



Today

2021 LENT DEVOTIONALS



Today begins our Lenten journey, this period of time before Easter when we focus and reflect on our need for a Savior. This week's devotions reflect on the meaning of Lent, the cross, and how the cross should change our daily life. May these devotions help you focus as you begin your personal Lenten season.

Christ Crucified

ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 17 | [1 CORINTHIANS 1:20-25](#)

We preach Christ crucified...Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.
1 Corinthians 1:23-24

Today is Ash Wednesday, the first day of the Lenten season. The word Lent derives from a Middle English word that means "springtime." But this doesn't mean Lent is a celebration of the annual renewal of nature caused by the tilt of the world's axis. No, Lent is a celebration of the renewal of human life caused by the grace of God.

I use the word celebration guardedly here, because Lent is not a joyful dance through a field of spring flowers. It is rather a season of solemn reflection and serious repentance that leads to spiritual renewal. It's the time when we remember that such renewal depends on Christ crucified.

People outside the Christian faith may wonder how we can celebrate a gruesome death that happened 2,000 years ago. It does sound ghoulish, unless Paul is right in [1 Corinthians 1](#), where he says that Christ is "the power of God and the wisdom of God."

As we focus today on the power and wisdom of God in the cross of Christ, our goal should be not merely to explain those mysterious ideas but also to apply the reality of God's power and wisdom to our daily lives.

Even as the renewal of nature in spring depends on the tilt of the earth, so the renewal of our spiritual lives depends on the cross. During this Lenten season, we invite you to set aside time each day to reflect, repent, and focus on the wonders of the cross.

—WRITTEN BY [STAN MAST](#)

PRAYER:

O crucified Christ, help me to experience the joy and peace of renewal that flows from your cross for my sake. Amen.

The Suffering Savior

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 18 | [ISAIAH 53](#)

He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. Isaiah 53:5

Several years ago our family went to see the movie *The Passion of the Christ*. It was controversial because of its extreme violence and some apparent contradictions with the Bible. Some church leaders warned their members not to watch it.

Taking these matters into account, we still found the movie worthwhile and deeply moving. We walked out afterward in total silence because there was nothing to say. Several questions came to mind, though: Did Jesus really suffer all of that; were his beatings and crucifixion really as horrendous as the film portrayed them to be? And how could God the Father allow human hands to treat his only Son the way they did? If you've not seen the movie, you may want to watch it sometime during this Lenten season. It may cause you to reflect on similar questions about Christ's suffering.

Some 700 hundred years before the crucifixion, the prophet Isaiah predicted and described Jesus' suffering on the cross. According to [Isaiah 53](#) this event was carefully planned by God himself. It is beyond human comprehension that the Son of God should willingly allow and accept such humiliation.

And he did it all for us: "He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities." Knowing what he suffered for our sake can cause us, in the words of a well-known hymn, to "tremble, tremble, tremble."

Take time today to read [Isaiah 53](#). If possible, read it with your family. As you do, ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand all that Jesus bore for your sake, for your salvation.

—WRITTEN BY [ART SCHOONVELD](#)

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus,
thank you for
your willingness
to suffer and
die for us. Fill us
with gratitude
and awe for
your great love.
Amen.

The Curse Of Crucifixion

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 19 | [MARK 15:25](#); [GALATIANS 3:11-14](#)

It was nine in the morning when they crucified him.
Mark 15:25

Do you have a necklace or earrings in the shape of a cross? Or do you have a cross hanging somewhere in your house?

A cross, as a symbol of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, can be a beautiful thing. But the crucifixion it represents was actually the most horrible of deaths in ancient times. Some victims hung for days in the scorching sun until finally the weight of their body, nailed at the hands and feet, collapsed their lungs. Any other death was preferable. Crucifixion was so horrible that it was inappropriate to mention it in polite conversation.

No one imagined that the cross might become a religious symbol. Because of the cross, the early Christian apologist, Minucius Felix, wrote a dialogue called *The Octavius* in which his pagan character called Christianity a sick delusion. He said that anyone who worshiped a crucified person should himself be crucified.

The Bible also talks about the horrors of crucifixion. The cross is called an offense ([Galatians 5:11](#)), a sign of shame ([Hebrews 12:2](#)), and foolishness and a stumbling block ([1 Corinthians 1:23](#)). [Deuteronomy 21:23](#) states that "anyone who is hung on a pole [a cross] is under God's curse."

Have you noticed that Mark uses segments of time ("nine in the morning," "noon," "three in the afternoon") to describe Jesus' crucifixion? He wants us to reflect on the long, agonizing struggle Jesus endured for us on the cross.

All of this adds significance to the fact that Jesus Christ was not just killed, but crucified. Yet Paul sees the transforming blessing of the cross: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us."

—WRITTEN BY [DEAN DEPPE](#)

PRAYER:

Lord, amid my busyness, help me to stop and focus on all you have done for me. Through your death I can live! Amen.

No Condemnation

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 20 | [ROMANS 8:1-4](#)

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
Romans 8:1

When Jesus died on the cross, he took on himself all of our sins against God and against people. He was punished by the religious establishment, the state, and God, so “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

And it is because of Christ's death that every believer has the capacity to change. Jesus' condemnation frees us to become like him. A person living on death row cannot live like a free person. He may become a better person in some ways, but as long as he lives behind bars awaiting death, he cannot live free. He cannot come and go as he pleases, doing the things people can do in free society. Condemnation robs him of freedom.

Many people live as condemned prisoners, even though they aren't behind bars. They cannot change because of the prison of their past. They cannot move ahead with their lives because of the chains of guilt and shame that hold them. As Dostoyevsky showed in his novel *Crime and Punishment*, some people are paralyzed by the fear of being discovered and punished for their crimes.

Do you live in that kind of prison of guilt and fear? As long as you do, you will not be able to change your life and become like Jesus. But that's exactly why Jesus died. He suffered condemnation because he wanted to save you from it and set you free to live a new life.

Are you living that life of freedom in Christ Jesus today?

—WRITTEN BY [STAN MAST](#)

PRAYER:

Holy Spirit, move in my heart to set me free from fear and guilt and help me fully receive the pardon that Christ's death on the cross assured. Amen.



WEEK 1:

Love, Humility, and the Cross

Join us this week as we focus in on the love and humility of Jesus' journey to the cross. How can Christ's example shape our daily lives and transform the way we approach the cross this Easter?

Full Extent Of His Love

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 21 | [JOHN 13:1-5](#)

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.
John 13:1

Everybody needs to be loved. It's one of the deepest truths of our shared human condition. More specifically, we all need to be shown love.

When my children were small, they sometimes engaged in trying to express how much they loved me. With arms and hands outstretched as far as their toddler-sized bodies would allow, they strained to show the extent of their love: "This is how much I love you, Mommy!" Of course, I was delighted!

As Jesus spent his precious final hours with his disciples, his primary objective was to make clear why he had come to earth. While the shadow of the cross crept steadily toward him, Jesus showed his disciples the central meaning of his mission: God's love. "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son" ([John 3:16](#)).

How did Jesus communicate that message of love? In an upper room one night, not long before he would suffer and die on a cross, Jesus knelt down in front of his disciples and washed their feet. The One who had come from heaven humbly washed away the earth's dirt from between his followers' toes. What an unusual expression of love!

Jesus' message of love is surprising. It's countercultural. Jesus' love bends low. His love washes us clean. Jesus' love searches and reaches out for us: and he loves us "to the end."

Have you opened your heart to the fullness of Christ's love?

—WRITTEN BY [RUTH BOVEN](#)

PRAYER:

Lord, thank you for loving me. Help me to grasp how high and wide and deep and long your love is for all people. Amen.

Willing To Be Washed

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 22 | [JOHN 13:6-8](#)

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."
John 13:8

It's a humbling, maybe even humiliating, experience to have someone wash you. Nurses know the awkwardness as well as the importance of bathing patients who cannot bathe themselves. And those who have broken an arm, leg, or hip understand only too well how that fracture can prevent you from fulfilling the basic task of washing yourself.

This is also true in the life of faith. Most of us cherish our independence. We are doers. We are achievers. We resent needing to rely on others for things we think we can do ourselves. Yet the truth is that we are broken because of sin. The Bible teaches that in order to enter into the fullness of life that God intends for us, we need to be washed clean. But we are unable to do that for ourselves.

When Jesus attempted to wash Peter's feet, Peter vehemently refused. We could translate his refusal like this: "You will never ever wash my feet! Never!" Peter thought he was saying the proper thing. It didn't feel right for Jesus to be acting as a servant to him. How could it be fitting for his Master to descend to such lowliness?

Jesus' reply to Peter was also vehement. In essence, Jesus said, "If I can't wash you, you can't have me." Peter needed to follow Jesus' example and humbly submit himself. He needed to be washed, and he needed to receive the forgiveness of sin that Jesus was offering.

Just like Peter, we need that too.

So give in. Be washed. And receive fullness of life!

—WRITTEN BY [RUTH BOVEN](#)

PRAYER:

God of grace,
wash me clean
of all my sins.
Help me walk
in humility and
receive the
fullness of life
that you offer
through Jesus.
Amen.

Daily Hygiene

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 23 | [JOHN 13:9-11](#)

“Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean.” John 13:10

When I was a child, Saturday night kicked off preparations for Sunday worship. Dresses were pressed, shoes shined, grimy hands, faces, and bodies scrubbed clean. Imagine my mother’s distress when one of my pajama-clad brothers would escape to rescue a forgotten ball from the dirt driveway. Thankfully only his feet needed rewashing!

Jesus told Peter he was clean. Jesus’ message was this: If you’ve been washed by me, you are clean once and for all. This is the great claim of the Christian faith. We believe that the precious body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ was sacrificed for the complete forgiveness of all our sins. Because of Jesus we are totally clean, now and forever.

Yet the call to Peter and to us is to take up our cross daily and follow Jesus. Daily we place our feet on the path of faithful living. Daily we confess the ways our feet stray from that path. And daily we are invited to rejoice in the assurance that we’ve been pardoned, that because of Jesus we are freed, forgiven, and wonderfully clean!

Will you walk humbly today in this assurance? And to whom will your feet bring you? Maybe to someone in your own family or someone you meet on the street? No matter who we are or where we go, we are called to make the most of any opportunity the Lord puts in front of us.

—WRITTEN BY [RUTH BOVEN](#)

PRAYER:

Gracious God, move my heart to daily confession and to walk humbly in the knowledge of your sacrifice. Guide my feet to those who need to know your forgiveness. Amen.

I Have Set You An Example

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 24 | [JOHN 13:12-17](#)

**"I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."
John 13:15**

In the washing of his disciples' feet, Jesus had done an outrageous thing. Jesus, the Master, had humbly bowed before and served those who were supposed to follow him. [Philippians 2:6-7](#) says that Jesus, though "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant." Jesus came to serve among us for our benefit, for our salvation, so that we might know and enter into the love God has for us.

In doing this, Jesus also set an example for us to follow. He showed us how we can live in the most blessed way possible: in humble service. When we serve others, we give our time, our attention, our resources, our very selves for other people's benefit and flourishing. It's a way of life that influences our every interaction. As imitators of Christ, we practice things like good listening, generous hospitality, and faithful care for people in need, starting with those closest to us.

Following Jesus' example of humble service is no easy calling. In [Romans 12:10](#) we are instructed, "Honor one another above yourselves." This is something we cannot do without the Spirit of Christ living in us. But Scripture promises that as we serve others, Christ, by his Spirit, is present to guide, equip, and bless.

How can you serve others today?

—WRITTEN BY [RUTH BOVEN](#)

PRAYER:

Loving God,
thank you that
Christ Jesus
came to this earth
as a humble
servant. Help me
today to humbly
serve others in
whatever way I
can. Amen.

What Glory Looks Like

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 25 | [JOHN 13:31-33](#)

**"Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him."
John 13:31**

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines glory as great "praise, honor, or distinction." Christians use the word glory often, especially in worship. In the church where I serve, we sometimes sing these words: "We will glorify the King of kings. We will glorify the Lamb. We will glorify the Lord of lords, who is the great I Am." Giving glory to God lifts our hearts upward toward the reigning King. We praise him for his greatness, power, and majesty.

But Jesus gives us another angle on glory in our verse today. Remember that Jesus is on the brink of his brutal march to the cross. "Now the Son of Man is glorified," he said. Jesus' glory is first of all about the fulfillment of his Father's purposes. Jesus' obedience to his Father's plan would be his glory, even though it meant suffering and death on a cross. Jesus showed us that glory comes through sacrificial love and obedience to God.

How do you and I think about glory? Our world would like us to think glory comes through achievement and status. Sacrificial obedience to someone else's plan would not seem to be the path to glory. But, truly, that's what it takes. Our submission and obedience to God's loving plan for this world is the only achievement worthy of praise, honor, and distinction.

To God be the glory!

—WRITTEN BY [RUTH BOVEN](#)

PRAYER:

God of glory, help me to realize that glory comes through sacrificial obedience to your loving plan for this world. May I obey you each day. Through Jesus I pray. Amen.

A New Command

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 26 | [JOHN 13:34-38](#)

**"A new command I give you: Love one another."
John 13:34**

I would like to have been there. Wouldn't you? Jesus was giving his final instructions to his disciples. To them he would soon entrust his life-giving mission. The tone of Jesus' speech was tender, yet urgent. His instructions were specific. Perhaps the clearest and most direct command was this: "Love one another."

While Jesus elsewhere teaches that his disciples must love all people, even their enemies, here he tells his followers they must love each other. This is how the world will see and understand the message of God's love.

If you are connected to a church, you know the challenge of this command. It can be hard to love fellow believers. Differences in theology, culture, lifestyle, worship style, and many other things can create conflict and division among Christians. Yet Jesus said that the world will know we are Christians not by our uniformity of thinking or practice, but by our love for one another, which comes from God (see [1 John 4:7-21](#)).

The good news is that the love we are commanded to share is not self-generated. We don't have to come up with this love all by ourselves. [Romans 5:5](#) tells us, "God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit." In other words, the more we open our hearts to receive the gracious love of God, the more we are able to love one another.

Is there a fellow believer or family member to whom you might show love today? Do you need to ask God to help you live his example of love?

—WRITTEN BY [RUTH BOVEN](#)

PRAYER:

Almighty God,
fill me with your
love. Help me
to show love to
all my brothers
and sisters in
Christ. Amen.

Great Service

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 27 | [MATTHEW 20:20-28](#)

"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant...just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve." Matthew 20:26-28

Service is a spiritual discipline that Christians have practiced for thousands of years. This practice is based on the life of Jesus who challenged even our most basic ideas of authority. He washed his disciples' feet, forgave their doubt, and willingly died for them.

In today's verses, a proud and loving mother intervenes for her two sons and tries to secure prime position in Jesus' kingdom for at least one of them. But Jesus' response is confounding. "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant." Although Jesus' answer may have sounded confusing to first-century ears, we now know that this is exactly what Jesus did.

Jesus washed his disciples' dirty feet, he fed those who were hungry, he healed those who were sick, and ultimately he gave his life for us all. Likewise, we can serve in many ways, both great and small. I once witnessed a well-known Christian leader bend down to pick up trash on a retreat. Perhaps you occasionally bring a meal to an elderly neighbor, or willingly watch a friend's children. It's also a service to receive gratefully from someone serving you.

As we grow in the grace of serving, we'll find more opportunities to serve. We can know we're mastering this discipline when we find ourselves serving without giving it a second thought. Serving will have become second nature. Then, perhaps, our elderly neighbor will ask us why it is that we serve, and we can tell her about Christ Jesus. Sharing this news is truly a great service indeed!

—WRITTEN BY [NORMAN BROWN](#)

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, you served me by dying for my sins. Help me to serve you by serving my neighbors around me. Make me humble, I pray, as I serve in your name. Amen.



WEEK 2:

Prayer and the Cross

This week, we invite you to reflect on the theme “Prayer and the Cross.” We will see that Jesus’ journey to the cross is filled with many prayerful moments. How can we learn from these examples? And how should they inform the way we pray today?

Lord, Teach Us To Pray

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 28 | [LUKE 11:1-4](#)

"When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us....Forgive us....And lead us....'" Luke 11:2-4

Throughout Jesus' entire ministry, he was preparing his disciples for the time when he would die on the cross. They may not have known what was coming, but Jesus knew he would soon leave them. Each day, Christ taught them by his example and equipped them for life after his death and resurrection. Part of this was teaching them how to pray.

Both Matthew ([6:9-13](#)) and Luke recorded Jesus' famous prayer lesson for his disciples. Today, many people know this prayer from memory. In worship, believers often recite it in unison. We call it "The Lord's Prayer," but it could also be called "The Disciples' Prayer."

Even before Jesus begins this prayer, Luke makes an important point. "One day Jesus was praying in a certain place." His disciples saw that Jesus was a man of prayer. And they knew he could teach them.

The disciples wanted to know how to connect with God when they were alone with him. Interestingly, Jesus doesn't say, "Just memorize this brief prayer." Nor does he claim that it covers all we should ask of our Father. But it does convey the essence of prayer and is well worth memorizing.

Notice that the first petition doesn't ask anything for ourselves, but only for God's honor: "Make your name holy" ("hallowed"). Above all, true disciples seek to uphold God's holiness and pray that his kingdom will come. After that come requests for the basics: daily needs; forgiveness as we forgive; and leading away from evil to full life in God's kingdom.

Do you want to be more like Jesus? Do you want to prepare your heart during this Lenten season? Start with this simple prayer.

—WRITTEN BY [NORMAN BROWN](#)

PRAYER:

Father, hallow your name in my life! Provide all I need so that I can be the person you call me to be for your kingdom here on earth. In Jesus, Amen.

The Best Protection Plan

MONDAY, MARCH 1 | [JOHN 17:6-19](#)

"My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one." John 17:15

Have you ever accused someone of having their "head in the clouds?" They just aren't listening to what you are saying or paying attention to what is going on. You want them to come down to earth and get in tune with what's happening here!

Sometimes Christians are accused of this sort of behavior, that is, "pie in the sky" thinking. Some people say that our minds are so fixed on heaven that we're of no earthly good. Perhaps we've been wrongly accused. Or could the critics be at least partly right?

The truth is, Jesus spoke of heaven, but mostly he spoke of God's kingdom in our world. The mission he entrusted to his followers was not about longing for heaven but about making disciples and growing God's kingdom here on earth. Just before Jesus was arrested in the garden, he prayed for his disciples. He knew he would not be with them much longer, so his prayer highlighted one of the fiercest challenges they would face: the evil one.

The work of the evil one is the work of undoing. We don't talk about this ugly truth often enough. But here's a question to consider: Why would Jesus pray for his disciples' protection if there were no real threat?

The evil one is real. He schemes to undo God's good work in our world. And he often targets us, Jesus' followers. So real is the danger of the evil one's plots that Jesus asks the Father to protect us.

Yet think about it. Could there be a better protection plan? Jesus himself is praying for us. As we work with the Lord to grow his kingdom here on earth, the power and presence of almighty God is always with us!

—WRITTEN BY [RUTH BOVEN](#)

PRAYER:

Lord, thank you that your power is infinitely greater than that of the evil one. Thank you for protecting me. Keep me from distraction and sin as I seek to know you better. May your kingdom come here on earth, I pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Letting The World Know

TUESDAY, MARCH 2 | [JOHN 17:20-26](#)

**"I in them and you in me....Then the world will know that you sent me."
John 17:23**

There's a lot of togetherness in Jesus' prayer for all believers. Jesus prays that all believers will be one and that the Father and Christ himself will be "in" all believers.

Opening our hearts and lives to God and to one another is foundational to living for the Lord who calls us. It shouldn't surprise us, for this is the way that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit live together in a relationship of deepest fellowship and love with each other.

What should surprise us is that we are invited into that holy fellowship. The psalmist marvels that the God of the universe even pays attention to us: "What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" ([Psalm 8:4](#)). In sending Jesus to live in our world, God opens the way for us to enter into an intimate relationship with him and with other believers.

This is a beautiful and joyful communion; God and his people joined together in purpose and unity. Jesus said that when we get this right—that is, when we share and celebrate the love of God in Christian community—the world is compelled to enter in. Do you find that to be true?

Jesus' prayer is at the leading edge of showing the world the full extent of God's love. May that be your prayer today too—for your relationships with your family and with all those around you.

—WRITTEN BY [RUTH BOVEN](#)

PRAYER:

Loving God, I want to show the world the love that you showed in sending Jesus. Help me to live in ways that draw others to join in communion with you and one another. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Praying According To God's Will

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 3 | [MATTHEW 26:36-46](#)

"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Matthew 26:39

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught his disciples to say, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" ([Matthew 6:10](#)). In today's verses Jesus models the process of seeking God's will. And we can learn from him.

First, Jesus honestly tells his Father that he would like this trouble to pass by him. He really did not want to go through the suffering that he knew was soon coming.

Like Jesus, we should not be ashamed to express our wishes and desires to God. God wants us to know ourselves and to establish an honest conversation with him. But too often we stop there. Our prayers are often only about what we want.

Prayer is a dialogue, and Jesus waits for confirmation of his request. He makes this same request a second time and then a third time. He has confidence that his prayer fits the will of his Father. But eventually he is convinced that his will is not God's will. So he submits to the fact that the cup of suffering is God's will for him.

Does this kind of asking and waiting fit how we pray? If our prayer time with God is honest and sincere, it often changes us and moves us in a new direction. We see possibilities that we were blind to before. We receive a deeper capacity to face challenges that once seemed out of reach. Continued prayer assures us of God's presence and affirms that our destiny is safe in his hands, whatever his will may be.

Christians are sometimes guilty of using the words "If it is God's will" rather flippantly. But praying that God's will be done is no easy matter. Our prayers must yield to God's will since that is the safest place to be.

—WRITTEN BY [DEAN DEPPE](#)

PRAYER:

Father, help me to truly seek your will as I pray. May your perfect will be accomplished in my life. In Christ, Amen.

The Spirit Is Willing

THURSDAY, MARCH 4 | [MARK 14:32-42](#)

He has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help. Psalm 22:24

Rarely does an hour pass by when we are not tempted. Sometimes the temptations are small: should we eat that cookie or not? But sometimes what is seemingly small can have much greater significance.

We rarely see the flaws in our character until we are tested. Jesus asked his disciples to watch and pray with him, but they dozed off ([Matthew 26:36-46](#)). By surrendering to a small temptation, they lacked the spiritual strength to fight off a much greater one. The disciples gave in to the weakness of the flesh, and as a result they were not prepared to support Jesus during his trial and crucifixion.

Our flesh is our own weak-willed human nature without the power of God. Our natural capabilities fail in the midst of temptation, so we need a divine infusion of persistence and endurance from the Holy Spirit. With the Spirit, we have the ability to defeat any temptation ([1 Corinthians 10:13](#)).

Throughout the Bible we learn that the Holy Spirit equips us for many tasks. The Spirit empowers the believer in many ways.

In [Mark 13](#), Jesus speaks of a time after he is gone and encourages his disciples that the Spirit of God will lead them into and through many struggles and much adversity. He even goes so far as to say that the Holy Spirit will give the disciples words to speak when they need them ([Mark 13:11](#)). We too can receive strength even when we are in trying circumstances!

We live in the age of the Spirit today. We can call upon the Holy Spirit to strengthen our spirits to resist any temptation. What a gift from God, who never stops giving of himself for us. Remember, all we need to do is ask, seek, and knock: call on the Lord!

—WRITTEN BY [DEAN DEPPE](#)

PRAYER:

Lord, I am so often weak in fighting temptations. May your Holy Spirit enlighten my spirit to the divine power at my disposal. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Rescue!

FRIDAY, MARCH 5 | [PSALM 22](#)

He has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help. Psalm 22:24

As Jesus hung on the cross, he uttered a few sayings that have become very familiar to many of us. When he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ([Matthew 27:46](#)), he was echoing the words of [Psalm 22:1](#) in an excruciating cry of pain to God his Father. This psalm, though it begins with a cry of pain, turns into an expression of faith and thanksgiving in the end.

The first half of the psalm foreshadows much of what Jesus experienced on the cross: mocking, insults, thirst, the piercing of his hands and feet, even the casting of lots for his clothing. But further into the psalm, as our verse for today says, God "has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help."

While it seemed Christ had been forever abandoned, God wasn't through with him. Jesus' body would be placed in a grave, but he would be raised from the dead, the Lord of life! He would be crowned with the name that is above every name (see [Philippians 2:9-11](#)).

[Hebrews 5:7](#) says that while Jesus lived on earth, "he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission."

He was heard! It seemed for a time that he was not, but God did hear, and Jesus was assured that he could rest in his Father's hands (see [Luke 23:46](#)). And on the third day he rose from the grave!

We too can be assured that God hears our every prayer. So take heart that you can share your thoughts, concerns, and even your most excruciating cries of pain with an ever-hearing God!

—WRITTEN BY [SHAWN BRIX](#)

PRAYER:

Gracious God, you heard Jesus even in those darkest moments. Thank you that I can trust that you will never abandon me. Thank you, Father! Amen.

A Childhood Prayer

SATURDAY, MARCH 6 | [LUKE 23:44-49](#)

Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last. Luke 23:46

The first bedtime prayer I was taught by my parents was "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep." Perhaps you learned the same prayer as a child and have taught it to your children.

In Jesus' day, little Jewish children were also taught a prayer. Every night, in houses all across the countryside, little children would pray the words of [Psalm 31:5](#): "Into your hands I commit my spirit." As parents tucked little ones into bed, each child spoke those comforting words of trust in the Lord.

It's likely that Jesus too was taught that prayer as a child. And some thirty years later it was the last thing he said before he took his final breath.

On the cross Jesus had reached the climax and the end of his entire mission. And as he took his dying breath, his final words were those of that prayer he learned at his mother's knee: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

That's the type of trust we're all called to. Jesus had taught earlier that "anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" ([Mark 10:15](#)). Jesus approached his Father both in life and in death with that simple childlike trust, praying always "Into your hands I commit my spirit."

Are your days permeated by that kind of simple prayer?

—WRITTEN BY [SHAWN BRIX](#)

PRAYER:

Father in heaven, teach me to trust in you with childlike faith. In life and in death, I want to commit my body, mind, and spirit into your worthy hands, as I trust in you. Amen.



WEEK 3:

Suffering and the Cross

In this week's devotions, we will ponder the ever-present and difficult issue of suffering. We will walk with Christ and his companions through their hours of deep suffering and explore the role of the cross in transforming unimaginable sorrow into joy.

A Man Familiar With Suffering

SUNDAY, MARCH 7 | [ISAIAH 53:1-6](#)

He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Isaiah 53:3

You may have heard this statement, or even used it yourself: "You can't truly know a person unless you've walked a mile in their shoes."

It's a great comfort to know that while Jesus was on this earth, he fully embraced this old adage. He walked in our shoes and showed that he genuinely knew the full range of human experience.

The Bible often reminds us that Jesus was one of us. He experienced joy and sorrow, feasting and hunger, the fruits of hard work and the setbacks of poverty. He also knew the grief of losing a close friend, which led him to weep ([John 11:32-35](#)). In addition, Jesus was sometimes discouraged by the spiritual numbness of his disciples ([Matthew 16:8-12](#)), and weary from hot, dusty travel ([John 4:6](#)). He became angry when people mistreated God and others ([Matthew 21:12-13](#)), but he also took children in his arms and taught and blessed them ([Matthew 19:13-14](#)). Through his crucifixion, Jesus experience unimaginable suffering and even, as Isaiah foretold, total rejection. And he experienced this all for you and for me!

Our salvation wasn't won in the beauty and safety of a royal palace. Jesus pioneered our salvation through the experience of human living in this world. He faced all the temptations and struggles we meet daily, and yet he never sinned ([Hebrews 4:15](#)). His words from the cross, "I am thirsty," ([John 19:28](#)) assure us that he willingly and obediently dealt with all human experiences as he worked to defeat sin.

—WRITTEN BY [SHAWN BRIX](#)

PRAYER:

Thank you, Jesus, for being willing to enter the grit and grime of humanity to save me. There has never been a greater sacrifice! Amen.

A Look Of Love

MONDAY, MARCH 8 | [LUKE 22:54-62](#)

The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter...And he went outside and wept bitterly. Luke 22:61-62

In today's reading, Jesus warned Peter that before the rooster would crow he would deny Jesus three times. As unimaginable as this was to Peter, we know that he did exactly what Jesus warned. First one denial, then another, and finally a third.

Isn't this often the case with people? One sin leads to another, and then another until the situation snowballs out of control.

Can you imagine the moment when Jesus turns and looks at Peter? It's after the third denial. Perhaps Jesus is being led from the house of the high priest Annas to the house of the high priest Caiaphas, and he walks past Peter. A rooster crows in the distance, and Jesus locks eyes with him. Remembering the Lord's warning, Peter stumbles out of the courtyard with bitter tears filling his eyes.

Oftentimes, in tears we find a glimmer of hope. I see a mother who looks into the eyes of a child who has done wrong. The child turns away, but the mother says, "Look at me!" The child sees the hurt and the love in the mother's eyes and begins to cry. It's the look of love that breaks the heart of that child. And it was the look of Jesus' love that broke Peter's heart.

But Jesus' love did not leave Peter broken and wallowing in shame. Through the cross, Jesus' love brought Peter unimaginable forgiveness, healing, and hope.

Have you ever wept bitterly when you faced the bitter consequences of your sin? Maybe these words today are like the crowing of a rooster reminding you that Jesus has his eyes fixed on you, and he loves you deeply.

—WRITTEN BY [JERRY HOYTEMA](#)

PRAYER:

Dear Jesus, I know that I often fail. I am so grateful for your redeeming love which covers all my sins. Forgive me today, and bless me. Amen.

They Beat Him

TUESDAY, MARCH 9 | [LUKE 22:63-71](#)

The men who were guarding Jesus began mocking and beating him.
Luke 22:63

These words bring to mind the story *Unbroken*. If you read the book or saw the movie, you know that Louis Zamperini experienced unbelievable torture and abuse from his captors in Japanese prison camps. Anyone who reads the book or sees the movie will likely feel disgust and even anger at what he had to endure. How can any human being be so unbelievably cruel?

I can imagine that Luke wrote these words with those same sorts of feelings.

There are certain crimes that are particularly offensive to us, like when the strong oppress the weak, parents abuse their children, or trusted leaders take advantage of children or others in their care.

Here, it is the soldiers that are committing the unthinkable crime. The Bible says that those "who were guarding Jesus" were "mocking and beating him." They poked fun of him; they rolled up their fists and pounded him; they spit on him; they played games that mocked him in the most humiliating ways. Yes, the men who were being paid to guard the rights and protections of the person on trial, the soldiers who bore weapons to stop evil and protect right, the very ones who were supposed to stop others from doing this were doing it themselves.

There was more to come, from chief priests who did the same, from crowds at his trial and at the cross, and from one of the criminals hanging on a cross beside him.

All of this shows clearly that Jesus knew from personal experience the depths of injustice. He knew the cost of doing God's work in a world that did not acknowledge him. And he bore it all for our sakes.

—WRITTEN BY [HOWARD VANDERWELL](#)

PRAYER:

Dear Jesus, thank you for your willingness to suffer in my place so that I might have a Savior who not only carries my sins, but also understands the depths of my suffering and pain. In your name, Amen.

A Sword Pierces Mary's Soul

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 10 | [LUKE 2:21-35](#)

"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many....And a sword will pierce your own soul too." Luke 2:34-35

On the cross Jesus said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son," and to John, "Here is your mother" ([John 19:26-27](#)).

What might Mary have been thinking as she heard those words? A hundred things could have raced through her mind. But at least at some point, she must have recalled the prophecy that Simeon had spoken when Jesus was only eight days old.

Mary and Joseph had brought Jesus to the temple to present him to the Lord for circumcision, according to custom. That's when they met Simeon. He had approached them as they entered the temple, and he had scooped Jesus up in his arms. This was the child he had been waiting for! This was the child God himself had promised Simeon he would see before he died.

Then Simeon said, "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation." But as Simeon handed Jesus back to his parents, he declared that one day this child would cause the rising and falling of many, depending on whether they would receive him as Messiah and Savior. "And a sword will pierce your own soul too," he said to Mary.

As she stood at the foot of the cross, watching her son give up his life, Mary must have felt a stabbing pain in her soul, a sorrow too deep for words. Many of us know this kind of sorrow far too well. But we are not alone. And we can have hope that sorrow is not the final word. For it is from this very sorrow that Jesus brought the unimaginable joy of salvation.

—WRITTEN BY [SHAWN BRIX](#)

PRAYER:

Father God, thank you for the hope you give us in the midst of sorrow. Help us draw near to you in our sorrow and teach us to come alongside those who know sorrow too deep for words. Amen.

Enduring Forsakenness

THURSDAY, MARCH 11 | [MARK 15:33-34](#); [PSALM 22:1-2](#)

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
Mark 15:34; Psalm 22:1

The story of famous couple Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning is a classic case of forsakenness. Elizabeth's parents so disapproved of her marriage to Robert that they refused to associate with her. In spite of that, every week for years she wrote a letter to her parents to say how much she loved them. She hoped that one day they would respond with love for her too. After ten years she finally received a large package in return, containing all her letters unopened.

Being forsaken is devastating!

But far more disturbing is the picture of Jesus on the cross crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" To pay the price for our sin, Jesus was abandoned by his eternal Father. God turned his face away, and his Son suffered the complete separation from God that we deserve.

Jürgen Moltmann, a German theologian, was born into a secular family and never felt the need for God. He became very skeptical when his best friend was killed in the fierce bombing of Germany during World War II. Entering the army, he was taken prisoner by the British. Receiving a Bible from a chaplain, he read until he came to Jesus' cry. In Jesus' forsaken cry, Moltmann said, "I found...somebody who understood me. And from that time, I became a Christian."

By enduring the darkness of God-forsakenness for us, Jesus ensured that we need never be alone. Even though we may feel forgotten and forsaken by someone we love, we can know that Jesus will never leave us nor forsake us. What a blessing!

—WRITTEN BY [DEAN DEPPE](#)

PRAYER:

Lord, thank you for taking my place and bearing my punishment. Your cry of forsakenness creates within me exclamations of thanksgiving. Amen.

Simply Trust

FRIDAY, MARCH 12 | [HEBREWS 9:11-15](#)

The blood of Christ...[cleanses] our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! Hebrews 9:14

There are times when almost all of us feel we need to add something to what Christ has done for us. Surely, we think, there must be some kind of additional payment we must make before we face God on Judgment Day! For some of us, this feeling can be overwhelming. We may struggle with that proverbial nagging voice that's constantly telling us that we must be better or do more.

But the truth is that all who are united to Christ by faith owe no more than what Christ has already paid on their behalf. He has paid our debt in full!

God doesn't embrace us as his children because we've been trying so hard. He doesn't welcome us into his family because we've been making great spiritual strides. He doesn't hold on to us and make us new because we've done something to make him proud. God is not like Santa Claus who promises special gifts if we've been good. He welcomes us solely because of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.

Under the old religious system, the blood sacrifices of goats and bulls symbolized the sacrifice needed to cleanse us from sin. But now that Christ has shed his blood for us, we are fully clean once and for all!

If you're wondering whether you'll ever be good enough, or if you struggle with always trying to do more and more to prove yourself to God, or if you fear meeting God, stop wondering and struggling and fearing, and simply look to Christ with a trusting, believing heart. "It is finished," he said. Trust in him alone and find peace.

—WRITTEN BY [SHAWN BRIX](#)

PRAYER:

Forgive me, Father, for often trying to add somehow to the finished work of Jesus. The work of my hands could never add anything to the work of his! Help me to trust that what Christ did is enough. Amen.

Grief To Joy

SATURDAY, MARCH 13 | [JOHN 16:16-21](#)

**"You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy."
John 16:20**

Some of us know the deep grief of being separated from a loved one. When we are steeped in grief, it's hard to imagine that we could ever experience joy again. Jesus knows that about us.

My husband and I once served a two-year term in East Africa. One of the hardest parts was leaving our dear family members back home. Toward the end of our term some of our family members came to visit. I had never before experienced such great anticipation and joy over a family reunion.

Jesus spoke these words to his disciples in preparation for his death. He knew his disciples would grieve when he was gone. But he assured them that their grief would not last. In fact, their grief would turn to joy because there would be a reunion. Their friend, teacher, and brother would be among them once again, talking, eating, and teaching. And great joy would overwhelm them.

Though we will continue to face situations and losses that will cause us grief while on this earth, we do not grieve without hope. Our hope is in Christ Jesus and the saving work he finished for us. In believing and receiving the forgiveness and new life Jesus has won for us, one day our joy will be complete. A family reunion like no other awaits us. Let's rejoice and be glad!

—WRITTEN BY [RUTH BOVEN](#)

PRAYER:

Gracious God, sometimes my heart is weighed down with grief. Reassure me that my hope is in Christ, who will lead me into joy. In his name, Amen.



WEEK 4:

Journey to the Cross

Walk with us this week as we reflect on the events that led up to Jesus' crucifixion, and we ponder the question "Were You There?" As we imagine ourselves in these scenes, what can we learn from them and how can they prepare us for coming to the cross?

A Special Banquet To Visit

SUNDAY, MARCH 14 | [JOHN 12:1-3](#)

A dinner was given in Jesus' honor.
John 12:2

Here's a banquet I would love to have attended! Many of us have had that experience; we've heard about a special event and wish we'd been included. Many of us can remember the look of broken-heartedness on one of our children's faces when they heard about a birthday party and they were not invited.

Well, let's imagine we're at this banquet, given in Jesus' honor. It must have been at the home of Mary and Martha in Bethany. These women were Jesus' close friends, the ones he relaxed with, the ones whose brother was Lazarus. Yes, Lazarus, the one who had been in the tomb for four days when Jesus brought him back to life! (See [John 11](#).)

Just look around the banquet room. There's Jesus! His disciples. Mary and Martha. Some other friends. And there's Lazarus, the same man whom Jesus had miraculously raised from the dead! You can't have a man like that at a banquet without him being at the center of attention! The banquet was clearly in Jesus' honor because the resurrection of Lazarus had established Jesus' reputation in that community.

Wouldn't you love to have been there celebrating with Jesus? I would. Would you have asked Jesus about his miracles? Would you have lavishly anointed his feet with perfume like Mary? Or would you have just sat there in quiet awe?

There are many other events from those days that I'd love to have witnessed as well. I often think about that during the season of Lent. As we follow the theme "Were You There?" this week, let's imagine together that we're "on location" at the times when some of the most momentous events in history took place.

—WRITTEN BY [HOWARD VANDERWELL](#)

PRAYER:

Gracious Lord,
accept my deep
thanks for coming
to this earth to
be my Savior. As I
look in to observe
your life and death
this week, stir my
faith in you. In your
name, Amen.

A Death Warrant

MONDAY, MARCH 15 | [JOHN 12:1-11](#)

The chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well.
John 12:10

Suppose you had been there and witnessed the confusing chain of events that led up to the death of Jesus. For three years, tension and animosity had been building between the religious leaders and Jesus. It seems that every time he performed a miracle or made clear that he was the Son of God, the leaders became more upset. As their anger built, it blinded them to who he was; their hearts hardened and they came to believe that Jesus had to be killed.

Then the most spectacular and striking miracle of all took place. Lazarus had died, and his body had lain four days in a tomb while all his family and friends mourned. Then, in an act that can only be explained by the power of God, Jesus brought him back to life!

What an amazing thing to observe! What a motivation to believe in Jesus as God's Son!

But this event led to a new tragedy. The religious leaders became even more agitated. They were angry at Lazarus because he was encouraging people to believe in Jesus. So the decision was made. Lazarus would have to die too. The evidence of Jesus' power had to be destroyed.

If you had been there, you would have sensed the tragedy and irony in these events, but you would also have seen firsthand how determined unbelief can be and how angry it can become when threatened.

Can you see instances of determined unbelief in our world today? The powers of evil can often seem so strong. But we know that God is stronger yet, and he will ultimately reign. Hallelujah!

—WRITTEN BY [HOWARD VANDERWELL](#)

PRAYER:

Lord, open the eyes of all who see the evidence firsthand but are so blinded that they refuse to recognize you as the Lord of life, the one and only Son of God. In your name, Amen.

Refusing To Believe

TUESDAY, MARCH 16 | [JOHN 12:37-41](#)

Even after Jesus had performed so many signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. John 12:37

Many of us think that if only we'd been there during the time when Jesus lived on this earth, we surely would have believed in him.

After all, the evidence was so clear. He loved people so much. He talked so clearly about God as his heavenly Father. Jesus left no doubt about his claim to be the Son of God. Lame people walked again. Sick people were healed. Demon-possessed people were freed. To top it all off, even dead people were raised to life. Could there be any doubt about Jesus' claims?

Yet even after all the miracles, people still would not believe in him. Why not? Belief with all that evidence would be far more reasonable than unbelief!

So why wouldn't people believe in him?

I guess there really is no convincing answer to that question except to say that hearts can be hard. Very hard. So hard that even the best of evidence makes no impression. So hard that blindness sets in. It's possible for people to resist so vehemently that eventually God takes away the ability to see. And then "would not believe" becomes "could not believe."

Maybe you've seen that happening in people you know. Maybe you have loved ones who just won't accept Jesus as their Savior. Pray that those who refuse Jesus will have a change of heart. Pray also that God will take away the blindness of those who have refused for so long.

—WRITTEN BY [HOWARD VANDERWELL](#)

PRAYER:

Lord, I pray today for friends who are refusing to believe. I pray for your mighty Spirit to open their hearts, see the evidence, and put their faith in Jesus. For his sake, Amen.

Trusting Hearts

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 17 | [JOHN 14:1-4](#)

**"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me."
John 14:1**

If you and I had been there, our hearts would have been just as troubled as the disciples' hearts were. And with good reason.

The disciples had seen the conflict develop between the religious leaders and Jesus, and they knew the leaders wanted to get rid of him. They had heard Jesus talk about his coming suffering and death. They'd also heard him talking about "going away." They saw Judas leave the Passover table and wondered what that meant. And then they heard Jesus predict that Peter would disown Jesus three times. So with all these concerns, their hearts were carrying a heavy load. No wonder their hearts were troubled.

But now, still in the upper room at the Passover table, Jesus makes this astounding statement that their hearts should be trusting, not troubled. How could that be?

As always, Jesus gives his followers many reasons to trust him. Look again at what he says. He points to himself and says, "Believe. Trust in me." He tells them about his Father's house with many rooms. He explains that he's going there to prepare a place for them! And then he'll come back. And when he comes back, he'll take them to be with him there. What a list of promises!

Don't you wish you'd been there to hear those promises directly from the Savior's mouth? It would be nice, but the good news is that we can read them in scripture and know that he was speaking to us too.

—WRITTEN BY [HOWARD VANDERWELL](#)

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus,
may your rich
promises bring
peace to my heart
today. When I'm
tempted to fear,
remind me that
you're preparing a
place for me. For
your name's sake,
Amen.

Faith That Will Not Fail

THURSDAY, MARCH 18 | [LUKE 22:24-34](#)

"I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail."
Luke 22:32

It must have been a jarring moment there in the upper room. So many important things had happened. Judas had left. Jesus had instituted a "new covenant" of love ([Luke 22:20](#)). And now he turned to Peter and stated that Satan wanted to ruin him.

Satan is the prince of evil. He rules the kingdom of darkness that Christ came to destroy. The prince of evil wanted to work intensely on Peter, one of Jesus' closest disciples. He wanted to "sift [Peter] as wheat," Jesus said. In those days a farmer would place his grain in a sieve and shake it vigorously. It wasn't pleasant for the wheat, but it was the only way for the chaff and dust to be separated from the grain.

Yet at the same time Jesus gave Peter a precious promise. He reassured Peter that he had prayed for him. With all that must have been going through Jesus' mind and heart as he faced his coming betrayal, trial, and crucifixion, Jesus was willing to focus his prayers on Peter, asking that Peter's faith would not fail. Jesus was referring, of course, to the temptations Peter would soon face as the devil worked on him to deny his Lord.

I've been sifted too. Have you? Are you aware that your Savior, who now rules in heaven, is constantly praying for us, praying that our faith will not fail when those times come? (See [Romans 8:34](#).)

—WRITTEN BY [HOWARD VANDERWELL](#)

PRAYER:

O Lord, just as you prayed for Simon Peter, pray for me today. I can often feel Satan shaking me and tempting me. Pray, O Lord, that my faith will not fail today. And pray for my loved ones too. In your name I ask this. Amen.

Facing The Cup

FRIDAY, MARCH 19 | [LUKE 22:39-42](#)

"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." Luke 22:42

Would you have wanted to be with Jesus when he spent his evening out in the Garden of Gethsemane? It apparently was a quiet, pleasant, beautiful place. It was a place someone could go to find peace and serenity.

But not tonight. This was the night for a "cup" in the garden; the cup of sorrow and suffering. Jesus had just identified Judas as his betrayer, warned Peter about his denials, instituted a new covenant, and given the disciples all the instructions they could handle for the night. Now it was time to be alone, alone with his Father, alone to face the cup of suffering that would soon come.

Jesus knew that once the suffering of that cup began to pour out, he would be arrested, taken to trial, beaten, condemned, and crucified. He faced the cup willingly, yet he recoiled from it. He asked for it to be taken from him. But he wanted the Father's will to be done more than his own. So he accepted the cup that no one else would or could ever want to drink.

Were you there when he faced that cup? Yes, you certainly were. If you trust him as your divine Savior, you were in his mind at that very moment. He was willing to face the cup and experience its suffering for your and my salvation. He knew that our salvation from sin required the payment that only his suffering and death could provide.

—WRITTEN BY [HOWARD VANDERWELL](#)

PRAYER:

Dear Jesus, how I thank you this day for being willing to endure the agony and suffering for my sin! Thank you for making me a child of God. In your name, Amen.

Strengthened By An Angel

SATURDAY, MARCH 20 | [LUKE 22:39-44](#)

An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him.
Luke 22:43

I'd love to have been there when this event happened. I've never seen an angel, but I'd really love to have seen what happened there. Wouldn't you?

The disciples hadn't been much help to Jesus. They hardly knew what to say about all these rapidly happening events. Judas was gone now, arranging Jesus' betrayal. Peter, James, and John were sleeping when they should have been praying for Jesus. Jesus was wrestling with the Father about the cup of suffering designed for him. Even though he was the eternal Son of God, this wrestling was real. His pain was intense.

So the Father sent an angel. Jesus was no stranger to angels. He had known them personally in heaven before he came to earth as a human. I'm sure he was also very conscious of them during his ministry as he encountered all the forces of evil in this world. Even Satan referred to them in his temptations of Jesus in the wilderness, quoting [Psalm 91](#) to say that God would command his angels to guard Jesus (see [Luke 4:9-13](#)).

Yes, I think it would have been deeply meaningful to stand alongside while the angel strengthened Jesus in his anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane. However, I doubt that my physical eyes would have been able to see the angel. After all, I've been told angels take care of me every day, and I have never seen that either. Yet I believe it. Do you?

—WRITTEN BY [HOWARD VANDERWELL](#)

PRAYER:

Thank you, Father, for sending an angel to strengthen your Son in his suffering. And thanks for sending your angels to guard me and my loved ones every day. For Jesus' sake, Amen.



WEEK 5:

Jesus' Words on the Cross

Join us this week as we contemplate the powerful and profound words of Jesus from the cross. These words, spoken in the the final hours of Jesus' life, reflect a spirit of love and forgiveness that are deeply humbling. As you reflect on his words, marvel at his example of selflessness, even in suffering.

They Do Not Know What They Are Doing

SUNDAY, MARCH 21 | [LUKE 23:26-38](#)

Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."
Luke 23:34

"They do not know what they are doing."

Who was Jesus referring to when he spoke these words from the cross? Was he talking about the soldiers who had just driven spikes through his hands and feet and were now rolling dice for his clothes?

Or could Jesus have been referring to people who were walking by, mocking and insulting him?

Or was it possible that he was speaking of his own disciples? They had abandoned him in his hour of deepest need!

Or maybe Jesus was thinking of the religious leaders, whose scheming had led to his sentencing. Or of Pilate, who gave in to the demands of the angry crowd even though he knew Jesus was innocent.

The list of possible suspects is long. Where do we stop when we think of who Jesus had in mind when he said these words? Could we go so far as to say that he was referring to you and me?

The Bible teaches that Jesus' statement includes all who "have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" ([Romans 3:23](#)). This includes you and me, but that is not a bad thing! This is because Jesus' plea was not one of condemnation. It was a plea of forgiveness. Thankfully, this plea wasn't specific to any one person or group of people. It was about forgiveness "for the sins of the whole world" ([1 John 2:2](#)). Praise be to God!

—WRITTEN BY [SHAWN BRIX](#)

PRAYER:

O God, thank you that Jesus' plea from the cross covers me and all my sins. I am overwhelmed by the forgiveness that he offers me each day. Amen.

An Outlandish Request And Response

MONDAY, MARCH 22 | [LUKE 23:32-43](#)

Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."
Luke 23:43

What boldness!

Picture it: a convicted felon, admitting that he is being justly punished, asking in his dying moments to be remembered by God's Son! A violent robber, nailed to a cross, gasping for air, asking for some kind of reward!

Something about Jesus made an impact on this condemned man. We sometimes hear of "death-bed conversions," but this was a "cross conversion"! Maybe the man feared meeting God unprepared. After all, the question he put to the criminal on the other side of Jesus was "Don't you fear God?" Or maybe he was struck by Jesus' plea asking God to forgive.

Whatever brought the change within his heart, the former robber turned to Jesus and said, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." He didn't say, "You owe me." He didn't say, "I deserve." Instead he pleaded for mercy: "Remember me."

And Jesus responded with a mind-boggling promise: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

On that day, the robber learned the greatest of all truths: God's grace is free to save sinners who offer nothing but their need for mercy. That's all the criminal had to offer. But that's all he needed to offer.

Today, that's all we need to offer as well. No sin is too great that God's grace and mercy cannot cover it. As it was for the thief on the cross, so it is for us.

—WRITTEN BY [SHAWN BRIX](#)

PRAYER:

Gracious God,
remember me.
In your mercy,
grant me the gift
of eternal life
today, tomorrow,
and forever,
when Jesus
returns to make
all things new!
Amen.

A Final Goodbye

TUESDAY, MARCH 23 | [JOHN 19:25-27](#)

Jesus...said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." John 19:26-27

In these words from the cross, "Woman, here is your son," and, "Here is your mother," Jesus was saying his final goodbye to Mary, his mother.

Of course, it was not the first time Jesus had said goodbye to his family. Three years earlier, when John the Baptist was preaching in the desert, Jesus knew that it was time for him to leave Joseph's carpenter shop and begin his public ministry of teaching and healing.

Things were never quite the same after that. From that time on, Mary was only able to love her son from a distance: on the edge of a crowd, outside a packed house, at the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Maybe she was even there when Jesus taught, "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life" ([Matthew 19:29](#)).

But it's reassuring to know that in his final hours, Jesus was deeply concerned for his mother's well-being. She was most likely a widow by this time (see [Mark 3:20-21, 31](#)), and Jesus was entrusting her to the care of John, one of his closest friends. For John, it was also a blessing to receive the loving care of a surrogate mother.

Today, Jesus continues to care for us in this very same way. Can you remember an occasion when a friend or church member walked with you in a time of grief or loss? Or have you ever responded to the Spirit's nudge to visit someone unable to leave their home due to illness?

Though we may not hear the audible words of Jesus, like Mary and John did from the cross, we know that he orders our care each day.

—WRITTEN BY [SHAWN BRIX](#)

PRAYER:

Thank you, Father God, for the special love and care Jesus had for Mary his mother, and his closest friend John. Thank you for the countless ways you care for all your followers today. Help me be aware of how Jesus wants to use me to care for those around me. Amen.

The Cry Of Forsakenness

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 24 | [MATTHEW 27:45-46](#)

Jesus cried out in a loud voice ...“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
Matthew 27:46

Jesus' words from the cross at “about three in the afternoon” were a cry of utter anguish and desolation.

For three years he had taught others to trust God. Again and again, he had encouraged crowds to place their faith in the loving Father.

But now here he was, suffering a horrible death. As he cried this most awful of cries, it may have seemed he couldn't practice what he had preached. But that was not the case. This was not a cry of unfaithfulness. It was instead the deepest, most guttural cry of misery and abandonment.

These words of agony were spoken after three hours of darkness had passed. This was not the darkness of a passing storm, or even an eclipse. It was the darkness brought on by human sin, the darkness of the torment of hell. The Father's abhorrence of all things evil was revealed to Jesus in those three hours.

And as the land lay in darkness, Christ felt the full weight of humanity's sin upon his shoulders. His hands and feet were pierced, but they were pierced for our transgressions and wrongdoings. His body was crushed, and that was because of our iniquities and offenses. (See [Isaiah 53:5](#).)

No wonder Christ felt so utterly deserted and abandoned by his Father. The sin of the world was upon him. Our sin was upon him.

—WRITTEN BY [SHAWN BRIX](#)

PRAYER:

Father, I can't begin to understand the depth of anguish Christ experienced for me as he hung on the cross. Thank you that, because of him, I will never have to face that kind of suffering. Amen.

Humanity In The Midst Of Divinity

THURSDAY, MARCH 25 | [JOHN 19:28-29](#)

Knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." John 19:28

In this statement Jesus expressed a need so human that anyone could have said it: "I am thirsty."

Of all the needs of the human body, water is one of the most basic. More than 60 percent of the human body is water! As we become dehydrated, our blood vessels and other cells literally begin to dry up.

By the time Jesus spoke these words from the cross, he had already been hanging there for more than six hours, and his body was becoming parched. Foreshadowing this moment, [Psalm 22:15](#) says, "My mouth is dried up like a potsherd [a broken piece of pottery], and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth."

A bruised, beaten man nailed to a cross and murmuring through cracked lips, "I am thirsty," is not what most of us picture when we think of God. But these details remind us of a great truth. At the center of the Christian faith is not a remote and distant God who lives beyond human pain. At the core of our faith is a person who is not only fully divine but is also fully human: indeed, human enough to be thirsty.

"I am thirsty." These words remind us that "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" ([John 1:14](#)). Jesus was human, like us.

—WRITTEN BY [SHAWN BRIX](#)

PRAYER:

O God, when I think you don't understand my hardships and pain, remind me again that Jesus took on human flesh, became one of us, and suffered in my place. Thank you that he knows all about being human and that he identifies with my needs. Amen.

No Quitter

FRIDAY, MARCH 26 | [JOHN 19:28-30](#)

When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. John 19:30

Were there times when Jesus simply wanted to quit? Is it possible there were moments when he was ready to simply say, "Thanks, but no thanks?"

Maybe you've never thought of Jesus wanting to throw in the towel. But isn't that what Jesus was expressing when he prayed in the garden on the night of his arrest? He said, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me" ([Luke 22:42](#)). Jesus was in anguish, praying so earnestly that "his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" ([Luke 22:44](#)). He was looking into his Father's heart, asking if there was some other way. He was looking up to the heavens, searching for another way to replace the path of suffering that he knew lay ahead.

Of course, we now know that he didn't give up. He followed through. In the end, he was able to pray, "Yet not my will, but yours be done" ([Luke 22:42](#)).

Jesus may have been on the verge of quitting, but he obediently pressed on so that his Father's will was accomplished through him.

That's what makes his words from the cross "It is finished" so magnificent. Despite every obstacle, Jesus fulfilled his mission. He had resolutely completed what the Father had sent him to do. He was no quitter; he was a finisher.

—WRITTEN BY [SHAWN BRIX](#)

PRAYER:

God, my Father, thank you that Jesus never gave up. He was determined to see your plan of salvation through to the end, for my sake and for your glory. Amen.

A Willing Sacrifice

SATURDAY, MARCH 27 | [JOHN 10:11-18](#)

**"I lay down my life....No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."
John 10:17-18**

"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When Jesus offered that prayer from the cross, he willingly gave up his life. He wasn't fighting back, or resisting it. He was simply entrusting his spirit to the care and keeping of God.

Luke says that Jesus called those words out with a loud voice. But it wasn't a cry of desperation like we heard earlier, when he said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" ([Mark 15:34](#)). Nor was it a shout of triumph, like his words "It is finished!" No, these were simply words of trust, calmly spoken in a loud, confident voice.

Earlier, Jesus had told his disciples, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep....The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life, only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."

Jesus wasn't forced to do anything for us. What he did for you and me, he did willingly.

He chose on his own to lay down his life as a sacrifice for his people everywhere. We see that willingness in his final words from the cross: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

What a Savior!

—WRITTEN BY [SHAWN BRIX](#)

PRAYER:

Lord God, thank you that Jesus gave his life for us without reservation, even while we were yet sinners! Thank you, Jesus, for choosing obedience so that we may have life! Amen.



WEEK 6:

Holy Week

Palm Sunday. Maundy Thursday. Good Friday. Dark Saturday. Easter. These are very important days in the life of the Christian Church and for individual Christians. This week is the culmination of our Lenten journey. For weeks, we have been preparing our hearts to consider anew the meaning of the cross. Join us as we walk through Passion Week, from the joyful crowds of Palm Sunday to the deep sorrow of Good Friday and ultimately to the triumph of Easter Sunday. On that Resurrection Sunday, we will rejoice in union once again as we say "Christ is risen! He has risen indeed!"

The Palm Parade

PALM SUNDAY, MARCH 28 | [JOHN 12:12-19](#)

They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel!" John 12:13

Today is one of my favorite days on the church calendar. This morning in many churches children will march up and down the aisles, singing praises and waving palm branches to remember the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. Perhaps your child or grandchild will be part of such a group. I find that each year, there's always some delightful mishap, such as one child who sings more exuberantly than the rest, or a youngster who tries to take someone's bigger branch.

Recently, I learned that the palm branches in Jesus' day had patriotic meaning. Rebels rising against Rome would mint coins stamped with palm branches on them. So, as Jesus entered Jerusalem to the waving of palms, the scene spoke of the Jewish people's national hopes that were pinned on Jesus.

Jesus chose to make his entry on a donkey, a humble symbol of both kingship and peace. But Jesus' message wasn't that he was the political king the people expected. His message was for the entire world. Jesus came not to save one nation but to offer salvation to all people. "He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near" ([Ephesians 2:17](#)).

It isn't by way of weapons or war horses that Jesus saves. Instead, on Palm Sunday, Jesus ushered in the humble message that he would lay down his life so that all people might claim him as Lord and King. Hosanna in the highest!

—WRITTEN BY [RUTH BOVEN](#)

PRAYER:

Blessed are you, my Lord and King, for you came to bring peace and salvation to all people. Equip me to join you in that great calling. In your name I pray. Amen.

Nothing To Do?

MONDAY, MARCH 29 | [MARK 11:1-11](#)

Since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.
Mark 11:11

We have to know a couple of important facts before we understand what is happening in our reading for today. First, Bethany was a small village on the other side of the Mount of Olives. This was where Jesus' friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus lived. Jesus often went there for some quiet rest among friends.

Second, the Palm Sunday triumphal entry had been the public proclamation of Jesus as the King "who comes in the name of the Lord." As the procession circled down the Mount of Olives and then up into Jerusalem, it ended right in the temple!

The fact that Jesus went to the temple should have resulted in an eruption of praise and celebration. The king had arrived! This was the very day for which the temple had been built!

But nothing happened! The whole thing fizzled! Jesus went to the temple, looked around, and then went to Bethany to visit with friends for the night! How awful! What a failure to recognize what was happening! The whole crowd had missed the point.

But if you and I had been there, would we have done better? Would we have recognized Jesus and given him the reception he deserved? As you think about that, can you think of other times when Jesus must have been equally disappointed with a response we've given him?

—WRITTEN BY [HOWARD VANDERWELL](#)

PRAYER:

Dear Jesus, forgive me for those times when I should have received you with joy and welcomed you eagerly, but instead I failed to acknowledge you. Open my eyes to recognize you always. For your name's sake, Amen.

When Feet Are Washed

TUESDAY, MARCH 30 | [JOHN 13:1-9](#)

He poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet.
John 13:5

Maybe you've seen pictures of this beautiful scene. Jesus humbly and considerately washes the feet of each of his disciples as a part of their Passover celebration. Foot-washing was a gracious act of hospitality that was usually received gratefully by guests.

I can think of several reasons why this should never have happened. Jesus was the Master at the head of the table, not the servant of the house. Jesus was on his way to Gethsemane and Golgotha, and his followers should have been washing his feet instead of Jesus washing theirs. Judas the betrayer and Peter the denier were both there and would also be exposed that evening, so why should he wash their feet? Besides, when you rented a room, the owner usually included a servant so that menial tasks like this could be covered. Where was the servant?

Nonetheless, Jesus picks up the task. He pours water into a basin and wraps a towel around his waist, while his disciples gawk in disbelief. Then he washes their feet, drying as he goes; even over the objections of Peter, who just doesn't understand.

It proves, doesn't it, that a lot of humble Christian service doesn't make sense to our way of thinking. It shows that Christians who think they are above certain "lowly" tasks toward one another haven't watched their Lord very carefully.

Do we willingly take on challenges and seemingly menial tasks that the Lord puts in our path?

—WRITTEN BY [HOWARD VANDERWELL](#)

PRAYER:

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the humble way you have served me and my brothers and sisters. Help me to be humble enough to serve them and others in the same way. For your sake, Amen.

Exposed

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 31 | [JOHN 13:31-38](#)

"Will you really lay down your life for me?...You will disown me three times!"
John 13:38

What a distressing time Jesus must have had that night in the upper room. First the disciples were embarrassed at the fact that Jesus washed their feet. Then Jesus exposed Judas as a betrayer, and Judas left. After they had eaten, Jesus also exposed Peter as one who would disown him three times that very night.

The shock was not only that Jesus would be disowned by one of the disciples, but that it would be Peter! Peter was the unofficial group leader. He was the one who first confessed Christ as the Son of God. He was the one who walked on water. He was the one who just now had said, "I will lay down my life for you."

Peter was the strong one. And if Peter was capable of a failure like that, what about the rest of us?

I wonder what Peter thought when Jesus exposed him. Was he embarrassed? Did he deny it? Did he feel shame? Did he understand his own personal dark side?

I wonder what you think as you read about Peter. If you had been there, what do you think you would have done or said or felt? Do you think you would have had the overconfidence that says, "I would never do anything like that!" Or would you have the realism that admits, "There but for the grace of God, go I"?

—WRITTEN BY [HOWARD VANDERWELL](#)

PRAYER:

Gracious Lord,
hold and guide
me when I face
times of trial.
Like Peter, I am
often so weak
that I fail you
in matters that
mean the most.
In your name I
pray. Amen.

Jesus' New Command

MAUNDY THURSDAY, APRIL 1 | [JOHN 13:31-35](#)

**"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."
John 13:35**

Let's take a moment to review the story of Jesus and his disciples in the upper room. They were eating the Passover meal: lamb, bitter herbs, and unleavened bread. As they shared this time together, only Jesus knew this would be his last night with his followers. Only he knew he would soon be arrested and killed.

Suddenly Jesus got up, wrapped a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin, and began washing his disciples' feet: their rough heels, hammertoes, bunions, and blisters. We read only of Peter's stuttering objections, but no doubt all the disciples were confused as Jesus performed this servant work.

Setting aside the basin of dirty water, Jesus returned to his place at the table. Then he explained, "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet." Later he added, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

Today is Maundy Thursday. The name comes from the Latin word "mandatum," meaning "command." On this night Jesus gave his disciples the "new command." They were to love one another as servants.

Like servants? That is a difficult command. But Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Loving others by humbly committing yourself to their service is no easy task. It is certainly not inherent to our human nature. But by the example of Jesus and with the power of the Holy Spirit, God assures us that we are able.

—WRITTEN BY [JOHN VAN SCHEPEN](#)

PRAYER:

Dear Teacher,
thank you that
you came
to earth and
became an
example for
me. Grant me
the wisdom to
be who you
call me to be.
Amen.

"It Is Finished"

GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 2 | [JOHN 19:28-37](#)

When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished."
John 19:30

"Are you finished with your chores yet?" a mother asks her teenager. Parents know their children are pulled in many directions by their friends, jobs, sports, and other activities. But following through on chores while we're young can help us learn to meet goals and complete important tasks in life.

Often as adults, however, we may find that we have regrets. Middle-aged parents may wish they'd spent more time with their children. People who become crippled by disease may wish they'd spent less time building a career and more time traveling with friends and building relationships. Some difficulties can't be avoided. Life has struggles and setbacks. Still, we do well to make the most of the opportunities we have each day.

Jesus, the Son of God, died one day long ago with the satisfaction of having completed his life's purpose. He came to seek and save the lost, and he accomplished everything needed for our redemption. Jesus meant it when he said, "It is finished." He made forgiveness and eternal life a reality for all who trust in him. "There is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" ([Acts 4:12](#)). That's why today is Good Friday.

As you look to the cross today, be sure to give thanks that Jesus completed his work and fulfilled God's mission.

—WRITTEN BY [JOHN VAN SCHEPEN](#)

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus,
thank you
for this Good
Friday, for
making my
salvation
possible. Thank
you for loving
me. Hallelujah!
Amen.

Hope In The Garden

DARK SATURDAY, APRIL 3 | [JOHN 19:38-42](#)

**At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden.
John 19:41**

Today is sometimes called Dark Saturday. It's the day Jesus' body lay lifeless, breathless, in a dark garden tomb. It's a strange in-between kind of day. Perhaps our hearts still mourn the stinging reality that Jesus' death was about our sin and about our wandering away from a loving God.

But perhaps our hearts are also beginning to thrill at the hope of what tomorrow will bring. When you think about it, that's where we live our lives. We live between what's been already accomplished for us in Christ, and the hope of what is yet to come.

The truth is that while Jesus' body lay in the grave, the world still turned, children played, families sat down to eat, and life, for many, went on as usual. The same is probably true for us, even as we take note of this day and week, in the twenty-first century.

How will you live this day? Likely you will eat and laugh and perhaps enjoy some leisure time. Will you also spend some time in expectant hope? Consider that in a garden tomb lay the hope of the entire world. Give thanks that the One who gave his life, out of love for us, has won the victory over death and hell. Let your heart anticipate tomorrow, a day of wonder. There's resurrection hope in that garden!

—WRITTEN BY [RUTH BOVEN](#)

PRAYER:

God of wonder,
my heart both
grieves and hopes.
Forgive my ways
of wandering from
you. Help me to
celebrate with joy
the resurrection
hope that is mine
through Jesus
Christ, my Lord.
Amen.

A Day Like No Other

EASTER SUNDAY, APRIL 4 | [JOHN 20:1-10](#)

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. John 20:1

Perhaps in church this morning you will greet one another with these words: "Christ is risen!" And the response might be "He is risen indeed!" We join centuries of Christians in marking this day as the day that changed everything. We celebrate the amazing truth that although Jesus was dead, he's now alive forevermore. Christ Jesus rose victorious over death. He is risen!

It's interesting to notice how John, the gospel writer, anchors the resurrection event to a day, a time, and a witness. On a particular day in history, early in the morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene saw that the stone had been moved away from Jesus' tomb. John wants to be clear. The resurrection of Jesus happened on earth's soil, in our time, for the benefit of us humans whom God created and loves. Because Jesus arose, life for us is forever anchored in good news.

Christ's resurrection gloriously demonstrates that God's sovereign love has the last word. As a glorious hymn puts it, "No power of hell, no scheme of man, can ever pluck me from his hand." We now live in the joyful assurance that because Christ lives, we too will live for all eternity.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah! Rejoice in Easter hope today!

—WRITTEN BY [RUTH BOVEN](#)

PRAYER:

Living God, my heart is lifted to you in praise and thanks that the grave could not hold my Lord Jesus. He is risen! Help me to live joyfully, hopefully, and boldly in the power of his resurrection. Amen.

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