



GROW. PRAY. STUDY.

The Church of the Resurrection – Weekly Guide

“Innocence, Hope and Forgiveness”

SUNDAY 8.5.18

“You have heard that it was said, *You must love your neighbor and hate your enemy*. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Don’t even the tax collectors do the same? *Matthew 5:43-46 CEB*

[Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”] And they cast lots to divide his clothing... When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this man was innocent.” *Luke 23:34, 47 NRSV*

What can I give back to the Lord for all the good things he has done for me? I’ll lift up the cup of salvation. I’ll call on the Lord’s name. I’ll keep the promises I made to the Lord in the presence of all God’s people. *Psalms 116:12-14 CEB*

I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the Lord; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope. *Jeremiah 29:11 CEB*

God: source and model of forgiveness

MONDAY 8.6.18 Isaiah 55:6-8

Pastor Darryl Burton’s tragic, triumphant story of unjust arrest and imprisonment shows that we don’t move past events like that by simply using our natural strength. The prophet Isaiah described the power of God’s generous forgiveness: “God’s ideas and God’s plans are often different from ours.... [Israelites] have to give up their formulation of how they should be restored, give up their plans, and believe that the word of promise and commission that God has issued will indeed produce its fruit in their restoration as a people. They don’t have to hesitate about doing so; God will be quite happy to pardon them.” *

- ✚ Isaiah 55 observed that God’s wonderfully merciful ways are very different from our natural patterns. How does Isaiah’s picture of the gap between God’s mercy and our ways of relating speak to your heart? Are there persons (or groups of people) to whom you do not want to show mercy? Are you convinced that God’s ways are indeed different from, and higher than, ours?
- ✚ Two chapters earlier, [Isaiah 52:13-53:12](#) declared that the figure God called “my servant” would conquer evil, not by brute force, but by taking all of evil’s worst upon himself. “God’s power is at its greatest not in his destruction of the wicked but in his taking all the wickedness of the earth into himself and giving back love.” ** How do stories like Pastor Burton’s show that God’s ways are truly higher than ours, absorbing and destroying evil’s power to lastingly hurt others?

Prayer: O Jesus, I’m not God—but you can shape me to be more and more like you. I offer my life to your re-shaping hand, because in the end your forgiving way of life is the best way of life. Amen.

* John Goldingay, *Isaiah for Everyone*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015, p. 212-213.

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** T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, ed. *The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000, p. 222.

Love (even) your enemies

TUESDAY 8.7.18 Matthew 5:43-46

How did Pastor Burton move forward after 20 years of unfair detention? He lived into the gritty realities of what Jesus taught about tragedy or suffering. Jesus was not much concerned with assigning blame for the bad things that happen in life, but rather with bringing healing. He told his followers that God doesn't send bad things into our lives, but rather finds ways to redeem even those when they happen.

- ✚ How do you understand "love your enemies"? Do you believe Jesus meant altering your emotions toward them to be more affectionate, or reaching beyond your emotions to act for their good? What kind of character and maturity growth does it take to love your enemies? Jesus said God makes it rain on the just and the unjust alike. How can you become more like God in your willingness to bless anyone who needs it?
- ✚ Pastor Hamilton wrote, "God does not take from us our freedom, nor does God miraculously deliver us from the consequences of our actions or the actions of others.... God does promise to sustain us and force good to come from the painful things we experience in this life." * Do you accept Jesus' picture of God as a just, loving, merciful parent, not a monster who makes bad things happen to us? How does your picture of God shape your whole spiritual journey?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, hate is so tempting—and, in the end, so destructive to your purposes for my life. Teach me more each day about how to love and pray for even my enemies. Amen.

* Adam Hamilton, *Why? Making Sense of God's Will*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011, p. 20.

Jesus lived the forgiveness he taught

WEDNESDAY 8.8.18 Luke 23:34, 47

When you hear Pastor Burton's story, do you realize how much Jesus can identify with Pastor Burton? Jesus' friends and his nation betrayed him, a Roman procurator who could see his innocence approved his crucifixion (cf. [John 19:4-6](#)), and he felt a deep sense of separation from God (cf. [Matthew 27:46](#)). Yet on the cross, Jesus did what might seem impossible—he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing."

- ✚ Too many Christians just ignore injustices like the one Pastor Burton suffered—as long as they don't happen to them. Jesus rebuked very pious people in his day for carefully giving a tenth of even tiny herbs like mint "while neglecting justice and love for God" ([Luke 11:42](#)). In what ways each day, in regular or volunteer activities, could you bring about greater justice? Are you willing to consistently make justice a priority?

Click here * to learn more about Pastor Burton's new "Miracle of Innocence" ministry.

- ✚ Jerusalem's religious leaders, fixated on outward "goodness," cruelly asked Pilate to break the legs of Jesus and two bandits to keep the Passover Sabbath "pure" (cf. [John 19:31](#)). Crucifixion victims suffocated--breaking a victim's legs added intense pain but only slightly hastened death. (**Click here** ** if you wonder how crucifixion killed. Warning: it was horrific.) Jesus asked God to forgive those who nailed him to the cross. How does the contrast clarify Jesus' call for his disciples' righteousness to be "greater" than the leaders' focus on externals (cf. [Matthew 5:20](#))?

Prayer: Compassionate God, you suffered so much, yet prayed, "Father, forgive them..." As you forge a new identity in me, may I see myself and others through your eyes, and forgive as you forgave. Amen.

* <https://www.miracleofinnocence.org/event>

** <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2004/apr/08/thisweeksciencequestions>

Dying Stephen echoed Jesus' prayer

THURSDAY 8.9.18 Acts 7:54-60

The world has changed since New Testament times. It's unlikely any of us will ever face crucifixion or stoning (and we're thankful). Jesus and his follower Stephen, however, faced those terrible deaths. Yet they both asked God to forgive even the people killing them, people who didn't even want their forgiveness. Their prayers showed how Jesus' kind of forgiving spirit can permeate our lives, if we are open to it.

- ✚ Pastor Hamilton wrote, "More than any other world religion, Christianity teaches, preaches, veritably shouts forgiveness. Yes, some of our preachers dwell too long on guilt.... That is unfortunate, for a Christianity obsessed with guilt is no Christianity. Christianity is a faith whose central focus is not guilt, but grace, redemption, healing, forgiveness, and mercy." * In what ways have you made forgiveness not an abstract idea, but a freeing, transforming personal reality in your life? Is there a specific relationship in which you will begin or deepen the process of bringing about a forgiven, forgiving life in the weeks ahead?
- ✚ Think of a time when someone wronged you in a major way. Remember how the situation came to be, what feelings it triggered in you, and what you did about them. Have you been able to forgive and let go of the hurt, or has this wrong continued to haunt you? What would it take for you to set yourself free from the past by forgiving? What kind of help, divine or human, might you need for that process? ([Click here](#) ** to learn about one option for genuine help.)

Prayer: Lord Jesus, have mercy on me. And even as I ask for your mercy, which I need every day, help me be merciful to those who wrong me, so that they and I may be free. Amen.

* Adam Hamilton, *Forgiveness: Finding Peace Through Letting Go*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, p. 17.

** <https://cor.org/leawood/care/counseling>

Radical trust that God's long-term plans are good

FRIDAY 8.10.18 Jeremiah 29:4-14

Babylon took many Hebrews into exile in 597 B.C., and then destroyed Jerusalem in a final conquest in 586 B.C. Before that final destruction, the prophet Jeremiah wrote a letter (which included today's reading) to the Hebrews who had already gone to Babylon. He offered them no false comfort--they should "settle down" for a long period of exile. But even exiled in that foreign land, they could trust that God's long-term plans for their nation were good.

- ✚ Some "prophets" were telling the Israelites that God would send them back to Israel within two years (see [Jeremiah 28:1-14](#)). If you had been an exile, wouldn't you have wanted that to be true, rather than Jeremiah's "wait, and be a good neighbor" message? Have you ever been disappointed with God's timing? How do you maintain patience and hope if things aren't working out as you'd wish, when you wish?
- ✚ In his letter, Jeremiah told the Israelites (on God's behalf): "When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me" (verse 13). In what ways was the quality of their connection with God essential to them being able to be good neighbors and live in trust even when in exile? What do you believe it would mean for you to seek God "with all your heart"? How might that reshape some of your ways of relating to others?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, teach me patience and endurance when life is hard. Plant in me the hunger and thirst to seek you with all my heart, to let you shape every aspect of the way I live my life. Amen.

We respond to God with gratitude, obedience

SATURDAY 8.11.18 Psalm 116:12-14, Deuteronomy 10:14-20

When we accept God's forgiveness, Psalm 116 said we respond with profound gratitude. The psalmist didn't see gratitude as just a feeling—it resulted in concrete actions. Deuteronomy 10 emphasized that with a phrase that may sound startling or puzzling at first: "Circumcise your hearts." "To circumcise one's heart in order to become a part of the Lord's covenant people was the internal equivalent of covenantal commitment to the Lord, observable by God, not a human being. Circumcised Israelites loved God from the inside out, and God sustained their trust in him." * Israel's faith translated that inner commitment to the Lord into actions that showed God's concern for all people, especially those who needed help. In theory (though too often not in practice—e.g. [Isaiah 58:2-10](#)), Israel was a nation in which everyone sought the well-being of all.

✚ "Using the terms 'widow' and 'fatherless' together may have been a way of designating disadvantaged classes in general. Groups other than true widows and orphans easily might have fallen into this category." ** In virtually every nation and culture, those who are "weaker," "outsiders" or "different" face prejudice because of ethnicity, poverty, lack of education or many other markers of "otherness." When have you seen "disadvantaged" people ignored or treated with contempt? Has that ever happened to you? How can you make things better rather than worse when such ugly actions happen? How can you faithfully serve "the great, mighty, and awesome God who doesn't play favorites"?

Prayer: Lord of all, when difference offends me, or when prejudice enrages me, remind me that you came to change my heart. Help me learn, like you, to be one who "doesn't play favorites." Amen.

* HarperCollins Christian Publishing. *NIV, Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, eBook: Bringing to Life the Ancient World of Scripture* (Kindle Locations 46007-46009). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

** HarperCollins Christian Publishing. *NIV, Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, eBook: Bringing to Life the Ancient World of Scripture* (Kindle Locations 46022-46023). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

Family Activity: Peace between people often requires forgiveness. A prayer attributed to St. Francis of Assisi begins with these words: "Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace." Invite each family to think of someone they need to forgive and an item or an instrument they could use to symbolize peace. Examples might include a hammer used to build others up, a rope to connect people in unity or a wind chime reminding us that many different voices can blend together to create one beautiful sound. Create a family art piece using these items or pictures of them to help each person be intentional about forgiving and bringing peace to one another and to the world. Pray and ask God to help your family forgive others and be instruments of peace.