

Dear Nova,

Welcome to the Nova Community Church Lenten (spring) Devotional! During these next six weeks, I want to invite you to join me and the rest of our writing team in preparing our hearts for Easter by reflecting on God's love for us displayed through Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Although our particular Christian tradition does not typically focus on the liturgical calendar, many Christians benefit richly from following the daily readings in lectionaries. The passages in this devotional are ones typically included in the Lent readings. I hope that, in addition to joining our hearts together as a Nova family, we will also develop a greater spirit of unity across denominational, racial, ethnic, and political differences within the Body of Christ. This is Jesus' desire for us:

“I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— I in them and you in me— so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:20-23).

As you use this devotional, you will need to read the Scripture passages from your Bible. I encourage you to read them slowly, perhaps multiple times. What word or phrase stands out to you? What might the Holy Spirit be speaking specially to you through the passage? You may want to write the words where you can recall them throughout your day. I also hope that you will be blessed by the personal reflections of your Nova family.

Grace and peace be with you,  
Amy Martin

Wednesday, February 14

Read Psalm 51

*“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”* Psalm 51:10

I have sung these words many times and prayed them in many versions over and over to God. I fail my heavenly Father daily and cry out for His forgiveness. Psalm 51 reassures me that God wants our hearts to be reconciled to Him, and He will forgive me if I but repent and ask. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to live as a human and to teach us how we should live. Through His sacrifice our sins are washed away forever.

Do you ever feel that you cannot come close to God because you have done something so bad that God couldn't possibly forgive you? David wrote this psalm after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba. It is his plea for mercy and forgiveness. He repented of his sins and God mercifully forgave him. I am reassured that we can read about faithful Christian heroes in the Bible and not only learn of their successes but see that they were imperfectly human and also sinned. David was mighty but also weak. In spite of that weakness, because David repented, God still blessed him and used him to further His Kingdom. However, David still had to face the consequences of his sin.

As we begin this season of Lent, ask God to create in you a clean heart and steadfast spirit. As you reflect on Jesus' sacrifice for us, keep in mind that no sin is too great to be forgiven. Read Psalm 51 again and be glad that *“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”* Come to Him in prayer and repentance and you will be blessed.

--Carla Conte

Thursday, February 15

Read 2 Corinthians 5:20-21

*<sup>20</sup> We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

If someone were to ask you what your purpose on earth is, you could read this scripture as an answer to that question.

Wherever we go in our day, whomever we connect with, we are ambassadors of Christ. Our message is the same: "Be reconciled to God."

For God so loved the world, He sent His son Jesus, so that in Him a perfect life would exist that could be credited to the account of those who belong to God. Jesus died a perfect death, the death that we should have died, so that we could be credited with living a perfect life. That's why there's no condemnation. God looks at the cross and sees Jesus who took our sin on Himself. God looks at us and sees His Son. That's what it means to be in Christ. This is the gospel. This is the message, the word of reconciliation that we are to share in the ministry of reconciliation as ambassadors. Reconciliation is by the will of God, by the act of forgiveness, by the obedience of faith and by the mighty work of substitution.

Dear Father, Your plan of grace is glorious, that You would treat Your Son as if He were a sinner so that You could treat us as if we were righteous. And one day You will make us righteous when we enter into the glory of heaven. May we be faithful in the ministry of reconciliation to live out the gospel by which we were reconciled, so that others may be as well. In Your Son's name, amen.

--Dean Mayeda

Friday, February 16

Read Psalm 23

Throughout my childhood, I lost a substantial number of family and friends, and I came to associate this passage with dying. Every time I heard it growing up, I would become somber or depressed. I wouldn't read along and I tried to think of something that would distract me and make me laugh. I was terrified of death for most of my life, and I didn't realize what it meant to have Jesus as my savior.

David is imagining himself as a sheep in this passage, and his creator, God himself, is his shepherd. Sheep at no point direct the Shepherd to follow them; the only time a shepherd follows a sheep is to grab them and pull them back. And even if God walks them into the valley of the shadow of death, David scoffs at fear because he knows the one who spoke the world into existence will beat evil down with a stick! Boom!

I now read this passage and understand the overwhelming feelings David has for God, and the infinite amount of love Jesus Christ has for us. Through Jesus, this psalm is about praise, comfort, strength, confidence and love eternal. Jesus gave his blood and his body for us so that we may live in eternity with him and he says to us: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" John 14:1-3.

Most people are afraid of death. Are you? Are you more excited about your earthly life than your eternal life? How would your life on earth be different if your main focus was on your eternal life? Have you cast *any* of your fears or anxieties on God and asked him to remove them?

Father, I thank you for taking my fears and anxieties from me. Your grace and love is never ending, and through Jesus Christ I know I will spend my eternal life with you. Fix my heart and eyes on the path I may have been avoiding or do not even see, and spend my time here on earth focused on your kingdom come. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

--Butch Paredes

Saturday, February 17

Read Mark 1:9-15.

“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” (NIV)

“You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy.” (NLT)

“You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.”  
(MSG)

"You are my Son, The Beloved; with you I am delighted." (Aramaic)

These words were spoken to Jesus before he did anything remarkable: before he overcame Satan’s temptations; before he preached the Good News; before he did his first miracle; before he obediently went to the cross.

How do you think these words affected Jesus? How did they shape his identity, or how might they have encouraged him during the trials ahead?

Which of the translations do you find most meaningful? Have you ever ‘heard’ the Father speak these words to you? ‘You are my daughter...my dearly loved daughter...’. Meditate on these words today. Let them sink into your open, receptive heart as a prayer of communion with God.

--Amy Martin

Monday, February 19

Read Colossians 1:24-27.

Does anyone enjoy suffering? Paul rejoiced in the suffering he was experiencing not because he desired it, but because it came from his love for those he was ministering to and his faithfulness in presenting the complete Gospel message of Jesus Christ. Then, as now, the Gospel message offended pretty much everyone everywhere and caused them to persecute Paul for speaking Truth that brought to light their sins, pride, and self-contentedness. He could easily have avoided his suffering by tailoring his message to make it favorable to his audiences, but he did not.

Are we able to rejoice in our own suffering? Who would purposely accept affliction? In writing about filling up his flesh to complete Christ's afflictions, Paul was not saying that Christ's suffering on the cross was *insufficient for our salvation* so that he or we needed to complete it. Since the church is Christ's body, when any member suffers for His name, Jesus also suffers. Thus, because of the suffering that Jesus said that His followers must suffer because of Him, His sufferings will be filled up or completed by His body, the church, before He returns. Also, as Paul himself experienced, there is a price that His followers must pay in the struggle to take the salvation Christ offers to every person. In your Christian service, have you been criticized, gossiped about or lied about? In thinking about afflictions such as these, however small, how do you feel? Privileged?

What is the big mystery Paul refers to? After he was saved, God revealed to Paul that the Gentiles are fellow-heirs of the gospel with the Jews through Christ. For Paul, this was a glorious truth. Before this, Gentiles had always been viewed by Jews, at best, as second-class citizens in the kingdom; something which Paul, together with others, zealously enforced before his conversion. Paul is saying that because Christ is in every believer and every believer in Christ, there is no room for prejudice. All need to hear the gospel, and all can share in its blessings. *Dear Jesus, I ask for your help that I might understand and live the truth of your Word. I pray that you will use me as your servant to lead others to grow in spiritual maturity. Lead us as we seek to be all that you want us to be. Amen.*

--Leland Austel

Tuesday, February 20

Read Psalm 130

I often wonder if God gets tired of my prayers. Not so much my prayers but my constant repetitive list of sins. I learned to pray using an acronym "ACTS". "A" for Adoration (praising and worshipping God); "C" for Confession; "T" for Thanksgiving; and "S" for Supplication (prayers for others). This acronym helps me to focus on my prayers and make sure I don't forget all the parts of my prayer. If you analyze the Lord's Prayer you will see it follows a similar format. I always get stuck on the Confession part. I know God asks us to repent of our sins, but mine always seem to be the same ones day after day. Does He shake his head at my repentance of "not spending quiet time with You" repeated each day? I picture God telling me to stop asking for forgiveness and just spend the time with Him.

Psalm 130 is short but it assures me that He forgives me, no matter what. It doesn't matter what I am confessing; it only matters that I am confessing my sins to Him and that I am truly sorry. He does not keep a record of my sins, and He will redeem me from all my sins. Forgiveness is powerful. God forgives us, and we are called to forgive others--especially those that sin against us directly. Just as He does not keep a record of our sins, we should not dwell on those sins committed by others.

*"Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord, O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy."* *Psalm 130: 1-2*

--Carla Conte

Wednesday, February 21

Read Psalm 91

My great, great-grandfather was a pastor in a small south Texas town during the Bandit War of the early 1900's. One night people in his town heard that a group of Mexican bandits had crossed the border and were headed in their direction. Far from other towns where they could seek protection (most people didn't have cars), members of his congregation came to his house asking for advice on what they should do. He told them, "Read Psalm 91 and go to bed." After they left, his children watched him to see what he would do. He went to his bedroom, got on his knees and read Psalm 91. Then, after praying, he got into bed and went to sleep. The bandits never came and the town was safe.

God wants us to take reasonable measures to protect ourselves and be wise in facing risks. However, there are many dangers that we can't avoid or even see coming. God is delighted when His children take refuge in Him, trusting in His promise to protect and care for them. What is causing you to feel afraid or anxious? Read Psalm 91 again and imagine yourself sheltered under the wings of God Most High, the Creator of the Universe.

--Dave Martin

Thursday, February 22

Read Romans 10:8-13.

Have you ever been asked, "How do I become a Christian?" or "How do I get to Heaven?" Romans 10:8-13 gives you the beautiful answer. Salvation is as close as your own lips and heart. People think it must be a complicated process, but it's not! The will of God that is laid before us is not difficult to understand. You don't have to be Einstein to understand it. You don't have to be Christopher Columbus to travel to distant regions to find it. And you certainly don't have to be Superman or Wonder Woman to fight for it! God has made it available to all of us. If we believe in our heart and say with our mouth that Christ is the risen Lord, we will be saved. And that's not an impossible task for anyone! So, when someone asks you any of these questions...the answer is easy as pie. Pray with them to confess and accept Jesus into their heart so that they may have a deep and loving personal relationship with Him. Let them know that they are Heaven bound!

*Heavenly Father, thank you for loving us so much that you sent your Only Son to die on the cross for us so that we may have Eternal life. May we continue to trust you in all aspects of our lives, and may we be faithful servants and share the Good News with others.*

*In Jesus' name, Amen*

--Lauri Chipeco

Friday, February 23

Read Romans 4:16-25.

What is true faith? True faith can be defined through the character and actions of Abraham. God had promised Abraham that he would have many descendants and be the “father of many nations”, and yet both Abraham and Sarah were very old and still childless. The circumstances seem impossible, but Abraham’s faith did not waver. His faith was alive and active, and “against all hope” he still trusted God to do what He promised. This is an amazing example of having faith.

Sometimes having faith in God means believing the difficult and even the impossible--to trust that God has everything under control no matter how impossible it seems. It means trusting that our prayers are being heard and answered, maybe not as we see fit but according to God’s will and plan for our lives. God is faithful to His promises and to His people. Do you have faith to trust that God is working in your life according to His will? Do you truly believe that? God is mighty enough to do all things! We can have peace in knowing that God can accomplish anything and is in control of our lives.

Today think of two words that describe God’s awesome power and write them down somewhere you look often. Memorize these words so that when your faith is weak and you feel attacked, they will reassure you and help re-establish your trust in Him.

*Lord, thank you for Abraham’s tremendous example of true faith. Even though the circumstances seem impossible, his faith did not waver. You are faithful to the promises you make to us. Help us to have the faith of Abraham in our lives. All things are possible with you.*

--Jackie Austel

Saturday, February 24

Read Mark 8:31-38.

As sinful people, we are used to living for the present, downplaying the power of evil, giving lip-service to the things of God, seeking joy only in the pleasures of life. But Jesus calls for a radical change in the thinking of his disciples:

(1) "If any of you wants to be my follower...you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your cross, and follow me," (v. 34, NLT).

"You're not in the driver's seat; I am," (The MSG).

REFLECTION: Who or what is driving my life?

(2) "If you try to keep your life for yourself; you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will find true life. And how do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul in the process?" (v. 35-36, NLT).

REFLECTION: Is there anything in my life that I need to get rid of for the sake of my soul?

(3) "If any of you are embarrassed over me...when you get around your fickle and unfocused friends; know that you'll be an even greater embarrassment to the Son of Man [Jesus] when he arrives in all the splendor of God," (v. 31, The MSG). Don't live with your Christian tail between your legs. Radiate Jesus.

REFLECTION: Do I bow for prayer in a public restaurant? If I do, how do I feel? Do those I rub shoulders with in life have no doubt that I'm a Jesus follower?

Prayer: "Have Thine own way Lord. Have Thine own way. Hold o'er my being absolute sway. Fill with Thy Spirit till all shall see Christ only, always, living in me." (Hymn: "Have Thine Own Way, v. 4).

--Ron Graff

Monday, February 26

Read John 13:1-18.

What do we mean when we use the word “blessing” or the word “blessed?” The dictionary defines it as “anything that gives happiness or prevents misfortune; bringing comfort and joy.” Who doesn’t want that? Lay it on me! I’ll take as much of that as I can get.

In John 13:1-18, Jesus reveals that the path to blessing is a path of servanthood. It’s a path that goes counter-culture and against our nature. By and large we want to be served and not to serve--especially when it comes to the Judas Iscariot types. Jesus has gathered with His disciples in an upper room to eat the last supper with them. He gets up from the table and performs an act designated for the lowest slave in the household: he washed the disciples’ feet. God in the flesh kneeling and performing the act of a slave. By His example, He was revealing what the path of servanthood looks like. In verse 16, Jesus said, “You know these things—now do them! That is the path of blessing.” What are the “these things” Jesus refers to as the “path of blessing?”

(1) It is having the quality of Jesus’ heart of love. Verse 1 says, “Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.” It was a sacrificial kind of love that gave regardless of the response of the one loved. Remember, Jesus knew Judas would betray Him, yet He still washed his feet. Jesus’ heart of love reaches out even to the unlovely.

(2) It is serving with a humble heart.

REFLECTION: If Jesus were out on the plaza after church, what do you think would be His goal? What is your goal? What should it be? How about at work, in your marriage, in your neighborhood, etc?

PRAYER: “Oh to be like Thee! Full of compassion, loving, forgiving, tender and kind. Helping the helpless and cheering the fainting, seeking the wandering sinner to find. Oh to be like Thee! Oh to be like Thee, blessed Redeemer, pure as Thou art! Come in Thy sweetness, come in Thy Fullness. Stamp Thine own image deep in my heart.” -Hymn: “Oh to Be Like Thee”, v. 2 and chorus

--Ron Graff

Tuesday, February 27

Read Matthew 10:28-31.

For many of us, worry is a daily struggle and is what drives us to accomplish things in our lives. Maybe you even have a concern on your mind right now that is distracting you from completely focusing on God. While we don't want to swing completely to the other side and become apathetic, a hyper-sense of worry can undermine the trust we put in God.

In these verses we are reminded that God keeps all things in motion. He keeps the sparrows alive and flying--and how much more valuable are we than the sparrows! The loving and intimate relationship we have with God is such that He even knows the number of hairs on our heads. God will continue to love us and we are assured that He will ultimately triumph over all evil. Therefore, in the grand scheme of everything, what is there to truly be afraid of?

What do you worry about? Take a moment in self-reflection and give these things to God, the One who loves you perfectly.

Father, I confess that my worries can take my focus away from You. Rather, when I worry, I pray that it would be a catalyst to remind me to put my trust in You for all things. Amen.

--Garrett Koch

Wednesday, February 28

Read John 15:18-20.

Is it obvious to the world around me that I don't belong? Do I walk in a kind of righteousness and truth that causes those who reject God and walk in darkness to hate me? Am I truly persecuted for my faith? Do I give others an opportunity to ignore the Good News?

Am I greater than my master? Of course not! Because if I am, than Jesus is no longer my master. This verse should be a hard word for us. It should be a huge roadblock that stops us on our path of complacency. On the other hand, these words of Jesus can also bring clarity to our experience. Why might I feel like I don't belong with my family or coworker or schoolmates? Why don't they accept my views or appreciate my choices? Because Jesus chose me to come out of the world to be like him. This was his experience, and I can expect to receive the same treatment when I identify with Christ.

Jesus, Master, thank you for choosing me. I don't want to be comfortable in this life if that means I'm not closely following you. Transform my heart and mind so that I can truly desire to fully identify with you.

--Amy Martin

Thursday, March 1  
Read John 2:13-22.

When you picture Jesus, do you ever imagine him as angry? I think we often view Jesus as this peaceful, calm person who was gentle and kind. But it's harder for us to picture him with anger like in this scripture passage. Jesus created a whip--like an Indiana Jones whip--and forced people out of the temple area. On top of that, he was flipping over tables, sending money flying everywhere.

Can you imagine the disturbance Jesus created, and what this chaotic scene looked like? It seems like it would take a lot for Jesus--Immanuel, God with us--to get angry. What exactly was Jesus so upset about? Money changers had created a thriving business out of charging inflated prices for sacrificial animals to bring as gifts to God in the temple. Even doves, which were meant to be accessible for those who had very little money, were expensive. These money changers were creating barriers that prevented foreigners and the poor from being able to worship God.

Jesus sees all this and it makes him angry. He responds in two ways. First, he physically stops the injustice. Secondly, he reminds people of what the scriptures said about the temple's actual purpose, that it was a place of worship for all nations. Jesus boldly confronts the culture of his time by speaking up and calling attention to their sin.

What are the things around you that prevent people from being able to access God? How can you be more like Jesus with his righteous anger? Will you choose to pay attention to these things and allow them to disturb you and lead you to action? Take some time to pray and allow Jesus to help you see those around you, and then to pray for them to have opportunities to know the truth of God's great love.

*Father God, please help me to see the people around me with your eyes. Lead me to listen to their cries and to have compassion on them. Lord, I invite you to soften my heart towards the foreigners, the poor, and those on the margins of our world. Teach me to be disturbed by the things that disturb you God. Would the world know that I am your disciple by the way I love others. I invite you to use me this week, to display your love to the people around me. Amen.*

--Coral Taluban

Friday, March 2

Read Psalm 19

Do you take the time to appreciate the beauty of God's creation? To recognize that nature proclaims His goodness? I often stop at appreciating His creation as a masterpiece, but don't think beyond the artistry into the majestic nature of the God it declares. It's easy to get caught up in the busyness of life or distracted by the troubles of this world and not look deeper than what is immediately visible. When that happens, we run the risk of missing out on God's goodness.

Do you see the laws of God as restrictive, or freeing and life-giving? Do you find His Word trustworthy and refreshing? Depending on my present circumstances, I find any number of things when I delve into scripture: comfort, conviction, encouragement, freedom. When I find myself frustrated by my situation, I know I need to look for His presence in my life, reminding myself that He has not forgotten about me and wants what's best for me, even when that doesn't align with what I think is best for me. This isn't always easy, but it's necessary for me to be reminded of His goodness and faithfulness to me, and to remember that He is sovereign.

Do you ask the Lord to reveal sins to you that are hidden? Do you ask Him for forgiveness when you know you've been disobedient? These things aren't easy for me. I know fully that I am a sinner, in desperate need of God's grace. I don't *want* to be reminded of where I've dishonored Christ or failed to do what I'm called to do. But by being vulnerable and open with Him, I also allow myself the opportunity to experience His goodness in new and deeper ways.

When things are going well, it's (usually) easier to see God's goodness in our lives. When we hit a rough patch or life isn't going quite the way we envisioned, that can be a different story. During this period of Lent, find joy in the sacrifice Christ made on the cross. As we approach Easter, take the time to stop and examine signs of God's goodness in your life. You *will* find them, whether in the majesty of creation, the living and active Word of God, in the forgiveness He has freely bestowed upon you, or in countless other unique ways God speaks to you.

--Natalie Pitman

Saturday, March 3

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.

As Paul writes, the cross of Christ divides the people of the world into two categories: perishing or being saved. For those that are perishing, salvation from the cross--a cruel and offensive instrument of criminal execution--is foolishly moronic and offends their pride in themselves. For those being saved, the cross is God's power in freely offering salvation to everyone while being both the just and the justifier, with no need for human merit or intellect, without compromising His holiness or leaving His righteousness unfulfilled.

Paul illustrates God's self-sufficient power to save, without reliance on human wisdom and intelligence, in his reference to Isaiah 29:14 and the story of Jerusalem's political leaders whose worldly-wise and clever statecraft failed to prevent invasion by Assyria and subsequent destruction of the city except for God's intervention.

In responding to the cross of Christ, Paul writes that people will stumble, laugh or believe. In stumbling, we want God to prove himself to us before considering submitting ourselves to Him. Such people don't want to obey God; they want to order Him around. In laughing, we want to wait to submit to God until after we have "figured Him out." Such people want to fit God into their minds before they will let Him fit into their lives. Whether they stumble or laugh, the perishing deny the cross because they see it as insulting their intelligence (too simple), ability (nothing to do), or ambition (no glory for self).

To those who are being saved, the cross of Christ is our message, our hope, our confidence. Regardless of our state, we need always go back to the cross and bond together around our love for the One who died for us there. For it is only by the power and wisdom of the cross that we are lifted from our sins, released from condemnation, given new life, and our feet set in a new direction. What could be smarter?

*Dear Lord Jesus, take me back to the cross. Help me to see it anew and afresh. Amen.*

--Leland Austel

Monday, March 5

Read Ephesians 2:1-10.

The Bible is clear that humans are sinful beings deserving of wrath and eternal punishment. If we do not realize how flawed and disobedient we are, then we cannot appreciate the magnitude of what God has done/does for us. Even in the midst of our daily disobedience, the Lord demonstrates His immense love and mercy for each one of us by sending His own son to bear the burden for our transgressions. It is so profound to realize that we have been saved by grace through faith by the creator of the universe. He chose us before time began and He has a particular plan for each one of us.

Take a moment to reflect on how comforted and loved you feel when you know that God chose you and made plans for you before the world was formed. Where has God shown immense grace and mercy in your own life? Praise Him for those gracious and merciful times!

--Lance Capel

Tuesday, March 6

Read John 3:14-21.

On Feb. 4, 2018 Super Bowl LII (52) became history and you may have seen someone holding up the sign John 3:16. This is one of the most quoted bible verses in history. Growing up I would see this sign held up at big sporting events but never paid much attention to it. But now as an adult Christian that verse has come to have a much deeper meaning: the choice of one's eternal destiny.

However, you may not be as familiar with the surrounding verses, the rest of the story. God is using these eight verses to explain the "Who," the "What," and the "Why" of life. The "Who" is both Jesus and us. The "What" is eternal salvation. And the "Why" is because we live in a fallen world and we have sinned. Jesus, the son of God, died for our sins and rose again for you and me. It is only through believing in Jesus, the Son of God, who died for our sins that we may not perish, but have eternal life. We live in a dark, fallen world. That is why God sent his only son to not condemn us, but to bring us into His holy light and save us so we may spend eternity in heaven with our Lord and Savior.

So the next time you see John 3:16 on a sign and someone comments about it, share God's story for salvation and God's light in you!

--Raul Chipeco

Wednesday, March 7

Read Jeremiah 31:31-34.

Relationships are fractured and torn apart all the time on the basis of someone not keeping a promise. Friendships, marriages, siblings, and work relationships can all be affected. Promises are so important and foundational to the relationships we all have.

Throughout the Old Testament we see the negative results of Israel not keeping their part of the covenant with the Lord. We feel the tension and the despair as they fall away from the Lord again and again. We resonate with this in our own lives as we see our own sin.

But God promises that a new covenant will be made: that he will forgive wickedness and remember sin no more. The barrier that hinders our relationship with God will be wiped away. Thankfully, with the life and death of Jesus this was made a reality. And now, through the Spirit, we see a glimpse of the future reality: no more sin and a perfect relationship with God where the law is written on our hearts. In the moments of our struggles and pain now, we hold on to God's unshakeable promise of the future which give us the greatest hope.

--Thomas Whiteside

Thursday, March 8

Read John 12:23-33.

Death.

It is the ultimate consequence of this broken world. We hate it, we fear it, we flee from it. And yet God is seen throughout Scripture using death to defeat itself. Jesus uses the analogy of a kernel of wheat dying and then producing many more seeds that bring about new life. Death is being redeemed into life in the natural world and Jesus has plans to use death to bring about new spiritual life, too. Jesus also uses death as a metaphor for what it means to follow Him. In various passages of Scripture, believers are commanded to “put to death” our sin. In Romans, Paul says that our old self was crucified along with Christ. We are to hate our old sins and flee from them.

Before we surrender our lives to Christ, we have desires for things that may be good (love, comfort, safety, etc.) that we pervert and allow to rule us. We set goals for our lives that often are self-serving and entirely temporal or superficial. This is the life that Jesus says we must “lose” or “put to death.” To truly follow Him, our mission must be His mission and our purpose must be His purpose. It is not enough to claim Him as Savior and then continue on our same path. In Matthew 19, the rich young man’s problem wasn’t that he was rich - it’s that he didn’t want a new agenda for his life. Following Jesus requires handing him the keys and going where He takes us.

Why do we struggle to surrender? Our desires are so easily conflicted between those of our old self and those of our new self. Spend some time asking God to give you new desires that would overtake those old desires. Ask Him to help you put to death anything in your life that needs to die. Reflect on the hope that we have in Jesus and how much greater His purpose for our lives is than anything we would attain for ourselves.

--Andrew Pitman

Friday, March 9

Read Philippians 2:5-11.

In the movie “Coming to America”, Prince Akeem is the prince of a wealthy African country seeking to find a wife in America. Instead of displaying his wealth by living in a fancy hotel or having his own TV show to find a wife, he disguised himself as a foreign student working at a fast food restaurant. Throughout the movie, his sidekick persistently asks the prince to impress his potential mate by showing off his birthright as a prince. However, Prince Akeem continues to refuse living like royalty even though he has every right to do so. But when he returns home, the prince was celebrated in his kingdom because he brought home a wife who loves him for who he is.

Similarly, Jesus had the right to live with power and luxury when he was sent to live among us. He could have been born in a palace and display his glory like Caesar. However, Jesus chose to obey God and live among us humbly as a son of a carpenter. Before he began his ministry, he was offered everything on this earth if he worshiped Satan. In his time of ministry he chose to experience sorrows and temptations and paid the ultimate price for our sin by dying on the cross. His obedience allows us to have a mediator that is empathic to our weaknesses. (Heb 4:15-16)

How should we choose to relate to others? Should we demand our wants like little children when they don't get their way? Should we seek to gain from others to benefit ourselves? May our action be guided by the attitude of Christ, because it is through his act of selflessness and the attitude of humility that we are able to be princes and princesses in God's kingdom and receive the wonderful blessing we do not deserve. Spend some time to reflect upon your own attitude and how you can continue to serve God by serving the people around us.

--Wilkin Lee

Saturday, March 10

Read Mark 14:3-9.

What is one of your most prized possessions? What is something that you cherish the most in your life? Mark writes that this woman came bringing an alabaster jar that cost more than a whole year's wages. This alabaster jar was more than just a costly possession that she owned. This was probably part of her dowry, which signified a financial gift that she would bring to her future husband. By choosing to break the jar and pour this perfume on Jesus she was sacrificing not just finances but her future relationship security. There is a finality and a confidence in this decision to break the jar. There is no turning back from this beautiful display of her devotion to Jesus. But not everyone celebrates her decision. The people around her mock her, and say that her sacrificial gift is a waste. There will always be people around you saying that you don't need to give Jesus your everything.

Jesus says that her act of love is a "beautiful thing" for him. Jesus desires to have our full love and devotion. Just like Jesus' sacrifice for us on the cross is final, this woman's decision for Jesus is also final. This woman gives us a beautiful example of unwavering commitment and love for Jesus.

What are the things in your life that Jesus is inviting you to "break" and surrender to him? How can you surrender these places to Jesus this week, as an act of your love and devotion?

*Lord Jesus, please give me the courage to surrender my heart to you. Help me to give you access to every part of my life. Help me to trust you with my future. Would you increase my understanding of your great love for me. I want to experience your love this week in tangible ways. Lead me to move in response to your goodness. Amen*

--Coral Taluban

Monday March 12  
Read Hebrews 10:16-25.

This is a powerful scripture that describes an essential aspect of our faith: we have been gifted a relationship with God through the blood that Christ shed on our behalf. God forgives our sins because of Jesus who took them upon himself and paid the penalty so our debt has been forgiven. He was the final offering for our sin, willingly given, so we may have eternal life and can stand before God spotless. In verse 23 we are told to “hold unwaveringly” or “tightly” to the hope we profess because God is faithful! We are encouraged to hold on to our faith in Jesus and all his promises.

We are also called to stand alongside each other and not to go at it alone. Fellowship with other Christians is a gift from God used to strengthen and help us grow. Do you feel alone? Is your faith struggling? Do you need encouragement today? Of course we all do! Life is tough, but it’s so much easier when you have someone walking alongside you. Are you in a small group? Who do you share life with and get support from? Who spurs you on towards love and good deeds? Today is your day to intentionally make plans to connect with a person or group who will stand with you when the storms come and the winds blow.

Who has seen a redwood tree? These amazing trees can live for more than 2,000 years and weigh up to 500 tons. They grow to over 350 feet tall and can be 25 feet in diameter. You would think the root system for these giants would go deep, anchored to the ground, providing support through all sorts of storms, winds and earthquakes. Would you be surprised to find that in reality they have very shallow roots that spread out and interlock with the root system of the tree next to them? Together they give each other the strength to survive any sort of storm. That is the perfect description of fellowship. Together we are stronger.

*Lord, thank you for your son Jesus Christ who paid the ultimate price for my sins so I may have eternal life. You are faithful, and I am continually amazed at the free gift of your grace I receive everyday. You surround me with so many opportunities to encourage and support others. Help me to be an example of your love and grow in awareness of people’s needs and provide support and encouragement where I can. Amen.*

--Jackie Austel

Tuesday, March 13

Read Psalm 63:1-8.

David's Psalm shows the desires of his heart. He longs to be in the presence of God. Have you ever been really thirsty? Once the cold water hits your mouth it's the most refreshing feeling. Just like the water quenching our thirst, God is the only thing that can quench our soul. This was the reason David sings a song of praise meditating on God's love and security. You can feel the intensity of David's heart. His son was out to kill him, but David wasn't focused on being rescued by God; he was focused on his relationship with God. How do you seek after God? Is your heart yearning to be in His presence?

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for David's song of praise. His Psalm ignites my soul to seek only you, to yearn for only you, and to long for only you. Please protect my heart from the influences of the world so that my heart only desires you. In Jesus' precious name I pray. Amen.

--Rebecca Hester

Wednesday, March 14

Read John 7:37-39.

The feast in this passage is called “Sukkot”. It required the people to live outdoors in hastily constructed shelters to remind them of God’s rescue from Egypt and His provision of water and food on the journey. Picture an eight day long campout filled with singing and celebration! Anybody who has ever gone camping knows that we forgo major conveniences to do so. This Feast of Tabernacles required similar sacrifices, serving as a reminder that everything we possess—both physically and spiritually—comes from God. In addition to looking backward at God’s historical blessings on Israel, Sukkot looked ahead to the time when all nations will celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem in honor of Israel’s reigning Messiah. (Zechariah 14:16-21)

So picture this: for seven days, right after a campout breakfast, a priest would walk down to the Pool of Siloam—amidst great music, celebration, and singing of Isaiah 12:3—and fill a golden pitcher with water. The priest would return to the Temple Mount, raise the golden pitcher for all to see, and pour the water into one of the silver basins by the altar. “Raise your hand!” the people would shout to the priest so that they could see he had poured the water into the basin. Then, with cheers, the morning sacrifice and singing would begin.

But on the eighth day, right before the morning sacrifice, Jesus stands up in front of everyone and shouts, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink!” Everyone is stunned! Jesus calls out, “Anyone who believes in Me, as the Scripture says, ‘From his innermost being shall flow rivers of *living water*!’” The people are in shock! Some say Jesus is a prophet! Some say He is the Christ! Some want to have Him arrested, and the place goes crazy as people argue about who Jesus is! The people had just sung the words of Isaiah 12:3: “Therefore you will joyously draw water from the springs of salvation.” Isaiah prophesied of what Israel would sing of the Lord “on that day”—looking forward to the coming Messiah! And He is standing right in front of them! Comparing physical thirst to spiritual thirst, Jesus offers the promised Holy Spirit, that same salvation, to anyone who believes in Him. We can daily draw *living water* from the Lord Jesus and share the river of life to those around us thirsting for something more.

--Rick D’Amico

Thursday, March 15

Read John 9:51.

This is one of my favorite sentences in the Gospel narrative. Jesus always knew what he was about; he was always purposeful. But now we see him starting down the road to the cross, and we can feel his passion and determination.

I remember watching the gymnasts in the 2008 Olympics. As they prepared to begin their routine, they would set their body and focus their whole face determinedly on a single point before they suddenly burst into action: running, leaping, flipping. They had prepared for one thing, and nothing could distract them from executing their routine. This is what it looks like to be resolute.

Take a minute to picture Jesus as he sets out for Jerusalem. What is his face like? How is he walking? How might he be feeling, or what is he thinking? How do his companions seem in comparison?

Jesus is setting out on his final and most important journey. He sets out by choice, knowing exactly what will happen along the way. To borrow the expression from Isaiah, Jesus set his face like flint. He is resolved to offer himself as the final sacrifice for sin. Hold this image in your heart today. Respond to that image with a prayer of worship and thanks.

--Amy Martin

Friday, March 16

Read Romans 5:1-11.

Christian and Jewish spiritual tradition employs the word *ineffable* to describe many attributes and actions of God: so great, so awesome that it is impossible to express with words. The very name of God is ineffable, yet He expressed it simply to Moses: I AM. The gospel also is ineffable, and yet we explain it to children. In this passage, Paul is using a lot of words to describe the glorious, amazing position we now have with God through Christ. And yet I feel that he can never use enough words to describe wholly and perfectly this gift. Perhaps that is why he twice resorts to the phrase “how much more”. As you read again this passage from the Passion Translation, quiet your mind and allow the Spirit to speak these words to the deep space of your soul:

Our faith in Jesus transfers God’s righteousness to us and he now declares us flawless in his eyes. This means we can now enjoy true and lasting peace with God, all because of what our Lord Jesus, the Anointed One, has done for us. Our faith guarantees us permanent access into this marvelous kindness that has given us a perfect relationship with God. What incredible joy bursts forth within us as we keep on celebrating our hope of experiencing God’s glory! But that’s not all! Even in times of trouble we have a joyful confidence, knowing that our pressures will develop in us patient endurance. And patient endurance will refine our character, and proven character leads us back to hope. And this hope is not a disappointing fantasy, because we can now experience the endless love of God cascading into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who lives in us! For when the time was right, the Anointed One came and died *to demonstrate his love* for sinners who were entirely helpless, weak, and powerless to save themselves. Now, who of us would dare to die for the sake of a wicked person? We can all understand if someone was willing to die for a truly noble person. <sup>8</sup> But Christ proved God’s passionate love for us by dying in our place while we were still lost and ungodly! And there is still much more to say of his unfailing love for us! For through the blood of Jesus we have heard the powerful declaration, “You are now righteous in my sight.” And because of the sacrifice of Jesus, you will never experience the wrath of God. So if while we were still enemies, God fully reconciled us to himself through the death of his Son, then something greater than friendship is ours. Now that we are at peace with God, and because we share in his *resurrection* life, how much more we will be rescued from sin’s dominion! And even more than that, we overflow with triumphant joy in our new relationship of living in harmony with God—all because of Jesus Christ!

--Amy Martin

Saturday, March 17

Open Up by The Brilliance

<p>You heard the cry of our hearts And you came down Freely you gave us your love Showing us how</p>	<p>All that we do without love It means nothing Grant us the courage to give As you're calling</p>
<p>Make me an instrument of your peace Where there is hatred let me show love Where there is darkness let me shine light and May your love cause us to open up Cause us to open up our hearts May your light cause us to shine so bright That we bring hope into the dark</p>	<p>Hope for the hopeless, your love is Strength in our weakness, your love is May we love, as you love Hope for the hopeless, your love is Strength in our weakness, your love is May we love, as you love (as you can love, oh god) May we love, as you love May we love, as you love</p>

Listening to this song I feel God's passion for us. Freely He gives us His love and through that love we are saved. He heard our cries and answered in the most beautiful way possible, allowing us entrance into His kingdom. He gives us hope through His teachings so that we may continue His work daily and in all that we do. He allows us to reach out to Him because we cannot do this alone. Only through His strength are we able to go out and shine bright for His glory.

God, I open my heart to your love. May I love you so much that my heart is a reflection of you that shines through my mouth as I speak. May that light radiate through my actions as I move throughout the day and my face glow with joy for your glory. May I continue to burn bright for you all of my days. Amen.

--Shureen Paredes

Monday, March 19

Read Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22.

“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever. Give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men. Let them sacrifice thank offerings and tell of his works with songs of joy.”

“Have I told you lately that I love you? Have I told you there’s no one else like you? Fill my heart with gladness, take away all my sadness, ease my troubles, that’s what you do.” (Van Morrison)

Have you told the Lord lately that you love him? Think of all the “wonderful deeds” he has done for you even though in times of rebellion you acted foolishly. Think of the times you “cried out to the Lord in the day of trouble and he saved [you] from [your] distress.” Out of his great love, Jesus gave it all at the cross. Out of our love for him, what can we give to him? How about a heart of thanksgiving and praise; a heart that continually tells the Savior, ‘I love you’; a grateful heart that can’t stop telling the world what he has done.

Have you told Jesus lately that you love him? Why not now and every day? Thank him and praise him for all he has done for you.

PRAYER: I love you, Jesus. O, how I love you. Forgive me for those times I have been a fool. Thank you for your unfailing love towards me. I lift up your name in praise and bless your most holy name. “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name,” (Psalm 103:1, KJV). Amen.

--Ron Graff

Tuesday, March 20

Read Isaiah 52:13-53:12

“The heart of Christ became like a reservoir in the midst of the mountains. All the tributary streams of iniquity, and every drop of the sins of his people, ran down and gathered into one vast lake, deep as hell and shoreless as eternity. All these met, as it were, in Christ’s heart, and he endured them all.” - Charles Spurgeon

In this prophetic passage, Isaiah foretells the coming of a Messiah far different than the one the Israelites would have expected. A servant, disfigured and despised, suffering...suffering...suffering. Surely suffering is not what would be expected of the Messiah, of God’s Son, of God himself. And yet Isaiah foresees suffering as the purpose of His mission, an ultimate act of service and sacrifice and intercession for sinners.

It is easy to find ourselves looking for the God we expect or desire. When the God we imagine doesn’t show up, we can find ourselves discouraged or angry. When Jesus arrived on the scene, he did very little to change the momentary circumstances of Israel. If anything, He inflamed the political situation, started a religious civil war, and sent His disciples on paths that would lead them to martyrs’ deaths.

Instead of changing our earthly circumstances, Jesus changes our eternity. While we must endure earthly suffering, Jesus has banished our eternal suffering through his suffering. Our resurrection day is coming because of his resurrection day. Every desire of our hearts in this life will be completely satisfied in the presence of God - forever!

As we suffer through life’s circumstances, let’s be reminded of the sufferings of Jesus. He suffered for us, and he suffers alongside us, so that we might be eternally changed and eternally rewarded.

“Though the sorrow may last for the night, His joy comes in the morning.” - Psalm 30:5.

--Andrew Pitman

Wednesday, March 21

Read Mark 14:22-25.

Each element of Passover symbolized how God had delivered his people from Egypt. Jews would begin the meal by drinking a cup of wine called The Cup of Salvation. This was a reminder of how God had saved his people from their slavery. Jesus told his disciples that the cup now represents a new covenant with God made possible through the sacrificial shedding of his blood. By this covenant, God has saved his people from their slavery to sin and death.

Next, unleavened bread would be broken and dipped in bitter herbs (parsley) to remind the Jews of the bitterness of their suffering in Egypt. Jesus said that the bread should now remind the disciples of his body which was without sin (yeast often represented sin in the Old Testament), yet would be broken and taste the bitterness of suffering for them. "And he took the 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.'" The Lord's Supper is not something that you can only do at church. Any meal can be an opportunity to remember Jesus' sacrifice for us.

--Dave Martin

Thursday, March 22

Read Mark 14:32-36.

As Jesus left the upper room with his disciples, he knew the culmination of his time on earth had finally arrived. This was the reason he left heaven and was born in a manger. Yet the prospect of horrific suffering filled him with intense dread. The temptation to escape must have felt overwhelming. In the midst of his darkest test, Jesus did what he had done so many times before: he went to a quiet place, gathered some close friends, and prayed to his Father.

Spend a few moments reflecting on the inner battle that Jesus fought. Then think of some inner struggles that you may be having. Spend some time in prayer, sharing honestly with God about your fears and how you would like Him to work out your circumstances. Then declare with Christ, **“yet, not my will, but yours be done.”**

--Dave Martin

Friday, March 23

Read Mark 14:41-50

Jesus' twelve apostles were his closest friends. He had spent over three years training them to change the world. Yet one of them turned against him and the rest abandoned him in his time of need. Think of a close friend who has abandoned or betrayed you, and the pain you felt. Then meditate on these words that Jesus spoke to his disciples shortly before his arrest: "But a time is coming, and has now come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me" (John 16:32).

Though Jesus was hurt, he was not paralyzed by pain and bitterness. He knew that his Father was with him and could be depended on, even when human friends could not. Because of this, he was able to forgive and welcome them after his resurrection. Think again about the person who betrayed or abandoned you. Imagine the hurt that you felt. Then imagine Jesus standing with you, and promising to never leave or forsake you. Imagine too how you would have acted if you had been one of Jesus' disciples on the night he was arrested. Then rejoice that because Christ is merciful and faithful to us, we can be the same to others.

--Dave Martin

Saturday, March 24

Read Mark 14:27-31, 66-72

In the comfort and safety of the upper room, Peter had bragged of his undying devotion to Jesus. However, when surrounded by Jesus' enemies a few hours later, he vehemently denied any association with Him. Examine your heart honestly and think about how weak your faith is apart from the grace of God. What could tempt you to deny your Lord? Peer pressure? Persecution? The loss of your income or the terminal illness of a loved one? Jesus does not want us to place our confidence in our ability to remain faithful him, but in his ability to remain faithful to us.

“Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” Our ability to persevere in faith does not depend on our strength but on Christ's. Therefore, humbly trust in him to give you the strength to remain faithful no matter what the circumstances. And when you fail like Peter, turn back to Jesus trusting that He will forgive and restore you. Spend some time asking and thanking God for His grace that enables you to run the race of faith with perseverance, and to keep getting back up when you fall.

--Dave Martin

Monday, March 26

Read John 19:28-30

“It is finished, the battle is over. It is finished, there’ll be no more war. It is finished, the end of the conflict. It is finished and Jesus is Lord. Yet in my heart, the battle was still raging. Not all prisoners of war had come home. These were the battlefields of my own making. I didn’t know that the war had been won. Oh, then I heard the king of all ages had fought all the battles for me. And now praise his name, I am free.” (Bill and Gloria Gaither)

“It is finished” was not a submissive cry but a shout of victory. “With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.” It is finished and always will be finished! In the Greek it was only one word, *tetelestai*, a term used by merchants meaning “the debt is paid in full.” When Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross, He paid the debt in full for our sins. No more needed to be done. Our redemption was finished. He said in John 17:4, “I glorified you on earth by completing down to the last detail what you assigned me to do.” (Message)

Lifted up was He to die,  
“It is finished!” was his cry;  
Now in heaven exalted high;  
Hallelujah, what a Savior!  
--Philip Bliss

How do Jesus’ last words “It is finished!” move you? How are you responding to his *tetelestai*, “paid in full?”

PRAYER: Thank you, dear Jesus, for paying the price for my salvation in full. Nothing in my hand I bring. Simply to the cross I cling. I yield my body, soul and spirit to you in grateful praise for setting me free.

--Ron Graff

Tuesday, March 27

Read Mark 15:33-41

Before Jesus died, people couldn't approach God the same way we can now. The Israelites believed that though God is both in heaven and present everywhere in the physical universe, He manifested his presence in a unique way over the ark of the covenant. This was kept in a room of the temple called the Holy of Holies, with a thick curtain across the entrance. Thus, Jews often referred to the temple as God's "house." However, the Holy of Holies was inaccessible to the average person. If someone went in unauthorized, she would die because of her sinfulness. Only once a year could the high priest go into that room to make a special sacrifice. The thick curtain separated a Holy God from a sinful world.

However, Jesus' death was the last sacrifice that needed to be made. All the animal sacrifices were just symbols of what He would do. By his sacrifice, "he has made perfect forever, those who are being made holy." Therefore, the curtain separating God and humans was ripped apart and now "we have confidence to enter the Holy of Holies by a new and living way" and "draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith" (Hebrews 10:11-22).

Spend some time confidently drawing near to God in prayer with the assurance that He hears you and sees you as perfect (even though your character is still in the process of being made holy) because you are in Christ and your sins have been dealt with forever.

--Dave Martin

Wednesday, March 28

Read Mark 15:42-47

To the disciples the cross must have seemed like a horrible end to the story of Jesus. Their hopes and dreams had been replaced by fear, confusion and despair. Would they be arrested and crucified too? How could God allow his servant Jesus, through whom He had done so many miracles, to die such a cursed death at the hands of pagan Gentiles? How could Jesus have been so wrong about his identity? Should they continue to honor his legacy and claim that he was in heaven? Was he in heaven? These questions and many more filled their minds.

Have you ever felt completely confused and disillusioned? The disciples were not idealistic dreamers or superstitious fools. Life in first-century Palestine was too hard and short to be based on fantasy. They had seen people die and knew that death was the end. As Jesus' women followers looked at his body in the tomb, they were under no illusions about Jesus' future. His spirit, they believed, had gone on to the afterlife and his body would remain dead and decay until the end of time when the great resurrection of the dead would take place and God would judge all people.

Are there circumstances in your life that seem completely hopeless? Christ's passion reminds us that no matter how bleak things appear, there is always hope beyond what we can imagine. Christ can and will bring a resurrection of hope and joy to your life if you will continue to cling to Him. He says to you: "I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

--Dave Martin