to get through dark and difficult days. William Barclay wrote, “Prayer is not flight; prayer is power. Prayer does not deliver a person from some terrible situation; prayer enables a person to face and to master the situation.”

Not all the hard times of life threaten our lives, but it is a certainty that we will face dark days and chaotic circumstances and ominous problems beyond our control. We will not have the answers. We will not have the resources. But *the* one great resource for the Christian is found in the promise of Jesus: “*Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you.*”

Jesus follows these words with a parable about a father who wants all good things for his children and will give them whatever they ask. My own experience is that God will do more than we ask. The breast cancer was arrested, and I am now cancer free. The lung diagnosis changed to something from which I will eventually recover. I asked only for the presence of the Father in my life, and with that presence came healing. How sad it is that so many of us wait for life-threatening problems. In all of life’s circumstances there is power and strength and healing available to us if we will only ask, seek, knock.

*R&D How regular are you in availing yourself of the power of prayer? What keeps you from tapping into this source of strength? Do you expect and look for answers? Why/Why not?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me to keep the lines of communication open through the presence of your Holy Spirit in my life. I desire to be with the Father, to talk with Him and to listen for His directions and answers.*

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## Day 15

**Read: Luke 6:46-49**

### Saying and Doing

Our oldest daughter possesses a proud, fiercely independent spirit. As a small child she had a mind of her own and wanted to do things her way. When this clashed with what we as parents deemed proper conduct for her, discipline was necessary. We discovered that the way to make her think about what she had done was to send her upstairs to her room, alone. Always, before much time had passed, she would come trudging down the stairs and say, “I’m sorry, Mommy,” and “I’ll never do it again.”

As supposedly mature Christians, we are not much different from that little girl. As we worship together in community, we say, “. . . we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. . . we are truly sorry.” And we are sorry for our sins of omission and commission, and we seek God’s help in overcoming our disobedience.

Jesus asks each one of us, “*Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and not do what I tell you?*” He further says that a life lived in obedience to him can face any crisis that life has to offer. A life that has its foundation laid through obedience to Jesus is a life that can endure.

There are periods in our lives when it is difficult to be obedient to Christ. There are times when the vacillations and vicissitudes of life imperil and threaten the comfort zone that we have built for ourselves and in which we live. During those times we are forced to examine what is important to us and how our Christian faith impacts our thoughts and actions. Like being sent up to our bedroom alone, we must think through how we will live our lives. Can we call Jesus “Lord, Lord” and not live by the values and standards to which he calls us? It is the crisis times that challenge our faith. It is the crisis times that also reveal our obedience.

R&D *A modern-day saint said, "Only he who believes is obedient; only he who is obedient believes" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer). How has God used the crisis times in your life and mine to teach us obedience?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, help me to seek your will in all that I do and say as you sought the Father's will in your life. Teach me true unquestioning obedience and help me to grow in trust and faith in you.*

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## Day 16

**Read: Luke 10:25-37**

### Worship and Works

The most effective teaching method that Jesus used was to tell imaginary stories called "parables." Each parable led the listeners to see a clear and unavoidable truth. Nowhere is that more evident than in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The point of the parable is that true religion will always lead us to the service of others. Jesus makes that truth crystal clear when he chooses a priest and a Levite, religious men by vocation and probably on their way to worship in Jerusalem, as the villains, and a Samaritan, a member of a tribe ostracized by the Israelites on the grounds of religious impurity, as the hero.

The relationship between worship and good works has been a perennial topic of interest since the beginning of the Christian faith. St. Paul makes it very clear that salvation is by faith and not by works. "...a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ...because by works of the law shall no man be justified" (Galatians 2:15-16). Sometime later the writer of James suggests a different emphasis. "*What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead*" (James 2:14-17).

Worship is our primary activity as Christians. But genuine worship inevitably leads the worshipper to see and respond to the needs of others around him. If it does not, it is not genuine worship.

A minister was called to serve a parish in the Midwest. When he arrived, the sign in front of the church said, "Divine Service" and listed the worship schedule. Within the first week, he changed the sign to read, "Divine Worship." At the bottom of the sign he wrote, "Divine service begins when the worship is ended."

Jesus made that abundantly clear, in the parable, when he spoke to all of us: "*Go and do thou likewise.*"

R&D *How do you carry out the mandate that Jesus has given all Christians to help others in his name?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you were always quick to see and serve the needs of people around you. Deepen my commitment, O Lord, that my heart may also be opened to others and, following your example, strengthen me that I may better serve them in your name.*

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## Day 17

**Read: Matthew 13:44-46**

### The Precious Thing

A featured segment on the Today Show was about some of the largest diamonds in the world and some of the most expensive rings and necklaces ever made. We watched, fascinated, as

the expert explained the cut and color and value of each item. Such stones are called “precious” because they cost a great deal of money and are therefore of great value.

Two concise clear parables of Jesus describe *the* thing that he considers to be of the most value, the most precious thing: “*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field...on finding one pearl of great value.*” For Jesus, living the kingdom life under the rule of God the Father and having a relationship with Him was the most valuable thing in life. It was so precious that everything else was considered secondary. It was so precious that all other things could and should be sacrificed in order to attain it.

Our modern society is not geared to kings and kingdoms. We watch the monarchy in England with great interest, but most Americans see it as quaint and out-dated and of little real value. We tend to place less value on authority than many other cultures, and value our independence above all things.

Jesus taught of the King and His kingdom. His first recorded preaching said, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*” (Mark 1:15). His own life was one under the authority of the Father and of obedience to Him. “*My food is to do the will of him who sent me...*” (John 4:34).

There are two ways that the kingdom life presents itself to us. We can either stumble across it in the course of everyday living, as did the man who discovered the treasure, or we can search for it, as did the person who found the pearl of great price. However the kingdom life presents itself to us, we are faced with a choice. Do we want in or out? Recognizing its great value, we then must be ready to do, with “*joy,*” whatever is required to attain the life in the kingdom.

R&D *With what attitudes do I live my Christian faith? Is it pain or pleasure for me?*

Prayer: *Lord God, daily I am aware of how other things in my life, people or things, gain priority and of how I relegate You to second place. Change my heart and mind, Lord, so I may joyfully see Your kingdom as the most precious thing and more fully enter into it.*

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## Day 18

**Read: Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23**

### Fruitful Soil

Growing up in a farming community in the Midwest, I found spring to be one of the most exciting times of the year. After the winter snows were gone and the ground plowed and ready, the spring planting began. And whether the seeds were oats or wheat in the fields, or carrots and lettuce for the garden, they were bought and planted. With the expected rain and sunshine there would soon be a harvest.

Jesus knew the agriculture of his day. He and his disciples may well have been walking along a field watching a farmer sowing the seed for his crop by broadcasting the seed by handfuls on the ground. The scene became the background for one of Jesus’ most famous parables, “*A sower went out to sow.*”

At first reading, the parable seems discouraging. Of the four kinds of soils that Jesus describes, three yielded little or no harvest. Seed fell along the path and was eaten by birds. Seed on rocky and shallow ground was unable to grow to maturity. Seed on the soil filled with thorns was crowded out and had no chance of bearing grain. Only the fourth soil, the good soil, yielded grain.

In the explanation of the parable, the seed is equated to the “*word of the kingdom.*” Some hear the message of the kingdom and simply do not understand it and reject it. Some hear the message and respond to it enthusiastically, but the faith they possess quickly fades away. Some

hear and accept the message, but the cares and attractions of the world crowd out the faith they possess. It is only in the good soil that the message grows and flourishes.

The sower is a parable of hope. There were many then, and are many today, who hear the message of Jesus and never believe in him or lose the faith that they have. But the assurance of the parable is that there will be those who hear and who live for Christ and share the message of his life with others.

*R&D As good soil, we bear fruit for Christ through the witness of the way we live and the words we say. What is the state of my witness for Christ? Am I willing to share the good news of my faith in him with others?*

Prayer: *“Open my eyes in power, I pray. Give me the strength to speak today, Someone to bring, dear Lord, to Thee; Use me, O Lord, use even me.”*

## Day 19

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**Read: Matthew 19:16-23, Luke 16:10-13, Acts 20:35**

### **Is Our Money a Spiritual Matter?**

As the deadline for filing income tax drew near, the media was filled with advice about preparing our tax returns. After the April deadline, one network focused a brief segment upon the spike in divorce rates immediately after tax times. As couples prepared their taxes, money and the way it was earned and spent came to the forefront of the relationship, and for some became the obstacle over which the marriage broke apart.

Money! *Money* is such a little word, and yet how important to all of us. For many it is the goal in life—how to earn it and how to keep it. For many, who they are and the value they place on themselves are tied up with their money. So it was with the rich young man. When faced with choosing his possessions or following Jesus, he chose to keep his money.

Jesus was aware of the place that money and possessions played in the thinking of people. It is said that money was the subject that Jesus talked about most, and that over half of his parables dealt with possessions and the role that they played in a person’s life. Jesus’ concern was that each person should have a relationship with the Father, and anything that stood in the way of that relationship had to be faced and dealt with. He said, *“No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other... You cannot serve God and mammon.”* This is why what we think about and do with our money is a spiritual matter. Money can either lead to devotion to God, or it can draw us away from Him.

If the way that we think about and use our money is so important to the kind of people we are, a spiritual barometer of our faith in God, then we need guidelines to manage it. Here, too, words of Jesus guide us: *“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”*

For the Christian, “giving” is a way of life. Jesus urges us to help the “weak,” to help those who have less than we have. In our society today, the good and just causes are endless, and we are called to do our part.

*R&D What we do with our money sets the priorities for our lives. It also reveals the priorities of our lives. What part does your money play in your relationship with God? What do you do specifically with your money to put it to work for God?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you were so aware of how what we possess influences what we think and do. Help me to keep my priorities straight and to use my money for the furtherance of your kingdom in my life and in the world around me.*

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## Day 20

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**Read: John 14:18-24**

### Being at Home

*Home* is a word filled with a thousand meanings. If we were to try to count the number of songs and poems and articles and books about what a home is and what significance it has in a person's life, we would find it an impossible task. Someone said, "Home is where the heart is," meaning it is a place that we love and where we find love. We sense a ring of truth in that simple phrase. Robert Frost deepened the meaning of the word when he wrote, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in...I should have called it something you somehow (do not have) to deserve." It is the place where you can find safe haven, no matter how the world treats you.

The disciples were desolate at the thought that Jesus would leave them. He had been "home" for them, that place where love is found, where purpose is given and where comfort and acceptance is always ready at hand. Like a parent who prepares a child to move to a new home, and makes assurances that the new home will be even better than the old, Jesus prepares his disciples for a new home. "*If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.*"

Our love and obedience allow us to walk through an always-open door into a relationship with God. It is the Father who will come to us and make His home with us. Henri Nouwen wrote, "Home is the center of my being where I can hear the voice that says, '*You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests*'...the same voice that gave life to the first Adam and spoke to Jesus, the second Adam." This is the relationship that Jesus offers to his disciples and to everyone who believes in him. We have a home where we are beloved and where God's favor blesses us joyfully and abundantly.

R&D *A Negro spiritual ends with the words, "goin' home to be with God." What images does such a phrase convey to you? How does it make you feel?*

Prayer: *Lord God, the houses in which we live are transitory. We move from one to another in this mobile society. But each house can be a home if You are there. It is Your presence that makes the difference, and we thank You that Your love surrounds us.*

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## Day 21

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**Read: John 15:12-17**

### A Commandment to Love

The bumper sticker on the car in front of me said, "My religion is loving kindness." Something I had once heard flashed through my mind: "A part of kindness consists in loving people more than they deserve" (Joseph Joubert). And here is the difficulty: while desiring love ourselves, we often find ourselves reluctant to give love freely and wholeheartedly. It is at this point in our lives that these words of Jesus, "*love one another as I have loved you*" become the most challenging of all his words.

Jesus asks of his followers a love that is founded on sacrifice: *“to lay down his life for his friends.”* The New Testament is a record of how Jesus himself lived out this kind of love. He was never too tired or busy or stressed or over-burdened or too self-important to attend to the needs of others. Anyone, rich or poor, young or old, sick or sick at heart, was welcomed into his presence and, insofar as they were willing to open their hearts to him, received his love and had their needs met.

As believers, we are asked by Jesus to allow this same kind of love, a gift from the Holy Spirit, to enter our lives and permeate all that we do and say and think. *“This is my commandment,”* Jesus says. Love is not an option for the Christian, but it must be the controlling force of his life.

When we allow the love that Christ gives to each of us to move to those around us, we become the beneficiaries of great and wondrous blessings. We become the friend of Jesus. With Jesus as our friend, our minds and hearts are open to new understandings, new possibilities, and new opportunities in our lives.

We understand that we are chosen by God to be His beloved children, and we each have our special place with Him. It is a place of value and purpose as we bear fruit for Him. We are given the ultimate blessing and privilege of communication with the Father, *“whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.”*

*R&D Love, friendship, chosenness, fruitfulness, and prayer are gifts given to us through our relationship with Jesus Christ. What part does each of these things play in your spiritual life? How do you nourish them?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, we thank you for the great love that you give to each one of us. Forgive me when I fail to share your love with others. Help me to grow ever closer to you that I may love others.*

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## Day 22

**Read: John 15:6-11, 16:22**

### A Joy-Filled Life

Many years ago a memorable poster was published featuring Snoopy from the Peanuts comic strip. Snoopy was lying in one of his habitual poses on top of his doghouse, and the caption underneath said, “Happiness is a warm puppy.” Not everyone in the world is a dog person who identifies with such a poster; nonetheless we could all finish the statement “happiness is” with something—a person or place or thing. There are many things that make us happy. We experience happiness when we receive a promotion, or travel on a long desired trip, or celebrate the birth of a child. Happiness is dependent upon the outward circumstances of our lives.

Jesus did not come to make us happy, but to make us joyful. His words are, *“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”* A line from Robert Louis Stevenson warns, “To miss the joy is to miss all.” When we fail to live joy-filled lives, we are missing out on an essential part of our relationship with Jesus Christ. We cannot always be happy. There are circumstances of our lives that fill us with sorrow and pain and grief. But we can always live lives of joy when Jesus Christ is the center and companion of our lives.

Joy is a part of our relationship with Christ that lies deep within us. It is the component of the relationship that allows us to fail and yet try again, to get up when life knocks us down, to face difficult problems and yet continue to try to find solutions. G.K. Chesterton said, “Joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian.”



Often we hear people say about others who are dealing with sickness or trouble or the death of a loved one, “I just don’t know how he/she does it...faces life with optimism and strength and power.” Is not the answer to that question seen in that the person is a believer and that the believer is in constant touch with the source of life himself, that one who came to give us joy?

*R&D How joy-filled is your life? How does your faith in Jesus Christ help you to build upon the many crises that life brings?*

*Prayer: “Thou dost show me the path of life; in thy presence there is fullness of joy, in thy right hand are pleasures forever more” (Psalm 16). Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the abundance of your joy that lifts me over the low spots of my life and helps me to endure. Thank you for the joy of your presence that makes each day worth living, no matter what happens.*

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## Day 23

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**Read: Matthew 14:22-33**

### Courage Versus Fear

What makes you afraid? Typically, we fear falling, or we fear heights, or we fear confined spaces. I recall going to the hospital for an MRI and not being able to face an enclosed tube. Only when I discovered an open-sided MRI clinic did I consent to the test. But far deeper than those fears for our physical well-being are the fears of our spirit. We fear being alone, being unloved, incapacitating sickness and, ultimately, we fear death. Fear is a normal part of life as it protects us from dangerous actions.

But to live a life dominated by fear is to live only half a life. It is far better to live facing our fears with courage and ultimately conquering those fears.

The disciples were in their small boat out on the sea on a very stormy night, “*beaten by the waves for the winds were against them.*” That circumstance alone was enough to produce fear in even the most seasoned of fishermen. But even more fear-producing was a sudden sight that they had never seen before and could not understand. Someone was walking through the storm to their boat, “*And they cried out in fear. But immediately he spoke to them, saying, ‘Take heart, it is I; have no fear.’*” It was Jesus.

Francis de Sales wrote, “Do not look forward to the changes and chances of this life in fear; rather look to them with full hope that, as they arise, God, whose you are, will deliver you out of them. He is your Keeper.”

For the Christian, the ultimate source of courage is faith in Jesus Christ. It is he who enables us to face the fears of life, whatever they may be, with courage. His own courageousness inspires us. But far beyond his example, are the gifts that he gives us, the strength and comfort and courage to face life’s day-by-day challenges and live through them to the abundant life that is ours in him.

*R&D Deliverance from fear, and courage to face all of life’s circumstances are gifts given through our faith in Jesus Christ. How do you avail yourself of these gifts? In what particular experience did you receive these gifts of God?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, there are times when I have been tempted to lose hope and to despair. But then I hear your voice saying, “Take heart, it is I; have no fear” and I am encouraged and strengthened. Stay with me, Lord, and each day give me courage.*

## Day 24

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

### Let Me Be Your Servant

A few years ago Hollywood produced a movie called “Pay It Forward.” The premise of the movie was that if someone did something good for you, rather than pay him or her back, you should pay it forward by doing something good for someone else other than your benefactor. And so, the hope was, the world would be a better place.

Jesus had a great deal to say about doing good to other people. In his parable of the Great Judgment, his strong words were that God would judge us by the way we treat other persons. *“Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you.... Truly, I say to you, as you did it unto the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me.”*

The judgment of Jesus sits in direct opposition to the judgment of the world. The world says that we are great and important, in part, by the number of persons that we can command and the number who serve us. Jesus says that our greatness is seen in our humility and our service to others. *“...whoever would be first among you must be the slave of all. For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve”* (Mark 10:44-45). We follow a Jesus who served. Following his example, we also are expected to serve others.

Service to others demands that we give something of ourselves to others: time, energy, money. We could mentor a child, we could help in the shelter for the homeless or for battered women, we could deliver meals to the shut-ins for Meals on Wheels, we could write a note to someone who is ill or bereaved. The list of areas where we could serve is endless.

The rewards of service are endless as well. There is the inner satisfaction of knowing that you have helped someone else. And even more importantly, there is the joy of knowing that the Lord approves...the joy of being one in the company that is the *“blessed of my Father.”*

R&D *“Each one of us can be used to minister to the needs of others.” As we consider the way that we live, where are the areas in which we serve others? How can we enlarge the ways in which we serve?*

Prayer: *I sing to You, Lord God, “O Master, let me walk with Thee In lowly paths of service free.” Help me to find those people and the places where I may best serve them and You. I want to be one of the blessed.*

## Day 25

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**Read: Luke 19:1-10**

### Do I Have to Change?

How does a person become a Christian? Have you ever examined your own faith in Christ to the extent that you can pinpoint a time when you decided to follow Jesus Christ? When did you consciously decide to make a commitment to Christ?

Sometimes we are uncomfortable with the above questions. They bore directly into who and what we are as persons. They make it very difficult to stand on the sidelines of the Christian faith, taking only what we want at various times in our lives. They say to us that we must at some time stand up and be counted.

Zacchaeus had such a time in his life. He was a rich man who, through his contract with the Roman government, helped collect their taxes. For this service he received a wage and, perhaps

like many other tax collectors, inflated the tax he collected and kept the overage for himself. Seen as a traitor, his fellow Jews despised him.

Then Jesus came to town and Zacchaeus wanted to see him. A short man, he had to shed any dignity and climbed a tree in order to even see Jesus. By that act, he placed himself in a position where Jesus could see him. See him, Jesus did, and called him into a conversation that led to his conversion and commitment. “*Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today.*’ So he made haste and came down, and received him joyfully.” Jesus invited and Zacchaeus responded.

Commitment to Christ must inevitably lead to a change in thought and conduct. The necessary change for Zacchaeus was clear. He had to give up his dishonest ways to share some of the wealth he had accumulated from his position.

The changes in our own lives may not be so clear or obvious. But they were there when we first met Jesus...and the need for change is still with us as we continue to walk life’s highways and byways with him. Commitment to Christ brings with it inevitable and continuing change as we become daily more what God intends us to be.

*R&D A gospel hymn contains the words; “I’d rather have Jesus than silver or gold.” That is what Zacchaeus decided. What is there in your life that stands between you and complete commitment to Jesus Christ?*

*Prayer: I am grateful, Lord Jesus, that you are a part of my life and have worked your changing power within me. Continue that work, Lord, until I am totally and completely yours.*

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## Day 26

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**Read: Matthew 16:24-28**

### Self-Denial

Denial of self is not very popular in our American culture. In fact when a well-known politician or celebrity does some good at cost to himself or herself, we are surprised. When a young dentist from the parish volunteers to work for some years on a hospital ship that treats patients in underdeveloped countries instead of developing a practice in the city, we shake our heads in wonder.

Self-denial is, however, the direct opposite of self-centeredness and a necessity for the Christian life. “*Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’*”

Is it not true that many of us never grow out of the “we want what we want when we want it” stage? And our feel-good society encourages us to indulge ourselves in our every want and desire. Self-denial for most of us is a difficult concept. Even when we see that what we are doing or saying is not good for us or for others, it is very difficult to let go of our habitual way of acting and to begin to change. Yet this is precisely what Jesus asks us to do. If we are to follow him, we must do the hard thing of saying “no” to self.

We are not expected to do this by ourselves. Francis of Assisi said, “Above all the grace and the gifts that Christ gives to His beloved is that of overcoming self.” When Christ asks something of us, he will be with us, enabling us, and will bring forth the best possible outcome for us. “*For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*” The promise of Jesus is that when we give our lives to him, we find life. We will be different, yes,

when we clothe ourselves with the gift of faith. But it will be a difference that will enhance life, and, oh so subtly and gradually, make us into the person God created us to be.

R&D *“The greatest burden we have to carry in life is self. The most difficult thing we have to manage is self” (Hannah Whitall Smith). In what ways do you agree/disagree with that statement?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I realize that self-centeredness is my greatest sin. You know that whatever happens, my first thought is of what it will mean to me. I pray you, Lord, to change my heart. Grant me the gift of self-denial and the joy of following you more completely.*

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## Day 27

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**Read: John 16:4-15; 14:15-17**

### Holy Spirit

One can never know everything about anything. There is always more to learn. No matter what we may know about music or art or history, there is more to learn. And clearly it is true that we can never know all there is to know about another person. Even after years of marriage, that most intimate of human relationships, people will say, “We are still getting to know one another.”

When Jesus told the disciples that he would be leaving them, they were desolate. After three years of being together, they were still just getting to know him and they wanted to learn more. His promise to them was that he would not leave them alone, but rather would send to them someone who would be with them all of the time. Jesus described this person as *“another Counselor...the Spirit of truth.”* The promised relationship would be an intimate one: *“you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.”*

For many Christians, the role of the Holy Spirit is a mysterious one. We know the Father’s work in creation. We know the Son’s work through his ministry and his sacrifice on the cross and his resurrection. But what is the work of the Holy Spirit? Jesus says that it is the work of the Holy Spirit that brings him, Jesus, into our minds. *“He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”*

The Holy Spirit keeps us connected. He is the link to the Father and the Son. But he is more than that. It is he who works within, us changing us. Paul admonishes us to have the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5). This is an impossibility using only our own resources, but made possible with the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. From him we will learn what is evil and what is good, *“sin and righteousness and judgment,”* and we will be enabled to choose the good.

We can never know everything about anything but with the Holy Spirit in our lives, we can learn more, daily, about ourselves and about God.

R&D *“He (the Holy Spirit) is the divine power or energy by which life is maintained and strengthened. All that a believer is called to be or do, the Holy Spirit can and will work in him.” (Andrew Murray). How do you recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life?*

Prayer: *Come Holy Spirit and fill my heart. Work in me that which is pleasing to the Father and the Son. Help me to know and to always choose the good.*

## Day 28

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**Read: Matthew 26:17-29**

### **The First of Many Meals Together**

The intimate fellowship that Jesus enjoyed with his disciples lasted about three years. The disciples had been there when Jesus fed the 5000 and healed the leper and raised Lazarus from the dead. They had heard him deliver the Sermon on the Mount and teach the truths of God in his magnificent parables.

Now all of that was going to end. Jesus was soon to die. And when he was gone, Jesus knew that they would need something besides fading memories to recall him into their presence. Indeed, later generations of Christians would also need something concrete, something they could see and touch and feel to bring him into their presence as well.

So, at the Passover meal in the upper room, Jesus took the bread, gave thanks and gave it to them saying, *“Take, eat, this is my body.”* And he took a cup and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, *“Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the new covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”*

That night they saw but a glimmer of what Jesus was doing. Later, they would remember it and they would understand. Jesus was telling them, *“When I am gone, eat this bread and drink this cup in remembrance of me, and there I will be in the midst of you.”*

We call it a sacrament, something that we can see and touch and feel, that signifies something that we cannot see and touch and feel. The bread and the wine, eaten and drunk this way, were invested by Jesus to be a very special vehicle through which he could come back again and again whenever and wherever Christians gather to do this in remembrance of him. Even before he died, he was laying another foundation by which he could come alive again. We call it the Holy Communion because it has become the way in which generations of Christians, you and I included, could come into union with the Holy One. What a privilege that is!

*R&D What do you believe about the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Holy Communion? How is Jesus present to you?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus, you promised to be present when we eat the bread and drink the cup in remembrance of you. Heighten my devotion, O Lord, that through the eyes of my faith, I may find you in these simple elements and take you ever more fully into my heart.*

## Day 29

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**Read: Luke 23:13-34**

### **Father, Forgive Them**

There are few scenes in history so full of anger and revenge and thirst for blood as the scene on Calvary Hill that Friday. Jesus has been tried, if you can call this travesty of justice a trial, and sentenced to death. The words and actions of the religious leaders at the trial and of the scribes and Pharisees at the foot of the cross graphically illustrate how depraved human behavior can sometimes become.

During this whole ordeal, Jesus has said very little. If we didn't already know what was ahead, we might wonder if he would say anything at all. What we want him to do is to call down a legion of angels to put a stop to this insane cruelty and, in a show of divine retribution, to punish the perpetrators of this horror! But there is none of that. And, except for some words of warning

to the women of Jerusalem who had come out to mourn his fate, Jesus has remained strangely quiet.

Then, in an incredible, almost unbelievable demonstration of God's grace, Jesus speaks to his Father on behalf of his persecutors. *"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."*

The contrast could not be more graphic. Faced with the monumental cruelty of these horribly mistaken religious men, God in Christ chooses not to punish nor to condemn, but to forgive. Sadly, their blood lust and need to protect their man-made authority was so strong that they could not hear or respond to this act of God's amazing grace. They carried out their execution believing that they were justified. But with these few words of unsolicited and undeserved forgiveness, their coveted power and position and authority were turned to dust before the great power of God's love.

Standing at that moment of history and feeling that power deep in your own soul, can there be any remaining doubt in your heart that God will also forgive you?

R&D *As you picture the scene on Calvary Hill, what strikes you most graphically about it?*

Prayer: *Lord God, Your love is so broad and so deep that I am not able to fully comprehend it. Direct my heart, I pray You, that I may truly give thanks for it, through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord.*

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### Day 30

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**Read: Luke 23:32-43**

#### A Way into Paradise

Jesus did not die alone. As a way of further criminalizing Jesus in the public eye, he was executed with two real criminals. They were common thieves. They were also a study in contrasts. The first, still totally consumed with himself, recognizes Jesus and badgers him, cursing and calling out, *"Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"* For him, recognizing Jesus as the Christ was of value for only one purpose: to get him what he wanted and to get it quickly. He accepted no responsibility for his life, no responsibility for his being here. He just wanted someone else to save him from the consequences of his own bad behavior. Jesus made no response to that.

The other, facing similar pain and an equally certain death, was more humble. He saw his need not so much to be delivered from this death on the cross, but to find a mercy he knew he did not deserve. Sensing that Jesus might be the one who could offer him that mercy, he says, *"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."* In another demonstration of the unbelievable grace of God, Jesus replies, *"Today you shall be with me in Paradise."*

There are two ways to deal with our moral mistakes. One is to blame anyone and everyone but ourselves, to demand that everyone around us excuse our unrepented failures, and, if need be, bail us out of our trouble. The other is to admit where we have fallen, to acknowledge responsibility for our behavior, and to openly appeal to the One who can remember us. The attitude of the first leaves no room for God. In the open heart of the second, God is able to enter, to remember and to restore us.

Two sinners. Two responses. Which of these two do you want to be like?

R&D *Why do you think that Jesus made no response to the first thief? How are you sometimes like that?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, it is so easy for me to rationalize and justify my behavior, even when I know inside that it is wrong. Strengthen my courage, O Lord, to see my fault and let me hear the only justifying words that matter: "Today, you shall be with me in Paradise."*

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## Day 31

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**Read: John 19:17-27**

### Ever Personal

In the violence of the arrest and trial of Jesus, and fearing for their lives, the disciples lost their nerve and ran away. Not one of the chosen twelve had the courage to follow Jesus to the cross. But the women were not so fearful. Unlike the twelve, they were under no threat of death. So they came to sit at the foot of the cross to be with Jesus while he suffered and died. There were three brave women, Mary his mother, her sister Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, and a single brave man, the one known only as "the beloved disciple." Sometimes in life and death struggles, all we can do is just be present, just be there to offer the comfort of our friendship and love. That is what these four people came to do.

In the midst of this cosmic struggle against both the human and spiritual powers of evil, Jesus looked down and saw his mother and the beloved disciple, and he thought to provide for them. If his mother had other children, as Mark's gospel records it (Mark 6:3), they were not followers of Jesus. As far as we know, the beloved disciple had no family. So, in a way that so characterized his whole life, Jesus ignored his own pain and struggle to minister to their pain. Jesus took time to create a new family for these two people so they would be able to live beyond this day. "Woman," he said to his mother, "*behold your son.*" "Son," he said to the beloved disciple, "*behold your mother.*"

If ever you wonder if God has any interest in or time for you, open your Bible to this moment and see. God is big enough and God loves you enough to pay attention to you no matter what else is going on. For you and I are his beloved disciples as well.

R&D *Why do you think Jesus was able to set aside his own pain and suffering and to see and respond to the needs of these two people?*

Prayer: *O Divine Holy Spirit, from the hard wood of the cross Jesus made the creation of a new family a holy task. So sustain and guide me in the life of my family that we, too, may be a holy place for you as well.*

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## Day 32

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**Read: Matthew 27:32-50**

### A Sense of Ultimate Loneliness

The crucifixion lasted six hours, from nine in the morning until three in the afternoon. The three hours we traditionally observe on Good Friday are the hours from noon to 3 p.m. when "*There was darkness over the whole land.*" The first three words Jesus spoke from the cross occurred in the morning hours. From noon until 3 p.m. Jesus said nothing. Then, piercing the darkness near the end, we hear this agonizing heart-wrenching cry of despair: "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani,*" "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" His ability to bear this physical and spiritual torture has been stretched to the limit. He has nothing left. He is desolate and feels himself to be absolutely alone. This sense of complete and utter loneliness is what some people believe hell to be like.

The words are the opening words of the twenty-second Psalm. Some believe that Jesus is reciting them as he prepares himself to die. Perhaps. It is more likely that after six hours of agony, Jesus genuinely feels himself to be abandoned. No one is ever abandoned by God, and at this moment Jesus was not. But sometimes it feels that way and, for Jesus, who in his humanity knew every emotion common to man, it felt that way to him.

Yet, even as he cries out, he cries out to, "My God." His Father, even in this perceived absence, is still his intimate friend. How different is this cry from the cry we sometimes hear, "Why does God allow this or that to happen?" "Where is God in all this?" "Why doesn't God put a stop to this?" These are appeals thrown into the air at an unknown and impersonal God with whom the questioners have no bond. Not so with Jesus. For him, no matter how abandoned and alone he feels, it is still "My God, my God."

Life is sometimes unbelievably hard, and God sometimes seems so far away. He is not. And such a God, when we cry unto Him as "My God," will answer.

*R&D Have you ever felt abandoned by God? How do you try to overcome that sense of estrangement?*

*Prayer: Help me, O Lord, to know in my mind and to believe in my heart, that You are always with me, especially when it doesn't feel that way to me. I pray this in Your holy name.*

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### Day 33

**Read: John 19:28-37**

#### **He Suffered as a Man**

The moment of aloneness was over. The descent that Jesus has made into the hell of utter loneliness has passed. The final moments of his struggle against death are now upon him. In a moment of self-consciousness, and as though to fortify himself for these last few moments of life, Jesus feels his parched throat and asks for a drink. "I thirst!" Among all the things that have been a part of these horrible hours of suffering, this is the most human. As we might thirst under similar circumstances, our tongues dry as sandpaper, so also Jesus' throat was dusty dry and he craved for the relief of a simple drink of water.

A few years ago, Mel Gibson produced a movie about the crucifixion titled "The Passion." It was generally viewed as too gratuitously violent and many Christians refused to see it because of that. My problem was different. After having seen it, I was brought face to face with my unconscious belief that, because Jesus was the Son of God, he really didn't suffer very much. The film destroyed that illusion forever. The fact is that Jesus did suffer both a physical and spiritual pain that is beyond our comprehension.

But God does nothing without a reason. And here there is the noblest of all reasons. Because Jesus, himself, suffered so terribly, there is no suffering or pain or physical or spiritual distress that may come to us that he does not understand. There is no agony with which he cannot empathize and to which he cannot minister. Being fully human in his suffering on the cross, Jesus has an intimate personal understanding of just how deep human suffering can be. And, as the Father sustained him in his pain, so he is now able to sustain us in ours. His tragedy, by God's amazing grace, has been turned into our blessing.

*R&D Have you ever experienced the strength and power of God when pain and suffering have entered your life? Can you describe the form in which that power came to you?*



Prayer: *Almighty God, the shepherd of the sheep, as You sustained Jesus through his pain, stand also with me in my times of pain and sorrow. Thank You for being with Jesus on the cross and for being a tower of strength even for me.*

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### Day 34

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**Read: John 19:30-37**

#### **It Is Finished**

The end is now upon him. The sky is gray with the clouds of mourning. The mid-afternoon air is hot and heavy, so breathing has become difficult. The crowd below, sensing that the end is near, has grown quiet as most of us might fall silent in the presence of impending death. Jesus has been given a drink of sour wine both to relieve his thirst and to numb his pain. Having sucked the wine from the spongy hyssop branch extended up to his mouth, Jesus looks up to his Father and simply says, *"It is finished."*

No one argues anymore about *what* was finished. This was not a cry of resignation from a man who was about to lose his battle with death. This was a quiet word of completion from a man who had been faithful to the very end to his Father's plan for the redemption of His creation. Having battled the forces of evil, both human and demonic, the fight was now over and, deep in his soul, Jesus knew that he had won.

God had determined that the disobedience of His human creatures would not be allowed to destroy His creation. He would not punish us. He would redeem us! So he founded a nation. He delivered a law. He began a worshipping community. Over eighteen hundred years, He nurtured and directed it. When it went wrong, He reformed it. It was not perfect, but it was enough. Then, in a moment of time, God, Himself, came into the world in a climatic act of grace. It would cost Him the life of his Son. But He did it. And here in this most unlikely setting, amidst the most unlikely circumstances, God's plan was finally completed. Somehow, at that moment, Jesus knew that it was done. Jesus knew he had won. He declared his victory quietly and simply. *"It is finished."* In this almost unthinkable act of sacrifice, offered for you and for me and for the whole of God's creation, God did what no one else could do to redeem His world. And, now, indeed, it was finished, forever.

R&D *What does it mean to you that Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world? Be as specific as you can.*

Prayer: *Almighty God, ruler of the universe, I will never really fathom the depth of Your grace that cared enough for the world, and for me, that You gave Your Son that we might be redeemed. Accept these halting words of thanks from my imperfect heart for this overwhelming gift of grace given through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

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### Day 35

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**Read: Luke 23:44-56**

#### **Commending His Spirit**

At one point in his ministry, when his disciples were arguing amongst themselves about who was the greatest, Jesus put a child in their midst and said, *"Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven"* (Matthew 18:3-5).

The quiet words of triumph *“It is finished”* are hardly out of his mouth when Jesus, still looking away from the world and up to his Father, says, *“Into your hands I commend my spirit.”* And his head slowly descends to finally rest on his chest, and he is dead. From any human perspective, it is the saddest moment in human history.

This is now the second time that Jesus has turned to the spiritual richness of the Psalms to find words to express his deepest feelings. These words are the fifth verse of Psalm 31. The first five verses of that Psalm were memorized by all Hebrew children and said just before bedtime. The phrases of the Psalm are strong and steady. *“In thee, O Lord, do I seek refuge...Be thou a rock of refuge for me...Yea thou are my rock and my fortress...Into thy hands I commit my spirit: thou has redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.”* So, here at the very moment of his death, Jesus returns to this childhood prayer to express his total trust in his Father. Becoming like a child again, he becomes the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

There is much to commend an adult, well-informed, well-thought-out faith. There is much to commend mature questioning that honestly seeks answers.

But there is also much to commend a childlike faith, a faith that, no matter what, we can put ourselves in the hands of God and we will be all right.

In spite of all the pain and suffering, it is with that childlike faith in his heart and on his lips that Jesus died. We might pray that we may also face our own pains and sufferings, and finally our own end, with the same childlike trust and faith.

R&D *How would you describe the difference between a “child-like” and a “childish” faith?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you said that unless we become as little children, we cannot enter the Kingdom of God. Increase that child-like faith in my spirit so, regardless of my outward circumstances, I may trust you ever more deeply. Thank you, Lord.*

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## Day 36

**Read: John 20:1-18**

### **Almost No One Believed It**

That Friday was the saddest day in history. He who had been identified at his baptism as *“My beloved son”* (Mark 1:11) and by Peter and the disciples as *“The Christ, the son of the living God,”* (Matthew 16:16) was dead. The self-serving and twisted form of religion created by the Pharisees and Sadducees had been so threatened and exposed that Jesus had to be eliminated. And he was, or so they thought.

In the upper room where the disciples had gathered, there was nothing but mourning and despair. The events of Friday had paralyzed the men into inaction. The women also mourned, but they were of a stronger spirit. It fell to them to prepare the body of Jesus for burial. So, after the Sabbath had passed and people could go about their business again, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome came to the tomb expecting to go about the grisly task of anointing the dead body of Jesus.

We have heard descriptions of these events so often that the stunning shock of finding the cave opened and the tomb empty is now almost impossible for us to grasp. The shock was not that he had risen. No one dared believe that, even though he had predicted it. The shock was that his body had been violated, stolen and taken who knew where. Deathly afraid of what might have happened, the women ran to the safety of their homes because they didn't know what else to do.

Mary Magdalene alone was not so easily put off. She went looking for the gardener—prepared to beg, if necessary, to find out where the body of Jesus had been taken. But it was not the gardener that she found. It was Jesus, himself, not dead, not stolen, not violated, but risen from the grave and alive. Jesus spoke her name, “*Mary*” and in stunned disbelief, she replied “*Rabboni!* (which means teacher).” It was a breath-taking moment of discovery and joy.

R&D *What aspects of the death of Jesus and his subsequent resurrection strike you most vividly? Can you think of why you are drawn to them?*

Prayer: *O Risen Christ, as you revealed yourself first to Mary Magdalene in the garden and spoke her name, so reveal yourself alive to me and, even as I speak your name in adoration, let me hear you speak my name in love and assurance.*

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### Day 37

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**Read: John 20:19-23**

#### **A Peace That Endures**

Jesus had predicted his resurrection, but no one really believed him. And who could blame them? It was a pretty outrageous claim. Even on this day, when the women came from the empty tomb and Mary Magdalene had told them, “*I have seen the Lord,*” her testimony was dismissed. The two disciples from Emmaus had charged into the upper room that afternoon bubbling over with their description of walking with the risen Jesus on the road. But that also was too bizarre to be believed.

It wasn't until that night that the disciples would see it. The doors of the room were locked, and the windows were tightly closed. In one moment they were alone. In the next Jesus was standing in the room with them. They rubbed their eyes in disbelief! Then, as the reality of his presence flooded in on them, they cried for joy. And Jesus said to them, “*Peace be with you.*” And he dispelled any remaining doubt by showing them his hands and his side.

Of all the gifts that God can give, which is the one we desire the most? We pray for healing and direction and prosperity and good fortune for our families and those close to us. And well we should, for these are gifts that God can give and often does. We pray for these things because we want life to be right for us and for those we love. But the gift that penetrates the most deeply and endures the longest is the gift of peace when everything is not right, when the winds of fortune blow against us. Our circumstances may be a blessing or a curse. And often we have little control over that. How we handle our circumstances, be they a blessing or a curse, is something over which we do have control. God is involved in both, sometimes changing our circumstances but always offering us the gift of peace and new life in spite of our circumstances.

It was the first gift the Risen Lord gave to his disciples. It is the deepest of all gifts that God gives to those who seek it from Him.

R&D *In what ways do you experience the peace of God that passes all understanding?*

Prayer: *Almighty God, the ocean seems so big and my boat seems so small. When the winds of fortune threaten to blow me away, strengthen my heart, I pray You, with Your gift of peace, given through Your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

## Day 38

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**Read: John 20:24-31**

### Thomas

Thomas was not with the other disciples when Jesus entered the upper room the first resurrection night. Like many of us, he preferred to do his mourning in private. When the others found him and told him, *“We have seen the Lord,”* Thomas wasn’t very easily impressed. *“Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.”* Because of that response, down through the centuries, Thomas has borne the title, “the doubter.”

It is difficult to be the one who always asks the hard questions. It is not easy to be the one who has trouble “going along in order to get along.” But Thomas simply had to see for himself. The news of the resurrection was too important to him to take it on anybody else’s say-so, even the say-so of trusted friends. Jesus respected that enough to meet it head on. Jesus appeared in the upper room a second time, specifically to see him. *“Put your finger here, and see my hand; and put out your hand and place it in my side; do not be faithless but believing.”*

The real character of Thomas is not as a doubter but as a serious believer. When shown the evidence, he fell on his knees and worshipped, *“My Lord and my God.”* His was no intellectual questioning, but a deep spiritual yearning for the truth. His response was no casual intellectual awakening, but a deep spiritual commitment.

Jesus would later say, *“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen but yet believe.”* Indeed, blessed are those who are able to believe deeply on simple faith and on the testimony of others. Blessed, as well, are those who search to see for themselves with honest questioning. To those whose search is honest, Jesus will also come to say, *“Put your finger here.... be not faithless but believing.”*

R&D *In times of doubt and perplexity in your faith, where do you turn for guidance and answers?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, the father with the epileptic son prayed, “I believe, help thou my unbelief.” Thomas said, “Unless I see....” Reveal yourself to me, O Lord that in my moments of doubt, like Thomas, I may be led to say “My Lord and my God.”*

## Day 39

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**Read: Luke 24:13-35**

### Proclaiming Victory Quietly

In a fanciful mood one Easter Sunday, I tried to imagine how the resurrection of Jesus would have taken place had I been in charge that day. I suspect that I would have been tempted to send Jesus to Caiaphas, the high priest, at breakfast time. “Hello. Remember me? No, don’t get up. I just wanted you to know that I am alive and well.” And then, at lunchtime, I might have asked Jesus to visit Pontius Pilate. “Good afternoon, Governor. I have to give you credit for trying to save me, but you must admit that you did capitulate to the crowd rather easily.” Then, to climax it all, I would have had Jesus descend into the center of the city on a cloud of fire with a band of angels so no one could possibly miss it or fail to see that he was alive.

Jesus did none of these things. Instead, he proclaimed his resurrection to his followers almost one or two at a time. He met Mary Magdalene in the garden alone. He spent the afternoon with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. He met the twelve in the upper room. And later, in that same upper room, he returned for the individual benefit of Thomas.

One wonders why. Perhaps he remembered being tempted by the Devil in the wilderness to draw followers by performing spectacular miracles, a temptation he rejected now even as he had rejected it then. Perhaps he felt the need to show positive proof that he was alive to his intimate friends so they would believe it and carry the message on without reservation.

We will probably never know. What we do know is that Jesus did not go to the world to proclaim his victory over death. He gave that task to his disciples then as he still gives that task to his disciples today. At the tomb, the angel shouted, *“He is not here! He is risen!”* (Matthew 28:6). He is depending on us to make that same cry today so our world can hear it from us and respond.

*R&D In what ways have you witnessed to your belief in the Risen Christ in this Lenten Season? In what ways could you witness to your faith in these next 50 days leading to Pentecost?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, lead me to see the magnificently empty tomb with the eyes of my faith and show me ways that I may proclaim it to the world around me.*

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### Day 40

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**Read: Matthew 28:15-20**

#### **Finished, But Not Ended**

On the cross on the fateful Friday that would change the world, Jesus declared, *“It is finished.”* And it was. Jesus had been sent into the world to bring to completion the last great act of God’s redemption. In his death, provoked by the evil and misguided men to whom Jesus had voluntarily submitted himself, he had bridged the gap between sinful men and a pure God. He threw open the door to forgiveness and salvation to all people who believed in him as God’s Son. What he came into the world to do, he had done and had done well. It was finished.

Yet, it was not ended. The path to salvation had been built. The sacrifice that opened the way to forgiveness had been made. But the world did not yet know the good news of what God in Christ had accomplished.

After his resurrection, on a hillside in Galilee, Jesus sent his disciples out into the world with this message: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always to the close of the age.”*

Given that mandate and driven by the power of the Holy Spirit, the disciples went out from that place, and the world has never been the same since. Yet, even now, it is not ended. It will not be ended until *“every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father”* (Philippians 2:11).

But who will finish it? No one will, until those of us in every age who have known the love of God in Christ Jesus reach out where we are and finish it. That is our mutual calling. The challenge of faith is always to see who among us will say, *“Here am I! Send me”* (Isaiah 6:8).

*R&D In what ways do you now reach out to bring others to Christ and thus participate in the Great Commission?*

*Prayer: O Holy Spirit, as you empowered the disciples, so empower me, that, by my word and example, I may be a clear witness for you in my time and in my world. I pray this in the name of him who gave us all the Great Commission, Jesus Christ, our Lord.*

*by John and Shirley MacNaughton*

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