Suffering Servant

DEVOTIONS
Lent 2022

Solid Rock Missionary Baptist Church
Harrisburg, PA 17111
(717) 395-4239
www.solidrockhbg.com

As an added feature, these devotions have reflection questions for each day's message. These can be used for self-study or as prompts for discussion when reflecting as a group.

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2022 Lenten Service Schedule

THEME: "We've Come to Give God Glory"

Greater Harrisburg Lenten Fellowship
Worship Services
March 2, 2022 – April 17, 2022

First Spirit Filled Baptist Church
2605 Locust Lane
Harrisburg, PA1 7109

7:00 pm

Brought to you in partnership with Lutheran Hour Ministries

SERVANT OF THE LORD

For He grew up before Him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; He had no form or majesty that we should look at Him, and no beauty that we should desire Him. He was despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces … Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed. … All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:2-3a, 4, 6)

This is part of the famous Song of the Suffering Servant from Isaiah 53. God gave the prophet Isaiah a vision of what Jesus would be like—of how He would save God's people from the power of evil.

Jesus wasn't what people were expecting. In God's eyes He was like a root out of dry ground—we would say, like a drink of cool water on a hot day. But to us? He was nothing special.

And so we ignored Him—rejected Him—and then turned on Him and put Him to death on a cross. That was the end of Him, we thought. Who could have predicted the resurrection?

Isaiah did. And now we rejoice, because we finally understand—Jesus was bearing our sin, taking our grief and sorrow on His own back. He is God in the flesh, come in the form of a Servant, to give us life—life that will last forever.

Dear Lord, give me a heart that trusts in You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you think Jesus looked like? Why?
- Do you think you would have recognized Him for what He was, if you had been alive then?
- What are you hoping for, during these days of Lent?

STARTING WITH A BANG

And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as was His custom, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and He stood up to read. … "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor." … When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and drove Him out of the town … so that they could throw Him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, He went away. (Luke 4:16, 28-30)

I wonder what Mary thought. This was apparently Jesus' first sermon to the hometown folks in Nazareth. At first everyone gushed over Him. "What gracious words! What a wonderful preacher!" Not a bad reception …

And then Jesus ruined everything.

He quoted them several cases from the Old Testament, where people were suffering and God sent His prophets to help them. But in each story, the people they helped were foreigners—Gentiles—not good upstanding people of God like themselves. Jesus made His point crystal clear—God had sent Him to seek out and save not just the Jews, but the whole world.

So they tried to throw him off a cliff.

What was bad news to the Nazarenes is good news to us, because Jesus has had us, all the people of the world, in His heart from the beginning. You are not an afterthought. Jesus came for You, and for me, and for all humanity, to save us—and even the people of Nazareth.

Dear Lord, thank You for Your love that includes us! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever had trouble with people who hate or fear those who are not like them?
- Is there any group you yourself have trouble loving or wishing well?
- Why does Jesus insist from the beginning on making it clear that all the world is included in God's salvation?

BRINGING JESUS HOME

After this He went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And He said to him, "Follow Me." And leaving everything, he rose and followed Him. And Levi made Him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them. And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at His disciples, saying, "Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:27-32)

Just imagine how Levi felt when Jesus called him—happy, scared, amazed, delighted, and eager. He wanted to show his gratitude to Jesus in the best way he knew how. So he rounded up all his friends and relatives and put on the best feast ever—all to honor his new Master, Jesus.

Of course, Levi could only give Jesus what he had already. And in the eyes of the religious leaders, what he had wasn't good enough. You're going to invite *those* evil people, Levi? To a party you can only afford because of your horrible tax-collecting ways? They were outraged.

Jesus was not. He saw what Levi was trying to do—to show love to Jesus. And when He looked around the tables, what did He see? Sinners—people God loved—the very people God the Father sent Jesus to lay down His life for at the cross. This was exactly where Jesus wanted to be—in the middle of the people He loved, serving the Father He loved.

We too can "bring Jesus home" to our own lives—no matter what sort of shape they are in. If they are broken, messy, wicked—so much the better! Jesus will get right to work cleaning, renewing, loving, saving. Never be afraid to bring Jesus home!

Dear Lord, come home with me—to my heart, to my family, to my friends. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you like to bring people over to your home for dinner? Why or why not?
- Who would you invite to dinner if Jesus were the guest of honor at your home?
- What do you think it's going to be like when we are guests in Jesus' home at the wedding feast of the Lamb (see Luke 14:15-24)?

SUFFERING

John, calling two of His disciples to Him, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are You the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?" … And He answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by Me." (Luke 7:18b-19, 22-23)

There was John, shut up in prison, soon to be killed. He hears about what Jesus is doing—healing the blind and the lame and the lepers, raising the dead, preaching to the poor. John recognizes that Jesus is fulfilling the many prophecies of Isaiah about what the Messiah would do.

But what about Isaiah 61:1? Will Jesus also "proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound"? Will Jesus set John free from prison? Why has He waited so long already?

Jesus' heart goes out to John. He knows what John is suffering, and how hard it is on John's faith. But He also knows that John's suffering is a preview of Jesus' own. Both John and Jesus are arrested, suffer, and ultimately die. It is not part of God's plan to rescue either of them in this world.

God has bigger plans. God intends to use Jesus' suffering to redeem, not just Israel, but all the people in the entire world. God the Father will not rescue Jesus from death; instead, He will resurrect Him—and share that everlasting life with everyone who trusts in Jesus.

And what of our own suffering? That, too, we trust to the Father. He knows; He cares. We can trust Him to do what's best, even when we can't figure out what that is.

Father, when I suffer, help me to trust You to end it in the right time and way. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Name a time you have suffered. How long was it? How did it end?
- What effect did the suffering have on your faith in God?
- How did Jesus care for you during this time?

ARE WE THERE YET?

Now it happened that as He was praying alone, the disciples were with Him. And He asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" And they answered, "John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen." Then He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered, "The Christ of God." And He strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." (Luke 9:18-22)

Jesus wants to know what people think of His identity because that will tell Him how much time He has left in His mission. Jesus knows He's headed to the cross; and the more people start talking publicly about Him being the Messiah—well, the quicker that trip is going to be. The religious and political leaders are bound to be upset, and they will join forces to destroy Him.

And so Jesus puts the brakes on—"Don't tell anybody who I am." Why? Because Jesus still has stuff to do before that happens. He is teaching and healing and preaching; He is training the future leaders of the church, and He has all too short a time to do it in.

Even when we're talking about suffering and death, Jesus is in control. Nothing will happen against His Father's will. This is true for us, too. When we go through grief and trouble and fear and sadness, Jesus is with us, helping us, walking with us through it. He knows the road; He has been down it before, to save us. And because of God's mercy, it ends in resurrection—first Jesus', then ours.

Lord, when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, be with me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Why do you think people hate being out of control?
- Think of a time when your life felt out of control. Who helped you?
- Did it comfort you to know Jesus was with you, and had been down that road before?

DENY YOURSELF

And He said to all, "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of Me and of My words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when He comes in His glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels." (Luke 9:23-26)

People talk a lot about self-denial. Sometimes it's in connection with dieting or trying to get healthier; sometimes it's during Lent. But many people make a big mistake—thinking that the whole point of it is the suffering they feel. "If it is hard for me," they think, "that means I'm doing it right."

But that isn't why Jesus told His disciples to deny themselves. He told them to "follow Me." The whole point was the following—the trusting—the obedient, loving life of a disciple who was glad to let God use him to bring others to faith in Jesus. If you live this way, losing your life for Jesus' sake and for His mission, you can bet there will be suffering involved. You may have to do all sorts of things that are contrary to your normal wishes—big, small, even terribly painful. But the pain is not the point. Belonging to Jesus is.

How could it be otherwise, when we belong to the one who laid down His life on the cross for us—only to take it up again when He rose from the dead? "If anyone serves Me, he must follow Me; and where I am, there will My servant be also" (John 12:26a). And in the end, we will be with the Lord—in joy and blessedness.

Help me, Lord, as I learn to follow You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you "give something up for Lent"? If so, does it help you? How?
- What about "taking something up" instead—something that draws you closer to Jesus?
- Will there be self-denial in heaven? Why or why not?

WRONG-HEADED

When the days drew near for Him to be taken up, He set His face to go to Jerusalem. And He sent messengers ahead of Him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for Him. But the people did not receive Him, because His face was set toward Jerusalem. And when His disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do You want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But He turned and rebuked them. And they went on to another village. (Luke 9:51-56)

The Jews and the Samaritans did not get along very well. When the people of this village found out Jesus was heading for Jerusalem, they shut their doors to Him. He wasn't welcome. In their eyes, He was an enemy.

James and John were perfectly happy to return their attitude. They wanted to kill them all with fire from God! No doubt they felt perfectly righteous about it. After all, the people were insulting the Son of God.

But Jesus is not like that. He looked at that village and saw, not enemies, but people—people to be loved, people to be saved and forgiven and cared for. He was on His way to Jerusalem to die for those people! And so He rebuked His disciples, and they went somewhere else to sleep.

No doubt the people thought they had "won." And in some sense they had—not by triumphing over Jesus, but rather by His gracious mercy. What did they win? Another chance, on another day, to somehow, some way, hear the true story of the One who came to visit them—the One who suffered, died, and rose again for their sake, so that He could invite them into His own kingdom.

And we, when we are fool enough to reject Christ—what do we win? Not what we deserve, usually. Because Jesus goes on trying. The Holy Spirit goes on calling. The Father seeks to bring us home—through Jesus His Son, our Savior.

Dear Father, help me to welcome Your Son always, as You have called me to be His. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Did you ever fail to recognize someone? Tell the story.
- When do you feel most defensive toward other people?
- Is there an enemy in your life? Ask Jesus to help you see the best way of dealing with that person.

JUSTIFIED

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" … Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. … But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'" (Luke 10:25, 30, 33-35)

It was a trick question, of course. The lawyer summed up the Law in a few pithy words—"Love God, and love your neighbor." Jesus agreed: "Do this, and you shall live." But who *can* actually do this? Who among us never fails in loving God or our neighbors? No wonder the lawyer wanted to justify himself!

But that isn't possible. We are broken, sinful people, in desperate need of help. In God's eyes, each of us is just like that man who fell among robbers—stripped, beaten, and left for dead. Who will help us?

Jesus will. Like that kind-hearted Samaritan, He comes to us, binds up our wounds, and takes us to safety. He stays with us and cares for us. He provides for us and gets us back on the road to life—not with mere money, but at the price of His own suffering and death on the cross. And He promises to return for us. Jesus Himself is our eternal life.

Lord, thank You for having mercy on me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever helped a stranger you found in trouble? If so, why?
- What moved Jesus to help you?
- Would you rather be justified by your own efforts or by Jesus? Why?

ATTACK!

Now He was casting out a demon that was mute. When the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke, and the people marveled. But some of them said, "He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons." … But [Jesus], knowing their thoughts, said to them … "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are safe; but when one stronger than he attacks him and overcomes him, he takes away his armor in which he trusted and divides his spoil." (Luke 11:14-15, 17a, 20-22)

When is it a good thing to be a robber? When you're robbing the original robber, of course!

And that is the way Jesus describes Himself when it comes to the devil and his power. The devil is strong, very strong, and he has many stolen things in his power. They include men, women, and children—human beings whom God made and loves, but whom the devil has enslaved and kept in darkness. He doesn't want to let them go free. He guards them day and night.

But then Jesus comes—and He is much stronger than the devil. He attacks the devil and overcomes him. He breaks Satan's grip on us and sets us all free. And now whoever belongs to Jesus is not a slave, but a child of God.

This is a good way to look at what Jesus was doing on the cross. Through His own death and resurrection, He overcame the power of evil. He broke Satan's grip on us. And He set us all free.

Lord Jesus, thank You for setting me free. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Does it surprise you to think about Jesus attacking and fighting and winning? Why or why not?
- When have you felt like a slave?
- How has Jesus helped you?

LOOKING AHEAD

[Jesus said] "I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a Baptism to be baptized with, and how great is My distress until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." (Luke 12:49-53)

Jesus has had a long day preaching to the crowds. Soon He will head for Jerusalem for the last time. Jesus is looking ahead, and what does He see?

A mysterious "baptism" Jesus is looking forward to with such distress—and what is that but His suffering and death on the cross? Jesus will die and rise again at Jerusalem, so that we too—all of us who trust in Him—will live.

And then what? Fire. Pentecost, when the purifying fire of the Holy Spirit begins to spread throughout the world as the Gospel goes out to all nations.

And in its wake, not peace but division. A world that is dead in the darkness is peaceful, isn't it? There is no conflict there. But in the wake of the Gospel, there will be conflict—because some will see the light, will come alive, and believe—and their families will resent that faith and do their best to kill it.

This isn't a peaceful future Jesus is looking forward to—and yet it is a good one. It is a future full of life and hope, the future we are living right now—as we wait for Jesus to return.

Lord, help us during this time of division to remember Your sacrifice and rejoice in Your purifying light. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What does fire represent to you?
- When have you looked forward to something with both hope and dread?
- Have you felt the effects of division over Christ in your own life?

LET'S SAVE IT!

And He told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" (Luke 13:6-9)

I really like the attitude of the vinedresser in this story. Most workers would just get out the axe and the tree would be firewood by sundown.

But this man is different. He asks the owner to give the tree one more year. During that time, the vinedresser is going to dig and fertilize and do all this extra work—and why? Because he cares about the tree. Even though so far it's been useless, he doesn't want to see it die. He wants to save it.

There's no denying that we can be an awful lot like that tree in Jesus' story. We know we should be bearing fruit for God—living lives that are good and holy and bring honor to Him—but, well … And so we fear the judgment we know in our hearts we deserve.

But Jesus says, "No. I'm going to save these people. I love them, and will do everything that can possibly be done for them, to make sure they live. I will live with them, suffer for them, die for them, and rise again. I will share My own life with them. Then they will live and bear wonderful fruit!"

Lord Jesus, thank You for giving Yourself to save me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you enjoy growing plants? Why or why not?
- Have you ever saved something other people thought was useless? Tell the story.
- How do you imitate Jesus' love in your own life towards others?

MOTHER HEN

[Jesus said] "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Luke 13:34)

My husband's grandma raised chickens in Vietnam. One day a hawk came. The mother fluffed up every feather she had and held her wings out. The baby chicks hid underneath, warm and safe. But up top, the mother was ready for battle!

This is the picture Jesus uses to describe what He does for us. He stretches out His wings, calling all God's people to Him. When we are next to Him, we are safe and warm. Nothing can harm us.

But the devil gets a totally different picture. What he sees is angry and scary. To him, the message is "Go away. Do not hurt the ones I love. You will regret it forever."

And that is what the cross says, isn't it? To us who believe in Jesus and trust in Him for life and salvation, the cross is a picture of safety. It reminds us that Jesus laid down His very life to save us—yes, and took it up again, too.

But to the powers of evil? Oh, to them the cross is a terrible thing—the proof that they are defeated and well on the way to being destroyed forever. That will happen once and for all on the Last Day, when Jesus comes again.

Lord, I am looking forward to Your coming again. In the meantime, keep me safe with You! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you know about hens and how they take care of chicks?
- Have you ever been angry and protective because something was endangering someone you love?
- Are there things in your life that may harm you and make God very protective of you—even to the point of anger?

EWWWW!

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:1-2)

You can just hear it in the voices of the Pharisees and the scribes. It's that childish playground sound: "Ewwww!" Jesus is hanging out with tax collectors and sinners. He even eats with them like friends! How can He bear that? Doesn't He know what kind of people they are? Ewwww!

Of course, Jesus knew what kind of people they were. He knew what kind of people the religious leaders were, too. They were sinners—all of them, the ones who pretended to be holy and the ones who did not. They were proud, selfish, lazy, angry, unfair, faithless. They were people who gossiped, envied, hated, grumbled, and hurt other people. They were like us.

Certainly, Jesus would have been justified to send them all away—to say, "Ewww, how horrible!" and wash His hands of them. But He did not. He called them close. He treated them—and us!—like lost sheep, valuable and in danger. He went looking for us like much-loved sheep, never resting until He found us.

And then He made us His own forever, by laying down His life for us on the cross. Jesus drew us as close to Him as it is possible to be, making us part of the body of Christ, members of His own body. He doesn't reject us—He does the exact opposite. He incorporates us, living within us and sharing with us His own resurrection life and joy.

You don't need to worry about Jesus rejecting you. He knows what you are, and He loves you—enough to live, die, and rise for you. You belong to Him forever.

Lord, thank You for wanting me and loving me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Are there people who make you say "Ewwww!" and go away from them? Why?
- How do you think Jesus feels about them? About you?
- What does Jesus' love say about God's heart?

LOST AND FOUND

[Jesus said] "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:8-10)

At the beginning of the pandemic, I lost a small diamond out of my wedding ring. I was not happy. That diamond meant a lot to me.

Jesus tells a story about a woman who finds her lost coin—and we're not talking dimes or quarters here, this coin was probably closer to my diamond in her eyes. She is so happy, her joy overflows. She calls her friends and neighbors to celebrate with her.

This is how God feels about us, Jesus says. Look at that wording: "There is joy before the angels of God." It doesn't say the angels are rejoicing, though I'm sure they are. It is God Himself rejoicing, while the angels look on!

When human beings sinned and cut themselves off from God back in the Garden of Eden, it wasn't just a tragedy for us. It was a deeply felt loss for God Himself. He loved the people He had made. He wasn't content to lose even one of them.

That's why He came to earth to *be* one of them—a human being, the Man Jesus. He took our sin, suffering, and death, and made them His own. He lost His own life so that He could find us. And He rose from the dead to give us life forever—never to be lost again.

That's something worth celebrating!

Father, thank You for finding us and bringing us home to You through Jesus, Your Son. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What is the most valuable thing you have ever lost and found again?
- How far would you go to get back a broken relationship?
- How can you help as God seeks out His lost ones?

GOOD NEWS

On the way to Jerusalem He was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And as He entered a village, He was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." When He saw them He said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests. "And as they went they were cleansed. (Luke 17:11-14)

I wonder sometimes about the priests—you know, the ones Jesus sent the people He healed to visit. How did they react when those people walked in?

It wasn't as if the priests had no idea what to do. In Leviticus 13-14 God gave the priests the responsibility to check on cases of leprosy and decide whether people were ill or not. People with leprosy would have to live as outcasts, away from family and friends. Leprosy did so much harm to people that in the Bible this disease is used as a symbol for sin.

If a person recovered, the priest could certify the recovery and send him or her home free. The healed person would wash and offer a sacrifice, and then be free to return to normal life—healthy, happy, clean.

But I doubt that happened very often. Leprosy was incurable before the discovery of modern drugs. For the priests, leprosy meant delivering bad news, again and again and again.

But not today. Today, the priests could give them good news. "Jesus has made you well," they could say. It's the same thing any Christian can say: "Through His sacrificial death on the cross, Jesus makes you well from sin. Wash in the waters of Baptism and be clean. Because of Jesus, you have your life back again—everlasting life, Jesus' gift to you!"

Lord Jesus, thank You for healing me from sin! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you think the healed people did first of all after seeing the priest?
- In what ways does sin resemble a disease?
- Tell about a time when Jesus brought healing to some aspect of your life.

THE JOY SET BEFORE HIM

And taking the twelve, He said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For He will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging Him, they will kill Him, and on the third day He will rise." But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said. (Luke 18:31-34)

It's clear that Jesus knew what was going to happen to Him in Jerusalem. He didn't just know He was going to die—He knew all the horrible details of it. I can't imagine what it must have been like—to still walk forward, heading willingly straight for the cross.

Why do such a thing? The author of Hebrews gives us a clue when he writes that Jesus, "for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2b).

What was that joy Jesus saw ahead of Him? It was you. It was me. It was all of us, all humanity, set free from slavery to evil and let loose into the glorious freedom of the children of God. That would be the fruit of His cross.

"And on the third day He will rise," Jesus said, speaking of Himself. He knew that it wasn't just death coming to Him—it was resurrection and everlasting life. That was the gift that He would share with every one of us who trusts in Him. That would be His great joy.

Lord, thank You for loving me so much. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Jesus finds joy in you. Who do you find joy in?
- When have you willingly suffered because you knew it would bring about a particular joy?
- Name a tiny way you return the love Jesus shows you.

RECOGNITION

And when He drew near and saw the city, He wept over it, saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation." (Luke 19:41-44)

It's a strange time to break down crying, in the middle of a parade. And yet a very natural one for Jesus, because the city where He will die has just come into sight—and He knows that the people are completely unprepared for what is coming next.

This Palm Sunday welcome will turn into rejection in days. The king they are welcoming now will be crowned with thorns and enthroned on a cross. His murder will be the greatest shame and grief in human history. And it will be followed, within forty years, by the destruction of Jerusalem itself.

Why? They didn't recognize Him. They failed to see God, their own God, coming to save them.

Jesus is grieved to the heart by this. And yet He's not giving up on them. He will save these people, and all people, through His death and resurrection. He is doing a wonderful exchange: we give Him rejection, and He gives us welcome. We give Him pain, and He heals us. We give Him death, and He gives us life—everlasting life.

In the end, it doesn't matter that we didn't recognize Him. What really matters is that God has chosen to recognize us—and to bring us into His family through Jesus, as forgiven children of God.

Lord Jesus, thank You for saving us and making us Your own. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Tell about a time when you failed to recognize someone you knew.
- What does it mean, to be recognized by God?
- When do you see God working in your past life, though you didn't recognize Him at the time?

CLEANING TIME

And He entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold, saying to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of robbers." And He was teaching daily in the temple. The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people were seeking to destroy Him, but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were hanging on His words. (Luke 19:45-48)

Over the years, the priests had allowed a market to grow up in the temple court, the space reserved for non-Jews who wanted to pray to the God of Israel. People could change money there and buy animals for offering. Because of the constant racket, it would be difficult for anybody to concentrate on praying—not that the leaders cared much about the foreigners!

During this last week of Jesus' life, Jesus put a stop to that. No more traders in the house of the Lord! (see Zechariah 14:21) No more cheating, no more greed, and no more distractions from prayer and worship. Instead, Jesus Himself would teach there. It would be a place of joy, prayer, and worship.

What about your own heart? That is the temple of God as well. Is there anything going on in there that is stopping you from worship, prayer, and learning about God? Is there anything Jesus needs to clean out—greed, corruption, or even simple distraction—so you can become a place for Him to do what He wants in that space?

If so, Jesus will gladly do it, and He will not blame you or reject you. It's what He gave His life for, after all—so that you, even you, could be the cherished home of God Himself.

Dear Lord, cleanse me and make me wholly Yours. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What kind of environment is the best for you to pray and learn?
- Where do you find such a place?
- Since you are God's home, what would you like to do to welcome Him this week?

EXPEDIENCE

The chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up and said to Him, "Tell us by what authority You do these things, or who it is that gave You this authority." He answered them, "I also will ask you a question. Now tell Me, was the Baptism of John from heaven or from man?" And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say, 'Why did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From man,' all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet." So they answered that they did not know where it came from. And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." (Luke 20:1-8)

This story makes me sad. The leaders of the temple can't answer Jesus' question—because for them, the right answer isn't the true answer. It's the expedient one. They want an answer that will help them keep their power, their position, their prestige. Was John from God—who cares? Was Jesus from God? Same answer.

It's shameful, but it's such an easy sin to fall into—preferring the easy answer to the true answer, the lie that protects us rather than the truth that might get us into trouble. Who can keep us from this evil? Only the Truth incarnate—Jesus Himself.

Jesus doesn't lie to us. When He says, "Your sins are forgiven," they really are. When He says, "I died for you," it's true. When He says, "I am alive forevermore," and "Whoever believes in Me will live forever," we can trust Him. We can build our lives on His answers, because He speaks the truth.

Lord, help me to cling to Your truth instead of the lies of the world around me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When have you fallen for a lie? What was the result?
- When have you been tempted to protect yourself with a lie?
- When do you long for the truth the most?

REJECTED STONE

When they heard this, they said, "Surely not!" But He looked directly at them and said, "What then is this that is written: "'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone'? Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him." (Luke 20:16b-18)

In ancient days, if you were going to build a stone house or temple, the cornerstone was the first piece of the foundation you would lay. It set the direction for both walls originating at it; it bore the weight of the whole house.

You would never want to pick a weak or crooked stone to do this job. It would mess up the whole building. No, you'd do your best to find a square or rectangular stone that was strong and straight, with no cracks or breaks in it.

And yet Jesus quotes Psalm 118 and makes it clear that He Himself is "the stone that the builders rejected," the one refused by the religious leaders, even to the point of arrest and death.

It's so tempting to call those men idiots. What were they thinking, to reject *this* cornerstone, Jesus our Lord? Did they want someone prettier—more impressive—someone weak and moldable who would do their bidding? That would be an utter disaster!

What we needed is exactly what God gave us—Jesus, who is strong enough to bear the weight of the entire world on His back, with all our sins and griefs and burdens. Jesus, who had no cracks or breaks in His own integrity, and no crookedness either. Jesus, who makes the entire building strong and holy—including all of us, the stones God is building upon Him.

Because of Jesus' strength, we will never fall. Because of His love for us, we have become part of God's house, God's temple—where we are forever welcome, honored, and useful. You have a place in God's building—safe and strong, built on Jesus our Rock.

Dear Lord, be my foundation forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Did you play with building blocks as a child?
- What specific things did you need, to make your building stand up strong?
- How do you see those characteristics reflected in Jesus' dealings with you?

PREMEDITATED

And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to put Him to death, for they feared the people. Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve. He went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers how he might betray Him to them. And they were glad, and agreed to give him money. So he consented and sought an opportunity to betray Him to them in the absence of a crowd. (Luke 22:2-6)

They call it "premeditated" when a murderer plans ahead of time how to kill someone. For days or weeks the murderer has been choosing a time, a place, a weapon. Premeditation usually gets greater punishment, because it wasn't spur of the moment; the person had plenty of time to change their mind. But they didn't, and that proves their hearts were committed to doing what they did.

There is no clearer word for what the chief priests and scribes did when they plotted to kill Jesus. Judas is guilty of this, too. He had days, maybe weeks, to change his mind. He did not. His heart was committed to it.

And what about God? Oh, what He did was definitely premeditated. From the foundation of the world He planned to save us, to rescue us from the evil that had destroyed our lives. In Genesis 3:15 He promised that a human baby would be born to destroy the power of the devil and save us. That baby was Jesus—God come as a Man, to live, serve, suffer, die—and rise again.

What Jesus did was definitely premeditated. His whole heart was in it. His plan has always been to rescue you, the one He loves, and make you alive, forgiven, and blessed—with Him forever.

Thank You, Lord, that Your heart has always been set on saving me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What is one thing you planned for a very long time?
- How do you know when someone is committed to loving you?
- Do you see these things reflected in Jesus? How?

PREPARING THE PASSOVER

Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat it." … And they went and found it just as He had told them, and they prepared the Passover. (Luke 22:7-8, 13)

Jesus sent Peter and John to go get the Passover meal ready for them. What would that involve? Well, first of all, it would mean finding a place to eat it in, as they were far from home. Jesus took care of that.

They would also need to see to buying food and wine, and getting everything properly cooked. No doubt they had the help of the family living in the house they were visiting.

But most important, they would also need to find a lamb and sacrifice it at the temple. Why? Because the lamb was a reminder of how God saved the Israelite children from death (see Exodus 12). It was also a foretaste of Jesus' own sacrifice as the true Lamb of God, whose death saves us all.

Though the disciples did not realize it, Jesus was even then preparing His own Passover—the one where He would save all the children of the world from the powers of death and evil. His blood is our safety, and His resurrection gives us life forever.

Lamb of God, Your blood is our safety. Thank You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What customary foods do you eat on holidays?
- What holiday traditions do you have that remind you of God's goodness to you?
- Why do you think Jesus had the disciples handle the sacrifice, instead of going Himself?

LONGING

And when the hour came, He reclined at table, and the apostles with Him. And He said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." (Luke 22:14-16)

Before my son went off to college, he asked whether it would be possible for our family to have Communion together. (My husband is a pastor.) He felt a strong need for that gift of love—that union with Jesus and with one another—that source of comfort and strength. I understood what he meant, for I asked for the same gift before a possibly life-threatening surgery.

Jesus describes a similar feeling on the night before His death. He says to the disciples, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." He knows what's about to happen to Him. He knows who he's going to do it for. And He takes comfort in these last few minutes with the people He loves. He spends them in the best way He can—celebrating the Passover, which is about to be fulfilled in His sacrificial death and His resurrection.

The disciples weren't the only people He was thinking of that night, as John 17:20-24 makes clear. You are among those people He loves. His suffering, death, and resurrection are highly personal—because He faced them for you.

Lord, turn my heart to You and draw me close to You in love. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When you are about to leave someone you love, what kinds of things do you do together?
- Do you ever have trouble believing that God cares about you?
- How do you find help in that situation?

WHO IS IT?

[Jesus said] "But behold, the hand of him who betrays Me is with Me on the table. For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!" And they began to question one another, which of them it could be who was going to do this. (Luke 22:21-23)

Have you ever looked at Renaissance pictures of the Last Supper? Not Leonardo's, the most famous one. I mean all the other ones out there—the ones where you can always tell who Judas is, because he's sitting on one side of the table, all by himself.

Of course, it wasn't really like that. It wasn't obvious at all who the betrayer was going to be. As Luke says, "And they began to question one another, which of them it could be who was going to do this."

As far as they could tell, Judas was just like the rest of them. He had been hand-picked by Jesus, just as they were; he had worked hard in the ministry; he had even gone out as all the apostles did, to preach and heal and cast out demons. Only John seemed to realize there was a problem (see John 12:6).

It's a sobering thing to think about—because that means that any of us, too, could betray Jesus. Judas was not someone bent on evil from the very beginning. He was like us—a human being flawed by sin, with strengths and weaknesses, good and bad mingled.

What separates us from him, then? Only Jesus. As believers, we are what Judas could have been. Jesus died for all of us, even Judas. And Jesus gives His everlasting life to everyone who trusts in Him, no matter who we are or what we have been like.

Dear Lord, keep me always with You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What kind of emotional reaction do you have to Judas?
- Why do you think you have that reaction?
- When have you looked at a bad situation and thought, "There but for the grace of God go I"?

THE VALUE OF A FALL

[Jesus said] "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." (Luke 22:31-32)

Almost everyone has an episode in their life that they look back on with shame, and so did Peter. He denied and abandoned Jesus during His trial. At the time Jesus spoke these words we've just read, Peter didn't know that was going to happen—but Jesus did. So He prepared Peter.

I'm paraphrasing what Jesus said, because in English we can't see the difference between the singular "you" and the plural "you," though it is clear in Greek. Jesus tells Peter, "Satan demanded to have all you disciples, to sift you all like wheat; but I have prayed for you specifically, so that your own faith may not fail. And when you yourself have repented, strengthen your brothers."

Although Peter will be shaken to his core, Jesus has asked God to maintain a tiny light of faith in his heart until Easter Sunday. Then he will see Jesus alive again—repent—rejoice—and be reinstated as a disciple of Jesus. More than that, he will become a major leader in the early church, strengthening all the other Christians.

Peter never forgot his fall, but it must have been a great comfort to the other Christians around him. They could look at this flawed, forgiven servant of Jesus, and know that they too could be forgiven—because Jesus gave Himself to die and rise for them.

Dear Father, use even the shameful parts of my past to bring help and comfort to others. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How do people cope with shame?
- When has God used someone else's past to help or comfort you?
- If you are willing, tell about a time you were able to use your own past to strengthen someone else.

SWORDS

And He said to them, "When I sent you out with no moneybag or knapsack or sandals, did you lack anything?" They said, "Nothing." He said to them, "But now let the one who has a moneybag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in Me: 'And He was numbered with the transgressors.'" … And they said, "Look, Lord, here are two swords." And He said to them, "It is enough." (Luke 22:35-37a, 38)

It's a strange passage. Why would Jesus advise people to buy a sword for a mission trip? How could two swords ever be enough for twelve people? And why did Jesus get upset when Peter actually used a sword to defend Him in the garden of Gethsemane?

I suspect Jesus was speaking in metaphors, not giving literal packing advice. He wanted the disciples to see that they were entering a new era—a time when Jesus would no longer be the honored Healer and Teacher, but rather a Man rejected and crucified by church and state together. From then on, the disciples would be just as unwelcome as their Master. They would need to provide for themselves and watch out for danger. The Good News would meet rejection.

Jesus' words came true. And after His resurrection, His followers walked the same dangerous path. Eleven of the twelve were killed for Jesus' sake, and Christians around the world still suffer by the millions for the sake of the Gospel.

Pray for those who live and worship under persecution. Ask God to strengthen them and to give them His joy—the joy that comes from knowing we can never fall out of the hands of God, and whatever happens, we will be with Him forever.

Dear Father, protect those who suffer for Your Son's sake, and keep them strong in Your Spirit. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you pray for persecuted Christians?
- If so, where do you get your information?
- Persecution seems to strengthen the church. Why do you think this happens?

SUFFERING

[Jesus said to the disciples], "Pray that you may not enter into temptation." And He withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, saying, "Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me. Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours, be done." … And being in agony He prayed more earnestly; and His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. And when He rose from prayer, He came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow … (Luke 22:40b-42, 44-45)

It hurts to see someone you love suffering. The disciples saw enough of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane to pass on to us this description. Then they apparently fell asleep. It sounds strange—how could they do that?—but I've seen other people react that way. They go to sleep to shut out the suffering they cannot bear.

What a good thing it is for us that Jesus never shuts us out. No matter what kind of suffering we are having, He is there for us. He is paying attention, holding us up, getting us through it—even when we cannot sense His presence, and it feels like God doesn't care. He has promised not to leave us, and He knows all too well what it feels like to be abandoned during suffering.

In Gethsemane, Jesus did what any man does in great pain and grief. He brought His friends with Him, though they were of little use. And then He turned to God. He cried out to God, praying with His whole heart. We can do this too, knowing that the God we cry out to loves us enough to live among us as one of us, carrying our sin and suffering—dying—and then, almost past hope, rising again. He is our hope.

Lord, You know my suffering. Please help me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Would you rather suffer or watch others suffer? Why?
- What point in your life felt like Gethsemane to you?
- How did the Lord care for you at that time?

MIRROR

While He was still speaking, there came a crowd, and the man called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He drew near to Jesus to kiss Him. but Jesus said to him, "Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?" (Luke 22:47-48)

Judas scares me. Who is this man, who could live alongside Jesus for years and still, in the end, betray Him with a kiss?

I'd like to think Judas was a monster. I'd like to think he was someone so totally different from me that we could never understand each other—that the chasm between us was uncrossable—that he didn't even qualify for membership in the human race.

I don't want to see him as a mirror. And yet I must.

Because Judas was not always Judas. Once upon a time, he was a child—a man—an ordinary follower of Jesus. Once upon a time he was a faithful teacher and preacher and healer, like the rest of the twelve. If one of the apostles could end up this way, what hope is there for me?

Only Jesus. He is the only One who has the power and wisdom to stand against all the traps of the devil—and to keep us safe, too.

Looking at Judas makes me want to cling to Jesus like a scared child grabbing a parent's leg. And that's a really good place to be, because Jesus will not turn us away, in spite of our sins—all the big and little ways we betray Him daily. Jesus died for us and rose again so that we could be new people—forgiven, restored, safe in His hands forever.

Lord, hold on to me and keep me Yours forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Why do you think Judas chose a kiss to mark out Jesus for His arresters?
- Is it easy or hard to see a reflection of yourself in Judas? Why?
- What differences do you see between Judas and Peter, who also denied Jesus?

HEALING FOR AN ENEMY

And when those who were around Him saw what would follow, they said, "Lord, shall we strike with the sword?" And one of them struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, "No more of this!" And He touched his ear and healed him. (Luke 22:49-51)

As far as we know, this is the last healing Jesus performed on earth. And given that Jesus was right in the middle of being arrested, it amazes me that He found the quick compassion to heal His enemy before being hauled away.

What a strange memory that must have been for the healed man, in the years to come! Fear—searing pain—and then the intent, compassionate face of Jesus, as He reached out to touch him. Blessed relief from pain. And then standing there dazed as he watched the rest of his group haul his Savior away to trial and death. Did the man tell his family this story? Did he—just possibly—find his way into the early Christian church, after Jesus' death and resurrection?

Because more than one man's ear was going to be healed that night. Jesus was beginning His Passion, knowing full well that His suffering, death, and resurrection would bring healing to all His enemies—every man, woman, or child who would trust in Him by the Holy Spirit's help. Jesus came to heal His enemies and to give them everlasting life—no longer as enemies, but now as beloved children of God.

Paul speaks to you and me when he says, "God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. … For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life" (Romans 5:8, 10). Jesus reaches out to us with healing that goes beyond an ear—that makes us, body and soul, a new creation.

Dear Lord, see where I am broken and heal me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What's the most important thing you ever had to do in a hurry?
- When has God healed you—physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually?
- Was it fast or slow? Why do you think God did it that way?

TRUTH AND LIES

Then Jesus said to the chief priests and officers of the temple and elders, who had come out against Him, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on Me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness." (Luke 22:52-53)

There is a thing called "gaslighting." It means messing with someone else's head—lying and acting in a way that makes the other person doubt their senses, their own ability to tell what is real.

Jesus points out that this is what the people arresting Him are doing. They have come out to arrest Him heavily armed—even though He never did a single bit of harm to anybody, and in fact has been teaching the people peacefully every day in the temple itself! Their behavior is not just violent, it is a lie, and no wonder—for they are doing the work of the devil, who is the father of lies (see John 8:44).

Jesus' protest seems to make no difference in the moment; they still arrest Him, take Him away, and ultimately kill Him. And yet it does make a difference, because it is a statement of truth by the One who is Truth incarnate (see John 14:6). It shows us, even years later, that what was happening that night was not an ordinary arrest, or a mistake, or even a political kidnapping; it was the devil opposing God Himself.

And why? Because God was doing something wonderful for us, the people the devil had taken captive with his lies. God was working to rescue us—by laying down His own life on the cross to break the power of darkness and rescue us. Now that Jesus has risen from the dead, all of us who trust in Him are free—children of God, alive forever.

Dear Lord, thank You for rescuing us. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you think there is such a thing as a "little white lie"? Why or why not?
- If you are willing, tell about a time when lies made trouble in your life.
- What does it mean to you personally, to know Jesus as the Truth?

THE BEGINNING OF HEALING

But Peter said, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about." … And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how He had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny Me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly. (Luke 22:60a, 61-62)

Peter would remember that night for the rest of his life—how he sat with Jesus' enemies, how they recognized him and began to whisper, the outright accusations—and his own denials, "I don't even know that man!" And then Jesus' look. No words at all, just Jesus turning and looking at Peter. And it broke Peter's heart.

What was in that look? Pain, no doubt. But also love. Love for a sinful, broken man that Jesus had known all along was going to break that way. His sin had never stopped Jesus loving him before. It wouldn't stop Him now.

Strangely, this was the beginning of healing for Peter. When Jesus looked at him, Peter too saw himself clearly. He saw what he had done in all of its horror. He saw his broken promise, and the pride that led him to make that promise in the first place.

But he also saw Jesus' forgiveness. He remembered that Jesus had prophesied he would do this—and yet continued to love him. He saw that even though the worst had come true, Jesus still loved him. He mattered to Jesus.

Jesus loves us too with this same love. None of our sins catch Him by surprise. He died to wipe them out. And He rose again to bring us to Himself—in everlasting life, with Him, in love and joy—forever.

Dear Savior, when I fall, look at me and forgive and heal me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever had a wound cleaned out? How did it feel?
- What would happen if you didn't get it cleaned out?
- When has God "cleaned out" the wound of sin in your own life?

"WHO STRUCK YOU?"

Now the men who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking Him as they beat Him. They also blindfolded Him and kept asking Him, "Prophesy! Who is it that struck You?" And they said many other things against Him, blaspheming Him. (Luke 22:63-65)

It's a nasty way to mock a prophet—to blindfold Him and then hit Him, saying "Who's hitting You, huh, huh, huh? You're a prophet, can't You tell?"

And the answers are all pretty obvious. Who's hitting Jesus? A bunch of jerks, that's who (sorry, the more appropriate terms are not fit for family media). A lot of people who get their kicks from hurting people who can't fight back. Some men who will probably go home after this and treat it like any other day, because they abuse prisoners all the time; it's nothing new.

But Jesus would define it differently. Who's hitting Jesus? A sinner infected with evil. Someone who needs a Savior. Someone God cares about so much that He chose to send His only Son into the world, knowing what human beings would do to Him.

These are good descriptions of us, too, aren't they? We also bear responsibility for what happened to Jesus. Our sins led to this beating—and to the cross. And yet Jesus welcomes us and cares for us just as He did for the very people who were beating Him—because we are the reason He came into the world. He takes us, blind in our sin and lashing out against Him—and He baptizes us into a new life as clear-sighted children of God. He carries the marks of our sin—and we carry His blessing.

Thank You, Lord, for loving us so much. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Who is really blind in this scenario, Jesus or the abusers?
- Jesus had the power to answer them with their names—do you think He did? Why or why not?
- When have you caused harm to someone (accidentally or not) and they returned you a blessing?

"I AM"

When day came, the assembly of the elders … said, "If You are the Christ, tell us." But He said to them, "If I tell you, you will not believe, and if I ask you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God." So they all said, "Are You the Son of God, then?" And He said to them, "You say that I am." Then they said, "What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from His own lips." (Luke 22:66a, 67-71)

To English-speaking ears, it looks like Jesus is dancing around the question. Partly it's because different languages have different ways of saying "yes" and "no," and not everybody does it with a single straightforward word. But there's more going on.

This conversation comes to a climax with them asking, "Are You the Son of God, then?" and Jesus says, "You say that I am." Pay attention to those last two words. They are a Greek rendering of the Name of God Himself, "I AM"—which our Bibles translate either as "YHWH" or "LORD." Proper Jews were not supposed to say this Name out loud. The grammar of Greek lets you avoid it, if you really want to. But Jesus doesn't. He says it right out. By phrasing the way He did, He didn't just say "Yes" to them; He also claimed to be God. No wonder they were upset!

At this point it's crystal clear. Jesus has claimed to be God—the Holy One of Israel, the Savior of His people. How will they respond? How will we respond?

Is Jesus truly God, as He says? If so, God Himself has loved you enough to come to you as a human being—to lay down His life for you on a shameful cross—and to rise from the dead, all for you. God Himself. Not an angel, not a holy man. God.

How will you respond to that?

Lord, I believe. Strengthen my trust in You! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Was there ever a chance that they might have believed Jesus?
- When have you been in a situation where people's minds were already made up?
- Does it cast a different light on some Gospel stories to reflect that, when people interacted with Jesus, they were interacting directly with God?

GETTING OUT OF IT

[Then the religious leaders] began to accuse Him, saying, "We found this Man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that He Himself is Christ, a king." And Pilate asked Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" And he answered him, "You have said so." Then Pilate said … "I find no guilt in this man." But they were urgent … And when he learned that he belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent Him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. (Luke 23:2b-5a, 7)

It's clear that Pilate wants nothing to do with Jesus' case. He does a brief examination, and when the religious leaders won't stop yammering, Pilate finds another dodge. He ships Jesus off to King Herod on the grounds that He is a Galilean. Maybe Herod will take care of the problem for him.

You might recognize this game from your workplace—or your community, or even your church. "It's not my problem, someone else can deal with it."

What a good thing that God does not take the same attitude with us! When we are in deep trouble, He pays attention. He involves Himself. He focuses His wisdom and concern on us, and He stretches out His hand to pull us out.

That's what Jesus was doing that very day as He stood before Pilate. He was God in the flesh, getting involved, pulling His people out of the power of sin, death, and the devil. Nobody else could help us, but Jesus could. His suffering, death, and resurrection would remake our world and redeem us to be free, blessed, living children of God.

Thank You, Lord, for making us Your problem. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What is a problem you have tried to get out of handling, big or small? Did it work?
- Why would you choose to handle a problem rather than sloughing it off on someone else?
- By analogy, what does God's choice say about His character and attitude toward us?

CREEPY

When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see Him … So he questioned Him at some length, but He made no answer. … And Herod with his soldiers treated Him with contempt and mocked Him. Then, arraying Him in splendid clothing, he sent Him back to Pilate. And Herod and Pilate became friends with each other that very day, for before this they had been at enmity with each other. (Luke 23:8a, 9a, 11-12)

I'm not sure why Herod and Pilate's friendship creeps me out. Is it because they are both rather horrible people, and any friendship between them has to be something awful? Is it because they are passing back and forth an innocent Man as if He were a game piece or a playing card? Is it because this friendship is built on Jesus' death?

Whatever it is, it makes me squirm. It's true Jesus is the Prince of Peace, but this is a sort of peace I think we could do without.

And yet … There was a different friendship Jesus was mending that day, or maybe we should call it a relationship, as it goes far beyond friendship. That was the relationship between God and His people. We broke that love way back in the Garden of Eden, when we rebelled against God and insisted on going our own way. That should have been the end of it—the end of us, really—but God would not give up. He came after us.

And now we are restored to friendship with God—not by our own doing, but by the willing suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. God made His own death the basis for our new relationship. He did it freely, because He loved us once, and loves us still. And that isn't creepy at all.

Dear God, thank You for restoring us to You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you know any relationships that make you shudder? Why?
- What have you done in the past to restore a relationship with someone you love?
- Are you comfortable using the term "friendship" for your relationship with God? Why or why not?

COWARDICE

Pilate then called together the chief priests and the rulers and the people, and said to them, "You brought me this Man as one who was misleading the people. And after examining Him before you, behold, I did not find this Man guilty of any of your charges against Him. … Nothing deserving death has been done by Him. I will therefore punish and release Him." (Luke 23:13-14, 15b, 16)

"I will therefore punish and release Him"—what is that about? Pilate publicly admits Jesus is innocent. But he's not going to just let Him go. He's going to scourge Him, which is a level of pain that some people don't live through. How is this justice?

It isn't, of course. But Pilate's relationship with the people has always been stormy. If he lets Jesus go, he may have a riot on his hands, and have to call out the army. If things get bad enough, the Roman emperor will recall him—and that could mean his own death.

Pilate decides to sacrifice Jesus. Better that than sacrificing himself, he thinks.

This is horrifying. And yet—who among us can say that we have never done wrong because we were afraid? It's so easy, isn't it—to keep silent when we should speak, to sit still and let someone else suffer, because we know what will happen to us if we get involved.

Cowardice is a sin—and yet, there is hope for us, in Jesus. He knows exactly what is in our hearts, and loves us just the same. His own courageous love drove Him to lay down His life for us, going as far as death on a cross. And now that He has risen from the dead, He calls us to Himself. Those who trust in Him receive the Holy Spirit, who is our courage and hope and joy—Jesus living through us.

Lord, be my courage when I am afraid. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When is the last time you heard someone praise courage as a virtue?
- Tell about a time in your own life when you were afraid to do what you knew was right.
- How did Jesus help you at that time?

SON OF THE FATHER

But they all cried out together, "Away with this Man, and release to us Barabbas"—a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection started in the city and for murder. They kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify Him!" A third time he said to them, "Why? What evil has He done? I have found in Him no guilt deserving death. I will therefore punish and release Him." But they were urgent, … and their voices prevailed. So Pilate … released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, for whom they asked, but he delivered Jesus over to their will. (Luke 23:18-19, 21-23, 24a, 25)

I wonder what Barabbas thought when the jailer came to open his cell. Did he think he was going to the cross? Did he struggle? How long was it before he truly believed he was going free?

I wonder what he thought of Jesus. Did they tell him who the alternate was—the Man who would now die in his place? Did he think of Him now and again? Did he creep to the back of the crowd at Calvary to see the Man who hung there for his sake?

Barabbas' name means "son of the father." We may never know what this particular son of a father did, as he went free to a life that was not, after all, lost to him. But as other sons and daughters of the Father, we can answer these questions for ourselves. For Jesus took our place as surely as He took Barabbas's—and we, too, have our lives restored beyond all hope.

What will you do, with the life He has given you?

Dearest Lord Jesus, true Son of the Father—I love You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever been given a second chance? When?
- What difference did it make to your life going forward?
- How could you show Jesus' mercy to someone else who needs it, even today?

SUBSTITUTE

And as they led Him away, they seized one Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, and laid on him the cross, to carry it behind Jesus. (Luke 23:26)

Imagine what it must have been like to be Simon. There you are, coming into the city from the country, where you've probably been staying during your Passover visit. You plan to go to the temple, maybe visit the market one last time before the Sabbath starts. You notice a flurry in the crowd and wonder what is going on—and then a Roman soldier grabs you, loads you with a heavy cross, and there you are, part of Jesus' execution parade.

Simon must have been shocked. Indignant. Scared. Upset. Embarrassed, even, to be involved with something so terrible. What if people thought *he* was the criminal?

Simon didn't know then that the real substitution was the other way around. Jesus was taking Simon's place—bearing the weight of Simon's sin and wrongdoing, all his shame and guilt and brokenness. Jesus would carry that weight to Calvary, where it would die with Him. And it would stay dead—though Jesus Himself would rise, alive again forever.

Simon didn't know Jesus was taking his place. But we know. And we know that Jesus did this for us, too—and for everybody in the world. Now that He has risen from the dead, He calls us to Himself. And everyone who trusts in Him will live forever—forgiven, loved, and free.

Lord Jesus, thank You for taking my place. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever substituted yourself for someone else in an unpleasant situation, small or large?
- If so, why did you do it? What was the other person's reaction?
- How do you think Simon felt when he became a believer and found out what Jesus did for him? (The fact that the early church knew his sons' names makes this very likely—see Mark 15:21.)

HOPELESS?

And there followed Him a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for Him. But turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' … For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (Luke 23:27-29, 31)

It always amazes me how much care Jesus shows for the people around Him, even on the way to His own death. The women of Jerusalem have come out to weep and lament for Him. But when Jesus sees them, He is grieved for them. Some of them will see the day when the Romans come to destroy the city and the temple. Some will doubtless lose children to the war, or even die themselves.

Jesus connects their suffering to His own. If He, the very Son of God, must suffer and die on a cross now, although He is innocent of any wrongdoing—what evils will happen to these people when the living presence of God is no longer physically among them? It will be like a wildfire sweeping through dry brush.

So is there any hope for them? Yes, the same hope that we have. For Jesus' death is not the end. On the third day He will rise, never to die again—and He will share that hope and victory with everyone who trusts in Him. The promise is for everyone—these women, their children—you and me.

Lord Jesus, when I am facing a situation with no hope, give Your hope and life to me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you think any of these people were among the first Christian believers?
- Have you ever felt hopeless?
- How did God care for you during that time?

THE COURTESY OF GOD

[Jesus] sent two of the disciples, saying … "You will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever yet sat. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' you shall say this: 'The Lord has need of it.'" … And they brought it to Jesus, and throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. And as He rode along, they spread their cloaks on the road. (Luke 19:29b, 30b, 31, 35-36)

I love those words, "The Lord has need of it." God, needing something from us? My mind boggles. But that is what we get, at the moment of Jesus' greatest earthly glory. It's all borrowed.

Jesus borrows a donkey because He has nothing of His own to use, no horse or cart. Jesus has no saddle—so His disciples volunteer their cloaks. He has no royal carpet to ride on, no courtiers to go before and after Him—so the townspeople supply everything He needs.

This is the great courtesy and kindness of God, to give us the honor of supplying His needs, even on this day of His glory. For how should it be, that the great God should become a human being—should need milk and clothes and a manger to sleep in, parents to change Him and wash His diapers? How should it be, that the God who came to save us should let us cook for Him, run errands for Him, anoint Him for His burial?

And now that He has saved us forever through His death and resurrection, He still gives us the chance to serve Him—to take care of "the least of these My brethren," the people in need around us. For He says, "What you do to them, you do to Me" (see Matthew 25:31-40). What an honor!

Thank You, dear God, for allowing me to give to You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What have you "lent to the Lord," small or great?
- How did it make you feel?
- Why do you think God makes our small services a part of His great work?

"THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO"

And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on His right and one on His left. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." … (Luke 23:33-34b)

How do you measure sin—by what the person meant to do, or by the harm that actually came of it? If I meant to do a minor harm and actually ended up doing lifelong damage, to what extent am I responsible? How much guilt should I feel? Can I ever be forgiven?

Certainly, the men crucifying Jesus had no idea what they were doing. They knew they were killing a man. They might have realized they were killing an innocent man. They had no idea they were killing the Son of Man—the Son of God—God Himself. How do you measure that?

Jesus doesn't. He refuses to measure their sin at all. Instead, He appeals to the Father, begging Him to forgive them regardless. Jesus is including their sin—this very sin of killing Him—in the whole mass of sins He is laying down His life to forgive. He doesn't want measurements—retribution—a scheme of debts or repayments. Let it all go, under the blood of Jesus. He is paying in full.

If we have sinned—no matter how deeply we have sinned, or what the consequences have been—we can be forgiven and cleansed through the blood of Jesus. Jesus has paid, and there is no higher price possible than His life willingly laid down. Trust in Him. Measurements don't matter anymore—except to remember, again and again, the depth of His love, and the wonder of His kindness.

Lord, take all my sins from me, and make me clean. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you tend to value sin and guilt by intentions or by actual harm done? Why?
- Does it make a difference if you are the sinner or the sinned-against?
- How does Jesus' unbelievably extravagant payment for our sins set us free from worrying over what we owe?

KING OF THE JEWS

And they cast lots to divide His garments. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at Him, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself, if He is the Christ of God, His Chosen One!" The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up and offering Him sour wine and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!" There was also an inscription over Him, "This is the King of the Jews." (Luke 23:34b-38)

Look at Him hanging there—naked, beaten, covered in blood. Look at the nails in His hands and feet. His crown is made of thorns, and His throne is a cross. The men of His court are dying criminals. What kind of a king is this?

Most people would say, "Not a very effective one." As the rulers put it, "He saved others; why can't He save Himself?" Where's the power and glory now, Jesus? Why can't You get down off that cross?

They didn't know that Jesus' weakness *was* His power, at that moment. His suffering was no accident; it was God's design to save us all. Even as they mocked Him, Jesus was working; He was working as hard as He had ever worked in His life, to break the power of sin, death, and the devil, and set us all free.

That is what a king is for—to save His people. The prophet Zephaniah tells us what Jesus is doing: "The Lord has taken away the judgments against you; He has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil" (Zephaniah 3:15).

This is the King of the Jews, the Lord, in our midst—our crucified and risen Savior, Jesus.

There is no one like You, Lord. Thank You, Father, for giving us Jesus as our King. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What makes a good king?
- How does Jesus go beyond being simply a good king?
- Why do you think the Lord chose this sort of death for Himself, and not something else?

TWO WAYS—ONE SAVIOR

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" But the other rebuked Him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." And He said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise." (Luke 23:39-43)

We usually treat the two criminals in this story as a contrasting pair. One takes out his pain and anger on an innocent bystander, Jesus. The other rebukes him and speaks politely.

The obvious moral of the story, humanly speaking, is "Be like the second man; don't be like the first!" But that's not good enough. Both of these men are dying; neither of them is going to escape, no matter how polite or kind they are. If that's the way life is, why *not* rage? Why not vent our feelings on everyone around us? It makes no difference in the end.

Except for one thing. Hanging between the two men is Jesus. He too is dying. He too is helpless—to save Himself, that is. But He can save them. He *wants* to save them. No sooner does the one man ask, "Remember me," than Jesus is already assuring him, "Today you will be with Me in paradise."

When we suffer—when we are angry and hurting and afraid—when we are dying—there is very little we can do, either. But Jesus can do something, and He does. He says to us, "I love you. I died and rose for you. Trust in Me, and you will be with Me in paradise. I am with you now, and I will never leave you, no matter what."

Lord, stay with me and deliver me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Why do people "vent"?
- When you are afraid and hurting, how do you usually react?
- How has God helped you during a time of great suffering?

BETTER THAN A PHOTO

And when the hour came, He reclined at table, and the apostles with Him. And He said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. …" And He took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me." And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood." (Luke 22:14-15, 19-20)

Like many people, I have voicemails and videos I will never erase. They are the only way I will ever see or hear again the voice of people I love who have died. Until I, too, go to be with the Lord, they are all I have.

On the eve of His death, it seems to me that Jesus, too, felt this need to leave the people He loved something of Himself. Oh, He knew He would rise again, and also that He would be with them forever, even after His ascension to heaven—but it wouldn't be the same as seeing and hearing and touching Him daily. So Jesus gave us Communion.

"This is My body," He said, breaking the bread and giving it to them. "This cup is the new covenant in My blood." And they ate and drank, and were comforted. Jesus gives us many gifts through Communion—forgiveness, life, peace—but best of all is the gift of Himself. And we have that gift forever, until the day He returns to us bodily—and we go to live with Him forever.

Lord, thank You for Your gift of love. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What keepsakes do you have of someone who loved you?
- How often do you go to Communion? Do you wish it was more often or less? Why?
- When you see Jesus face to face—what do you imagine your reaction will be?

NO ACCIDENT

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit!" And having said this He breathed His last. (Luke 23:44-46)

Three hours of darkness. An earthquake. And Jesus' final words, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit!"

And then He died.

For most of us, death comes unchosen. It happens when we can no longer escape it. But that's not true for Jesus. His death was planned from the foundation of the world, chosen by Father, Son, and Spirit in the council of the Trinity. Now it has come, the climax of history.

See the darkness and the earthquake, tearing the temple curtain in two. God the Father is honoring the death of His Son. Listen to Jesus call out with a loud voice even from the cross, which normally kills its victims by slowly suffocating them. Clearly Jesus can still breathe—but He has finished His work of salvation. He chooses to lay down His life at this moment, entrusting Himself to the Father.

Jesus has finished the work that love drove Him to do. The devil has been defeated; the great ransom has been paid; God's people are free. They don't know it yet, but they will soon—and they will rejoice.

For on the third day Jesus will rise from the dead, never to die again—a thing that has never happened since the beginning of the world. He will share this gift of life with the people He loves and has saved—with you and me, everyone who trusts in Him. And the long course of history will begin to bend upward, into the light—as millions and billions of people come to know Jesus as their Savior, until the day He returns again in glory.

Dear Lord, thank You for saving us. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What emotions does Good Friday usually inspire in you? Why?
- Why do you think God caused the curtain of the temple to be torn in two?
- How has Jesus' death affected the darkness you've experienced in your own life?

LOVE IN DARK TIMES

Now there was a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid Him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with Him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how His body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. (Luke 23:50-56)

It comforts me to see these people caring for Jesus. Joseph, who got up his courage at the last moment—*after* the last moment—and went off to claim Jesus' body, when the only thing likely to happen now was Joseph getting in trouble with the rest of the council. The women, who could do nothing at the cross, but are determined to see that Jesus' funeral is done right. It looks like a waste of time—except that love is never wasted.

And of course they did all this in hopelessness—maybe not even remembering what Jesus had said about rising on the third day. No, they thought Jesus was dead forever and would never know about their care. They did what they did because they loved Him. That was all they had. And that was enough. Because God was handling the rest of it, unknown to them—just as He does for us when we walk in the darkness.

Their sun was about to rise.

Father, make Your love shine through me even in times of darkness. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- In times of tragedy, are you more likely to sit stunned or to get busy?
- When have you acted in darkness simply because you loved, and not because you saw any good coming out of it?
- Did God bring good out of it regardless?

LOOKING FOR JESUS

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. … The men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how He told you, while He was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." And they remembered His words … (Luke 24:1-4, 5b-8)

"Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here." The women knew that. They had already seen that the tomb was empty.

So where was Jesus? The angels *didn't* tell them that. They would have to find out for themselves.

And where should they look? Not among the dead. Among the living, then. And they took off running.

The rest of the day was like a game of hide and seek, as various people saw Jesus, or didn't. You could follow Jesus' trail by the living joy He left behind Him. They were no longer stuck in the quicksand of disbelief and sadness. Jesus had been with them!

So where will we find Jesus today, then? Not among the dead, that's for sure. As we wait for His Second Coming, we will find Him among the living—among those who trust His words, even when they sound impossible—"I forgive you," "You are Mine," You are children of God." The risen Jesus has raised us from the dead, too, and we are His forever.

Lord Jesus, be with me forever, and make me alive in You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Is there a difference between believers and nonbelievers, in your experience?
- If so, what is it?
- What difference does Jesus' resurrection make to your daily life?

THE JOY OF GOD

That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus … Jesus Himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing Him. And He said to them, "What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered Him, "Are You the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" And He said to them, "What things?" And they said to Him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth …" (Luke 24:13a, 15b-19a)

I love to see the joy of Jesus, on this, the day of His resurrection. With each new visit He sees the people He loves go from grief to overflowing joy, as they realize they have Him back against all hope. Now, with our salvation finally won, there is time for play—even a bit of teasing.

The two disciples walking to Emmaus come in for the worst of it. They have heard about the resurrection, but they do not believe it—though they can't stop talking about it! What a great time for Jesus Himself to walk up beside them, unrecognized, and start asking innocent questions. "What are you talking about?"

And Cleopas says the most embarrassing thing ever: "*Are you the only one* in all Jerusalem who hasn't heard the news?" To which Jesus says (as if He didn't know!) "What things?" I can just see Him shaking the sleeve of His robe a little further down, to hide the nail-holes!

Jesus' joy is one of His best gifts to us, and not something to miss. He died for our sins, yes—and He has risen for our eternal life, joy, and blessedness with Him forever. Thanks be to God!

Lord, thank You that You give us not just forgiveness, but love, joy, and life forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you tend to think more about your sins or about God's goodness and mercy?
- Why?
- How does Jesus' joy make a difference in your life?

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