

Thank you, Friend, for joining me on this Journey to the Cross. This devotion booklet was written with you in mind. We will celebrate Easter on April 1 as we gather with all of creation to rejoice that Christ is victorious over sin and death. As you read the Bible passages and devotions for each day, you will see how God declared the coming victory beginning in Genesis and how Jesus finished the work through the cross. Our desire is to grow to be like Jesus, allowing His work on the cross to change our lives.

Growing in Christ does not happen automatically. It requires dependence on the work of God in your life coupled with a commitment from you to seek the Lord with an obedient and humble heart.

Beginning March 1, a devotion has been written for each weekday – a total of twenty-two devotions – for you to study each day. Your commitment to spend time every day in reading God’s Word, listening to God’s voice, seeking God’s wisdom, and obeying God’s instructions will reap great reward.

Here is a suggested pattern for using this guide for the next thirty-one days. Each Monday through Friday, read that day’s Bible passage and related devotional thoughts. Read the verse printed in the devotion guide several times, thinking carefully about what God is saying to you. Write your impressions in the margin or in a separate journal. Ask God to give you insight and spend time quietly listening to Him in prayer. Act when God tells you to act. Commit to being obedient to Him.

On Saturday, read your Sunday School lesson and be ready to learn from others and to share what God has taught you. On Sunday, participate in Sunday School and worship. Encourage other Christians to grow in Christ and share with them what God is doing in your life.

Above all else, spend time with God and ask Him to work in your life. Broaden your understanding of the work of Jesus on the cross; deepen your relationship with the One who went to the cross for you.

Douglas Falkner

Thursday, March 1, 2018

Final Sacrifice – Genesis 3:1-24

And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel.

Genesis 3:15

The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus to provide the redemption of sinful humanity was not God's "Plan B" after everything else failed. Instead, God anticipated sending Jesus as the sacrificial lamb before He spoke all of creation into existence.

This passage shows how Adam and Eve rebelled against God through intentional disobedience and broke the unity of relationship they enjoyed with Him. It also gives us the first indication that God intended to restore the broken relationship when the serpent would be crushed by the Seed of Eve.

Adam and Eve believed the lies of the serpent instead of the truth of God's Word. When they ate of the forbidden fruit, their eyes were opened, they saw their nakedness, and they walked in shame. Instead of enjoying the pleasures of God and all of His creation, now they hid from Him. They sewed together leaves to cover their bodies in a failed attempt to hide their shame. The personal relationship they shared with God was now damaged and their efforts to make it right would not and could not succeed.

As Adam and Eve tried in vain to hide, God came calling. He addressed their sin with its consequences and pointed to the eternal solution that He would provide: the Deceiver would be defeated. Then, God graciously provided a covering for their nakedness and protected them from further harm.

In the midst of rebellion and brokenness, God offers help for today and hope for tomorrow. His promise to send a victorious Savior was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. When you suffer the consequences of your sin, in Jesus God provides help for today and hope for eternity. Today, trust God for forgiveness and restoration through Jesus.

Friday, March 2, 2018

Final Sacrifice – Genesis 4:1-16

And Abel also presented an offering-- some of the firstborn of his flock and their fat portions. The LORD had regard for Abel and his offering.

Genesis 4:4

It is natural for us to want to come to God on our own terms, proving to Him (and ourselves) that, somehow, we deserve the recognition and favor from Him. “See how hard I’ve worked!” we boast to God. “Notice all the good I have done!” God is not impressed.

Cain and Abel, the two eldest sons of Adam and Eve, brought offerings to the Lord out of their respective labors as a farmer and shepherd. The offering from Abel was received by the Lord while Cain’s was rejected. Why was one rejected while the other was accepted? Perhaps this is because one was grain and the other an animal, but the Bible indicates another reason.

While Abel brought the best he could offer (“the firstborn of his flock and their fat portions”), Cain only brought “some” of his grain to the Lord as an offering. Abel set himself aside and gave the first to the Lord; Cain reserved the best for himself and gave the extra to the Lord. Cain and his offering were “not regarded” while the Lord “had regard” for Abel and his offering.

“To regard” meant “to gaze upon” something. In essence, God would not look at Cain to receive him or his offering. God deserved the first portion while Cain brought leftovers, the extra. Cain believed his pittance of an offering were good enough and grew angry and despondent when rejected. Still, God offered him hope and encouragement, but Cain continued to turn away.

When Abel brought the firstborn of his flocks to the Lord, he presented the best portion. What offering do you bring to the Lord? Do you bring your leftovers, extras, or something you think you can live without? Or, do you offer Him the best of yourself as a recognition that all you have is His? Today, give God your best.

Monday, March 5, 2018

Final Sacrifice – Genesis 22:1-19

And Abraham said, "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering." So the two of them went together.

Genesis 22:8

As we study the passage for today, we read one of the greatest examples of faith and obedience in all the Bible. Here, a loving father leads his long-promised son up the mountain to offer him as a sacrifice. Abraham's obedience reveals his great trust that the holy and righteous God would, somehow, return his son to him. He did not know the plan, but he knew he could trust God.

This story is also a foreshadowing of the love of another Father who would send His Son to be the sacrifice for the sins of the world. The long-promised Son would be led up Calvary's mount to be offered as a sacrifice. And Jesus knew that His holy and righteous Father would raise Him from the grave, conquering sin and death.

Abraham revealed his trust in God when he assured Isaac that the sacrifice was for the Lord and that the Lord would provide the lamb. Isaac, too, trusted his father for he continued with him up the mountain. Together, they climbed the mountain believing that God would provide what was needed.

And, He did.

God provided what was needed for Abraham and Isaac and He provided what was needed for you and me. The perfect sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins could only be provided by God Himself and God's great love compelled Him to send Jesus as that sacrifice.

Have you trusted Jesus as the perfect sacrifice for your sins? There is no other offering that will suffice. There is no other sacrifice that will cover your sin. There is no other name for you to trust. Today, turn from your sin and your own efforts and trust in the holy and righteous gift of God: Jesus.

Tuesday, March 6, 2018

Final Sacrifice – Exodus 12:21-27

Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, "Go and select lambs for yourselves according to your clans, and kill the Passover lamb."

Exodus 12:21

The stories of the Old Testament continually point us forward to the cross of Jesus. All of the Hebrew scriptures are marching us to the cross, revealing God's great holiness, our great sin, and God's glorious offer to reconcile sinful man to a holy God.

When Pharaoh once again refused to set free the people of Israel, God warned Moses that the final, dreadful plague would come upon the land. The firstborn male from the greatest in the palace to the lowest in the dungeons would die. Families across the nation of Egypt would wail from the devastation.

The only hope to be spared such grief would be to kill a one-year old lamb, gather the entire family to roast it, and eat all of it. Then, they are to spread the blood of the lamb on the two doorposts and the lintel of the home. At midnight, the angel of the Lord would pass through the land, bringing death to every Egyptian home. But, to every home covered with the blood of the lamb, the destroyer would pass over.

It happened just as the Lord had said. The people who trusted God were protected by the blood and that very night were freed from the bondage of slavery. They fled from Pharaoh's presence and hurried out of Egypt.

When Moses announced to the people God's plan for salvation by the Passover lamb, they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord. Then, they acted with obedience to accomplish all that the Lord had commanded. When freedom came, they were ready.

This plan to free the Israelites from bondage through the Passover lamb pointed to THE coming Passover Lamb. All who are covered by the blood of Jesus, our Passover, are set free from the bondage of sin. When we recognize the pain of the cost of freedom and joy that it brings each person who trusts in the Lord, our right response is to bow in worship.

Today, humbly worship God, thanking Him for passing over your sin through Jesus, your Passover Lamb. He bought your freedom.

Wednesday, March 7, 2018

Final Sacrifice – Psalm 22

Everyone who sees me mocks me; they sneer and shake their heads.

Psalm 22:7

Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of the crucifixion graphically portrayed in this psalm. This psalm from David pulls us quickly to the cross as we see Jesus live out its vicious savagery. What are a few of the ways Psalm 22 points to the coming crucifixion of Jesus?

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Here is the anguish of Jesus as He bore the consequences of our sin. Perhaps, also, Jesus is calling attention to this writing, as if He was declaring, “This is fulfilled in Me today!”

“They have pierced my hands and feet.” After His resurrection, Jesus invited His disciples to see His hands and feet where they had been pierced by the nails.

“They divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.” After nailing Jesus to the cross, the Roman soldiers divided His clothing among themselves. His tunic, however, was one large, seamless item so they gambled to see who would win the prize.

However, the cross and resurrection ended sin’s power and death’s sting. It was not the end but the beginning of hope for all who would trust in Jesus. Recall these words from Psalm 22:

“You who fear the LORD, praise him!” “For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted.” “They shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it.” The ending of this psalm is as powerfully confident as the first verses are forcefully ruthless. Overcoming the cruel cross, Jesus is triumphant.

Remembering this psalm, we look from the cross to the empty tomb, knowing Jesus victoriously gave His life that we might have hope. Today, thank God that Jesus endured the cruelty of the cross so we could proclaim His righteousness.

Thursday, March 8, 2018

Final Sacrifice – Isaiah 53

But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

Isaiah 53:5

As much as yesterday's reading in Psalm 22 recalled the Roman soldiers' brutality at the crucifixion as the mocking crowds jeered and sneered, today's reading in Isaiah 53 reminds us that we are the reason Jesus died. Read again verses 4-6, noting how often first person plural words – *we*, *us*, and *our* – are used. Jesus died at the hands of the Romans, but it was our sin that compelled Him to go to the cross.

This chapter of the Suffering Servant also remind us that, while the Jewish religious leaders demanded for Pilate to instruct his soldiers to crucify Jesus, none of them "forced" Jesus to be crucified. Jesus bore our sins on the cross because He was "smitten by God" (v. 4) and "it was the will of God to crush Him" (v. 10). God Himself offered the only means by which our sins could be forgiven and sinful man could be reconciled with a holy God.

The gospel accounts of the crucifixion also reveal the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 53: the silence of Jesus before Pilate and Herod, the crucifixion with the two thieves, the burial in a rich man's tomb, the innocence of Jesus. And, it reaffirms that through the death of Jesus, the sins of many will be forgiven and they (we) will be counted as righteous.

Consider the magnitude of this. Our sin separates us from the holy God. Yet, He desires to restore our broken relationship. Our only hope is for the holy, just, and righteous God to take our sin upon Himself and to call us righteous. God proves that He is also merciful, gracious, and kind.

Today, recall the high cost of your sin, repent, and yield your life to God. You can trust Him to care for you.

Friday, March 9, 2018

Final Sacrifice – Hebrews 9:11-28

He entered the most holy place once for all, not by the blood of goats and calves, but by His own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.

Hebrews 9:12

As we wrap up a cursory overview of the Old Testament foreshadowing and prophecies of the cross, let us look at how Hebrews addresses these scriptures. The book of Hebrews is (in my opinion) a sermon which addresses the supremacy of Jesus above all else.

Beginning in the first chapter, the sermon declares that Jesus is greater than the angels, greater than Moses, greater than the priests, greater than Melchizedek, greater than the tabernacle and temple, and His covenant is greater than the first covenant. Then, in chapter 9, the sacrifice of Christ is compared to the sacrifices of sheep and goats as prescribed by the Law in the Old Testament.

These Old Testament sacrifices are called “copies” of the sacrifice provided by Jesus. They are presented in an earthly temple while Jesus is presented in the throne room of heaven. Animals must be sacrificed every year, offering only a temporal sacrifice. Jesus died once and for all, satisfying the wrath of God against sin and purifying consciences to serve the living God.

The sacrificial system taught through the Old Testament Law always pointed to THE sacrifice that God Himself would provide through the Christ. The first sacrifice was temporal, earthly, and a mere copy of what was to come. Jesus’ sacrifice was eternal, heavenly, and more excellent than any and every offering that could be presented to God.

Today, thank God that Jesus is still the more excellent sacrifice. Jesus declared, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6). *This Sunday, join us as we learn to use “The 3 Circles” presentation to tell others the good news about Jesus.*

Monday, March 12, 2018

Final Journey – Luke 9:51-62

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

Luke 9:51

This week we will turn to the gospels as Jesus makes His final journey to Jerusalem. Luke's gospel reveals the determination of Jesus to head to Jerusalem and the cross. Traveling to Jerusalem through Samaria was an unpopular decision with the Samaritans and, as Jesus sent teams to make preparations, they rejected Him. Why did they reject Jesus? Because He was headed to Jerusalem.

Two disciples, James and John (who had the fitting nickname *The Sons of Thunder*), were upset by this rejection and suggested calling out for fire from heaven to consume the village. Jesus rebuked His disciples and simply traveled to another village.

Two encouragements come to me as I read this story. First, when God calls us to a task – as Jesus was called to Jerusalem – do not become sidetracked by opposition. The cross of Christ was too important to become frustrated, discouraged, or vindictive by the unwillingness of one village to show Jesus hospitality. He kept moving forward to Jerusalem.

Has Jesus called you to a task? Perhaps He has placed a lost friend in your path and a door opens to share the love of God demonstrated by the cross of Jesus. Do not be sidetracked by how others might respond. Speak God's truth with grace and mercy.

Second, when I become frustrated, vindictive, or respond inappropriately to opposition, I am in the wrong. Jesus rebuked James and John, not the village folks. These two men responded with fury instead of faith, by lashing out instead of loving.

Experience has taught me that hurting people and lost people act like hurting people and lost people. There will be times when individuals misjudge your heart. Love them anyway. There will be times when society rejects your beliefs and actions because you are determined to follow Jesus. Love them anyway. Today, let the love of Jesus be reflected in your words, attitudes, and actions.

Tuesday, March 13, 2018

Final Journey – Luke 18:15-34

And he said, “The things which are impossible with men are possible with God.”

Luke 18:27

All kinds of people came to Jesus, asking for healing or wisdom or offering to follow Him. Interestingly, Jesus welcomed all of them – but on His terms, not on theirs. In this Bible passage, children were brought to Jesus and a wealthy ruler came to Jesus, asking about eternal life.

The disciples, apparently trying to protect the time of Jesus, shooed away the parents bringing their children to Jesus for a blessing. Certainly the Master had better things to do with His time! But Jesus gladly welcomed the children and held them out as an example for all to come to Him. Everyone desiring to receive the Kingdom of God must come to Him like a child.

Compare this to the wealthy ruler. According to his own words, he tried to do what was right, he called Jesus good and recognized Him as a teacher. But, his desire to hold on to his wealth outweighed his desire to follow Jesus. Jesus invited the wealthy ruler to come with Him, but he would not go with Jesus.

The children came with nothing and, through their parents, only wanted to be touched by Jesus. The ruler came with much and, while he wanted to go with Jesus, preferred to cling to his wealth. The children were blessed by being with Jesus; the ruler was sad while leaving Jesus.

Marveling at the challenges of rich people coming to Jesus, Peter noted the disciples’ willingness to leave home to follow Him. Jesus commended them and used the occasion to teach about His coming arrest, disgraceful treatment, death, and resurrection.

Like the wealthy ruler, so often we want to come to Jesus grasping our plans, our history, our future, our possessions. Our intention is to fit Jesus into our lives. This will never do. He will never fit into our lives and He will never be molded in our image.

If we are to enter the Kingdom of God, we must be molded into the image of Jesus. Our lives are to be placed in His. This will require releasing everything in our grasp and trusting Him to fill us with whatever He desires. All along the journey, Jesus will teach us about the cross and we will learn to follow Him.

Wednesday, March 14, 2018

Final Journey – Luke 19:1-10

For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.

Luke 19:10

Another rich man crossed paths with Jesus as He was heading toward Jerusalem and the cross. This man, employed by the Roman government in collecting taxes, had enriched himself off of his fellow citizens. At times, Zacchaeus even apparently cheated his neighbors to line his own pockets.

When Jesus came through his town of Jericho, Zacchaeus wanted to get a better look at Him. Unfortunately, the crowd blocked out Zacchaeus and his small stature did not allow him to see over the crowd. This chief tax collector did two things unexpected for a man of his status: he ran and he climbed a tree.

Can you picture Zacchaeus running through the crowd, trying to get far enough down the road so he could get a better view of Jesus? Then, as quickly as possible, he scurried up a tree, perched up on a limb so nothing would block his view of Jesus.

Imagine the joy when Jesus stopped at the base of the tree and invited Himself over to Zacchaeus' house. Some people, however, did not share his joy. They grumbled, complaining about the sinfulness of the man whose home Jesus was entering.

Did Zacchaeus hear their remarks? Did they sting as he once again felt the brunt of their disapproval? The Bible does not say, only that this man was changed by the presence of Jesus. Instead of hoarding, Zacchaeus committed to giving generously from his personal wealth to benefit the poor.

And, Jesus affirmed him. Jesus did not call him a traitor or consider him a sinner beyond His reach. Jesus called Zacchaeus a son of Abraham. Jesus declared that salvation had come to this house.

While marching to the cross, Jesus reminded everyone that He came to seek and to save that which was lost, including a chief tax collector. Thankfully, this includes you and me, too.

Thursday, March 15, 2018

Final Journey – Mark 10:46-52

And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus.

Mark 10:50

As Jesus continued His final journey to Jerusalem and the cross, He passed through the village of Jericho. Just before He left town with his disciples and a large crowd, a blind beggar, when he heard that it was Jesus walking by, began calling out for help.

“Have mercy on me,” Bartimaeus screamed! The crowd rebuked him, but the beggar would not be silenced. And, Jesus did help him.

I love this story and am amazed at the lessons God teaches me each time I read it. Here are three lessons. First, never be dissuaded from calling out to Jesus, even when others expect me to be quiet. The crowd often has its own agenda which may not reflect the will of Jesus.

Second, when Jesus calls, cast everything else aside and come quickly to Him. Read verse 50 again. Bartimaeus threw his cloak to the side, sprang up, and came to Jesus. There was no hesitation. There was no measured response. This blind man was not concerned with finding his way back to his cloak. His only concern was finding his way to Jesus. So, with a full commitment, he rushed to Jesus.

Third, I can bring my biggest concerns to Jesus. Nothing is too difficult for Him. The beggar did not ask for money. He did not ask for understanding from the crowd. He requested what no person could give him: sight. It was a bold, audacious request, but he believed Jesus could do it. And, He did!

How many times do I want to check with the crowd, seeking the approval of others, before I call out to Jesus? I have a great need. Only Jesus can help. Let me set my attention only and fully on Him.

How many times do I hear Jesus call only to answer Him with a measured, half-hearted response? I hesitate. I take my time. I measure my response. I look around to make sure I can find my way back to my beggarly ways. No! I must come and come quickly. With reckless abandon I will rush to the voice of Jesus calling.

How many times do I avoid telling Jesus my real need? I hedge, only bringing the small, little, minor problems. But Jesus alone can heal my soul, mend my wounds, and fulfill my deepest needs.

Let us come to Jesus: determinedly, quickly, fully. Our faith will be in Jesus and He will satisfy.

Friday, March 16, 2018

Final Journey – John 11:1-53

*Then Thomas, who is called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples,
"Let us also go, that we may die with Him."*

John 11:16

Death was on the mind of everyone throughout this chapter. Word had come that Lazarus was sick, and Jesus knew he would die before they arrived to see him. Thomas knew there was a possibility that he and the rest of the disciples would die if they went to Jerusalem with Jesus. Mary and Martha grieved the death of their brother and had hoped Jesus would come sooner to prevent it. Friends and neighbors gathered with Mary and Martha to mourn with them. The religious leaders began looking for an opportunity to put Jesus to death.

Death was on the mind of everyone, but Jesus was also planning life. Before making the journey to Bethany, Jesus told His disciples He would raise Lazarus from the dead. Jesus told Martha that Lazarus would rise again. When Mary came to see Jesus, He asked to see the tomb where Lazarus was buried. It was time to call the dead man back to life. The disciples plan to die; Jesus plans for the resurrection. The chief priest plans to kill Jesus; Jesus plans to conquer death.

This is just like Jesus. We become overwhelmed by the reality of the tomb while Jesus overwhelms death and the grave. Life crashes in on us while Jesus knowingly assures us even as He weeps with us. There is not anything going on in our lives that Jesus cannot and will not use to demonstrate His power over all of creation.

The work of Jesus calls for a response from us. He desired the disciples to believe, He asked Martha if she believed, and many of the incredulous mourners saw the living Lazarus and believed.

Do you believe that Jesus has the power to work through the hard circumstances of your life? Today, bring your brokenness to Jesus and trust Him to work in whatever way He thinks is best. Believe Him today.

Monday, March 19, 2018

Final Conversations – John 14:1-7

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

John 14:6

During the devotionals for this week, we will look at some of the final conversations Jesus shared with His disciples, preserved for us in the gospel of John. As with all of Jesus' teachings, He desired for His followers to gain more than knowledge; He called for their lives to be changed. As He prepared His friends for His arrest, brutal treatment, and crucifixion, Jesus taught them lessons that would prepare them for the challenges they would face.

Jesus wants us to learn these lessons, too.

Today, we are called to trust Jesus as the only one who can lead us to the Father. As followers of Jesus, we want to move past this quickly, declaring that we settled this issue when we initially professed faith in Jesus. But these disciples, who left everything to follow Jesus and who previously confessed that Jesus is the Christ, heard Jesus again calling them to trust in Him.

The disciples' world was about to be turned upside down. Not only was Jesus soon to be arrested and crucified, they themselves would abandon Him. Fear and failure would crash upon them. And in these final conversations, Jesus says, "Trust in Me."

It is easy for me to trust Jesus when life is easy and everything is turning up roses. But what is my level of trust when I'm faced with hardship? Do I fully trust Jesus when the circumstances of life knock the wind out of my sails? When I'm afraid? When I fail?

Jesus never told the disciples life would be easy or fair or pain-free. He told them that when life spun out of control to trust Him, that He cared for them now and would care for them in the future, and that He was their only hope.

You can trust Jesus, too. Perhaps an area of your life has crashed in upon you. Jesus cares for you. He is your only hope. Today, trust Jesus.

Tuesday, March 20, 2018

Final Conversations – John 14:18-31

Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.

John 14:27

In these final conversations Jesus shared with His disciples before He is crucified, Jesus addressed His leaving them. Jesus and the disciples walked together for three years. He taught them. They saw Him walk on water. They gathered the food after Jesus fed the thousands with a few loaves of bread and some fish. He was transfigured before them. They witnessed Jesus healing the sick, casting out demons, raising the dead to life.

How should they react with His departure? Jesus called them to peace.

They would have peace because Jesus would be raised from the grave. Death had no power over Him.

They would have peace because the Holy Spirit would come. The Holy Spirit would teach them and remind them of everything Jesus had taught them.

They would have peace because they knew Jesus would be with the Father. The presence of the Father is where the Son belongs.

Peace would be available in each of these – and many more – ways because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The “ruler of this world” had no claim on Jesus and, through the resurrection power of Jesus, he has no claim on us. He cannot rob us of the peace found in and through Jesus.

As you trust Jesus to work in your life and through the circumstances around you, He fills you with peace which the world cannot provide. The peace from Jesus is eternal, lasting, and pervasive. Fear is driven away. Unwanted events cannot steal it. The Holy Spirit whispers to your heart, “Jesus has not forgotten you. Remember His great love for you.”

And, your heart is overwhelmed by His peace.

Wednesday, March 21, 2018

Final Conversations – John 15:1-11

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

John 15:5

From the time Adam and Eve rebelled against the holiness of God in Genesis 3, the relationship between God and man was broken. As they hid in shame, God came searching for them. He punished their sin, covered their nakedness, and promised the coming Messiah would defeat sin and death. God restored the broken relationship that they might abide in Him.

God continues to restore broken relationships through Jesus that we might abide in Him, too. Our abiding in Him results in the Father receiving glory as He bears fruit through us. If we do not abide in Him, we will not bear fruit.

There is a tendency for us to strive to live independently from outside influences. We are our own people and no one can tell us what to do, say, or think. And herein lies our trouble. When we live independently from Christ, our lives bear no fruit. Jesus said plainly that we cannot bear fruit unless we abide in Him.

When we abide in Him, we become productive fruit bearers and, through His effective pruning, we bear much fruit. God continually works in our lives to deepen our dependence on Him, for His influence in us to increase.

Our abiding in Christ involves remaining in His word. We do not live by our own creed or by the customs of culture, but we insist that the word of God form our core and inform our actions. We passionately keep His commandments because our lives are hidden in Him. There is no other way for us to live.

This is not to say that abiding is easy or pleasant. Abiding in Christ requires rejecting every other source of abiding. Pruning often causes pain. But it is also here – in the difficult and painful times – that the joy of Jesus grows and overflows in our lives.

Today, abide in Jesus. Let His word resonate in your soul. Live for Him and let His joy multiply in you.

Thursday, March 22, 2018

Final Conversations – John 15:12-21

Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.

John 15:13

On St. Valentine's Day, love is celebrated with cards and candy, flowers and dinners, presents and presence. Some of the gifts are meticulously planned and lavishly unveiled while others are purchased at the last minute and hastily given. Woe to the husband who forgets to express his love in any form!

Jesus made one thing abundantly clear to His disciples: love is sacrificial. He modeled this kind of costly love for His followers and He called them to express costly love. "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). There is no greater proof of love than the death of Jesus on the cross as He bore our punishment of sin.

And, we are commanded to love one another with the same type of costly, sacrificial love. I want to find some loophole around this command, an out that will allow me to offer lavish love toward some while feigning love toward others. But Jesus will have nothing of this. Twice in this passage He commanded me to love those around me with no caveats or exceptions. I will do well to learn how to love like Jesus loved.

Jesus loved sinners like me, but He did not allow them to continue wallowing in sin's muck. Jesus loved people from all walks of life, but He did not allow them to cling to their old life. Jesus loved people weighed by the guilt of sin, but He did not abandon them to its consequences. He left the glories of heaven, walked and talked and ate with sinners, and died for their (my) sin. He laid down His life to care for people like you and me.

I cannot die for the sins of others, but I can love like Jesus. My self-indulgences and comforts can be sacrificed so I can meet people on their turf. I can endure persecution for the pleasure of living for Jesus and of telling others how they can live for Him, too. Jesus, help me to love others like you love me.

Friday, March 23, 2018

Final Conversations – John 16:16-33

These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.

John 16:33

On July 4, 1952, long-distance swimmer Florence Chadwick waded into the cold waters off Catalina Island to begin the 26-mile swim to the California coast. Boats flanked her to drive away sharks. After 15 hours in the water, a thick fog engulfed her. Soon, she told her mother – riding in one of the boats – that she did not think she could make it. She swam another hour before being pulled from the water, just one mile from the shore.

Two months later, Chadwick attempted the swim again. Just as before, the thick fog set in, but this time she successfully reached the shore. What made the difference? She kept a mental image of the shoreline as she swam. Victory would soon come.

Jesus spoke to the disciples about His death. They would weep and lament. Their hearts would be sorrowful. They would scatter in fear. He compared their travails to a woman giving birth.

Then Jesus showed them the shoreline. He would rise from the dead and ascend to the Father. The weeping and lament and sorrow would turn to celebration. The woman's anguish in labor would be replaced by joy as she holds her precious baby.

Difficulties may be faced with courage because something greater has come. Jesus has overcome the world! Seeing His resurrection power, we bring our burdens to the Father, assured of His love for us as a result of our love for the Son. God works in our lives and through the circumstances around us for our good and His glory.

There will be suffering in this world. Sin's consequences cause pain and sickness and brokenness and hurt. When you are tempted to quit, remember the end and take courage. Jesus has conquered. He has overcome. He is victorious.

Monday, March 26, 2018

Final Days – Matthew 26:1-16

But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me."

Matthew 26:10

We are now just a few days from the crucifixion of Jesus. How will you prepare to honor Jesus bearing your sin on the cross? Do not wait until the Maundy Thursday or Good Friday service. Today, consider how you will remember the work of Jesus on the cross.

In this passage, Jesus reminded the disciples the Passover was coming and then He would be crucified. Shortly afterward, while He was dining with Simon the leper, Mary (John 12:3) came to Jesus with an alabaster flask filled with expensive perfume and poured it on His head and feet (John 12:4). When the disciples, led by Judas, complained about the waste, Jesus defended her and held her out as an example to be celebrated. She had done it, He said, to prepare His body for burial.

Although we are edified by special services remembering the death of Jesus, our purpose is not to edify ourselves but to glorify Him. For this to happen, our focus will be on Jesus and His work, His substitutionary sacrifice, on our behalf. We are the benefactors of His death. Jesus is the one to be honored.

In order to honor Jesus, make plans to gather with us this Thursday and Friday evenings at 7 for worship. Come anticipating a time of personal and corporate surrender. Resist viewing the evenings as "wasted" time that you could use on other "good" opportunities. When being pulled in other directions, resolve to give your best to Jesus. It will be sacrificial, costly. He is worth it.

Come anticipating a time of personal and corporate thanksgiving. Express gratitude for His mercy and grace.

Come anticipating a time of personal and corporate repentance. The cross confronts us with our sin and its consequences. Let us turn away from every blackness of sin and lay it at the feet of Jesus. Hold nothing back from Him.

Tuesday, March 27, 2018

Final Days – John 13:1-20

If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

John 13:14

Jesus always placed life's circumstances into the right perspective for the apostles. Too often they became overwhelmed and self-focused when their personal expectations were not being met or when life took an unexpected twist. They argued about who was the greatest, they complained when expensive perfume was poured on Jesus instead of sold for the poor, they expressed frustration at the instruction to feed the multitudes. And the list goes on!

Each time, Jesus stepped in, spoke truth, acted with wisdom, and taught them to look beyond themselves to see the hurting people and how God would powerfully work with grace and truth. He placed life into God's perspective.

In today's Bible passage, John confirms that Jesus' actions at the Passover supper were driven by His coming death. He knew His time with the disciples was coming to an end and that He would be reunited with the Father. He knew Judas had agreed to betray Him. So, Jesus girded Himself with a towel, and, taking a wash basin, proceeded to wash the disciples' feet.

The Teacher and the Lord humbly served the disciples and called on them – and us – to follow His example of humble service. We are not to exalt ourselves over others, expecting them to serve us, but we are to gird ourselves with a towel to be servants.

Jesus' actions of service were borne out of His love for His disciples, even Judas. Perhaps especially Judas. This one who would soon betray Jesus experienced Him kneeling at his feet, washing, drying, serving. No one would be outside the expressed love of Jesus.

Today, make a special effort to serve someone. With the love of Christ overflowing in you, humbly serve one another.

Wednesday, March 28, 2018

Final Days – Matthew 26:20-30

As they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take and eat it; this is My body."

Matthew 26:26

Each time Jesus observed the Passover feast with His disciples, they were remembering the people of Israel enslaved in Egypt and God's powerful deliverance of them. [reread the devotional for March 6.] Salvation from the final plague, the killing of the firstborn of every household, could only be received by killing a lamb and spreading its blood on the lintel and doorposts. Since it did not need time to rise, leavened bread was prepared so the people could leave quickly when driven out by Pharaoh.

Jesus had shared the Passover meal with His disciples on other occasions, but this time was special. Jesus took the loaf of unleavened bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the apostles. Then He declared that the bread represented His body.

He took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to the apostles. Then He declared that the wine represented the blood of the covenant which He would pour out to provide forgiveness for all who would trust in Him.

The symbols of the Passover meal would be satisfied in Jesus as He gave new meaning to them. The body of Jesus would be broken; the blood of Jesus would be poured out. Salvation from the final plague, sin and death, could only be received by trusting the Passover Lamb: Jesus. He is the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" as announced by John the Baptist.

Have you trusted Jesus – whose body was broken, whose blood was poured out – for the forgiveness of your sin? There is no other way to escape the final plague. If not, right now, admit your sin, turn away from it, and put your trust in Jesus. Believing that Jesus has the power to forgive your sin, commit your life to Him as your Lord. The back of the devotional will guide you now.

If you have already trusted Jesus, invite an unbelieving friend to lunch and tell her about Jesus. She'll be eternally grateful.

Thursday, March 29, 2018

Final Days – Mark 14:32-42

And He said, " Abba, Father! All things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me. Nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will."

Mark 14:36

In the final moments before His arrest, Jesus continued the pattern He had established throughout His ministry: obedient submission in prayer. With His closest friends on hand, Jesus entered an intense time of prayer.

Read the main passage again, noting how Jesus expressed His emotions. Jesus understood well the physical, emotional, and spiritual consequences of the crucifixion. Facing the reality of the coming events, Jesus was "greatly distressed and troubled." He shared His grief with Peter, James, and John while asking them to pray with Him.

As Jesus prayed, He poured out His desire to God. "Let this cup pass from Me." Yet, Jesus was not defiant or demanding. He addressed God with the intimacy of a child with his father, "Abba." He yielded His will to the wisdom of the Father, surrendering, trusting, obeying.

At the end of His prayers, Jesus found His friends sleeping. In fact, three times Jesus went to pray and each time He returned to find them sleeping. This final time they offered no excuse. It did not matter. The time for His betrayal had come and Jesus had been ministered to and strengthened by an angel (cf. Luke 22:43).

I want to live a life of obedient surrender to the Father. It is not enough to make bold proclamations like the disciples. Neither will it come from a weak, half-hearted prayer life. To learn obedient surrender, I will confess every fear and desire to my loving Abba, knowing I can trust Him. Then, I will rise and obey.

Jesus endured the pain of the cross, the pain of seeing His mother watch Him being crucified, the pain of bearing our sin. He endured the cross, knowing He was safe in the Father's hands.

You can trust Him, too. Today, obediently surrender to God.

Friday, March 30, 2018

Final Days – John 19:16-37

*When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!"
Then bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.*

John 19:30

Every prophecy about the coming Messiah was fulfilled in Jesus. In Genesis 3, God promised the serpent that his head would be crushed, then He provided an animal-skin covering for the shame of Adam and Eve. In Genesis 22, Abraham placed the wood for the altar on his only son, Isaac, and assured him that God would provide the sacrifice. In Psalm 22, David declared the awfulness of the crucifixion would be overwhelmed by the righteousness of the Lord. Jesus was the Passover Lamb described in Exodus 12, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53.

As He neared the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus more directly taught His disciples that the prophecies about the Messiah that they had learned from childhood would be fulfilled in Him. He healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, raised the dead to new life. Rich and poor, healthy and sick, religious and outcast were all welcome to follow Jesus.

But they would follow Him to the cross and there He would be crucified. At the cross they would witness God become flesh bearing their sin and the sin of the world. There Jesus would conquer sin and death.

When nearing the end of life, Jesus recognized that everything had been fulfilled, finished. After declaring His thirst and being given sour wine, Jesus declared for all to hear, "It is finished!"

Sin's curse had been broken. The sting of death had been defeated. The relationship between God and man broken by rebellion is now restored as the holy God invites sinful men and women to turn from their sin and look to Jesus who has borne their sin on the cross. Soon, all creation would bear witness that the tomb is empty, Jesus is victorious, and that "It is finished!"

Let us join the battle cry of victory and, with one voice, proclaim, "It is finished!"