

Lenten 40 Day Devotional Restore Church 2016

Six weeks of transformation through conscious self-examination. Each week will focus on ONE WORD upon which to focus our hearts, our souls and our minds. Each day will have a short devotion or piece of information followed by a scripture for meditation.

Scripture for Lent. Put this verse to memory.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." [John 15:5-8]

WEEK ONE, Ash Wednesday, Feb 10 – Saturday, Feb 13

One Word: FASTING

Scripture for the Week

When you practice some appetite-denying discipline to better concentrate on God, don't make a production out of it. It might turn you into a small-time celebrity but it won't make you a saint. If you 'go into training' inwardly, act normal outwardly. Shampoo and comb your hair, brush your teeth, wash your face. God doesn't require attention-getting devices. He won't overlook what you are doing; he'll reward you well. [Matthew 6:16-18, The Message]

February 10, Ash Wednesday

Awesome power can be released through you as you fast through the enabling of the Holy Spirit. Fasting is one of the most neglected spiritual admonitions. In fact, it has been ignored for so long that many people don't realize it can be a life-changing experience. A few facts about fasting:

- Fasting was an expected discipline in both the Old and New Testament eras. For example, Moses fasted at least two recorded forty-day periods. Jesus fasted 40 days and reminded His followers to fast, "when you fast," not if you fast.
- Fasting and prayer can restore the loss of the "first love" for your Lord and result in a more intimate relationship with Christ.
- Fasting is a biblical way to truly humble yourself in the sight of God (Psalm 35:13; Ezra 8:21). King David said, "I humble myself through fasting."
- Fasting enables the Holy Spirit to reveal your true spiritual condition, resulting in brokenness, repentance, and a transformed life.
- The Holy Spirit will quicken the Word of God in your heart and His truth will become more meaningful to you!
- Fasting can transform your prayer life into a richer and more personal experience.
- Fasting can result in a dynamic personal revival in your own life-and make you a channel of revival to others.
- Fasting and prayer are the only disciplines that fulfill the requirements of II Chronicles 7:14.

Meditation

"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." [II Chronicles 7:14, NIV]

February 11, Thursday

If you have never fasted before, congratulations on your present interest! Fasting has been a major emphasis in the lives of many of the great spiritual leaders throughout history. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist denomination, fasted every Wednesday and Friday and required all of his clergy to do the same. Effective ministers of God from the apostle Paul to Martin Luther to John Calvin made it a continual part of their walks with God.

No men or women have a "formula to fast" that is the only "right" way. Fasting is about the condition of the heart, not the number of days. Each fast should be one that is impressed upon you by God to do so. So, start slowly. Fast for one meal during this week or perhaps one meal a day for several days, or one full day a week, or eventually, even one week in a month. Do what seems right to you.

Meditation

Next Jesus was taken into the wild by the Spirit for the Test. The Devil was ready to give it. Jesus prepared for the Test by fasting forty days and forty nights. That left him, of course, in a state of extreme hunger, which the Devil took advantage of in the first test: "Since you are God's Son, speak the word that will turn these stones into loaves of bread." Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: "It takes more than bread to stay alive. It takes a steady stream of words from God's mouth." [Matthew 4:1-4, The Message]

February 12, Friday

Physical Preparation: Although fasting is primarily a spiritual discipline, it begins in the physical realm. You should not fast without specific physical preparation. If you plan on fasting for several days at any time during Lent, you will find it helpful to begin by eating smaller meals before you abstain altogether. Resist the urge to have that "last big feast" before the fast. Cutting down on your meals a few days before you begin the fast will signal your mind, stomach, and appetite that less food is acceptable. Some health professionals suggest eating only raw foods for two days before starting a fast. I also recommend weaning yourself off caffeine (coffee/tea) and sugar products to ease your initial hunger or discomfort at the early stages of your fast.

Spiritual Preparation: In preparation for this special time with God, I strongly urge you to examine your heart, and detect any unconfessed sin. Scripture records that God always requires His people to repent of their sins before He will hear their prayers. In your prayers, confess not only obvious sins, but less obvious ones as well. The sins of omission as well as the sins of commission experiences. These may be experiences leaving your first love for our Lord: worldly-mindedness, self-centeredness, spiritual indifference, and unwillingness to share your faith in Christ with others, not spending sufficient time in God's Word and in prayer, a poor relationship with your spouse, your children, your pastor, or other members of your church.

Meditation

Come close and listen,

all you who honor God;

I will tell you what God has done for me:

My mouth cried out to him

with praise on my tongue.

If I had cherished evil in my heart,

my Lord would not have listened.

But God definitely listened.

He heard the sound of my prayer.

Bless God! He didn't reject my prayer;

he didn't withhold his faithful love from me. [Psalm 66:16-20, CEB]

February 13, Saturday

Receiving God's best blessing from a fast requires solid commitment. Arranging special time each day with God is absolutely crucial in attaining intimate communion with the Father. You must devote yourself to seeking God's face, even (and especially) during those times in which you feel weak, vulnerable, or irritable. Read His Word and pray during what were mealtimes. Meditate on Him when you awake in the night. Sing praises to Him whenever you please. Focus on your Heavenly Father and make every act one of praise and worship. God will enable you to experience His command to "pray without ceasing" as you seek His presence.

As you enter this time of heightened spiritual devotion, be aware that Satan will do everything he can to pull you away from your prayer and Bible reading time. When you feel the enemy trying to discourage you, immediately go to God in prayer and ask Him to strengthen your resolve in the face of difficulties and temptations.

The enemy makes you a target because he knows that fasting is the most powerful of all Christian disciplines and that God may have something very special to show you as you wait upon Him and seek His face. Satan does not want you to grow in your faith, and will do anything from making you hungry and grumpy to bringing up trouble in your family or at work to stop you. Make prayer your shield against such attacks.

Meditation

Right after that, as the blind men were leaving, a man who had been struck speechless by an evil spirit was brought to Jesus. As soon as Jesus threw the evil tormenting spirit out, the man talked away just as if he'd been talking all his life. The people were up on their feet applauding: "There's never been anything like this in Israel!" The Pharisees were left sputtering, "Hocus-pocus. It's nothing but hocus-pocus. He's probably made a pact with the Devil." Then Jesus made a circuit of all the towns and villages. He taught in their meeting places, reported kingdom news, and healed their diseased bodies, healed their bruised and hurt lives. When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. So confused and aimless they were, like sheep with no shepherd. "What a huge harvest!" he said to his disciples. "How few workers! On your knees and pray for harvest hands!" [Matthew 9:32-38, The Message]

Final thoughts about FASTING

In scripture, fasting usually refers to giving up food or drink or some combination of the two. However, in modern times, people have chosen to give up other things to signify their desire to “fast.” Whatever you choose to drop from your daily routine, do it with a heart toward Jesus and replace that time with prayer.

WEEK TWO, Sunday, Feb 14 – Saturday, Feb 20

One Word: PRAYER

Scripture for the Week

The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant. They're full of formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from God. Don't fall for that nonsense. This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply. Like this:

Our Father in heaven,

Reveal who you are.

Set the world right;

Do what's best—

as above, so below.

Keep us alive with three square meals.

Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.

Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.

You're in charge!

You can do anything you want!

You're ablaze in beauty!

Yes. Yes. Yes. [Matthew 6:7-13, The Message]

February 14, Sunday

Prayer is not a normal part of the life of the natural man. We hear it said that a person's life will suffer if he doesn't pray, but I question that. What will suffer is the life of the Son of God in him, which is nourished not by food, but by prayer. When a person is born again from above, the life of the Son of God is born in him, and he can either starve or nourish that life. Prayer is the way that the life of God in us is nourished. Our common ideas regarding prayer are not found in the New Testament. We look upon prayer simply as a means of getting things for ourselves, but the biblical purpose of prayer is that we may get to know God Himself.

“Ask, and you will receive...” ([John 16:24](#)). We complain before God, and sometimes we are apologetic or indifferent to Him, but we actually *ask* Him for very few things. Yet a child exhibits a magnificent boldness to ask! Our Lord said, “...unless you...become as little children...” ([Matthew 18:3](#)). Ask and God will do. Give Jesus Christ the opportunity and the room to work. The problem is that no one will ever do this until he is at his wits' end. When a person is at his wits' end, it no longer seems to be a cowardly thing to pray; in fact, it is the only way he can get in touch with the truth and the reality of God Himself.

Be yourself before God and present Him with your problems— the very things that have brought you to your wits' end. But as long as you think you are self-sufficient, you do not need to ask God for anything.

To say that “prayer changes things” is not as close to the truth as saying, “Prayer changes *me* and then I change things.” God has established things so that prayer, on the basis of redemption, changes the way a person looks at things. Prayer is not a matter of changing things externally, but one of working miracles in a person’s inner nature. –Oswald Chambers [**My Utmost for His Highest**, Aug 28 entry]

Meditation

I have much more to say to you, but you can't handle it now. However, when the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you in all truth. He won't speak on his own, but will say whatever he hears and will proclaim to you what is to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and proclaim it to you. Everything that the Father has is mine. That's why I said that the Spirit takes what is mine and will proclaim it to you. Soon you won't be able to see me; soon after that, you will see me.” . . . In the same way, you have sorrow now; but I will see you again, and you will be overjoyed. No one takes away your joy. In that day, you won't ask me anything. I assure you that the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Up to now, you have asked nothing in my name. Ask and you will receive so that your joy will be complete. [John 16: 12-16; 22-24, CEB]

February 15, Monday

Praying is no easy matter. It demands a relationship in which you allow someone other than yourself to enter into the very center of your person, to see there what you would rather leave in darkness, and to touch there what you would rather leave untouched. Why would you really want to do that? Perhaps you would let the other cross your inner threshold to see something or to touch something, but to allow the other into that place where your most intimate life is shaped—that is dangerous and calls for defense. . . . Each time you dare to let go and to surrender one of those many fears, your hand opens a little and your palms spread out in a gesture of receiving. You must be patient, of course, very patient until your hands are completely open. It is a long spiritual journey of trust, for behind each fist another one is hiding, and sometimes the process seems endless. Much has happened in your life to make all those fists and at any hour of the day or night you might find yourself clenching your fists again out of fear. [Henri Nouwen, <http://bit.ly/1voOnjx>]

Meditation

*Living in the Most High's shelter,
camping in the Almighty's^[a] shade,
² I say to the LORD, "You are my refuge, my stronghold!
You are my God—the one I trust!"
³ God will save you from the hunter's trap
and from deadly sickness.
⁴ God will protect you with his pinions;
you'll find refuge under his wings.
His faithfulness is a protective shield.
⁵ Don't be afraid of terrors at night,*

arrows that fly in daylight,
⁶ *or sickness that prowls in the dark,*
destruction that ravages at noontime.
⁷ *Even if one thousand people fall dead next to you,*
ten thousand right beside you—
it won't happen to you.
⁸ *Just look with your eyes,*
and you will see the wicked punished.
⁹ *Because you've made the LORD my refuge,*
the Most High, your place of residence—
[Psalm 91:1-9, CEB]

February 16, Tuesday

- Prayer is an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed to heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial as well as joy; finally, it is something great, supernatural, which expands my soul and unites me to Jesus.
--St. Therese of Lisieux
- "Pray as though everything depended on God. Work as though everything depended on you."
--St. Augustine
- 'We must speak to God as a friend speaks to his friend, servant to his master; now asking some favor, now acknowledging our faults, and communicating to Him all that concerns us, our thoughts, our fears, our projects, our desires, and in all things seeking His counsel.'
--St. Ignatius of Loyola
- Prayer is the inner bath of love into which the soul plunges itself.
--Saint John Vianney

Meditation

Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Don't suppress the Spirit. Don't brush off Spirit-inspired messages, but examine everything carefully and hang on to what is good. [1 Thessalonians 5:16 – 21, CEB]

February 17, Wednesday

"Prayer is a conversation with God," says African-American theologian James M. Washington, author of *Conversations with God*, which recounts the traditions of prayer in the Black church. In the vibrant tradition of African-American worship, the human side of that conversation takes the many forms that are part of prayer language everywhere. There is the offering of praise, the words "Praise God!" so commonly heard in the call-and-response forms of prayer in the black worshipping community. And there is the language of thanksgiving, for prayer is what Washington calls "an attempt to count the stars of our souls." The words "Thank you...Thank you...Thank you" are a way of calling to mind, one after another, the gifts of God, the stars of the soul. With the language of repentance and confession, one turns inward in honesty to humble oneself before God. And with words of petition, one lays before God the longings of the soul.

Whether congregational or individual, prayer is a disposition of the heart, a way of being as much a ritual act. There is listening and speaking in these conversations with God. And many who pray attest that these words of thanks, of praise, of repentance, and petition take place anywhere and everywhere. For Christians, prayer is not reserved for churches or for Sundays, but is an ongoing, daily, attentiveness to God's presence.

Meditation

*Listen to my words, LORD,
consider my lament.*

*Hear my cry for help,
my King and my God,
for to you I pray.*

*In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice;
in the morning I lay my requests before you
and wait expectantly. [Psalm 5, NIV]*

February 18, Thursday

Prayer is our greatest Christian privilege but — we may as well admit — our greatest Christian failure. All of us need to learn to pray more and to pray better. But one of the reasons we don't pray better than we do, or any more than we do, is that we have questions about prayer. These questions cause us uncertainty. Then our uncertainty sometimes neutralizes us and we become hesitant about prayer. We will look more closely in the coming weeks about the vital subject of prayer. As we enter Lent, what more important commitment could we make than to commit ourselves more to prayer? If we're going to impact our families, our nation, and our world in these critical days, prayer is where it begins.

One of the questions most often asked about prayer is: Why should we pray when God already knows our needs? Why tell God what He already knows or ask Him to do what He already wants to do? Thank God we don't have to understand prayer in order to pray. Yet, there are some consistent valid questions people have concerning prayer, but these must not hinder us from relying upon it. . . . He knows what we have need of before we ask, but we're definitely, specifically, unqualifiedly told to pray and to ask — not to impress or inform God, but to invite God, so that we might have that fellowship with Him, so that we might grow, and we would learn to depend upon Him. —Adrian Rogers (adapted)

Meditation

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. 4 We write this to make our joy complete. [1 John 1:1-4, NIV]

February 19, Friday

How often should we pray? What do you think? Once a day? Once a day plus before meals? Once a day plus meals plus emergencies? Unless you will permit the obvious answer, “much more than we are praying today,” it isn’t an easy question. The Bible addresses this, but it doesn’t give a cut and dry number.

In Romans 12:12, Paul says we should be “constant in prayer,” and in Colossians he says we should “continue steadfastly in prayer” (Col. 4:2). OK, but what exactly does that mean? Well, David prayed seven times a day (Ps. 119:164), and Daniel prayed three times a day (Dan. 6:10). Certainly they knew something of the best practices of prayer. Jesus is said to have prayed very often, both with the disciples and privately, but it could be argued that Jesus is an outlier in this whole prayer business being that he is the Son of God.

So, what about the apostles? Well, they definitely prayed often according to Scripture, but how often is difficult to determine. So perhaps there are some Bible principles that will guide us in the frequency and fervor of our prayer lives.

Read more tomorrow, but remember this: Prayer is the way we connect daily with our heavenly Father. Every believer should make it his life’s pursuit to be good at prayer--very good at prayer. Nothing else will make as big a difference in our lives, our families, our churches and the Kingdom of God than that! – Noel Dear (adapted)

Meditation

But I will remember the LORD’s deeds;

yes, I will remember your wondrous acts from times long past.

I will meditate on all your works;

I will ponder your deeds.

God, your way is holiness!

Who is as great a god as you, God?

You are the God who works wonders;

you have demonstrated your strength among all peoples.

With your mighty arm you redeemed your people;

redeemed the children of Jacob and Joseph. [Psalm 77:11-15, CEB]

February 20, Saturday

So perhaps there are some Bible principles that will guide us in the frequency and fervor of our prayer lives. Here are some suggestions:

1. **Scheduled prayer.** Every believer should have appointed times to pray. These are times when a believer blocks out a part of his schedule, gets alone, prepares his heart and mind for an encounter with God and spends time in uninterrupted prayer. You choose the number, but I believe once daily would be a good starting place.
2. **Public prayer.** I believe the practice of praying before meals and at other times to publicly thank the Lord for his provision is very important. While the purpose can never be to draw attention to ourselves,

these times of public prayer are modeled in Scripture and they serve as tools to both thank the Lord and declare his kindness before men.

3. **Need-based prayer.** In Philippians 4:6-7, Paul says the believer should never be anxious about anything, but instead should pray. We learn from that admonition that we should pray about any situation, circumstance or need that rises to the level of possibly causing us anxiety or stress. If there is a need, if there is a concern, then there should be a prayer! These can be quick rocket-prayers said under one's breath, or these can be extended times of pulling away from the situation to spend time before the Lord, or these can be a calling on others to join you in earnest prayer. But without exception every burden, every stressor, and every source of anxiety should prompt us to pray.

4. **Attitude prayer.** Look again at Romans 12:12 and Colossians 4:2; how can we be constantly in prayer? The Bible teaches that we should have an attitude of prayer that acknowledges we are in constant fellowship and communication with the Spirit of God. We should walk with an attitude of thanksgiving and gratitude. We should be moment by moment leaning upon Him for wisdom and direction. –Noel Dear (adapted)

Meditation

*Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, **faithful in prayer**. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. [Romans 12:9-18, NIV]*

Final Thoughts About PRAYER

How can you make prayer a much higher priority in your life beginning today? Sometimes we talk too much "about" prayer when really, what we need to be doing is actually praying. No one can ride a bike by just watching videos and observing others. It's a practice that takes practice. Prayer is the same. The difference is that we "need" prayer in our lives.

*Our Father who is in heaven
Hallowed be your name
Your Kingdom come,
Your will be done,
In earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
Forgive us our trespasses
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
Lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For yours is the kingdom, and the power
And the glory, forever and ever.
Amen.*

[For additional insights, look at various translations of Matthew 6:9-13]

WEEK THREE, Sunday, February 21 – Saturday, February 27

One Word: GIVING

Scripture for the Week:

Be especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don't make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you won't be applauding. When you do something for someone else, don't call attention to yourself. You've seen them in action, I'm sure—'playactors' I call them—treating prayer meeting and street corner alike as a stage, acting compassionate as long as someone is watching, playing to the crowds. They get applause, true, but that's all they get. When you help someone out, don't think about how it looks. Just do it—quietly and unobtrusively. That is the way your God, who conceived you in love, working behind the scenes, helps you out. [Matthew 6:1-4, The Message]

February 21, Sunday

Giving is a privilege. It is a privilege for both the giver and the receiver. Both are honored and ennobled by the action of giving. Giving is a rare and precious energy resource, the energy of connecting. When we show kindness and generosity towards one another, we connect deeply and are enriched by the connection. The giver and receiver are bonded together in a state of delight and unity.

It is said in the Scriptures that to be a perfect giver, we should give without thought of reward. This is extremely difficult for most people to do. Unselfish giving, if done in the right spirit, has been known to defy gravity and have us walking on air for days.

Why is giving so difficult sometimes? Because it threatens the ego with the fear of loss, scarcity, and deprivation. Logic tells us if we have two apples and give one away, we simply have one less apple. Whereas in fact, it is a spiritual law that to give is to create a flow. Because in giving, we open ourselves to receive as well. Giving and receiving are an act of faith in the limitless supply of divine generosity. They affirm divine support. And in that affirmation a flow is created within us, replenishing the supply. Changes take place in our awareness and our lives when we give and receive graciously. -- Leslie Temple-Thurston

Meditation

We are intimately linked in this harvest work. Anyone who accepts what you do, accepts me, the One who sent you. Anyone who accepts what I do accepts my Father, who sent me. Accepting a messenger of God is as good as being God's messenger. Accepting someone's help is as good as giving someone help.

This is a large work I've called you into, but don't be overwhelmed by it. It's best to start small. Give a cool cup of water to someone who is thirsty, for instance. The smallest act of giving or receiving makes you a true apprentice. You won't lose out on a thing. [Matthew 10:40-42, The Message]

February 22, Monday

Each of us has something to offer. We can give our money and our time to charity, be a friend to someone who is sick or lonely, do volunteer work, or be a peacemaker, teacher or minister. We may give unselfishly of our time to our spouse, children or parents. We may choose a service-oriented occupation, or we may just do our everyday jobs with integrity and respect for others.

It would seem that the more we give to others, the poorer we become, but just the opposite is true! Service to others brings meaning and fulfillment to our lives in a way that wealth, power, possessions and self-centered pursuits can never match.

Helping those in need is one of the major themes of the Bible and of Jesus' ministry. As far back as the thirteenth century B.C., the Hebrews' law institutionalized assistance to the poor (Leviticus 19:9-10). Through service, we give others the things they lack, and we find meaning and fulfillment to our own lives. Both the Old and New Testament writings give many examples of the importance of service and charity (Isaiah 58:10-11; Luke 3:10-11). The Bible tells us to share generously with those in need, and good things will come to us in turn. We are not meant to live hard-hearted or self-centered lives. It is not necessary to be a wealthy philanthropist or a full-time volunteer to make a meaningful contribution. Rather, we should give generously of whatever wealth and abilities we have, no matter how small the amount.

Meditation

If you love those who love you, why should you be commended? Even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, why should you be commended? Even sinners do that. If you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, why should you be commended? Even sinners lend to sinners expecting to be paid back in full. Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend expecting nothing in return. If you do, you will have a great reward. You will be acting the way children of the Most High act, for he is kind to ungrateful and wicked people. Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate. [Luke 6:32-36, CEB]

February 23, Tuesday

Generosity is freely sharing what you have with others. It is being willing to offer money, help or time when it is needed. To be generous means giving something that is valuable to you without expectation of reward or return. Many traditions measure generosity not by the size of the gift, but by what it cost the giver.

Sometimes generosity requires pushing past a feeling of reluctance because we all instinctively want to keep good things for ourselves. Even so, we can structure our lives in ways that make generosity more spontaneous and fun. When we intentionally "live below our means" and avoid over-commitment, we cultivate a sense of bounty or surplus that makes us want to share. When we give, we reap the pleasure of knowing we have made someone else's life a little happier. –Wisdom Commons

Meditation

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. [2 Corinthians 8:1-7, NIV]

February 24, Wednesday

Messenger by Lois Lowry is a powerful book filled with great examples of compassion and generosity. The main character is named Matty. Matty's traits of compassion and generosity touched me in powerful ways.

In the beginning of the book, we learn that Matty lives in a place called Village with a blind man named Seer who came there years before. The Village community is welcoming and will help anyone who needs help. They take in poor, disabled, mistreated misfits and give them a role in their community. They are very generous and will turn no one away. This inspired me to be more welcoming, to never mistreat people and to always be willing to help. I think that Lois Lowry was trying to convey that we should always be trying to make the world a better place.

One of the most important things that I learned from this book is that we should DO, expecting nothing in return. Throughout the book Matty learns that he has special healing powers just by touching injured things. In the end of the story, their world has changed and is full of evil things. There comes a point in the story where Kira, who is the Seer's daughter and Matty's friend, asks Matty to save the world. He is awfully injured at that time by the forest.

Despite all that, he rolls into the mud and reaches out his arms and his hands to feel the earth and he lays there knowing that he will die. This is so amazing to me. In modern society, it is unheard of that if someone was asked to use them self to heal the world after they have just been through so much themselves and know they will receive nothing in return. We do so little and expect so much in return. Matty is doing so much and expecting nothing in return. – Essay by 7th grader, Kate Padrnos, Parker, Colorado.

Meditation

In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified

with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. [Hebrews 9: 22-26, NIV]

February 25, Thursday

Pennsylvania Turnpike

To the man that paid my way
On the Pennsylvania Turnpike
You just made my day
In fact you made my whole night
I try in every single way
To work hard and try to do right
I try to start a brand-new day
Every day there's been a new fight

I was digging around for change
I found seven seventy five
I've searched around all in it
But the man said I needed nine
I've been looking for some change
I found all that I can find
This ****, I'm neck deep in it
I guess I'll have to pay the fine

They won't take my credit card
I got my kids in the backseat
Why the **** is life so hard?!
For days I've been on my feet

Every day has been a struggle
Ever since I was a child
I've always been in trouble
I was brought up in the wild
This world seems shallow as puddle
No place to raise a child
I can't keep them in a bubble
I hope they don't turn out too wild

A stranger paid my way today
His kindness gave me so much hope

When he said my toll was paid
I swear I almost choked
My cash he would not take today
Merry Christmas was what he spoke
All these dues everyday I've paid
He repaid today when I was broke. – Shawn Self, 2013

Meditation

You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. [Matthew 5:38-42, NIV]

February 26, Friday

The reason Paul doesn't use the command to tithe is not because proportionate giving has ceased to be the rule. In 1 Corinthians 16:3, Paul says, "On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that contributions need not be made when I come." In other words, proportionate giving is still the rule. If you prosper more, you give more. If you prosper less, you give less. And that is exactly what tithing is. So there is no conflict here. Proportionate giving is still the rule, and that can't be why the command to tithe is not used. . . .

When we release a tenth of our income and give it over to the ministry and mission of Christ in the world, we honor the Creator rights of God who owns everything, including all our income. One objection to thinking of a tenth of our income as especially belonging to God is that ALL our money belongs to God. Psalm 24:1 "The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it."

That is absolutely true. It's why my main way of talking about money year in and year out is not to focus on tithing, but to focus on lifestyle. What you do with every cent says something about your view of God and what he means to you. And what your values are in this age. And what you think your few years on earth should be spent for. That's true.—John Piper

Meditation

But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you rest from all your enemies around you so that you will live in safety. Then to the place the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name—there you are to bring everything I command you: your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, and all the choice possessions you have vowed to the Lord. And there rejoice before the Lord your God . . . [Deuteronomy 12:10 – 12a, NIV]

February 27, Saturday

A number of Christians today practice tithing. And that can be a good thing when it is done for the right

reasons. But before we start patting ourselves on the back too hard, let's remember that Jesus never seemed too impressed with tithing. Sacrificial giving, meanwhile, definitely caught His attention.

Do you remember the story of the poor widow? Now she got the Lord's attention! The spirit of giving in the New Testament is that of overwhelming gratitude and generosity. It is done from the heart in response for all that God has done to accomplish our salvation.

"God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Cor. 9:7) That's because the Christian life is above all intended to be one of thanksgiving and cheerfulness for all that God has done for us. Our response will never come close to matching the glory and the power of His grace and His "indefinable gift." (2 Cor. 9:15) Jesus didn't teach on tithing per se because His gift is far greater than our response. If we are not completely enthralled with His gift, how in the world is the Old Testament command of tithing going to instill that sense of awe and wonder in our hearts? Instead, it will only produce a spirit of resentment, pride, or self-righteousness.—Dan Delzell

Meditation

As He looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. "I tell you the truth," He said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on. [Luke 21:1-4, NIV]

Final Thoughts about GIVING

Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. [Luke 6:38-39, NIV]

Bottom line: giving, whether it's your money, your time, or your energy, is part of a believer's DNA.

WEEK FOUR, Sunday, February 18 – Saturday, March 5

One Word: THANKS

Scripture for the Week

*You are my God, and I will praise you;
you are my God, and I will exalt you.
Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.* [Psalm 118: 28-29, NIV]

Sunday, February 28

The New Testament emphasizes that the individual who thanks God should be in such close agreement with God that the act of thanksgiving is in harmony with the rationale behind the thanks. . . .

The nature of the New Testament as well as the Greek language is more easily understood through doctrine and the intellectual fulfillment of the prophetic message. The four gospels record the historical events that implemented the work of the Messiah. The epistles that follow examine the theology of that work and outline the spiritual attitudes that should motivate the “twice-born” to emulate the righteousness of the Lord Jesus. Thus, the thanksgiving of the New Testament believer moves from the sacrificial confession and formalized activities of the nation to personal responsibility, agreement with Scripture, and open confession of biblical truth.

Obviously, the attitude of thanks is more important than the act of thanks. God’s evaluation of our hearts has not changed since the creation. When the Old Testament prophet Samuel was surprised at God’s selection of young David, God told Samuel, “The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7). Our instructions are just the same—“look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18).—Henry Morris III

Meditation

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil. [1 Thessalonians 5:16-22, NIV]

Monday, February 29

There are about 150 references to giving “thanks” in the Bible. . . . Perhaps the most important truth about giving thanks that became apparent to me is that our primary reason for giving thanks is God’s grace to us. Paul’s epistles burst into praise constantly, . . . Giving thanks is a major theme from beginning to end of the Bible, and can be seen in the sequence of sacrifices and offerings in Leviticus. Commentators point out that offerings of thanksgiving tend to come at the end of the pattern, and are a culmination of worship. Burnt offerings and tribute offerings have to do with God’s transcendence and atonement for sins, which leads appropriately to the peace or thank offerings, where the worshiper

praises God for His grace and goodness. As the covenant relationship with God is remembered and renewed, the worshiper is lead into thanksgiving.—Jed Stuber

Meditation

How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son.

Because of the sacrifice of the Messiah, his blood poured out on the altar of the Cross, we're a free people—free of penalties and punishments chalked up by all our misdeeds. And not just barely free, either. Abundantly free! He thought of everything, provided for everything we could possibly need, letting us in on the plans he took such delight in making. He set it all out before us in Christ, a long-range plan in which everything would be brought together and summed up in him, everything in deepest heaven, everything on planet earth. [Ephesians 1:3-10, The Message]

Tuesday, March 1

You may think it's a little bit strange to say this, but I think we need to learn to appreciate our trials a lot more than we do because they're what make us grow and mature in godly character. You see, in hard times, we tend to experience more of His nearness and power in our lives. It's in those times that we really come to know Him.

Complaining actually opens a door for the devil. We need to learn to thank God in everything.

Don't go to lunch with someone and spend the whole time talking about your problems. Remember, recall and recount the good things God is doing in your life. Talk about your Red Sea moments. Remember the manna He gave you last week. Remember the resurrections you've had in your life. The Bible says to fix your mind on those things that are worthy of praise (see Philippians 4:8). Remember those things. Talk about those things.

I'm not telling you it's going to be easy to do. It's much easier to make excuses and feel sorry for yourself because things will happen to you that don't seem fair. The key is to keep saying, "I trust You, God, and I believe You will work it all out for my good."—Joyce Meyer

Meditation

Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. [Philippians 4:6, CEB]

Wednesday, March 2

For Christians, cultivating a spirit of thankfulness is more than a good idea; it's a direct command from God. In the Old Testament, God laid down specific guidelines for the Israelites to bring thank offerings. In the New Testament, believers are instructed to be thankful in all circumstances (1 Thessalonians

5:18). When we're struggling with trials and difficulties, this sounds like a strange command, especially since we live in a culture that encourages us to act on the basis of how we feel. But God knows that when we focus on our blessings, it's easier to keep our problems and concerns in the right perspective.

Cultivating a spirit of thankfulness honors God and strengthens our faith. It also strengthens our relationships with other people. We can't be in a right relationship with God or with anyone without a spirit of thankfulness. No matter what problems we're struggling with, we don't want to be like the nine former lepers who forgot to say "thank you" to their Healer.—Dianne Neal Matthews

Meditation

*Teach me your way, Lord,
so that I can walk in your truth.
Make my heart focused
only on honoring your name.
I give thanks to you, my Lord, my God,
with all my heart,
and I will glorify your name forever,
because your faithful love toward me is awesome
and because you've rescued my life
from the lowest part of hell. [Psalm 86:11-13, CEB]*

Thursday, March 3

"If [thankfulness] were a drug, it would be the world's best-selling product with a health maintenance indication for every major organ system," said Dr. P. Murali Doraiswamy, head of the division of biologic psychology at Duke University Medical Center. While the act of being thankful is not a substitute for a proper medical diagnosis and treatment, it's certainly a strategy that can be used to enhance wellness.

"The brain's primary reward chemical is called dopamine," continued Wasden. "The interesting thing, however, is that we can't feel rewards and threats unless we focus attention on them. Many good and bad things happen in our life every day, but until they come to our own attention, we don't get the neurotransmitter release that allows us to feel good or bad."

But there's a twist. The brain doesn't know the difference when it's reacting to reality, fiction or even past events, which explains why people feel scared while watching horror movies even though they know it's not real or they cry when reading a sad novel. Feeling thankful for things that have happened acts as a "mental movie," Wasden explained. The brain releases dopamine, which, in turn, has a positive effect on mood and emotional well-being.—Mikaela Conley, Good Morning America

Meditation

*I love the Lord because he hears
my requests for mercy.
I'll call out to him as long as I live,
because he listens closely to me. . . .
So I'll offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving to you,
and I'll call on the Lord's name. [Psalm 116:1-2; 16, CEB]*

Friday, March 4

"I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought; and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder." --G.K. Chesterton

"Cultivate the habit of being grateful for every good thing that comes to you, and to give thanks continuously. And because all things have contributed to your advancement, you should include all things in your gratitude." --Ralph Waldo Emerson

A simple first step to being more thankful is to pause during your day and ask yourself these two questions:

What are 3 things I can be thankful for in my life today?

Who are 3 people I can be thankful to have in my life and why?

If you don't come up with 3 people and 3 things each day then that is OK. One thing or person is great too. But if you can, try to not repeat yourself too often. Instead, think of more people and things to be grateful for to, day by day, expand your thankful view of your world.—Henrik Edberg

Meditation

First of all, then, I ask that requests, prayers, petitions, and thanksgiving be made for all people. Pray for kings and everyone who is in authority so that we can live a quiet and peaceful life in complete godliness and dignity. This is right and it pleases God our savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. [1 Timothy 2:1-4, CEB]

Saturday, March 5

It was the simplest of moments. I had just raised the blinds in our living room, and was awestruck by the view of Central Park, bathed in the morning light. The Park is always stunning - it's one of the reasons Phil and I chose this apartment when we were looking for a place to live when we moved to New York. But on this particular day the park was especially breathtaking, her deep green leaves gently waving as if to say good morning to me.

"I am so grateful for this amazing view," I said to Phil, who was sitting on the sofa reading the paper. "It really is a gift, you know?"

And that got me to thinking about how important it is to be grateful for the things we have in our lives, and not pine for what we don't have. I'm thankful for so many everyday gifts that are finely woven into the tapestry of my life -- like my loving life partner, good friends, inspiring work, a close, caring family, smart colleagues, good health and lots of laughter.

Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote, "Keep your eyes open to your mercies. The man who forgets to be thankful has fallen asleep in life" -- and I truly believe that. When we live life too fast to stop and acknowledge our daily gifts -- when we let those moments slip by without embracing them in true thankfulness -- we're missing out on how blessed we are.

Some may wonder why I'm writing this months after Thanksgiving -- but maybe that's the point: Why designate just one day a year to express our gratitude when there's really so much to be thankful for every day.—Marlo Thomas

Meditation

Our God gives you everything you need, makes you everything you're to be.

You need to know, friends, that thanking God over and over for you is not only a pleasure; it's a must. We have to do it. Your faith is growing phenomenally; your love for each other is developing wonderfully. Why, it's only right that we give thanks. We're so proud of you; you're so steady and determined in your faith despite all the hard times that have come down on you. We tell everyone we meet in the churches all about you. [2 Thessalonians 1:2-4, The Message]

Final thoughts about Thanks

Thankfulness is more than an expression; it is an attitude of life. When we are thankful we are better able to experience blessings in our lives. The challenge for this week has been to become aware of the importance of giving thanks for your life, for the people in your life, and yes, even your circumstances. All of these things are an expression of God's goodness to you. Do you trust God with your life?

WEEK FIVE, Sunday, March 6 – Saturday, March 12

One Word: SERVICE

Scripture for the Week

Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all. [Mark 9:35, NIV]

Sunday, March 16

Always remember, Mary and Martha were sisters. That is to say, service and spirituality go hand in hand, the active life and the contemplative life should never be separated.

It is a hard lesson for us to learn. We seem constantly to swing from one extreme of the pendulum to the other. First we are out working and serving, doing and accomplishing. But, sooner or later, exhaustion of body and barrenness of soul can no longer be ignored. And so we drop everything and withdraw into a tight circle of self-care and self-interest.

What we need to see is the way the Mary and Martha impulses function together in symbiosis [any interdependent or mutually beneficial relationship between two persons]. . . . We first enter a lowing, ongoing, ever-growing relationship with God. In other words, we learn to become a branch, gaining our life sustenance from Christ, the vine. Once this reality has worked its way deep within us then, out of the abundance of this life, we serve others, freely and joyfully. Even the clarity about which services to

undertake and the means for accomplishing them, they need to flow out of the “**one necessary thing.**” – Richard Foster reflecting on Meister Eckhart Sermon 34.

Meditation

While Jesus and his disciples were traveling, Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him as a guest. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his message. By contrast, Martha was preoccupied with getting everything ready for their meal. So Martha came to him and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to prepare the table all by myself? Tell her to help me."

*The Lord answered, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. **One thing is necessary.** Mary has chosen the better part. It won't be taken away from her. [Luke 10:38-42, CEB]*

Monday, March 7

Servanthood requires a mental shift, a change in your attitudes. God is always more interested in why we do something than in what we do. Attitudes count more than achievements. King Amaziah lost God's favor because "He did what was right in the sight of the Lord, yet not with a true heart." Real servants serve God with a mindset of five attitudes:

- **Real Servants are Self-Forgetful:** They focus on others, not themselves. This is true humility: not thinking less of ourselves but thinking of ourselves less. Paul said, Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand. This is what it means to "lose your life" - forgetting yourself in service to others. When we stop focusing on our needs, we become aware of the needs around us.
- **Real Servants Think like Stewards, Not Owners:** They remember God owns it all. In the Bible, a steward was a servant entrusted to manage an estate. Joseph was this kind of servant as a prisoner in Egypt. First, Potiphar entrusted Joseph with his home. Then the jailer entrusted Joseph with his jail. Eventually Pharaoh entrusted the entire nation to him. Servanthood and stewardship go together since God expects us to be trustworthy in both. The Bible says, The one thing required of such servants is that they be faithful to their master.
- **Real Servants Think about Their Own Responsibilities, Not What Other Servants are Doing:** They don't compare, criticize, or compete with other servants or ministries. They're too busy doing the work God has given them. Competition between God's servants is illogical . . .
- **Real Servants Base Their Identity in Christ:** They remember they are unconditionally loved and accepted by grace, so they don't have to prove their worth when they are threatened by lowly jobs. Most of us are too insecure to be servants. We're afraid our weaknesses and insecurities will be uncovered so we hide them with layers of protective pride and pretensions.
- **Real Servants Think of Ministry as an Opportunity, Not an Obligation:** They enjoy helping people, meeting needs, and doing ministry. They "serve the Lord with gladness." Why do we serve with gladness? Because we love the Lord, we're grateful for his grace, we know serving is the highest use of life, and God has promised a reward. Jesus promised, The Father will honor and reward anyone who serves me. –Rick Warren

Meditation

Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion. [Philippians 2:5-8, The Message]

Tuesday, March 8

Serving God is a wonderful thing if we understand what it is and how God does it through us. Ministering for Jesus Christ can be as uplifting and exciting as hang gliding, or it can be as burdensome and boring as repeatedly rolling the same rock up the mountain as Sisyphus did in the Greek myth. No matter how difficult the work or how many times we feel like quitting, we can keep going and growing if we minister the way God tells us to in His Word.

When I began my ministry back in 1950, I'm afraid I didn't have a clear vision of what Christian work was all about. Consequently, I floundered and was frustrated, not knowing exactly what to do or how to evaluate what I was doing. A Roman proverb says, "When the pilot does not know what port he is heading for, no wind is the right wind." I was certainly a bewildered pilot! Because I had received excellent training, I didn't lack for methods or ideas; but I wasn't clear as to principles. I was on the ocean of life with a road map instead of a compass, and I wasn't sure how to handle the rudder of the ship.

As the familiar couplet puts it, "Methods are many, principles are few; Methods always change, principles never do."

Certainly we need methods to serve God, but we must remember that methods work because of the principles behind them. To adopt a new method just because it worked for somebody else, without first understanding the principles behind that method, is to abandon both the compass and the rudder.— Warren Wiersbe

Meditation

When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. [Matthew 20:24-28, NIV]

Wednesday, March 9

Unfortunately, many mistakenly believe that the reason to become a Christian is so God will bless us, give us stuff and make us happy. People of this society have been conditioned to feel a sense of entitlement. We want what we want, when we want it...even from God. We are constantly wondering when God will answer our prayers about our fears, worries, personal needs and wishes. We believe that if we keep pure thoughts, follow the rules, stay out of trouble, and adjust our "faith" to God's

satisfaction, He will grant us our hearts desire, just like Santa Claus. Some use their "name it and claim it" faith seeking a more trouble free life, instead of for the Kingdom of God. In a sense we are trying to manipulate God to get what we want.

Well...I hate to break it to you, but the Kingdom of God is not just about getting what you want and keeping you happy. Don't get me wrong. Of course God blesses us with food, a roof over our head, employment, financial security, health, etc. What I am saying is that many Christians pray and have faith solely for God to take care of their own needs, yet never seek to serve Him other than by putting money in the church offering plate. We are more concerned about our job, love life and money problems, than about doing God's work. This is so far from what being a servant of God is all about.—Edrick

Meditation

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." [Matthew 22:37-40, CEB]

Thursday, March 10

God is master as servant. God exercises creative and redemptive power through servanthood. In the same way, Jesus doesn't come to earth to "become" a servant; He comes as a servant to reveal who God is. As servant, Jesus is not simply identifying with us; rather, He is showing us who God is. It is not so much God becoming like us as God inviting us to become like Him. Our celebration of service isn't a move from master to servant but from isolation and self-security to a way of service that reflects the servant-nature of our Master.—David Chronic

Meditation

Therefore, brothers and sisters who are partners in the heavenly calling, think about Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession. Jesus was faithful to the one who appointed him just like Moses was faithful in God's house. But he deserves greater glory than Moses in the same way that the builder of the house deserves more honor than the house itself. Every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant in order to affirm the things that would be spoken later. But Jesus was faithful over God's house as a Son. We are his house if we hold on to the confidence and the pride that our hope gives us. [Hebrews 3:1-6, CEB]

Friday, March 11

Oswald Chambers, author of My Utmost for His Highest, died in 1917 at age 43. His influence, however, lives on. Almost a century later, God is still using this man's book to speak to hearts; I am one of the many convicted by his words. Chambers' message has lasted because he gave priority to things of eternal value rather than to things of the world.

Sadly, many people choose an existence with no enduring significance. Setting out to make as much money as possible, please oneself, and retire to enjoy the good life is unbiblical. Worthwhile living involves giving ourselves unreservedly to God so He can use us in any way He sees fit. Christians like

Chambers, who make a lasting impact in their sphere of influence, have a passion to serve the Lord. They look for ways to express their love and devotion to Him.

As citizens of a heavenly kingdom, believers should see their job title as "servant of almighty God." Perhaps you are thinking, I have a secular job or My life doesn't matter much. Friend, if you are determined to find ways to be useful for the kingdom, God will supply tasks of eternal value. Be sensitive to people in need. Share your faith with those who hurt. Whether through your vocation or in your community, you can make yourself available to individuals who need help. Tell others what the Lord is doing in your life.—Charles Stanley

Meditation

Although I'm free from all people, I make myself a slave to all people, to recruit more of them. I act like a Jew to the Jews, so I can recruit Jews. I act like I'm under the Law to those under the Law, so I can recruit those who are under the Law (though I myself am not under the Law). I act like I'm outside the Law to those who are outside the Law, so I can recruit those outside the Law (though I'm not outside the law of God but rather under the law of Christ). I act weak to the weak, so I can recruit the weak. I have become all things to all people, so I could save some by all possible means. All the things I do are for the sake of the gospel, so I can be a partner with it. [1 Corinthians 9:19-23, CEB]

Saturday, March 12

Practical ways to serve God

- **Serve God Through Your Family:** As we lovingly give of ourselves to our family, and serve them with hearts full of love, our acts will also be counted as service to God.
- **Give Tithes and Offerings:** Money from tithing is used to build God's kingdom upon the earth. Contributing financially to God's work is a great way to serve God.
- **Volunteer in Your Community:** From donating blood (or just volunteering at the Red Cross) to adopting a highway, your local community has great need for your time and efforts.
- **Donate Clothing and Other Goods:** Generously giving of these items to help others is an easy way to serve God and declutter your home at the same time. When preparing those things you are going to donate it is always appreciated if you only give those items that are clean and in working order.
- **Be a Friend:** Kindness is a passport that opens doors and fashions friends.
- **Serve God by Serving Children:** But Jesus called them unto him, and said, "Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God." [Luke 18:16]
- **Mourn with those that Mourn:** "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. " [Galatians 6:2]
- **Share Your Talents:** Examine your life and see what talents you have. What are you good at? How could you use your talents to help those around you?
- **Simple Acts of Service:** So often, our acts of service consist of simple encouragement or of giving mundane help with mundane tasks, but what glorious consequences can flow from mundane acts and from small but deliberate deeds.
- **Serve God by Humbling Yourself:** As we humble ourselves before the Lord our desire to serve God will greatly increase as will our capacity to be able to give of ourselves in the service of all our brothers and sisters.—Rachel Bruner

Meditation

So now, revere the Lord. Serve him honestly and faithfully. Put aside the gods that your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt and serve the Lord. But if it seems wrong in your opinion to serve the Lord, then choose today whom you will serve. Choose the gods whom your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live. But my family and I will serve the Lord.
[Joshua 24:14-15, CEB]

Final Thoughts about Service

Why do we serve? Ideally, every action is motivated by our love for God. This is the season to reboot our intentions; recommit our hearts to the Truth. To serve is an action verb.

WEEK SIX, Sunday, March 13 – Saturday, March 19

One Word: REFLECT

Scripture for the Week

*As we have heard,
so we have seen
in the city of the Lord Almighty,
in the city of our God:
God makes her secure
forever.[a]
Within your temple, O God,
we meditate on your unfailing love.
Like your name, O God,
your praise reaches to the ends of the earth;
your right hand is filled with righteousness. [Psalam 48:8-10, NIV]*

Sunday, March 13

I take solace in the words of Isaiah, “All you who are thirsty, come to the water!” (Is. 55:1) God wants to give us ‘Living Water.’ Like the woman at the well, we are not sure what He means, but the idea of quenching that thirst for God, for truth, for goodness, — we want that.

This Lent, God is inviting us to nurture the desire for communication with Him. Traditionally, Lent is a cycle of giving up something or denying self, and certainly those are good practices. But there is more.

We can be intentional about communication with God. In the best of all worlds, we could set aside the first hour of our day to come before the God who made us, to express gratitude, to ponder His word, to sit in the quiet, to listen for the much needed response.

If your life allows it, then this is a good time to begin. However, there are other ways to be intentional about our connection and communication with God. What if at every red light we took a few seconds to acknowledge God's presence and action in our life. How about the waiting we do...we can use waiting time to turn our heart's gaze heavenward, once again acknowledging God's presence.—Sister Mary Ann Barnhorn

Meditation

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." [John 4:10-14, NIV]

Monday, March 14

There are very few people who want to be controlled. Most humans have a natural inclination toward wanting to be the one to determine their own needs and wants. Being in relationship with another person can be hard work if both people are trying to be in control. When we gain a rhythm in our mutual relationship and find commonness with each other we experience a peace in what may have once feared would be agitating.

When Christ uses the word "yoke" to express the extent to which He desires relationship with us, we may want to run the other direction. A yoke would seem to be too controlling, as if we are stuck with no way of escape. But in Matthew, Christ reminds us that His yoke is easy.

When we take on Christ we become like Him: demanding our own control seems unimportant, aligning ourselves with Him becomes as easy as if we were professional dance partners. He leads, and we naturally follow. The result? We are at peace, and we can know rest for our souls.—Cindy Lowcock

Meditation

Jesus resumed talking to the people, but now tenderly. "The Father has given me all these things to do and say. This is a unique Father-Son operation, coming out of Father and Son intimacies and knowledge. No one knows the Son the way the Father does, nor the Father the way the Son does. But I'm not keeping it to myself; I'm ready to go over it line by line with anyone willing to listen.

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. [Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.] Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." [Matthew 11:25-30, The Message]

Tuesday, March 15

Pause a moment and try to imagine yourself as a person who acts with the compassion of Christ; who has the patience of God Himself; who is discerning; gentle, yet confident; surrendered to the will and purpose of God. This is the life Jesus wants you to inherit, transforming you into a person who is motivated by the beautiful, not the lustful; the generous, not the selfish; the noble, not the conniving; the creative, not the destructive.—Gary L. Thomas

Meditation

Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is—what is good and pleasing and mature. Because of the grace that God gave me, I can say to each one of you: don't think of yourself more highly than you ought to think. Instead, be reasonable since God has measured out a portion of faith to each one of you. [Romans 12:2-3, CEB]

Wednesday, March 16

When 'happiness' eludes us -- as, eventually, it always will -- we have the invitation to examine our programmed responses and to exercise our power to choose again. Through exaggeration, confusion, and distortion, we have allowed our politics, our church and our families to fall out of emotional balance. We can learn to heal our reactive responses by seeking "emotional sobriety," which is really the task that we call contemplation.

Bill Wilson, one of the founders of the 12 Step Program of Alcoholics Anonymous, said that recovery was not complete until addicts achieved "emotional sobriety." In many ways he was saying the same thing that mystical religion recognized -- authentic spirituality should lead to a total "rewiring" of both our conscious lives and our unconscious programming. It will not just change external behavior, but internal emotions and responses, our entire pattern of thinking. Contemplation is not first of all about being religious, introverted, or pious -- it is about being emotionally and mentally honest!—Father Richard Rohr

Meditation

Test yourselves to make sure you are solid in the faith. Don't drift along taking everything for granted. Give yourselves regular checkups. You need firsthand evidence, not mere hearsay, which Jesus Christ is in you. Test it out. If you fail the test, do something about it. I hope the test won't show that we have failed. But if it comes to that, we'd rather the test showed our failure than yours. We're rooting for the truth to win out in you. We couldn't possibly do otherwise. We don't just put up with our limitations; we celebrate them, and then we go on to celebrate every strength, every triumph of the truth in you. We pray hard that it will all come together in your lives. [2 Corinthians 13:5-9]

Thursday, March 17

Researchers have determined that thinking about God can help relieve anxiety associated with making mistakes. However, the finding only holds for people who believe in a God. The researchers measured brain waves for a particular kind of distress response while participants made mistakes on a test.

Those who had been prepared with religious thoughts had a less prominent response to mistakes than those who hadn't.

“Eighty-five percent of the world has some sort of religious beliefs,” says Michael Inzlicht, who cowrote the study with Alexa Tullett, both at the University of Toronto-Scarborough. I think it behooves us as psychologists to study why people have these beliefs; exploring what functions, if any, they may serve.”

With two experiments, the researchers showed that when people think about religion and God, their brains respond differently—in a way that lets them take setbacks in stride and react with less distress to anxiety-provoking mistakes.—Rick Nauert, PhD, LiveScience.com

Meditation

Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life. [Philippians 4:6-7, The Message]

Friday, March 18

Problems are part of life. Storms come to every person. Yet when we see the hand of God working in our lives, storms lose their punch and anxieties lose their grip on our hearts. But there is one key to experiencing God's power – our heart needs to be completely His. In the book of James we are told that a double-minded person is unstable in all their ways and can expect nothing from the Lord. A double-minded person is someone tossed back and forth by the cares of this life. They follow God, but then something turns their hearts back and they follow their own ways. They can never see God's hand because they are not willing to stand firm long enough to see God work through any situation. Each time we take the reins from God, we steer away from where God is going. So how can we ever expect to receive what God is giving? –Eddie Snipes

Meditation

*I offer my life to you, Lord.
My God, I trust you.
Please don't let me be put to shame!
Don't let my enemies rejoice over me!
For that matter,
don't let anyone who hopes in you
be put to shame;
instead, let those who are treacherous without excuse be put to shame.
Make your ways known to me, Lord;
teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth—teach it to me—
because you are the God who saves me.*

*I put my hope in you all day long.
Lord, remember your compassion and faithful love—
they are forever!
But don't remember the sins of my youth or my wrongdoing.
Remember me only according to your faithful love
for the sake of your goodness, Lord. [Psalm 25:1-7, CEB]*

Saturday, March 19

Beware of surrender that is motivated by personal benefits that may result. For example, “I’m going to give myself to God because I want to be delivered from sin, because I want to be made holy.” Being delivered from sin and being made holy are the result of being right with God, but surrender resulting from this kind of thinking is certainly not the true nature of Christianity. Our motive for surrender should not be for any personal gain at all. We have become so self-centered that we go to God only for something from Him, and not for God Himself. It is like saying, “No, Lord, I don’t want you; I want myself. But I do want You to clean me and fill me with Your Holy Spirit. I want to be on display in Your showcase so I can say, ‘This is what God has done for me.’ ” Gaining heaven, being delivered from sin, and being made useful to God are things that should never even be a consideration in real surrender. Genuine total surrender is a personal sovereign preference for Jesus Christ Himself.—Oswald Chambers, March 12 entry.

Meditation

After calling the crowd together with his disciples, Jesus said to them, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them. [Mark 5:34-35, CEB]

Final Thoughts on Reflection

In order to move deeper into the things of God, we must, occasionally take time to reflect and examine the heart. For it is within the heart that the Holy Spirit shares residence.

HOLY WEEK, Palm Sunday, March 20 to Easter Sunday, March 27 One Word: HOLINESS

Scripture for the Week

But what happens when we live God’s way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness

permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely. [Galatians 5:22-23, The Message]

Holy Week begins on Palm Sunday and culminates in the early morning hours of Easter Sunday. It's also the final week of Lent, which is the 6-week period of reflection before Easter. Christians observe Holy Week as a sacred memory of the events leading up to the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ. Each day holds special meaning based on the actions of Jesus in his final hours.

Palm Sunday, March 20

“Hosanna” is the English rendering of the Hebrew word *hoshianna* which is found only in Ps 118:25, and it is hard to capture its exact meaning in English. In ancient times hosanna was a cry of distress or a prayer for deliverance in times of trouble, not a shout of praise. Normally this word was directed to the king or God, and it meant something like, “Please, save us;” “Help, I pray;” or, “O Lord, we beg you to save us now.” The New American Bible footnote says that it means, “O Lord, grant salvation.” Over the centuries hosanna’s meaning and usage gradually changed, and it evolved into a general cry of jubilation, a word of welcome, or a joyful acclamation of praise roughly equivalent to “Hail,” a greeting of honor for a king or a dignitary, or a liturgical or spiritual acclamation for God. In contemporary jargon it could easily mean “Hail to the chief!” “Praise God!” “Praise the Lord,” or “Alleluia!” —Father Michael Van Sloun

Meditation

The next day the huge crowd that had arrived for the Feast heard that Jesus was entering Jerusalem. They broke off palm branches and went out to meet him. And they cheered: Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in God’s name! Yes! The King of Israel!

Jesus got a young donkey and rode it, just as the Scripture has it:

No fear, Daughter Zion:

*See how your king comes,
riding a donkey’s colt. [John 12:12-15, The Message]*

Monday, March 21

The stern and holy Christ, the indignant, mighty Messiah, the Messenger of the Covenant of whom it is written: “He shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering of righteousness,” is not agreeable to those who want only a soft and sweet Christ. But the record ... portrays the fiery zeal of Jesus which came with such sudden and tremendous effectiveness that before this unknown man, who had no further authority than his own person and word, this crowd of traders and changers, who thought they were fully within their rights when conducting their business in the Temple court, fled pell-mell like a lot of naughty boys.—John MacArthur

Meditation

Jesus went straight to the Temple and threw out everyone who had set up shop, buying and selling. He kicked over the tables of loan sharks and the stalls of dove merchants. He quoted this text:

*“My house was designated a house of prayer;
You have made it a hangout for thieves.”*

Now there was room for the blind and crippled to get in. They came to Jesus and he healed them.

When the religious leaders saw the outrageous things he was doing, and heard all the children running and shouting through the Temple, “Hosanna to David’s Son!” they were up in arms and took him to task. “Do you hear what these children are saying?”

Jesus said, “Yes, I hear them. And haven’t you read in God’s Word, ‘From the mouths of children and babies I’ll furnish a place of praise’?”

Fed up, Jesus turned on his heel and left the city for Bethany, where he spent the night. [Matthew 21:12-17, The Message]

Tuesday, March 22

The Bible tells us the "I.D." of the Messiah. His ethnic background, place of birth, time frame of his arrival and other identifying characteristics are given. These "credentials" enable us to identify the Messiah, and to recognize imposters.

Of course it might be objected that if these "credentials" are so clear, why didn't most Jewish people believe in Jesus, and why were they so taken in by false Messiahs like Bar Kochba and Shabbetai Zevi?

To understand this, one must realize that by the time of Jesus, the Messianic hope had become greatly politicized in the minds of the people. They were seeking deliverance from the tyranny of Rome. Although the Scripture spoke both of the sufferings and of the victories of the Messiah, the victorious aspect had become uppermost in the minds of the common people because of the Roman domination. This "lopsided" view of the Messiah has stuck with Jewish people, and the politicization of the Messianic hope has continued among the Jewish people of today. –Jews for Jesus.com

Meditation

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; 26 and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

“Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.” [John 11:25-27, NIV]

Wednesday, March 23

In Scripture the action of anointing someone conveys God’s grace, God’s love upon that person. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the kings were anointed by God’s prophets, as Samuel anointed David by extravagantly pouring oil over his head. In Bethany, a week before his passion, Jesus is at a dinner given in his honor with his friends Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus. Mary, we are told, takes a pound of pure nard, a perfume and anoints Jesus’ feet. Then she wipes his feet with her hair! In the culture of the time Jewish women wore their hair up, only prostitutes would let their hair hang loose, it was too

tempting for the men. Mary is demonstrating her extravagant love for Jesus in the face of cultural norms.

The story of the woman anointing Jesus is found in all four gospels. Luke is telling a slightly different story in that the woman who anoints Jesus feet is a known sinner who washes his feet with her tears and then anoints him in response to the forgiveness of her sins. Jesus makes the point by telling his host that, "I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love." (Lk. 7:47)

In Matthew and Mark's Gospels an unnamed woman brings an "alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard" and pours it over Jesus' head. Only in the Gospel of John is the woman named as Mary of Bethany. In each case the woman is showing extravagant love towards Jesus. The story is slightly different in each Gospel. It is similar to watching the evening news on different channels, where each reporter has a slightly different view of the same story

Meditation

While he was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head.

Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another, "Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year's wages and the money given to the poor." And they rebuked her harshly.

"Leave her alone," said Jesus. "Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her." [Mark 14:3-9, NIV]

Maundy Thursday, March 24

A study of the Lord's Supper is a soul-stirring experience because of the depth of meaning it contains. It was during the age-old celebration of the Passover on the eve of His death that Jesus instituted a significant new fellowship meal that we observe to this day. It is an integral part of Christian worship. It causes us to remember our Lord's death and resurrection and to look for His glorious return in the future.

The Passover was the most sacred feast of the Jewish religious year. It commemorated the final plague on Egypt when the firstborn of the Egyptians died and the Israelites were spared because of the blood of a lamb that was sprinkled on their doorposts. The lamb was then roasted and eaten with unleavened bread. God's command was that throughout the generations to come the feast would be celebrated. The story is recorded in Exodus 12.

During the Last Supper—a Passover celebration—Jesus took a loaf of bread and gave thanks to God. As He broke it and gave it to His disciples, He said, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance

of me.' In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you'" (Luke 22:19-21). He concluded the feast by singing a hymn (Matthew 26:30), and they went out into the night to the Mount of Olives. It was there that Jesus was betrayed, as predicted, by Judas. The following day He was crucified.

Meditation

When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."

After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. 18 For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."

And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."

In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. [Luke 22:14-22, NIV]

Good Friday, March 25

There was a crowd of loyal followers who remained loyal to Jesus – those who accompanied him from Jericho and others. But there was an explosion of public sentiment alive with expectation that Jesus was the messiah for whom they had longed for centuries. Excitement bubbled over. But, like the disciples, who constantly thought Jesus' kingdom was going to be political (fighting over who would sit at his right hand and at his left when he chased the Romans and set himself up as the Davidic King), the people of Jerusalem were expecting a bloody uprising. As they saw that Jesus was not the warrior king they had expected, enthusiasm waned. . . . public opinion in Jerusalem had turned on Jesus. He was no longer the promised one, but another charlatan come to deceive. He was not who they thought he would be. So, when offered Barabbas or Jesus, they chose Barabbas and called for Jesus' blood.

I am not saying that all of the exact same people were shouting "Hosanna" one day and "Crucify" a few days later. But the point is the switch in public opinion. At the Triumphal Entry, Jerusalem rejoiced. But then Jesus failed their expectations. He had come to defeat sin and death, not Rome. His kingdom was in hearts, not on a throne (at least not yet). They began to reject Jesus as the campaign of lies by the religious leaders had its effect. Finally, by the time Jesus stood before Pilate, there had been a dramatic shift in public opinion. Isn't that kind of the way mobs act?—Dave Miller

Meditation

Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. Therefore, I will punish him and then release him."

But the whole crowd shouted, "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!" (Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.)

Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. But they kept shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

For the third time he spoke to them: "Why? What crime has this man committed? I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty. Therefore I will have him punished and then release him."

But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. 24 So Pilate decided to grant their demand. 25 He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will. [Luke 23: 13-25, NIV]

Holy Saturday, March 26

In more traditional church practices, Holy Saturday is sacred as the day of the Lord's rest; it has been called the "Second Sabbath" after creation. The day is and should be the most calm and quiet day of the entire Church year, a day broken by no unnecessary activities or services. Christ lies in the grave, the Church sits near and mourns. After the great battle He is resting in peace, but upon Him we see the scars of intense suffering...The mortal wounds on His Body remain visible....Jesus' enemies are still furious, attempting to obliterate the very memory of the Lord by lies and slander.

Mary and the disciples are grief-stricken, the early Church mourns the One who went up to Calvary and returned from Calvary, broken and beaten. When the Church reflects upon all of this, it seems as if the wounds of the dearly Beloved Jesus begin to bleed again, so much is the sorrow.—Dr. Jeffrey Mirus (adapted)

Meditation

As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. 61 Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first."

"Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard. [Matthew 27:57-66, NIV]

Easter Sunday, March 27

14 EVIDENCES OF JESUS'S RESURRECTION.

JESUS' EXISTENCE. That Jesus was a historical individual is granted by virtually all historians and is supported by ancient Christian, Jewish, and pagan sources. Yet modern skeptics often feel that their best strategy for denying the evidence of his resurrection is to deny that he even existed.

JESUS' DEATH. The most popular counter to the Resurrection in non-Christian and heretical beliefs is to deny that Jesus died on the cross (e.g., this is the position of Islam). However, historians regard the death of Jesus by crucifixion as ordered by Pontius Pilate to be as historically certain as any other fact of antiquity.

CRUCIFIED MESSIAH. Crucifixion was a horrible, shameful way to die, so much so that it would never have occurred to anyone in the first century to invent a story about a crucified man as the divine Savior and King of the world. Something extreme and dramatic must have happened to lead people to accept such an idea—something like his rising from the dead.

JOSEPH'S TOMB. All four Gospels agree that Jesus' body had been buried in the rock tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish high council (the Sanhedrin). This is an unlikely Christian fiction, because Christians blamed the Sanhedrin for their role in having Jesus executed.

WOMEN WITNESSES. The four Gospels all agree that the first persons to find the tomb empty were Jewish women, including Mary Magdalene. It is very unlikely that anyone would make up such a story, since women's testimony was devalued compared to men's and since Mary Magdalene was known as a formerly demon-possessed woman. If the empty tomb story were fiction, one would expect that Joseph of Arimathea, already identified as the tomb's owner and a respected male leader, would be credited with the discovery.

ANCIENT THEORIES. The earliest non-Christian explanations for the origin of the Resurrection belief (mentioned in John and Matthew) were that the body had been taken from the tomb—either moved to another burial place or stolen to fake the Resurrection. These explanations conceded three key facts: Jesus died; his body was buried in Joseph's tomb; the tomb was later found to be empty.

TOMB WAS GUARDED. Critics routinely dismiss Matthew's story about the guards being bribed to say that they fell asleep, giving the disciples opportunity to steal the body (Matt. 28:11-15). But Matthew would have no reason to make up the story about the guards being bribed except to counter the story of the guards saying they fell asleep (see v. 15). Either way, the guards were there: the body had been in the tomb, the tomb had been guarded, and the body was no longer there.

PAUL AND LUKE'S INDEPENDENT ACCOUNTS. Paul's list of resurrection witnesses in 1 Corinthians 15:5-7 coincides with Luke's account at several points, but in wording and in what is included Luke's account is clearly independent of Paul. For example, Paul calls Peter by his Aramaic nickname "Cephas," not Simon or Peter; he refers to "the twelve," Luke to "the eleven"; Luke does not mention the appearances to James or the five hundred. Thus Paul and Luke give us independent accounts of the appearances they both mention.

CLEOPAS AND THAT OTHER GUY. Luke gives the name of one of the two men on the road to Emmaus who saw Jesus (Cleopas) but not the name of the other man. If he was making up names he would

presumably have given both of the men names. The fact that he identifies only one of the two men by name is best explained if that man, Clopas, was the source of Luke's account. In short, this fact is evidence that the account came from an eyewitness.

BROTHER JAMES. Although Luke does not mention the resurrection appearance to James (the Lord's brother) mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 6, Luke does report that James had become a leading member of the apostolic group (see especially Acts 15:13-21). Since Jesus' brothers had rejected Jesus during his lifetime (John 7:5), Paul's reference to Christ appearing to James is probably based on fact.

JOHN'S EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT. The author of the Gospel of John emphatically states that he was an eyewitness of the death of Jesus, of the empty tomb, and of resurrection appearances of Jesus (John 19:32-35; 20:2-9; 21:7, 20-25). Either he sincerely had these experiences or he was lying; appeals to legend or myth are out of the question here.

ANCIENT SKEPTICISM. Luke reports the skepticism of the men disciples the morning the tomb was found empty (Luke 24:22-24), and John reports Thomas's skepticism about Jesus' resurrection (John 20:24-26). These accounts (see also Acts 17:32; 1 Cor. 15:12) demonstrate that the perception of ancient people as gullible hayseeds who would believe any miracle story is a modern prejudicial stereotype.

PAUL'S CONVERSION. Paul was a notorious persecutor of the early Christians prior to his becoming an apostle. His explanation, that Christ appeared to him and called him to faith and the apostolic ministry, is the only plausible explanation for his 180-degree change. Moreover, Paul's experience was entirely independent of the experience of the other apostles.

PAUL'S GENTILE MISSION. Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus did not result merely in him accepting Jesus as the Jews' Messiah. Instead, he saw himself, a trained and zealous Pharisee, as commissioned by Jesus to take the good news of the Messiah to uncircumcised Gentiles. The fact that Paul embraced such a calling against his former passionate beliefs and training makes any appeal to hallucination or delusion implausible.—Rob Bowman

Meditation

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' [Matthew 28:5-7, NIV]

Final Thoughts about LENT and Jesus, our Lord

This has been a journey which only you could choose to take or not take. But the days are not over. The Lord is risen and is still with us. The truths remain and may be revisited at any time of year. Thank you for sharing this Way with me and the Church.

