



Lenten Devotional Guide

40 Day Lenten Journey—Meeting the Christ of the Cross

This devotional series will take you through the Lenten season toward a fuller appreciation of the Christ of the Cross we will celebrate this Easter. Scripture quotations have been taken from the Contemporary English Version, with a slight change to use the proper name *Yahweh* where the CEV uses the traditional "LORD" in place of God's personal name in the Hebrew Scriptures. These devotions are not simply meditations on the cross. They are a challenge to encounter Jesus and follow in the path of discipleship.

First Day—Ash Wednesday:

“Listen, Israel! Yahweh our God is the only true God! So love Yahweh your God with all your heart, soul, and strength.” Deuteronomy 6:4-5

Today's text, the *Shema* is the emblematic summary of the commandments which the Hebrews pinned to their clothing and attached to the door posts of their homes as visible reminders of the uniqueness of *Yahweh*, God of Israel, and their duty to honor and serve *Yahweh* alone. While we honor God as the only God and the only one worthy of our worship, our lives and allegiances are still too often divided.

We serve the gods of wealth, fame, prosperity, comfort, and tradition. We bow to the dictates of media messages, even as we decry and repudiate their influence upon the larger society in which we live. We still struggle to honor *Yahweh*, God of Israel, incarnate in Jesus Christ as the only authority in our lives. We pay homage to wealth, power, success, and the latest consumables heralded as worthy of our wealth, time, and attention.

Singing praises to the name of God, odes to the holiness of the One who has called us to new life in eternal relationship is good, noble, and right. Loving God as the only sovereign of our lives, however, is a far different thing. Love expressed in the proper words at the proper times is one thing. Love that is not also expressed in actions which underscore our words of praise is no love at all. How do our lives express a love for God?

I am reminded of a young man who wrote a love letter to his girlfriend: “I would climb the highest mountain, sail the deepest ocean, swim the widest river, and walk the driest desert just to spend an hour with you! P.S. See you Saturday if it doesn't rain.” Unfortunately, the postscript belies the whole expression of love.

Are my actions expressive of my love for God, or only when loving God is convenient?

Find one way today to express your love for God, not in words alone, but in action.

“Lord, help me to understand what it means to love you and why you would love me despite my meager love for you.”

Second Day:

“Finally, my friends, keep your minds on whatever is true, pure, right, holy, friendly, and proper. Don’t ever stop thinking about what is truly worthwhile and worthy of praise.” Philippians 4:8

Writing from prison, Paul addresses issues of joy, peace, and contentment, as he calls on believers to focus their attention toward the goals of the Christian experience. Our minds are to be focused on the very characteristics of Jesus Christ, the goal of our call. If we are to become Christ Jesus to the world, we are to live as Jesus himself lived. We are to become refashioned into the character of Christ Jesus.

From Paul's perspective, this begins by refocusing our minds and attentions on the character of the One we have been called to love, emulate, and express to the world around us. As we focus our attention on Christ, we must likewise take our attention and focus off the world. Those things which are not Christ-like must be removed from the focus of our attention in order that Christ Jesus might take center stage. Those things which are right, true, pure, holy, and proper are the things which must fill our minds.

There are many demands for our attention today. Not many of them measure up to this list of Paul's. There were many competing demands for his attention in his own day. He was imprisoned, chained to a Roman guard 24 hours a day. He heard reports of conflict in the Philippian church. Even so, he chose to focus his attention on the things of Christ Jesus instead of the suffering he faced.

The battle for our attention is the battle for our direction, focus, and character. The GIGO principle—Garbage In, Garbage Out—applies to our spiritual lives as well as to technology. If we are to become a people who love God and live according to the purposes of Christ Jesus, we must give Jesus and the things of God the focus of our attention.

How much time do I give God to influence my life to become more like Christ Jesus?

As well as finding an active way to express your love for God, choose one way to focus your attention on the things of God and the character of Christ Jesus.

“Lord, help me to focus my attention on You, giving you more opportunity to speak to and direct me than I give to other influences.”

Third Day:

“You, Yahweh, are my shepherd; I will never be in need.” Psalm 23:1

As the psalmist reflected, God as shepherd cares for our needs. All too often, however, we live and talk as though our needs are provided by some other means—those means we can measure, quantify, and compare in a modern economy. We teach our children that it is through hard work, diligent

preparation, and a persevering struggle to get ahead that our needs will be met. This is the message of our society, yet it is not the message of God.

With the fluctuations of markets, the closing of corporations, rising costs of health care, and the pressures of foreclosures, we are tempted to believe the message that God has little to do with the provision of our needs. We are tempted to read the names on paychecks as the sources of our provision. It was perhaps easier in an agrarian society to understand one's dependence upon the God who sends rain, bring fertility to the flocks and crops, and makes the sun to shine.

Yet we are still dependent upon wind and rain, tides and seasons, sun and snow to provide for our needs. God's ways of provision may not be as visible or traceable in an industrial, technical, and electronic society, yet the truth of God's provision is still the same.

For generations upon generations, we have fought this truth expressed by the psalmist. We have struggled with the interpretation of wants versus needs. We have struggled to understand how God uses our efforts as part of the means of provision, yet providing beyond the limits of our abilities and possibilities. We have struggled against the very idea of this dependence. We want to be less dependent and in greater control.

The psalmist, however, found comfort in God's provision. The psalmist learned to rest in God's provision and relish that he did not need to be in control. When we can arrive at that point in our own lives, there is true refreshment and rest in the character of this Shepherd who does indeed care for our needs.

Do I consciously rely on God to meet my needs as the shepherd of his sheep?

While you continue finding ways to demonstrate love for God and focus your attention on God's character, look for a source of your worry in regard to the provision of your needs. Turn that over to God—the One who loves you and cares to meet your needs. Trust God enough to be God's provision for someone else today.

“Lord, help me to let go of my need to be in control, that I might rest in your provision, finding the freedom I need to serve you.”

Fourth Day:

“Then Joshua told the people: Worship Yahweh, obey him, and always be faithful. Get rid of the idols your ancestors worshiped when they lived on the other side of the Euphrates River and in Egypt.”
Joshua 24:14

Joshua's words did not come at the beginning of his ministry. He is not speaking to people to whom *Yahweh* was a new name, a new understanding of God. This was a people who had already lived under the leadership of Moses. They had been rescued from Egypt under Pharaoh, crossed the Sea of Reeds, and been led to victory over kings during their wilderness wandering. God had fed them with manna, given them water in an arid land, and entered the Promised Land on dry ground amid the waters

of the Jordan River. They had seen the victories *Yahweh* had granted them. Regardless of all this, they were still not wholeheartedly serving *Yahweh*.

We may often be surprised at how long it took this nation to trust *Yahweh* and *Yahweh* alone. Too often, however, we fall into the same trap. As these Hebrews, we look to the traditions and culture of our families with greater attention than to the words and instructions of God. We look to those things our forefathers held dear as the tried and true ways to make our way in the world. Sometimes those ways and values have indeed coincided with the will of God. Too often, they have fallen short.

We have looked to the idols of “might makes right”, “wealth is proof of God's approval”, “the pursuit of our happiness is our divine right” (and therefore God's will) and other idols that advanced our private welfare and causes over the needs and circumstances of others. We have allowed our self-centered interests to interfere with hearing the gospel preached by Christ Jesus.

What happened to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”? Where have we found room in our lives for “if your enemy is hungry, feed him, if he is thirsty, give him to drink”? What have we done with “do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”? How have we allowed the mind of Christ to be in us, “who did not consider his station as God something to which to cling, but emptied himself, taking up servant form by being born a human being”?

Rather than live to serve *Yahweh* and *Yahweh* alone, as the Hebrews before Joshua, our allegiances are mixed. We serve self and seek to use the means given us by our society to center our lives on our personal gain, our advancement at the expense of others, and the increase of our welfare with little to no thought to the welfare of two billion people going to bed hungry tonight. We claim to love God, yet John declares that we cannot love God and hate our brother. Ignoring the plight of billions can not be an expression of love and worship, can it?

True worship requires putting aside those idols, values, and ideals that keep us from serving God as God would be served. Find a way to express in action that God is important enough to place personal concerns aside and live more fully aware and involved in the ideals of Christ Jesus.

“Lord, help me to see where I fail to worship you, that I might lay aside all that which impedes me from a true and wholehearted worship.”

Fifth Day:

“On the day of judgment many will call me their Lord. They will say, ‘We preached in your name, and in your name we forced out demons and worked many miracles.’ But I will tell them, ‘I will have nothing to do with you! Get out of my sight, you evil people!’” Matthew 7:22-23

Ouch! These are definitely not the words of Jesus that we expect. We are perhaps too lulled by Jesus as presented in the hymn, *Softly and Tenderly Jesus is Calling* to see Jesus in the force of these words. Nonetheless, this is an aspect of Jesus we need to hear. Along with God's tremendous love poured out for us on the cross of Christ, we must recognize the call to committed discipleship.

We would hardly allow for a marriage partner to assume the goodness of our love would ignore any sense of responsibility and commitment on their part to the relationship. We would think little of one who claimed to love a spouse who consistently neglected and abused them. We would call that an abusive and faulty relationship. Love may be granted with all its tenderness, forgiveness, and willingness to pay a deep price to help the other. That same love, however, demands the sincerity of a commitment in reciprocity.

Some have said that love is a 50-50 proposition. Wiser ones have stated that a lasting love relationship requires that it be a 100-100 proposition. Each one must assume full responsibility to meet the needs of the other, even when the other is unable to respond. Where the commitment is one-sided, however, it is not a relationship of love. It is a parasitic relationship.

Jesus does not offer that we become parasites to a God who fulfills our needs, whims, and desires. Jesus offers rather, that we become wedded to God in a committed relationship where calling Jesus Lord means that we offer our lives to serve the direction God establishes at the expense of our own personal preferences and ambitions.

We may perform deeds of visible service in the name of Christ Jesus without ever bowing our lives in acceptance of Him as Lord. Ambition may drive some to becoming heralded by men as servants of God, while they serve themselves alone. Wealth, fame, and fortune may take others to make a pretense of Christian service that puts on a respectable show. Allowing the love of God room to grow in our lives and transform us into true servants of the Almighty, however, is a far different thing.

Today's text comes at the conclusion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. He speaks of works that bear out the truth of our claims of service. If we are to accept Jesus as Lord, we must allow the words of the whole sermon to filter into our daily actions and transform our motives from personal advancement to love that places the needs of others on a par with the way Jesus received those in need of healing, cleansing, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Does the story of my life display the presence, will, and direction of Jesus' life?

Worship is service and action. Find a practical way to love someone who God loves, but I find difficult to serve. Allow Christ to direct your actions, becoming lord of your relationships with those Christ would touch through you.

“Lord, interrupt my plans, ambitions, and dreams by replacing them with yours. Take my life out of its rut and place me in your path of service.”

Sixth Day:

“But if you don't want to worship Yahweh, then choose right now! Will you worship the same idols your ancestors did? Or since you're living on the land that once belonged to the Amorites, maybe you'll worship their gods. I won't. My family and I are going to worship and obey Yahweh!” Joshua 24:15

Joshua again! This is only one verse later than what we read two days ago. He was pretty emphatic with these people. In the same context, he will tell them that he does not believe they will be faithful, regardless of their cries of fidelity to *Yahweh*. He knew them too well. They were too enmeshed in their way of life to let God change them in any meaningful way. They knew all the right answers to Joshua's cry for commitment, but their words were empty.

If we went back, we would find Moses giving the people pretty much the same challenge a generation before. We would have heard about the same response, too—all the right answers, all the declarations of fidelity to *Yahweh*, and all the same empty content of a people following a tradition of faith without a real commitment to allow that faith to change them from the inside out.

Joshua made a stand against the people. It wasn't a stand against a nation that volubly rebelled against God to serve its own immoral interests. He took a stand against a people who were more like the church. They were a people who claimed to honor God. They were a people who claimed allegiance to God. They were a people who made a loud, public show of their faithful worship. They were a people who were still not committed to God beyond those external trappings of allegiance.

They checked into their religious forms of expression. They repeated all the right words. They sang the songs, offered the right sacrifices, and repeated the prescribed prayers. They railed against the excesses of others, the wickedness of their neighbors, and the abuses of the poor and disenfranchised. At the end of the day, they went back to their patterns of living for self instead of for God. They refused to discard the idols that were still in their possession.

They prayed to *Yahweh*, and then performed the fertility rituals associated with the idols of their forefathers. They sacrificed as *Yahweh* prescribed and presented the required offerings, and then used them as an excuse to go on with their plans for revenge, enjoyment of the thrills of the cultures surrounding them, and accepting the conveniences of their idolatrous neighbors with little regard for *Yahweh's* demand that they be holy.

They set aside the command to reflect on the uniqueness of *Yahweh* as a daily practice that would consume their activities. They ignored that they were called to actually love *Yahweh*, not simply agree to a few descriptions and statements about God. Joshua took a stand to be different from within a nation that outwardly accepted being the people of *Yahweh*. It was not enough to hide in the crowd. God called him to a different quality of service and dedication the crowd would never accept.

It is too easy to adapt to the standard practice of acceptable worship. How will you allow God to make a difference in your life that is deeper than that of run-of-the-mill Christianity all around us? Find a practical way to make your relationship with God one that truly makes a difference in your life.

“Lord, you have called me to more than a mere existence alongside your name. Help me to serve you as you wish to be served, not as the patterns for which I have settled.”

Seventh Day:

“Jesus answered, ‘Why did you have to look for me? Didn’t you know that I would be in my Father’s house?’” Luke 2:49

What do our habits say about us? Jesus expected his family to know where to find him. Even as a child, a pattern was laid for his character, identity, and concerns. The routines of his life spoke of who he was and fashioned a mold of what one might expect of him.

His parents missed the cues of what to expect, possibly because they were too wrapped up in their own established patterns of routine. Apparently, they had not paused long enough to think about where Jesus would be, and what he would be doing.

Early on, Jesus’ life had a pattern. From his *bar mitzvah*, this celebration event at which he became a son of the covenant and regarded as an adult before the law, a pattern was already set. He could already expect his parents to know where he would be and what he would be doing. His character and habits were established around his identity and relationship with God. This relationship had visible marks as it impacted where he went and what he did. It affected what others could and should expect of him, even if they often failed to expect what they should.

This was not the first time that Jesus failed to meet expectations. It was not the last time that the expectations of others regarding him were upended. What made the difference in his case was that others did not really understand God, nor the degree of dedication to serving God’s purposes exhibited in Jesus’ life. They expected less of him than they were seeing. They expected Jesus to be more like themselves than to continue in the pattern he had already established.

That is often the case with our expectations, is it not? We often expect less of others, instead of more. We are surprised when we find people who truly dedicate their lives to serve God. Perhaps we wish they were more like ourselves and thus held us to lesser standards. Perhaps we prefer to ignore the challenge their lives might place before our own experience and commitment to following Christ Jesus. Perhaps we look to Christ with the same dumbfounded response of his own parents who did not recognize that he would be found involved in the business of God.

While we might be tempted as they to recast Jesus more in line with our own ideals, attitudes, and aims, we must seek to find Jesus according to his true identity and character. The one who here does not follow the crowds home from the Temple, but remains to converse about the will, character, and identity of God, is the one who made his way not to the glory of a crown, but to the disgrace and shame of a cross. He is obviously to be found about his Father’s business and in his Father’s house, if we would but stop to consider who he is, we would find him.

Where can I be found? What do my habits, routines, and aims teach others to expect from me?

Determine how your habits need to adapt if love for God is to change your life. What would it take for friends and family to know to look for you going about the business of your Father?

“Lord, help me to see you for who you truly are, that I might carry on with your plans and purpose. May others know to find me seeking after your priorities, not of those of the crowd.”

Eighth Day:

“Don’t be afraid,’ Elisha answered. ‘There are more troops on our side than on theirs.’ Then he prayed, ‘Yahweh, please help him to see.’ And Yahweh let the servant see that the hill was covered with fiery horses and flaming chariots all around Elisha.” 2 Kings 6:16-17

Things are not always as they appear. It seems I have heard that refrain in some form repeatedly in various books, movies, and TV shows. Though we use the idea with fiction and imaginative fantasy, it is also a deeper reality of the physical and spiritual world in which we live. Political mantras and rhetoric do not always follow the realities they claim to define or interpret. Those we believe to speak truth may themselves be deceived. Our pet understandings of science or history may indeed prove to be false on closer inspection.

Gaining a clear grasp of reality is not a simple exercise. We are not omniscient creatures, nor are we gifted with a simplistic portrayal of all truth in the Scriptures. Rather, here we are instructed to seek God with all our heart in order to truly find him. Jesus will tell us that he spoke in parables in order that they crowds might NOT understand and then be held accountable. Faith, understanding, and knowing God and seeing God in action are part of a journey that must be taken in sincerity and with commitment to allow God to reveal spiritual truth on God’s own terms.

Our first thought might be that we need to see. We desperately need to see God and what God is doing around us. This may not be quite true, however. It is not normal in the Bible for even the heroes of faith to see with Elisha’s perception and live on the basis of a heavenly powered sight. Faith, after all, is not so much about knowing, but about trusting even when we do not know. It is about following when we cannot see the one who leads. It is about overcoming fear when there is every reason to fear, not simply when fear is vanquished.

Elisha could see what *Yahweh* was doing, yet his servant remained blind. Elisha saw, but he had first been brought to believe and trust before God had taught him to see. The enemy soldiers remained blind to the reality of God’s presence and action. This kind of perception of God’s presence and action is not for the uninitiated, but for those who truly seek to know God and follow God’s leading despite the evidence of visible reality. It is a journey of learning trust.

Elisha does pray for God to grant new sight to his servant here. Perhaps more importantly, we need the faith to accept that God is in control, present, and active, despite what we are able to see. Which is the greater faith, after all: a faith which see things as they are, or the faith that trusts God without regard for appearance or vision at all? Are we willing to follow God even while still blind?

Seek out that one thing you know to be God’s will, yet can’t see how appearances make it possible. Trust God to be present and active, regardless of appearances and circumstances.

“Lord, make me more aware of your presence and action. More than that, however, make me confident in you, regardless of the limitations of my sight.”

Ninth Day:

“I know all about my sins, and I cannot forget my terrible guilt. You are really the one I have sinned against; I have disobeyed you and have done wrong. So it is right and fair for you to correct and punish me.” Psalm 51:3-4

Sin. We are not very comfortable dealing with questions of sin. Well, our own sin, anyway. We are much more comfortable dealing with the sin of some unidentifiable mass of people without names or those whose actions have personally offended us.

We can easily decry an unknown, unidentifiable mass who systematically kill unborn babies. We can decry the destruction of the family and the way divorce has damaged so many lives. We can paint sin out most any way we choose, especially when we are removed from the individuals struggling with hard choices. When we identify the face of a friend or family member in crisis, issues suddenly take on a different hue. When hard choices come down to my life, my situation, and my family, circumstances suddenly look vastly different from mass murder, escalating divorce rates, and corporate greed. We weigh issues differently when we are personally involved.

It is one thing to decry war over mineral rights. It is a far different to understand that my desire for cell phone gadgetry is complicit in the death and torture of hundreds of thousands of people between my cell phone and the mining of precious minerals in an African nation I have never visited. It is one thing to brush aside reports of starving billions in unknown reaches of the world and quite another to overlook a mother in line at the grocery store, unable to pay for the meager items in her cart.

“Someone should do something about it” ignores my responsibility to be God’s means of resolution. Standing on the sidelines to decry the sins of some nebulous “corporate greed”, “mass murderers”, “terrorists”, and “criminals running rampant” does not do justice to my own neglect in delivering justice, equity, mercy, compassion, and God’s love for those in need.

Too often we hide behind slogans that speak of society’s attack against the church or the morals and values for which Christianity stands. Feeling ourselves threatened from the outside, we resort to a defensive posture or return our own attacks against a nebulous foe. In the process, we fail miserably to address our own sin. This is the sin we have the power to do something about. This is where the battle really begins. This is where the war is won or lost.

Jesus did not come attacking the society around him so much as pointing the way of righteousness and justice through his own example. Sure, he decried the hypocrisy of those claiming to speak for God. More often, however, he taught his own disciples to look inside their own hearts and lives. It is not the sins of the world for which I need to be concerned. It is my own sin. That is the one I can address. Are we willing to judge ourselves with honesty?

God knows our sin. What is the major obstacle in your relationship with God that keeps you from becoming God’s wholehearted servant? Confess that sin and make plans for God to help you beyond its influence.

“Lord, you know my sin and failure. Help me to see myself according to your perception.”

Tenth Day:

“You know the commandment which says, ‘Be faithful in marriage.’ But I tell you that if you look at another woman and want her, you are already unfaithful in your thoughts. If your right eye causes you to sin, poke it out and throw it away. It is better to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to end up in hell.” Matthew 5:27-28

We would much rather compare ourselves to the standards of the society around us than the standards of Christ Jesus. It is much easier to compare our failings with the worst examples we can find around us. Jesus just does not allow for that kind of evaluation.

We like to grade sin. We have our scales for things like genocide, murder, abortion, homosexuality, adultery, pre-marital sex, pornography, slavery, racism, intolerance, theft, greed, and degrading others. There is some validity to the scale in that there is greater harm from some actions than from others. Perhaps we should say there is more direct or visible harm from some than others. Maybe that is the real problem with our grading scale.

Sin is sin is sin. There is just no getting around it in light of Jesus’ words. There are no big sins and little sins in Jesus’ equation. To live in adultery and to stimulate adulterous thoughts in ourselves or others is simply wrong. To rob a bank and to wish for ownership of another’s property are equally wrong. To take food away from the hungry and to gorge ourselves beyond the meeting of our needs are both wrong. Sin is sin is sin. It is failing to measure up to God’s will, design, and plan for our lives.

We want to legislate morality. We want to define acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Mostly, we want to legislate rules and restrictions for others. For ourselves, we want to find loopholes, exceptions, and excuses. What a wonderful world it would be if everyone else loved their neighbors, gave to those who requested, met everyone else’s needs, and returned good for evil—so long as I were free to enjoy the freedom of living according to my self-interested desires! Jesus’ words call us to a higher plane of living.

We are not called to play the limbo with God’s instructions for life—struggling to see how low we can get and still scrape by. Rather, we are called to not only a higher plane of experience, but to the highest standard possible. We are to live by the standard that Jesus not only preached in the Sermon on the Mount, but also lived all the way to the cross.

In *Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare puts it this way: “‘How far that little candle throws its beams.’ ‘When the moon shone, we did not see the candle.’ ‘So doth the greater glory dim the less.’” In the greater glory of Jesus’ teaching and example, the lesser standards of virtue are dimmed to extinction. It is after the greater example we are called to strive. Where am I failing to seek the standard of Christ Jesus?

Focus on one area of life where you have settled for a lesser standard. Determine to live according to the standard of God’s perfect will.

“Lord, you know I am far from who I should be. Give me the courage to seek after your perfect will and purpose.”

Eleventh Day:

“Hatred stirs up trouble; love overlooks the wrongs that others do.” Proverbs 10:12

We desperately want to believe that hatred centers on the other person—the one who has wronged us or those we love. Perhaps we extend it to some who have insulted God or the patterns of our religious convictions. At heart, however, hatred is a personal issue. It is a private world that revolves around our own response to a lagging sense of worth and self-protection.

Our libraries shelves, movie theaters, and even our children’s cartoons are full of stories pointing out that those who are most filled with hate are the villains of meanest character. They are the arrogant, self-serving, narcissists who hate those who provide a critique to the value or self-serving interests of the one whose hate is most evident. They are the troublemakers.

When we look at our own hatred, however, we blot out what we naturally know about hatred. We ignore the wisdom of our vast entertainment literature, as well as the wisdom of God. Hatred is bad in others, we try to say, but not in ourselves. Our own hatreds are justifiable responses to injuries we have suffered from the negligence or evil actions of others. We hate them because of what they have done. It is a comment on their character, not our own.

By such logic, God should hate us. It would be justifiable for God to hate all of humanity, for we have all offended God, trashed God’s creation, neglected to render worship and praise to our creator. We are even complicit in nailing God to a cross in our rejection of God’s interference in our lives, serving our traditions about God rather than very God. Such is not the logic, nor the choice of God.

Rather than hate, God calls us to love. Rather than anger over injury, grievance, and suffering, God calls us to forgiveness and restoration. God calls us to love.

When we are injured, God says, “Forgive.” When we are assaulted, God says, “Love.” When we are wronged, God says, “Become more like me and display grace and mercy.” Rather than look outside us to find excuses for living without love, we are to look within to find God’s love to share with those who are still yearning for acceptance, worth, and love.

As self-justified as our hatred may seem, it does nothing more than destroy and create trouble. It is never a Godly response. It is never Jesus’ way of answering those who have wronged another. Rather than hatred, Jesus taught and responded with love. While this love did not ignore the realities of sin and evil, it looked beyond them to offer a better way of responding and restoring what is broken.

Am I ready to look beyond the hatreds I harbor to find the restoring love of God?

Identify where hatred, anger, and resentment still reign in your life. Give them up to the One who lay down his own life in love in the face of our anger, rebellion, and hatred.

“Lord, help me to let go of my hatred, anger, and resentment. Help me to see those who have injured me or my friends as needing the restoring grace of your love flowing through me.”

Twelfth Day:

“Then Jesus said to the man who had invited him: ‘When you give a dinner or banquet, don’t invite your friends and family and relatives and rich neighbors. If you do, they will invite you in return, and you will be paid back. When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.’”
Luke 14:12-13

What a strange way to thank a host for inviting you to a meal! Why didn’t Mary teach Jesus some descent manners? Then again, manners may be exactly what Jesus was addressing as the problem.

We follow the prescribed norms of interacting with people to make sure that we are greeted in a favorable light. We teach our children to be pleasant and ingratiating, specifically for selfish interests. If they put on a nice face and make people feel good around them, it is the most self-serving thing one can do—and you can get away with it along with everyone’s praise! You’ll get yourself invited back, and that will be one more free meal!

Well, we don’t talk about manners in those terms, but that is how it works. Politeness and courtesy are often much more about serving our own reputation and self-interest than truly serving the interests of others. Jesus would rather we serve those who need our service.

“Please” and “Thank-you” are those magical words that Barney teaches our young. They are an important lesson on the road toward understanding the importance that other people play in our lives. We begin interacting with the world in need to making a connection between our actions and the lives of those around us. Play fair. Don’t bite. Don’t hit. Be nice. As far as it goes, those are great manners to learn. The problem is when we stop with those manners we teach our children and don’t get beyond them to the harder issues of relating in love toward strangers, foreigners, those we do not deem our peers, and others in need of our abundance.

This is what Jesus is addressing. In part, he is recognizing that his host is heading in the right direction by inviting Jesus and his retinue with the full knowledge that Jesus cannot repay with a similar invitation. Yet the issue goes further on Jesus’ lips. Not only should this courtesy apply to one deemed a servant of God, and therefore to be repaid by the Almighty, it should also extend to those who are in need of the very basics of life.

It is one thing to invite a friend over to a meal. It is another to make the same invitation to those whose very presence makes us uncomfortable. It is dangerous. As we invite them into our lives, they will become more than someone to ignore. They become one whose story we are learning to hear. They become individuals for whom Christ died. They become friends who are in need. They become extensions of our own family. They become that other child in preschool with whom we are taught to share.

How far does your hospitality extend? At what point are we afraid to love strangers in need?

Look for a way to invite a stranger into your life and circles of concerns. This is what Christ has done on the cross.

“Lord, help me see others not as problems, but as friends with whom to share your blessings.”

Thirteenth Day:

“Yahweh said, ‘Gideon, your army is too big. I can’t let you win with this many soldiers. The Israelites would think that they had won the battle all by themselves and that I didn’t have anything to do with it.’” Judges 7:2

To start with, the odds weren’t too good for Gideon. Sure, Gideon had a force of 32,000, but the enemy numbered over 130,000. One to four odds in a battle of personal confrontation doesn’t strike my fancy as very good. When *Yahweh* whittled Gideon's force down to 10,000, the odds were one to thirteen. God still did not like those numbers. Sure, it would definitely be a stretch for them to win, but if they won with those numbers they would be proud of their heroic prowess, bravery, skill, and stamina. When Gideon was left with 300 men, God was finally pleased.

One man up against 433 was simply impossible odds. There was no way they could claim credit for a victory in those conditions. They did not have superior weaponry with which to mow down their enemies at a safe distance. They did not have modern air superiority or automatic assault weapons. In fact, they did not have the capability to even begin a battle. All they had was the opportunity to allow God to work through them and in spite of them.

The battle plan was interesting. They were to skyline themselves atop the hills surrounding the enemy encampment after nightfall. Each man would be armed with a torch, a pitcher, and a trumpet. The torch would be kept inside the pitcher until the proper time. On signal, each would break his pitcher to allow the light to shine on the one holding it. With his right hand, each man was to hold a trumpet and sound a loud blast. They were to yell, “A sword for *Yahweh* and for Gideon!”

There was just one glaring problem. What do you do with a sword, bow, sling, shield, or lance while one hand is busy holding a torch and the other holds a trumpet? None of the men had three arms to my knowledge. If they had swords at all, they were hanging useless by their sides.

To be sure, Gideon’s men were not called as warriors. *Yahweh* had summoned them, chosen them out of the 30,000, but not to fight. There was only one thing they were tasked to do. They were to stand on the hillside, hold a torch, blow a trumpet, and announce the presence of *Yahweh*. Skill, power, eloquence, background, education, status, and wealth were completely ignored. Their task was to point not to themselves, but to *Yahweh*, God of Israel. What had to be accomplished in the lives of others depended on God’s doing, not their own. They were tasked as heralds, not warriors.

Is it too different for us? God doesn’t expect great things of us because we are special, skillful, wealthy, powerful, intelligent, or otherwise important in the eyes of society. Serving God is not about our prowess. Rather, it is about heralding God. It isn’t declaring ourselves to the world. It is declaring to the world that Christ Jesus is in our midst. They need not reckon with us, but they must answer to Jesus Christ. Are we ready to join in heralding the presence and action of Christ Jesus in our world?

Find a way to declare the presence of Christ Jesus in your life. Witness does not point to our own qualities, but to Christ Jesus. Point someone else to Christ today, as a faithful herald.

“Lord, guide me to become a faithful herald of your presence, even when the odds seem hopelessly stacked against me. Remind me to point others to you and not myself.”

Fourteenth Day:

“Jesus asked, ‘What do you think the owner of the vineyard will do? He will come and kill those renters and let someone else have his vineyard. You surely know that the Scriptures say, “The stone that the builders tossed aside is now the most important stone of all. This is something Yahweh has done, and it is amazing to us.”” Mark 12:9-11

When Jesus’ words sound harsh, they seem directed not at unbelievers, but at those who call themselves God’s people. They are the ones he criticized most strongly. The Pharisees, Sadducees, and other religious leaders were too comfortable with their standing before God. In hanging onto those things they held dear, they were forgetting about serving God according to God’s plans. They were overly focused on being right, on belonging, on holding onto a tradition, heritage, and promise.

Jesus did not mince words. He painted a bleak picture of those self-righteous religious leaders. It was not that they didn’t have a good set of answers. It was not that they didn’t hold to a good tradition. It was not that they didn’t claim the promises of God through the prophets. It was not any failure to offer sacrifice, worship as prescribed, or study and memorize God’s revealed word. It was that they did all these things to serve themselves, rather than God or those in need of God’s message.

Their focus was not on God, despite their loud claims. They focuses on themselves—their heritage, traditions, beliefs, doctrine, and patterns of living. It was the continual establishment problem. A younger generation desires to correct the excesses of the generation before. It builds new structures then shift focus to preserving the new or improved institution.

As a generation tackles error and excess, it creates excesses of its own. Once again we need reform. Reformation is a continual struggle. Each generation must face its own context, issues, excesses, and errors. It must battle the consistently inward turning of religious structures. It must train its eyes once more toward God and God’s will for a people. It must look long and hard look at its constant bent toward personal issues as the expense of God’s.

We must assume that our own generation faces the same issues. It is too easy to look across the breadth of church history to find its errors and excesses in the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the selling of indulgences, the church’s attempts to wield political power, and attempting to silence Galileo and Copernicus’ claims that the earth was not the center of the universe. We see the problems of the religious leaders in Jesus’ day, but too often ignore our own complicity.

Where is it that we use religious experience, expression, tradition, and heritage to serve our own interests instead of God’s? Are we too attached to our traditions, heritage, or the institutions we have built or inherited to look beyond them to serving the mission and purposes of God?

Look again at the purposes of God in Christ—to reconcile the world in forgiveness, mercy, and grace. Repent of your actions which promote personal interests above the interests and purposes of Christ Jesus. Determine how you will change the direction of your life focus onto the purpose of reconciling the world to God. For Jesus, it is a very serious issue.

“Lord, show me where my life strays from your purposes. Grant me the courage to allow you to alter my course.”

Fifteenth Day:

“We know that Yahweh your God rules heaven and earth, and we’ve lost our courage and will to fight.” Joshua 2:11

We serve the Creator, the All-powerful God, the Ruler of the Universe. We speak of God's greatness, majesty, and authority. We know there is nothing impossible for God. We sing these claims. We quote Scriptural claims of the same. We offer prayers in recognition of God's power, yet in times of distress, we too often look elsewhere for words of comfort, hope, and courage.

That is what happened here in the story of Joshua's spies sent to Jericho. A generation before, Joshua had been one of two spies to report confidence in the victory of *Yahweh* as the people made their way into the land promised to Abraham. He had been one of two spies reporting in contrast to the fear and anxiety of ten others who called the nations of the land giants against whom there was no hope. The nation listened to the words of fear, instead of faith. They spent forty years wandering as a result.

This time around, after a generation's wilderness wandering, Joshua returned Jordan with the Hebrews. He sent two spies into the land to bring back a report. As they entered Jericho, they hid in fear for their lives. They found refuge with a pagan prostitute. Likely she was employed in the practice of temple prostitution to some god or another. She was no servant of *Yahweh*, God of Israel. She had no experience eating manna or drinking water springing from the rocks. She had not participated in the deliverance from Egypt. Even so, it was her words that carried the day.

Jericho was up in arms at recognition that Hebrew spies had entered the city. The king and his soldiers frantically searched for the hidden spies. Rahab turned them away with the story that they had already left town and should be pursued before they got far away. When the soldiers returned to the king, she made her way to the spies she has hidden. Why had she betrayed her people? It was because she was afraid—afraid of *Yahweh*, the God of Israel.

A generation before, Joshua's people had been the ones to cower in fear. Now it was Jericho. The king's soldiers were after the spies, because they were afraid of the Hebrews and their God, *Yahweh*. The Hebrews were afraid of the people of Jericho. It would then be through the words of this woman—a pagan, a prostitute who likely worked in the temple of some false god—that the message of *Yahweh* would come to the Hebrews awaiting the report of the spies.

God's word does not always come, or is not always heeded, anyway, through the likely conduit. It is not through Joshua that the people listened to the word that victory was assured because of *Yahweh*. It was through a woman, a prostitute, a pagan, a traitor to her nation, that God's word was finally heard. How often are we as guilty as these Hebrews of disqualifying the message of God, then determining that only those we determine as qualified can be used to speak for God? Perhaps the real problem is that we just don't trust God and don't want to hear what God has to say.

How has God been trying to get your attention? Determine to be receptive to God's word, regardless of the source through which God should choose to speak.

“Lord, help me to recognize when you speak to me, not disqualifying those through whom you choose to speak, and respond according to your will.”

Sixteenth Day:

“Then Jesus told them, ‘Give the Emperor what belongs to him and give God what belongs to God.’ The men were amazed at Jesus.” Mark 12:17

It was the perfect trick question for trapping Jesus, or so they thought. No one likes to pay taxes. No one like the idea of taxes being raised—at least not when it means they will be the ones paying. After all, we are all at least a little bit selfish. We begrudge taxes at any rate of payment. We begrudge fines we incur through our own folly or through willful decisions to break laws or failure to meet obligations. My rights, my money, and my will always seem to come before any obligation to another.

So they asked Jesus whether or not to pay taxes to Cesar, the emperor who demanded tribute as though he and the gods of Rome were more important than the only true God. Doctrine was on their side. This tax was considered tribute. Tribute was an act of homage and worship. It was the declaration of the rights of the gods of Rome who had gained victory over Israel, vanquishing *Yahweh* in the eyes of the world. The Jews served only one God—the only God. Tribute should never be given to another, since it was an act of worship. Only *Yahweh* was worthy of that! It was the first of the commandments.

Not only were taxes unpopular and the tribute contrary to *Yahweh's* commandments, if Jesus said not to pay them, he would be guilty of treason toward Rome and summarily executed. What they had not counted on was that Jesus was not as selfish as the rest of his generation. He was not so concerned with amassing wealth and believing that coins provided for one's needs. Rather, he trusted that it was God who provides for our welfare.

He had them show him the coin for the tribute. When they showed him the coin, he asked them about the image engraved on it. They responded that it was Cesar's. Jesus reminded them that it was unlawful for them to make or possess any graven image. They should then return to Cesar what came from Cesar. They should also give to God what belongs to or originated with God.

That doesn't leave us much, does it? Once we return to our government all that we receive from our governors and return to God all that comes from God, there is not much left. Selfish hoarding is simply not a divine right. While it may be our natural desire, it is not God's plan for our lives. The Jews talked about being the people of *Yahweh*, but living the reality of that claim is far more than stating a fact. It means living our lives in recognition that we are not our own, but belong heart and soul and talents and breath to God.

Are we any less guilty than those of Jesus' day for coveting what does not really belong to us, and robbing God through our unfaithfulness? Whom do we really fool when we are not faithful in the stewardship of our time, talents, and resources? If it comes from and belongs to God, are we less than thieves if we claim it as our own?

All we have is a gift from God—life, breath, health, time, and talents. Determine what you may have been keeping from God. Decide how you will return to God those things you have been withholding.

“Lord, help me to let go of my selfishness and recall that life with all its blessings is a loan from you. Make me faithful in my stewardship.”

Seventeenth Day:

“Yahweh then stood beside Samuel and called out as he had done before, ‘Samuel! Samuel!’ ‘I’m listening,’ Samuel answered. ‘What do you want me to do?’” 1 Samuel 3:10

Samuel was not expecting God to speak. Sure, he was going through the motions of sleeping before the altar to incubate a word from *Yahweh*, but that did not really mean he expected an answer to his actions. It was customary to offer sacrifices and sleep before the altar of a god to attempt to force some kind of answer. Samuel just did not seem to expect much in the way of results. It is no wonder he expected little, as the passage opens by telling us that God's word was rare in those days.

Samuel made his bed before the altar and lay down to sleep in God's presence. He did not know what to expect, but he went through the motions of pressing for a word from *Yahweh*. After *Yahweh* called him the third time, he was told by Eli to expect it to be God talking to him. He was to answer with the attitude of one ready to hear and obey. *Yahweh* did call again. This time, Samuel answered expectantly. The message was not one he had been seeking. He found himself caught off guard. He was exposed. Only a child, he was unprepared for God to speak directly to him and require his services.

On some level, this was what Samuel was longing to happen. On another level, it was something for which he was unprepared. He wanted to gain God's ear. He wanted God's attention, but he still wanted his distance. Samuel wanted to play at knowing God. He wanted to toy with the idea of being God's prophet and spokesman. He wasn't ready to make this a habit and daily occurrence. It was great to nab God's ear, just as long as he might also turn God's attention away when he was through playing.

When we interact with God, however, we must do it on God's terms, not our own. Samuel was not in control of the situation. Oh, incubating a dream or vision was supposed to give him control, but there is a difference between pagan rituals intended to grant one control over the gods and playing with *Yahweh*, the Almighty. He may respond to the ritual, but not on our terms. He is still God, regardless of the games we might play.

Samuel began a new phase of life that night. From servant to the priest of *Yahweh*, he became the prophet in training. God took him beyond his childish dreams and expectations and ushered him into a new life of service and living in the presence of the Almighty. From incubating a dream according to pagan traditions and rituals, he became the vehicle for God's word to the people of Israel. He had known that God was real. He knew that *Yahweh* had answered his mother's prayer, granting him life. He knew he had been dedicated to serve before *Yahweh*. He had just not counted on that becoming reality beyond life as he had experienced it with Eli.

Are we guilty of playing games with God? In speaking of God, do we expect our lives to be interrupted with the presence of the Almighty?

As you pray for direction and guidance, expect God to respond. There is plenty you already know to be God's will—love, mercy, justice, forgiveness, grace. Focus on those things as you as God to guide your steps and be present in your life.

“Lord, make me more aware of you and the games I tend to play. Grant me the courage to truly seek your face and allow Christ to shine through me.”

Eighteenth Day:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem! Your people have killed the prophets and have stoned the messengers who were sent to you. I have often wanted to gather your people, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you wouldn’t let me.” Luke 13:34

This is not the reaction we would expect, at least not of ourselves. Perhaps we have become numb to the words and picture of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. Perhaps we have become jaded by the picture, such that we miss what Jesus actually said. This is a cry of unrequited love, mercy, forgiveness, grace, and condemnation all rolled into one. It is the cry of a lover who has been rejected, not once, but over, and over, and over.

This was the city of God, the seat of *Yahweh’s* presence on earth. It was the center of knowledge about the Creator God, the one who had redeemed an enslaved people from Egypt and led them into the land promised to Abraham. They were the people of God, taking for themselves the name of *Yahweh* for all to see. Even so, Jesus’ words address a deep failure to accept God on God’s own terms. Rather than honor and worship *Yahweh* in truth, they had taken the name of God in vain.

Even so, God cared for this people. They had run after Ba’al in the days of Ahab, sending Elijah running for his life. They had built the temple in the days of Solomon, while Solomon took pagan wives who brought their idols into Jerusalem. They had refused to heed God’s warnings time and again, sending Jeremiah to prison for declaring the truth of impending exile. They had ignored the preaching of John the Baptist, allowing for Herod’s taking him prisoner and decapitating him to silence God’s word of critique and call to repentance.

Even at the moment Jesus spoke, the leaders of Jerusalem were plotting to take his life in order to silence the critique of their conflicted interests. They were concerned over position, power, status, prestige, tradition, and heritage. They were focused on their comfort and their claim on truth rather than the claim of God on their lives. Instead of heeding God’s message through the prophets, they sought the message of those who kept them feeling comfortable and secure in their way of life, the pursuit of their own purposes and ambitions.

They had wreaked violence on God and God’s messengers. Jesus’ response was love. They had killed the prophets. Jesus’ response was an offer to forgive. They had tried desperately to silence God’s word of opposition to their excesses. Jesus extended grace, mercy, and a call for reconciliation. We would carry the wounds on our sleeves shout for revenge. Jesus weeps for love, forgiveness, and grace to unite even violent enemies of God under the reach of his love. Though God would be justified in wiping out those who stone his prophets, he offers grace and love, instead.

Are we up to the challenge of responding to violence according to Jesus’ example? While he confronted those fighting God, he embraced them and gave his life that we all might live.

All too often, we are also guilty of attempting to silence God. Ask God to convict you of where you are still struggling against God’s direction and will.

“Lord, help me respond to violence according to your mercy, grace, and forgiveness. Remind me of my own need of forgiving grace and grant me the courage to love like you.”

Nineteenth Day:

“One day Yahweh said, ‘Samuel, I’ve rejected Saul, and I refuse to let him be king any longer. Stop feeling sad about him. Put some olive oil in a small container and go visit a man named Jesse, who lives in Bethlehem. I’ve chosen one of his sons to be my king.’” 1 Samuel 16:1

Samuel felt Saul’s failure deeply. He took Saul’s excesses as an affront to his own ministry. He felt responsible for having anointed Saul as king. Sure, he had warned the people that a king was not necessarily a good thing. Just because their neighbor had kings, charged with issues of security, that did not mean it was a good thing. It had been necessary for *Yahweh* to remind Samuel back then that it was not Samuel who was being rejected, but *Yahweh*. The people had stopped trusting that *Yahweh* would provide relief when enemies attacked them. They wanted someone visibly responsible to take on their enemies and lead their battles. It had not been God’s plan, but God was willing to allow for a king.

The king was supposed to be commander in chief. The king was also supposed to represent God to the people and the people to God. He was the stand-in for God’s presence along the lines of the prophets. He was to lead in serving *Yahweh*, as well as serving the interests of the nation. Therein was the problem. Saul became too enamored with his own power and interests and left God to the sidelines.

Samuel was depressed over how things had turned out. God had rejected Saul, even though he still held power. There had been a parting of ways between Saul and *Yahweh*, and Samuel was the one most disturbed by the fact. God’s purposes were not so thwarted by Saul’s failure. God was still going on with the task of leading a people, protecting a people, and calling a people to dependence upon *Yahweh* rather than men.

“How long will you persist in grief over what is over? How long will you continue hanging on to what is no more?” *Yahweh* called Samuel to let it go. He was to stop taking Saul’s failures personally and get on with the task of faithfully serving God. Saul had not been removed from his position, but that was just a matter of time. As Saul began proving his true colors before the rest of the nation, God was sending Samuel to anoint another who would take up the task of protecting *Yahweh*’s interests and the interests of the nation.

Stop grieving over what was. Release the past. Stop burrowing in what might have been. God’s purposes are not enmeshed with the institutional structures of government or religion. God is more concerned with anointing the unlikely to become instruments of God’s provision. David became much more of a king than Saul had ever been. He still had his problems, but God was concerned with the direction of his life, rather than the power structures of the day.

Are we too concerned with the “has been’s” of the past, structures that have become irrelevant, or leaders who have failed us? Institutions are the product of human construction more than the vehicles of God’s will. While they may be useful, it is God’s direction and will that truly matter.

Determine what you may be hanging onto that God is ready to release. Allow God to direct in the path God deems appropriate.

“Lord, help me overcome my attachments to people and structures as the only way to serve you. Make me willing to follow your guidance and the expense of my grief.”

Twentieth Day:

“I use stories when I speak to them because when they look, they cannot see, and when they listen, they cannot hear or understand.” Matthew 13:13

We consider stories as vehicles for communicating and teaching. We think of them as interesting ways of teaching lessons, morals, history, and patterns for living. A good story captures the imagination, awakens the senses, and introduces us to worlds, characters, and ideas we might otherwise never know. They engage, enlighten, and cajole us with truth—a truth they sometimes they hide.

We don't normally think of Jesus' parables in terms of hiding truth. We think of them as making God's truth clear and accessible. We want to see in them that the gospel message is readily accessible for any and all, if they would simply listen to Jesus' words. There is more than that going on in Jesus' parables, however. As Jesus taught the crowds, he also challenged them to listen and invest some time and energy in understanding God. He did not want to declare too much too openly. Truth, gospel truth, requires more than knowledge. It requires the commitment to understand, to seek, and to live.

Simply put, Jesus did not want everyone to understand what he said. This was not a question of keeping secrets, so much as protecting those who were not committed. They would be held accountable for what they understood. If they did not understand, they had less for which to answer.

Degrees of accountability don't make a lot of sense to us. We are more often focused on the black and white contrast answers of the gospel. Either one is saved and going to heaven, or one is unsaved and cut off eternally from God's presence. Jesus does not clarify much in terms of the meaning of degrees of accountability for those rejecting God. He does address much more specifically degrees of reward in opportunity for service for those who accept God's offer of grace and reconciliation. In the meantime, we are left with the side of Jesus' parables as enigmas to unravel.

There is work involved in understanding God. There is commitment required of those who would know God and live in relationship with the Almighty. There is a challenge of dedication to seeking to find God, even as God reveals his character and identity in Christ Jesus. As some have stated, grace is not free, as it cost God an extremely high price. So access to God is not free to us, in that it requires a determined effort to understand the implications of the gospel and apply them to our lives.

We do not earn grace and salvation. Neither are we served a platter of understanding God that requires no chewing and digestion. The gospel and word of God is not an IV drip of nutrients plugged directly into our veins. The words of Jesus require that we invest energy and effort into comprehending God's will and applying it to our daily living.

What are you ready to invest in your relationship with God? On some level, we will get out of that relationship what we put into it.

Set aside some time to regularly reflect on God's will for your life. Establish a pattern according to Paul's words that Timothy study to show himself approved and ready to serve God.

“Lord, help me accept my responsibility to know you and apply the demands of the gospel to my life. Remind me daily of my need to learn from you.”

Twenty-First Day:

“One day someone came to visit the rich man, but the rich man didn’t want to kill any of his own sheep or cattle and serve it to the visitor. So he stole the poor man’s lamb and served it instead.” 2 Samuel 12:4

Nathan’s parable paraded before King David pretended to be a true story—a story about another. It is a classic strategy, not likely to have begun with Nathan, but certainly his was the foremost example upon which prophets like Amos built their own critiques of the nation and its leaders. King, listen to this story of gross injustice! How can such a thing happen in Israel with no one held accountable? What an outrage! As David’s emotions are stirred by the story, he delivers an edict of condemnation. That is when Nathan delivers the punch line: You are the man.

He could have brushed Nathan aside. He could have ignored the prophet’s condemnation. The kings of the other nations around Israel would not have considered his actions with arranging the death of Bathsheba’s husband worthy of self-flagellation. Guilt over adultery and the murder of a foreigner within the nation’s borders were insignificant issues as they related to a king. David had authority and power to ignore Nathan, imprison him, or arrange for his death in response to a critique of the king. It is not so much his sin of adultery and murder that sets him apart from the kings round about, nor the rest of the kings of Israel and Judah. What sets him apart is the way he responds to Nathan highlighting his guilt.

He did not hide behind his position, power, reputation, or authority. He did not seek to escape his guilt or project an image of innocence. He was not as worried about what people would think of him if they found out about his faults. He was much more concerned with God’s reaction. He was concerned not so much with the past, but about the future. He was wanted to know how would God respond and lead him into the future. He was concerned with restoring his relationship with God and returning to a position of leader of his nation before God.

Nathan’s job was to convict David. It was not to rebuke him and leave him in the reject pile. The point of conviction is restoration. It is to clear the air and allow for a renewal of focus. It is to bring the convicted to a new beginning, not an end.

There were consequences to David’s sin. There were things he could not undo. The dead were not to return. Adultery could not be undone. His life could be refocused, however. He could become “a man after God’s own heart.” He could return to the character of the boy Samuel had anointed while Saul was still king—one who would trust God for direction, rather than his own inclinations, desires, and self-serving interests.

Are we willing to look at our sin as an opportunity to start over, returning our lives to God’s will and direction? Are you ready to allow God to alter the focus of your life, beginning with confession of your own failures and need for God’s forgiveness and restoration? Will we give others the same chance?

Take a hard look at your own guilt. Turn it over to God and receive a new lease on life.

“Lord, grant me the courage to leave behind my sin, accept my failings, and begin life anew after your will. Grant me the grace to allow others a new beginning without condemnation.”

Twenty-Second Day:

“A servant who is always faithful will surely be put in charge of everything the master owns.” Luke 12:44

Jesus spoke a lot about being prepared. He talked of living with an eye on eternity, not just the moment. Meanwhile, he did not focus on eternity as a destination. He focused on eternity as a question of relationship and service. He wanted people to understand that eternity with God is a serious issue. He also stressed that eternity is tied to one's relationship with God and how that relationship impacts those around us. Faith is relational and includes transformation into servants of God Almighty.

Paul considers that in faith we are purchased by Christ and belong to God as servants—slaves who give their lives to Jesus as master. Consequently, there must be a change in the orientation of our lives. Our focus, direction, and ambition must shift from personal interests to God's. We must exchange a run-of-the-mill acceptance of God for a commitment to serve God with all our resources. We are stewards of God's blessings, charged with the task of representing the One we call Lord.

Jesus had just told a parable about being ready for eternity by actively serving God. Peter responded with his penchant for sticking his foot in his mouth. “You don't mean us, do you? We are your disciples. We are already set, right? We have our reservations for the messianic banquet in hand. Of all the people listening to you, we are the ones who have followed and stuck with you as disciples.”

All too often, we respond to Jesus like Peter. We need the prophet Nathan to come along to point his finger in our faces and say, “You are the one!” Jesus indeed included Peter and the other eleven. He included us, as well. We are all charged with faithful observance of God's will, guidance, and direction. We are all charged with stewardship of that with which God has entrusted us. Along with that charge comes the promise of further responsibility for those deemed faithful.

Perhaps many who sit in our pews would be in shock to find that heaven is not a vacation in paradise. From Jesus' words, we should rather expect heaven to be further opportunity to continue serving God in line with the service we are called to present on earth. We may be uncomfortable with the idea of serving through eternity, yet Jesus has more to say about eternity than that. By implication here, we are also to be granted opportunities to serve in relation to the faithfulness that has qualified our service to God on this side of eternity.

As we look at the important issue of preparing for eternity, we need to look at the preparation we make in our actions, habits, and service to God. Are we living in accord with God's plan for eternity, or are we anticipating a reality that is not to be? If our lives are not lived in faithful preparation for God's vision of eternity, what is the point of preparing for any alternative notion? God's call on our lives involves much more than our comfort, pleasure, and ambitions. Isn't it time we placed faithful service to God at the center of all we do?

Take an inventory of all God has entrusted to you. Find three ways to actively use God's provision as an extension of God's will, purpose, and presence.

“Lord, help me to see more clearly how you would use me for your purposes. Guide me in the way of service to your purposes instead of my own desires and ambitions.”

Twenty-Third Day:

“Samuel said: ‘If Yahweh has turned away from you and is now your enemy, don’t ask me what to do. I’ve already told you: Yahweh has sworn to take the kingdom from you and give it to David. And that’s just what he’s doing!’” 1 Samuel 28:16-17

We want to put out a fleece like Gideon until we get the answers we seek. We aren’t so willing to trust what we know is God’s will. It has always been this way. It is the same for the gambler and lotto player. If the roll of the dice does not work the first time, we try again until we get the answers we seek. The best two out of three becomes the best out of eleven. We are the child repeating a request of his parents again and again, hoping they will eventually change their minds, giving in to our will.

We struggle with God’s will. On one level, we want to know God’s will. On another, we know that God’s desires conflict with our own. We wrestle to understand God’s will mostly in terms of the “big ticket items”—a job, position, promotion, house, choice of school, or mate. We think God is mostly concerned with issues we call major. They are not issues about which we find God concerned in the Bible. Sure, there is the exception, like finding a wife for Isaac, yet on the whole, careers, spouses, and housing are not central among God’s interests in our lives. God is much more interested in character, trusting God, loving others, and caring for the justice concerns of those in need.

These were the real issues facing Saul. Saul wanted to win battles and protect position, power, and status. He was concerned with personal comfort and security. *Yahweh* was concerned about Saul serving the people and God. Saul took a mission to discredit David or end David’s life. He saw in David a threat to his position and prestige. The true threat was ego and placing his interests ahead of God’s. He worried about looking good before the people, wielding power, and putting himself first. God wanted to be first in his life. The rest of the issues were insignificant to God’s big picture.

If Saul had given God the central position in his life, Saul would have had no need to worry for the other issues he faced. Those concerns would have paled in comparison with pleasing God. Instead, he found himself in the quarters of a medium in Endor, calling up the spirit of Samuel to determine how *Yahweh* might give him military victory. Samuel’s response is to be expected. *Yahweh* had never sanctioned the use of mediums. Saul had even made a show of putting all the mediums to death. At his first whim to locate one, however, his servants knew exactly where to turn. Contrary to God’s clear will, Saul ostensible sought to determine God’s will. He already knew what he needed to know. He had known all along. What he had not done was to submit to living as God had already made clear.

We are not too different in our search for God’s will. The problem is that we are not so concerned with God’s will, so much as God’s sanction of our decisions, ambitions, dreams, and desires. We force God’s will into a little box of our pet concerns. We want to know God’s will within a range of options we have preselected and limited. Determining to discover and follow what God really wants just seems too open-ended and makes us too uneasy. Are we ready to allow God free reign of our lives?

What is it that God is wanting of you that you have been shoving aside? Place your life focus on fulfilling God’s will as already revealed in Christ Jesus. The lesser issues will fall in place.

“Lord, grant me the strength to seek your will, beginning by following the example of Christ Jesus.”

Twenty-Fourth Day:

“The man looked up and said, ‘I see people, but they look like trees walking around!’” Mark 8:24

Jesus' way of healing was sometimes strange. Why did Jesus heal this blind man in two steps? Wouldn't one have been sufficient? Was he unsure of what he was doing? Did he need the practice by trial and error? What we know of Jesus makes that unlikely. There must be a better explanation for this strange account of healing a blind man. After all, Jesus had a reason for everything he said and did.

It might be that Jesus simply had more going on than meeting this blind man's need of sight. He was obviously concerned with the physical needs of those around him. It may be that he had other concerns that were just as important, and he chose to address more than one issue at a time. He was, after all, a teacher. He had a responsibility to guide the disciples toward a better understanding of God and the gospel. Perhaps this was a good opportunity to teach his disciples about spiritual vision and understanding, as well as meeting this man's need.

He had fed five thousand with loaves and fishes. He fed another four thousand days before. Even so, the Pharisees called on him to perform some miraculous sign from God that would prove his power as originating with God. They wanted him to offer confirmation that he was indeed a spokesman of *Yahweh*. It was especially important to them, as his words often contradicted their pet ideas, doctrines, or way of living. Proving divine authority was actually a Scripturally-backed demand. They had been told to test those who claimed to speak for *Yahweh*. They were to demand a sign that could be confirmed. The problem was that Jesus had already given many signs they had chosen to ignore.

Miraculous signs are not enough to spawn true faith. Faith based on miracles requires more signs. It is as tenuous as the latest miracle, certainty that no trick was involved, and the reputation of witnesses. Certainly, miraculous signs draw attention and grant a hearing but are insufficient grounds for true faith. The experience over, questions of exactly what happened—our second guessing—begin. Faith built on signs is only as secure as their ongoing presence or the ability and desire to shove doubt aside.

Jesus did not trust signs, nor did he trust the fickle nature of the devotion of the crowds. Sure, he fed 5000, and then 4000, but it was the inner group of twelve on whom he focused his attention. They had seen all the signs and marvels. They still did not really understand the essence of who he was nor the focus of his mission and purpose. They failed to grasp that he had little concern for the minor issues of food, clothing, and shelter. His concern was for the spiritual realities of the coming Reign of God.

There are those who are blind. There are those who seem blind. There are those who believe themselves capable of seeing, yet whose vision is grossly distorted. Regardless of our claim to understand and speak for God, we too often find that our vision is only as good as this blind man who began to see, yet whose eyes showed only a poor image of people walking as trees. As him, the disciples needed better vision and understanding that Jesus had to offer.

God desires to teach us to see clearly according to God's priorities and values. Ask God to help you set aside your sense of spiritual vision in place for the understanding God would give you.

“Lord, help me to focus less on my issues that I might see life according to your values and priorities. Grant me the spiritual vision by which you desire me to direct my steps.”

Twenty-Fifth Day:

“Jesus asked, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ The blind man answered, ‘Master, I want to see!’” Mark 10:51

What is it with Jesus and blind men? With the first, Jesus practiced to get it right. Now, he does not seem to understand that a blind man would want to be healed of his blindness! Surely that can't be right. So why should Jesus bother asking a blind man such a lame question, “What do you want me to do for you?” That would have been obvious to anyone present who knew the man was blind!

Perhaps we should back up just a little in the story Mark was telling. James and John had just been asking Jesus for a favor. One of them wanted the privilege of being second in command in Jesus' coming kingdom. The other wanted the next position in line. To be honest, they both really wanted the point position of full command, but knew that was simply beyond their reach. Since they couldn't be God, they would settle for the positions next in line.

“Master, say 'Yes!'" was their request. Jesus stopped to ask them what it was they were wanting. Once they clarified their desire for power and position, Jesus told them that in the coming reign of heaven, power was not to be wielded for personal privilege. Position and power were concerned with issues of service and sacrifice on behalf of others. Rather than enjoying the rewards of position over others, they were being called to a life of service and the kind of love that pours itself out on behalf of the world for whom God cares.

It must have seemed that Jesus' ministry had been wasted. The disciples were just too dense to grasp the core values and principles of the kingdom. They had not really heard the Sermon on the Mount. They had missed the point when Jesus talked of loving our enemies. Their ears were clogged when Jesus had spoken of God's reign requiring more than the Law. It had gone in one ear, and out the other. They had fallen back on the ambitions of childhood—the things their culture and society taught them to crave. They wanted power, privilege, and control over others. They wanted to use the tools of the world to advance the reign of Christ. The ends do not justify the means, however. In the reign of Christ, the means are the end.

Jesus turned to the blind man and asked the same question he had asked of these two. “What do you want me to do for you?” “Master, I want to see!” There was no concern for power over others. There was no ambition to place others under himself. There was no yearning to wield the tools and weapons the world so desperately seeks. There was the message for the disciples, however, that they needed to concern themselves with living according to God's perspective.

It is so easy to see the failure of these two disciples. The others wanted the same, but had not been brazen enough to ask Jesus for position first. It is a pity that we aren't very different. We also fail to see the issues with the eyes of Christ Jesus.

It is hard to rely on God to meet our needs when we live in a world where power dictates the distribution of food. Allow God to make love your priority and trust God to meet your needs.

“Lord, grant me the courage to trust that as I live the love Jesus preached your love will cover my needs. Help me to see life according to your priorities, not my own.”

Twenty-Sixth Day:

“When Mordecai was told what Esther had said, he sent back this reply, ‘Don’t think that you will escape being killed with the rest of the Jews, just because you live in the king’s palace. If you don’t speak up now, we will somehow get help, but you and your family will be killed. It could be that you were made queen for a time like this!’” Esther 3:12-14

Esther's began as the classic rags to riches story—from an orphaned foreigner to queen of the world's greatest superpower! Her people had been despised, conquered, and deported, yet she had risen to the position of queen of the foreign power. Now here people were in great peril.

In the midst of their exile, an enemy had risen in power as a friend to the king. He had laid plans to eradicate her people. Esther was in a position to do something to aid her people. To do so, however, was to place her life in jeopardy. Being queen did not give her open access to the throne, heart, and mind of the king. No one had that kind of access. One did not dare enter the throne room unless the king had summoned them. To enter otherwise, was to risk death.

When Esther's uncle suggested she save her people, she was petrified. She was more than nervous about the challenge. She was little more than a teenager, anyhow, and to risk her life to protect her people seemed like the task of someone much better prepared, equipped, and experienced than she. After all, the very reason she was queen was due to the fact that the king had killed the previous queen for refusing a drunken request to disrobe publicly at a royal banquet.

Gaining an audience with the king was no simple matter. It would place her life in jeopardy. She was too young. She was insecure. The king did not invite her to see him, and she was fearful of risking her position and security when it should be someone else's job. After all, she would be pitting her life against the life of the king's closest friend and adviser. It was just too much to ask.

Mordecai gave her a little more to think about. Inaction was also a risk. Besides, God had a purpose for her life, and she had an opportunity to serve her people from a vantage point of a position she could not claim to deserve. She was still the orphaned foreigner, belonging to that people who were under threat from a common enemy within the walls of the palace. She might try to hide, but hiding was a risk and would not be forgotten if someone else stepped in to plead for her people. She might act selfishly to save her own skin, but in so doing she would lose her standing in the eyes of her people.

She was tempted as we to believe that her position, power, and resources were for her own use, her own good. Mordecai's message said otherwise. She should rather look at her resources from the standpoint of how she might benefit her people as a whole. Lifting her eyes to the plight of her people, she gained the courage and strength to live for them, instead of for her own benefit.

It is only natural to live for our own interests. We are born with the drive to survive and meet our needs. Maturity, however, requires that we look not to our interests alone, but to the benefit of others. Ask God to show you where your life may need to shift from selfish pursuits to meet the needs and purposes God has for your life.

“Lord, grant me the perspective and faith to act for others, and not just my own benefit. Help me to see your journey to the cross as an example for my own living.”

Twenty-Seventh Day:

“The blind will see, and the ears of the deaf will be healed. Those who were lame will leap around like deer; tongues once silent will begin to shout. Water will rush through the desert, scorching sand will turn into a lake, and thirsty ground will flow with fountains. Grass will grow in wetlands, where packs of wild dogs once made their home.” Isaiah 35:5-7

Sounds great! We like passages pointing to a happy reversal of fortunes for God's suffering people. We gladly sing songs filled with their refrain, joyfully belting out words that comfort us and give security at the picture of a better future, of pie in the sky, of an ending to suffering, pain, want, and discomfort. At least, we like such passages as long as we consider them as speaking to our fortune and material welfare. What we may miss, however, is that they point to God's interests in reversal of fortune for those in despair more than comfort for those doing well.

Isaiah addresses *Yahweh's* interests in the disenfranchised, disheartened, disabled, and overlooked by those in power. He simultaneously spoke to the fact that deportation to Babylon lay ahead of the nation living in dread of a conquering world power. It would only be after a time of exile that *Yahweh* would usher in this reversal of fortune. When those same rose to power, however, they would tend to forget the position from which they came. God's interests seem to shift to the new population suffering at the hands of those who rose to prominence as the people of God. Neither is God unwilling to cast down a people consumed with themselves until they turn to God in wholeness of heart.

It is not that God is so concerned with keeping us comfortable. God is concerned with a people whose faith and confidence remain focused on God, rather than on circumstances. Those more desperate in circumstances tend to seek rescue in God. Those in comfort focus on issues of maintaining comfort, rather than using their resources as emissaries and stewards of the Almighty. When we have received the blessing of God's reversal of our fortunes, we too easily forget that God would also reverse the fortunes of those who yet experience deprivation, disease, hunger, and disillusionment.

We read Isaiah's words and think of ourselves. We pat ourselves on the back for having God's blessings in our hands—access to the resources to meet our physical needs and opportunity for spiritual nourishment upon demand. Too often we fail to consider those still yearning to find God's promise of reversal a reality in their own experience. We see ourselves and promise fulfilled. We do not see a world in desperate need of fulfillment. While they remain hungry, thirsty, ill, blind, and lame in body, we become so in spirit. We ignore God's desire to see all his creatures living in peace, nourishment, and health. We look upon ourselves and turn blind eyes upon God's will for another 4,000,000,000 hungry bellies to be satisfied, nourished, and embraced with the love of Christ pouring through us.

We have the power, position, and resources to make a difference. We have Esther's opportunity to become God's channel of blessing for many. We must first take off our blinders, focus not on our own lives, but on God's love for all who are still cut off from what we have taken for granted.

We focus too often on ourselves while God calls us to view the world of his creation. Seek out a way to be involved in making a difference for those who needs are desperately greater than yours.

“Lord, grow your love in me, that I might long for the blessing of others still in need.”

Twenty-Eighth Day:

“Stay joined to me, and I will stay joined to you. Just as a branch cannot produce fruit unless it stays joined to the vine, you cannot produce fruit unless you stay joined to me. I am the vine, and you are the branches. If you stay joined to me, and I stay joined to you, then you will produce lots of fruit. But you cannot do anything without me.” John 15:4-5

We want Jesus alongside us as we travel life’s uncertainties. We want a strong helper on our side to get us through our conflicts. We crave the comfort of knowing we are not alone, not forgotten, not overlooked, not helpless. In the process, we overlook that the purpose of being joined to Jesus is that we might live according to his example, bearing the same kind of results we see in his own life.

Jesus’ words are words of comfort to disciples who were about to experience great grief, loss, and desperation upon his death. John records these words as part of Jesus’ last message to the twelve before heading to the garden to be betrayed and crucified. The disciples needed to understand and be prepared for what lay ahead. They needed comfort in the face of a crucifixion they did not understand. Yet Jesus’ words paint a message far greater than mere comfort in the face of insecurity, pain, and loss. He is concerned with the ministry they would carry on in face of the cross and after the resurrection.

He had already dealt with the fact that the cross was not abandonment. Now he turns to the fact that the reason they are not being abandoned is that there is a task laid before them. There is a mission for their lives. There is a purpose to our continued living as through our lives Jesus desires to continue to bear the same fruit he bore during the days of his ministry on earth.

Jesus had spent three years among the disciples, teaching about the character of life in the reign of Messiah. John’s account of that teaching focused on Jesus’ words and ministry to various individuals. He had called the religious Nicodemus to a new life of faith beyond the trappings of religious tradition. He had called the Samaritan woman to recognize God’s will to call people of any background to worship in spirit and truth. He had called the Jews to look beyond their religious traditions to find God’s interest in mercy, love, redemption, and restoration. He called them beyond rules and regulations to the way of love—love empowered by forgiveness and grace.

The fruit of his ministry was redemption, love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness. It was a series of people who found in his actions that God was more concerned with reconciliation than listing regulations. “I have loved you, just as my Father has loved me. So remain faithful to my love for you.” Live according to my love. Bear the kind of fruit that my love and actions have borne in the lives of others. Let your lives display the character of my love for all those you have seen me love. He went on to say that the greatest love was displayed in dying for another. Then he died for us all. This is the character of fruit our own lives are to bear. It is the identity, purpose, and character of Christ Jesus that should pour forth in our actions, words, and being. Christ living within us is not so much about our comfort, as about embracing a world of people for whom he died.

Love is actually a difficult thing. It is so much more than a romantic notion. To be joined with Christ is to allow the love of Jesus to be expressed in us. Determine where Jesus’ love is not evidenced in your life. Ask Christ to be present there, too.

“Lord, be present in me, even among those I would rather not love or simply ignore.”

Twenty-Ninth Day:

“You disgraceful nation, gather around, before it's too late. Yahweh has set a time when his fierce anger will strike like a storm and sweep you away. If you humbly obey Yahweh, then come and worship him. If you do right and are humble, perhaps you will be safe on that day when Yahweh turns loose his anger.” Zephaniah 2:1-3

It was in the days of Jeremiah. Israel had already been led away under the Assyrian armies. Isaiah had warned Israel of impending doom. Two hundred years later, his message had been used to remind Judah of its own impending plight of exile into Babylon. Jeremiah, Old Doom and Gloom himself, had been preaching that there was no help to be had from Egypt against an exile *Yahweh* had decreed. There was nothing to do, he said, other than turn to *Yahweh* in expectation of a change of course or finding a way through the impending crisis.

Zephaniah's words were not so different. He expected exile. He expected judgment. He expected no help from foreign sources. He also expected the leaders of his people to turn to God instead of their devices to attempt to countermand the plans of *Yahweh*. Knowing they had not, he still felt his expectations were in line.

Zephaniah's was not a pluralistic society. Zephaniah's was not a secular society. His audience was no broad-spectrum population with varied systems of beliefs, values, and moralities. Government did not stem from the background of a Judeo-Christian heritage. Rather, governing officials publicly led worship of *Yahweh*. It was not a secular society with a backdrop of religious tradition. The government was overtly religious. Officials were expected to represent God's values and will in all their decision, actions, and words. Zephaniah simply expected them to honor *Yahweh* in more than name. That's where his expectations went haywire. The problem was his expectations were still matched by the expectations of *Yahweh*.

There was still a chance to avert the impending destruction. There was still an opportunity to keep the otherwise intractable exile at bay. It had to do with correcting the people's relationship with *Yahweh*, however, not their political strategies, platforms, and devices. The power of political structures has never been of such great importance to God. We may place a lot of confidence or hope in political processes, but God is so enamored with human power structures. God's plans and purposes are not denied or advanced by political means, so much as through humble submission.

The halls of power were concerned with power. They were worried with maintaining the status quo or advancing the cause of power, wealth, and influence. God's requirement was for submission, humility, and worship. Real worship is not about making ourselves feel good. Rather, it is about recognizing our need for submission before Almighty God. In that context, our grasping for power and control fall aside in light of the supremacy and authority of the One we are called to serve.

Where are your dreams and ambitions pinned to concerns of power and security, rather than service to God? Humble yourself as the servant you were created to be, bowing your life to the means and direction of God, rather than the priorities of human structures.

“Lord, help me to let go of my fears and insecurities that I might serve you with a whole heart, and with humble submission.”

Thirtieth Day:

“Welcome all the Lord's followers, even those whose faith is weak. Don't criticize them for having beliefs that are different from yours.” Romans 14:1

Why doesn't everyone believe like I do? Can you even be a Christian if we disagree? We hear comparisons like those often enough. My group is always in the right, and that other group is always in the wrong. Since I know I belong to Christ, that means all the rest have somehow missed the boat. Why can't they see the need to jump ship to join me? Since they are wrong and refuse to change their minds, they must not be sincere in their faith. They must not even be Christians at all.

We may not take the argument to that extreme, but it is a natural response to competing doctrines, ideas, emphases, and directions. After all, when I recognize that I am wrong, it is a simple thing to change my mind and once again assume I am right. When I hold the truths of doctrine in high regard, it is easy to reduce faith to a list of truths to believe and accept. On the other hand, if all truth is relative to the individual, truth also becomes irrelevant and loses any unimportance.

That is not where Paul was going. He did not believe truth to be unimportant. He just understood our take on truth as a fragile exercise prone to failure and hounded by imperfection. While truth may not be relative, our grasp of truth, communication of truth, and application of truth is never without fault. Even so, faith is not about being right or wrong. It is about trusting God even amid our failures to understand. It is about following Christ Jesus, even when we do not get it right, understand it correctly, or measure up to the stature of Jesus in word and deed.

It is on this basis Paul calls for unity despite differences of doctrine and application. He talks of eating meat which had been sacrificed to idols before its sale in the marketplace and the observance of the Sabbath. Both were big issues among believers in his day. The interesting point in his comments is not defining which side had it right. In one sense, both were right—not because they had the right answer against a wrong one. They were right because the direction of their actions was to honor Christ Jesus with integrity and a clear conscience. It was in following Christ that they were right. It was in following Christ that their faith had its vitality, identity, and importance.

While there was conflict between the groups, Paul's answer was not to offer the truth before each dispute. His answer was to address one's dedication to following Christ Jesus. In following Jesus, there is grace to allow others the freedom to be wrong—the same freedom we claim for ourselves. As Baptists in the latter 1700's argued, “I am the one who will stand before Christ to answer for my life. Who are you to place some obstacle in the way?” We are called to accept in grace that our claim on truth is fragile, but the Christ we serve is greater than any dispute we may have of doctrine and claims of truth.

It is easier to fellowship with those who believe and act like us. It is more akin to the faith Paul proclaimed to accept those whose beliefs and actions differ from our own. Determine who God would have you embrace with the grace of Christ Jesus, despite your differences. Go out of your way to extend them fellowship and love.

“Lord, grant me the openness to love those who disagree with me without condemning them. Make me more aware of my own failings, that I might more freely offer others the same grace I need.”

Thirty-First Day:

“Now this is the answer of the holy God of Israel: ‘You rejected my message, and you trust in violence and lies. This sin is like a crack that makes a high wall quickly crumble and shatter like a crushed bowl. There’s not a piece left big enough to carry hot colas or to dip out water.’” Isaiah 30:12-13

We tend to see God in the Old Testament as violent, vengeful, or angry. We equate the Old Testament God with force, war, destruction, and calamity. We want to believe that this God is somehow different from our perception of Jesus, as though the character of Jesus were not the character of God. There are indeed passages depicting God along those earlier lines of force, but they are not the whole picture, nor the clearest. Here in Isaiah's words is a whole other aspect of God's character, *Yahweh's* determination that violence is not the better way, not God's chosen path.

To be honest, this latter face of God is visible from the third and fourth chapters of Genesis if we cared to look for it. God's trade in mercy, grace, and forgiveness is long-standing—as long-standing as our own propensity to violence, deceit, and selfish advancement. It should not really be a shock to find that God is indeed a God of love and has been so from before creation. Perhaps the difficulty we face is more that at heart we are not a people of love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness. We are the ones prone to seek violence and the use of force rather than love and humble submission.

We want to picture God as violent, fierce, and vindictive in order to cast ourselves in a better light. We want to feel free to wage violence along the force of our emotions, to determine that violent means may be justified in the pursuit of loftier goals. We want to believe that our exceptions are more important than Jesus' commands to return good for evil, love for rejection, and forgiveness for attacks against our friends, families, nation, and self.

Trust in “violence and lies”, or in “perversion and oppression” as in other translations, is much closer to our natural inclinations. This is not the purpose and objective of *Yahweh* in the words of Isaiah. It was rather God's plan to allow the nation to face deportation without recourse to violent response, even that of self-defense. They were to learn submission to God, rather than the defense of rights, freedoms, or self-determination. They were to accept *Yahweh's* sending the Assyrians as judgment for their own lack of faithful service.

Rather than repentance, contrition, and seeking forgiveness, the establishment struggled against God's will. They had too much invested in the status quo. Rather than humility and submission, they stood their ground in defense of their own purposes, in defiance of God's stated will. In the balance, they lost the blessing of being the people of *Yahweh*. In their attitude of defiance, they rejected God's purposes for their lives and the very independence for which they chose to fight. Humility and submission would have brought them the overall goal they sought, but they were too enamored of their choice of means to accept God's direction.

Where do your own actions flow from an attitude of violent response? Offer your struggle against God's way of love and submission in sacrifice to God's will. Ask God to help you live according to the example of Jesus en route to the cross.

“Lord, help me to match the means and direction of my life with your purposes of love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness.”

Thirty-Second Day:

“The Spirit has given each of us a special way of serving others. Some of us can speak with wisdom, while others can speak with knowledge, but these gifts come from the same Spirit. To others the Spirit has given great faith or the power to heal the sick or the power to work mighty miracles. Some of us are prophets, and some of us recognize when God’s Spirit is present. Others can speak different kinds of languages, and still others can tell what these languages mean. But it is the Spirit who does all this and decides which gifts to give each of us.” 1 Corinthians 12:7-11

It is fairly easy to celebrate our individual differences. Society speaks glibly of diversity. We may look upon diversity as a goal to achieve or a threat. We celebrate our distinctive differences. In the process, we may celebrate ourselves, painting our own characteristics in a better light than those we find somewhat different or alien to our experience. At other times, we may highlight the gifts of others as more important than our own, perhaps excusing ourselves for reticence to use our own gifts. This diversity, with all its importance and contribution, however, is not the point Paul was trying to make. He states the differences in gifting, but his point is that gifts qualify us to serve.

Verse seven says that these gifts are “a special way of serving others.” There is a purpose to the gifting of God’s Spirit. It has nothing to do with advancing our personal talents, our individual notions, our private agendas, or placing people in some kind of spiritual caste system. Rather, within our diversity, we are called together in service to build the larger body of Christ Jesus. This is not a task relegated to a few with special gifts. It is God’s purpose for each one gifted by the Spirit. Working together through varied means, we are commissioned to multi-dimensional and varied service with a shared goal. That goal is to serve others under the name and authority of Christ Jesus.

We can spend much energy trying to make ourselves the same. We can spend countless hours worrying over how to stress our differences, how to divide ourselves, how to determine our relative individual worth. We can compare, analyze, and study the potential contributions of our make-up and that of others, but in all this we may miss the point. The question we really need to ask is whether we are allowing God’s Spirit to use the gifts entrusted to our care.

As members of the body of Christ, we are called to represent Christ Jesus in the world. We are called to ministers to the rest of the body of Christ. We are called to reveal Christ to those outside the gospel through our words and deeds—the witness of our lives. If we take up our call and mission, there will not be time and energy left over for so much of the infighting that has characterized the church since Paul wrote the Corinthians.

They were divided over definitions of who was in the right, who was more important, who held to the more faithful emphases or traditions. In the process, they took their hearts, minds, and lives of God’s purpose of mission and ministry. After all, God had created and gifted them all differently, but for one purpose—to reveal Christ and show the world how to love as Jesus did. Can we set aside our concerns over diversity and distinction to join in the mission of service to which we are all called?

Set aside your penchant for criticism by focusing on how God has gifted you. Apply those gifts to touch others with the love of Jesus Christ.

“Lord, help me to think less of myself, and more of how you prepare me to serve you.”

Thirty-Third Day:

“Get out of Babylon, my people, and run for your lives, before I strike the city in my anger! Don’t be afraid or lose hope, though year after year there are rumors of leaders fighting for control in the city of Babylon. The time will come when I will punish Babylon’s false gods. Everyone there will die, and the whole nation will be disgraced.” Jeremiah 51:45-47

Jeremiah was preparing a people for the experience of exile. He knew it would not be an easy life. He knew there would be great issues to face, suffering of an oppressed population, and the loss of home, freedom, and identity. They would be heartbroken over leaving their land and all it symbolized in terms of the blessing and provision of *Yahweh*. He also knew there were greater dangers than these.

After some time in exile, they would begin to re-establish themselves within the foreign society. They would find their lives enmeshed with the lives of their conquerors. They would lose sight of just how they were becoming dependent on the culture and environment. They would attach themselves to association with a society they might even still consider evil, foreign, and oppressive. They would develop a new sense of security in the land of their exile, making it difficult to follow *Yahweh*’s leading should it become time to return to the land of promise.

Even within exile in a foreign, hated land, among a people they considered nothing but enemies, it would be an easy thing to become acclimated and redefine security in terms of maintaining the new life built in a hated land. They would be tempted to adopt the god of security, the god of the known, the god of comfort, above the God of Israel.

Change can be a difficult thing. We are so often unaware of how much change has transpired in our lives. We easily become acclimated to things, patterns, routines we may have once considered evil, immoral, ungodly, foreign, or oppressive. When God calls us to leave behind that to which we have grown accustomed, we are in a quandary. We are uncertain about leaving our attachments. We decide that perhaps God asks too much, that we are misunderstanding God, or that the little things to which we cling are too insignificant to really matter to God. Security in our attachment to routines, possessions, links to the way of life around us begin to outweigh our reliance on and allegiance to God.

Jeremiah knew such would happen to his people. He warned them that there would come a time when their new host nation would find itself under God’s judgment. There would come a time when they would be called to step away from what they now considered an enemy threat, but they would be firmly attached to a new sense of security. At that time, their allegiance to God would be tested, and their lives would hang in the balance.

The church has always been a minority—the real church, that is. We have often, however, come to associate ourselves with a society in which we live. We have faced the struggle to remain true to God when associating with a dominant culture would lull us to believe that being a good citizen is the same as being a faithful Christian. God calls us, however, to step beyond our culture to live according to a far greater mission. Do we have the courage to step aside to live for God in spite of cultural attachments?

Take a close look at where culture prevails over God in your life. Give God priority.

“Lord, help me follow your priorities over my attachments to the world around me.”

Thirty-Fourth Day:

“When people sin, you should forgive and comfort them, so they won't give up in despair. You should make them sure of your love for them.” 2 Corinthians 2:7-8

Ours is a violent society. Our nation was birthed in the context of war and the struggle for power, wealth, and independence from competing claims for our submission and allegiance. Settlers from England fought to take land from native peoples, from competing European powers, then for independence from the dictates of an English king.

Early on, we learned to settle our differences with the use of force, torture, and death. Early on, we burned those believed to be witches, tarred and feathered others, and opened the West with the law of the powerful, the fastest draw, and a legacy of “might makes right.” We oppressed African slaves, new immigrant populations, and any we could force to do our bidding and so increase our wealth and prosperity. In the process, we came to shy away from many of these practices. Adopting the law of loving our enemies, however, is still a very distant purpose.

More recently, we have developed more cultured means of intimidation, retribution, and revenge. We hire lawyers to press our desires and sense of being offended before the courts. We battle former spouses in divorce proceedings, we seek financial damages to cover personal stupidity, and pretend that our business dealings are separate from our personal dealings with real people. What we can call legal, we call right, justified, and appropriate.

These socially sanctioned uses of power, coercion, and intimidation, however, simply remain as strategies to avoid the law of love set forth in Christ Jesus. When others fail us, we are not encouraged to get even. Rather, we are challenged by the love of Jesus Christ to forgive as did Jesus from the cross. We are challenged to offer comfort for those who wrong us. We are challenged to allow the love of God to flow through us in an earnest desire to seek their redemption and reconciliation.

From getting mad and getting even, Paul reminds us that we are to take dose of the love of Christ Jesus. That love is to flow from us, touching the lives of those who wrong us. We are more comfortable pointing out the errors of others than convincing them of our love and acceptance. We are more of a mind to enforce a demonstration of repentance, penance, and change of character than to offer unconditional love. Love seems counter-intuitive. Love seems a response that does not fit with actions that do us harm. Yet love was the standard of Christ, the example of the cross.

The Bible never says the life of faith is the easy road to travel. The Bible never taught that being a Christian was to live by our natural inclinations, instinct, and the patterns of society, heritage, and the history of our people. It is rather the convocation to leave all else aside to follow the example of the one who love us enough to face the cross, offering life and love to those who sinned against him, nailing him to a tree. Can we call ourselves Christians and live by conflicting purposes to that love?

Review a short list of people who have sinned against you. Determine to forgive them and find concrete ways to express that forgiveness and allow the love of Christ to flow through you.

“Lord, grant me the grace to let go of my desire for revenge and restitution that I might embrace those who injure me as you embraced the cross on my own behalf.”

Thirty-Fifth Day:

“Someday, I, Yahweh, will cut a tender twig from the top of a cedar tree, then plant it on the peak of Israel's tallest mountain, where it will grow strong branches and produce large fruit. All kinds of birds will find shelter under the tree, and they will rest in the shade of its branches. Every tree in the forest will know that I, Yahweh, can bring down tall trees and help short ones grow. I dry up green trees and make dry ones green. I, Yahweh, have spoken, and I will keep my word.” Ezekiel 17:22-24

Ezekiel's words spring from the perspective of the Babylonian exile. Israel had been dispersed under the Assyrians and Judah had found itself deported to Babylon. Zedekiah, king of Judah had signed a treaty with Babylon, swearing to it by the name of *Yahweh*. He had then broken the treaty, seeking alliance with Egypt to protect Judah from Nebuchadnezzar. What had once been a people under the great kings, David and Solomon was now a captive remnant bowed under the sway of Babylon.

Ezekiel's words were a reminder that *Yahweh* was had been behind the deportation. Zedekiah's broken vow was not simply treachery against Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar, but against *Yahweh* who had brought Babylon to power. In struggling against Babylon, Judah had struggled against God. Now they could see in retrospect that the deportation to Babylon was the plan and design of *Yahweh* to bring the nation back into faithful submission.

Ezekiel's words are a reminder of judgment. They are not, however, simply a message of judgment and condemnation. They are also words of hope. What God had dried up and deported to exile through Babylon would also be restored. In the meantime, there Judah had opportunity to repent and turn back to *Yahweh* in anticipation of being restored. Rather than depending upon human strength, strategy, and military might, they should depend upon *Yahweh's* amazing restoration of a dried up branch. *Yahweh* who had created the world was powerful also to restore those sent into exile.

Cedars are not known for producing fruit, but Ezekiel speaks of a new tree that would offer back to *Yahweh* devotion and action of submission and service. In the search for restoration, there is a need for returning faithfulness to God—bearing fruit as servants of the Almighty.

Many had questioned God in the process of deportation. They had wondered what had happened to the Rock of Israel. They had worried over why *Yahweh* would allow a heathen king to claim power and authority over the chosen people. Yet all along, there had been *Yahweh's* word through the prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zephaniah, challenging the status quo of Israel and Judah, calling them to honor *Yahweh* alone as God. Deportation and exile might have been avoided, but for a stubbornness in keeping God's concerns at bay.

They had been judged and found guilty. Even so, God was still interested in restoring them, brining them back to the land of promise, if they would only turn in repentance and faith. If they would recognize God with the proper honor, reverence, and humble service, they would become part of the expression of *Yahweh's* unique greatness once again. Are we willing to bow our lives to God?

Claiming to belong to God is not enough. Ask God to help you see where your life is less than dedicated to Christ Jesus. Turn that over to the One we claim as Lord.

“Lord, give me the courage to trust you will all my life, not just a portion.”

Thirty-Sixth Day:

“Peter and John answered, ‘Do you think God wants us to obey you or to obey him? We cannot keep quiet about what we have seen and heard.’” Acts 4:19-20

Even in ministry there are times when one is called on to place some other concern ahead of faithfully serving God. There are institutions to protect; there are donors one should not upset; there are issues the general public is not prepared to discuss or understand. There are concerns over paying homage to history, tradition, and heritage that may contradict the teaching of Scripture or the mission of Christ Jesus for the church. There are hot button issues of society that to addressing stirs up a hornet’s nest of controversy. It is tempting to go along with the flow—to allow the swell of public opinion or the direction of institutional heritage sweep us along in its current.

This is somewhat the situation Peter and John faced. They did not consider themselves as preaching a new religion, breaking off from Judaism. Jesus was, after all, a Jew. He had remained so through his death and resurrection. He had never disavowed his heritage or the basic structure of Jewish faith. On the other hand, he had questioned certain emphases from tradition and legalism as he spoke of grace, forgiveness, love, and God’s desire to reconcile all people under the banner of faith.

For Peter and John, Jesus message became inconvenient. It was a great inconvenience to the Jewish religious leaders. It promised to distract the population from following the prescribed traditions of doctrine and practice that kept them in power. Jesus’ message was upsetting the apple-cart of Jewish life. This was why they had connived to have him crucified by the Romans. Jesus had been a threat to their way of understanding God and the structures of worship they found comfortable and secure. They had deemed the means of executing Jesus justifiable for the purpose of settling the people down and getting them back in line. He had been a danger to their way of thinking, so they had gotten rid of him. Now Peter and John had come along with more of the same message.

The two disciples were beaten, thrown in prison, and brought before the religious leaders to be ordered to keep their mouths shut. If they were a threat to the establishment, the establishment was not above threatening them if they should continue reporting the gospel of Jesus and his resurrection. Their very lives hung in the balance, for Rome did not interfere with such trials. Their response was likely startling. By all rights, they should have cowed in fear. They should have tucked their tails and run.

Their attitudes, however, were not those of commoners cowed in the face of authority. They answered in self-assured tones, yet with confidence expressed in God alone. They determined to remain true to their experience of Christ and the direction of God’s Spirit, regardless of opposition from any other quarter. This was not an attitude of arrogance, but of submission to the call and character of Christ Jesus. It was not a violent stance, but one that would face opposition just as they had watched Jesus face it—with humility, grace, forgiveness, and peace. It was a stance that called for an assessment of pressure placed upon them and the determination of its origin. Are we involved in wrongly applying pressure to conform, or do we stand with the integrity of faithfulness to God?

Determine how far your faithfulness to God goes. Perhaps issues are clearer in the case of Peter and John, but what matters is how they play out in your own life.

“Lord, help me to clarify what you desire of me over what is simply expedient.”

Thirty-Seventh Day:

“So once again, I, Yahweh All-Powerful, tell you, ‘See that justice is done and be kind and merciful to one another! Don’t mistreat widows or orphans or foreigners or anyone who is poor, and stop making plans to hurt each other.’ But everyone who heard those prophets stubbornly refused to obey. Instead, they turned their backs on everything my Spirit had commanded the earlier prophets to preach. So I, Yahweh, became angry and said, ‘You people paid no attention when I called out to you, and now I’ll pay no attention when you call out to me.’” Zechariah 7:8-13

A common refrain in the Passover Seder meal is “we were once foreigners in Egypt, but God rescued us with a mighty hand.” It is a reminder to include the poor, destitute, and otherwise needy in our celebration of God’s provision and blessing. Caring for widows, poor, foreigners, and orphans was a standard Ancient Near Eastern estimate of one’s righteousness. This concept was not limited to the people of Israel, but understood by most of the Hebrews’ neighbors as a test of one’s character.

If Lord Afton is correct that power corrupts, it is also true that setting aside our power over others to meet the needs of those without power is a sign of overcoming that corruption. This is the concern of *Yahweh’s* proclamation of judgment. Judah and its leaders knew well that justice demanded seeing that the disenfranchised shared in *Yahweh’s* blessings. They knew they could not advance themselves at the expense of the needy without answering to God. Regardless, they had chosen to ignore their responsibility for the less fortunate to advance their own causes.

They had ignored the demands and will of *Yahweh*. For this, they were now in exile. Here they would sit and consider how they had ignored God’s demands for righteousness and delivering justice to the oppressed. Justice here is not about retribution, punishment, and violence against aggressors. It is rather seeing that the needs of the needy are held in priority. Those who have no one to speak on their behalf are those for whom we must display concern. Justice is assuring they have food, shelter, and the means to live without oppression by those who would take advantage of them.

We have heard people raise the cry against predatory lenders. We have seen outrage against lavish bonuses in contrast to a rapid rise in unemployment rates. We have heard of “unlawful combatants” subjected to torture we would repudiate at the hands of any other government. We may have witnessed aggression against foreign workers, oppressed by those who exploit their fear of deportation. We may have heard of human trafficking supporting a sex trade within our own nation. We may have recognized the violence inherent in our business practices that place profit above compassion for workers and customers. Israel and Judah had turned blind eyes to their neglect of justice for those they oppressed. From exile, however, God called them back to faithfulness through repentance.

It is easy to point fingers at those who kill unborn babies. It is a different thing to recognize our own complicity in denying life and justice to millions as we ignore their needs by focusing on our own advancement. Will we become a people after the righteous justice of God?

Assess your own habits in search for how you overlook the plight of the oppressed. Find a way to change you life patterns according to God’s cry for justice.

“Lord, make me more aware of those whose needs I am tempted to brush aside or simply overlook.”

Thirty-Eighth Day:

“Friends, when I came and told you the mystery that God had shared with us, I didn’t use big words or try to sound wise. In fact, while I was with you, I made up my mind to speak only about Jesus Christ, who had been nailed to a cross. At first, I was weak and trembling with fear. When I talked with you or preached, I didn’t try to prove anything by sounding wise. I simply let God’s Spirit show his power. That way you would have faith because of God’s power and not because of human wisdom.” 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

It is tempting to reduce the gospel and a life of faith to what we can accomplish with our gifts, talents, and strength. It is easy to style our ministry efforts after the manner of the business community. We look for scientific models, procedures, and tested strategies for growing a church, building an institution, or adding numbers to membership, attendance, and financial giving. While there is some validity in all of this, Paul points to something greater than human strategies and know how.

Some would try to tell us that if we simply proclaim the true gospel people will flock to hear. They would tell us we are not responsible for presenting Christ in an appropriate manner so as to gain an audience. They are concerned only that the gospel be pronounced. That is not what Paul has in mind, either. Neither does Paul envision the proclamation of the gospel as a science of strategy to luring hearers through convincing arguments. He does, however, point to some sort of middle road between the extremes. His own manner of proclamation in Corinth was taken with care not to harm the gospel’s reputation. Likewise, he took pains not to reduce the gospel to an argument of human wisdom and undertaking. He also did not resort to preying upon the emotional needs of a people, luring people with a sugar-coated message.

He wanted people to understand the character, message, and identity of Christ Jesus. He made no attempt to hide the fact of the crucifixion. He didn’t explain away the scourge of shame heaped on Jesus as he paved the way of grace through faith. He didn’t fashion the gospel into an intellectual system. He simply presented Christ Jesus in a manner that could be heard. He wanted people to hear the message of Jesus and allow God to do the work of convincing them of the truth.

Amid all the possible strategies for bringing the gospel message to the Corinthians, the one Paul adopted was to live its tenets, allowing his example to back up his proclamation of Jesus. He did not take the guise of another peddler of wisdom in the Corinthian marketplace. He simply presented Christ Jesus as crucified, taking the brunt of our sin, and offering grace, love, and forgiveness in exchange.

Paul was not sure how he would be received. He began his preaching with fear and trembling. He knew that Jesus had been crucified for the message Paul now proclaimed. As his Lord, however, Paul chose the path of presenting the gospel of God’s love in word and deed. There would be those who heard and heeded. There would be those who would wish him crucified, as well. It would be through a small few that Christ would build a gathering in Corinth. They would be a few who struggled as those original disciples to understand the gospel as a message to live and share with others after the example of Christ Jesus.

Determine how God would use your life to present the gospel of Christ to others.

“Lord, grant me the strength to live your gospel and share its message with others.”

Thirty-Ninth Day:

“I, Yahweh All-Powerful, have something to say to you priests. Children respect their fathers, and servants respect their masters. I am your father and your master, so why don't you respect me? You priests have insulted me, and now you ask, ‘How did we insult you?’ You embarrass me by offering worthless food on my altar. Then you ask, ‘How have we embarrassed you?’ You have done it by saying, ‘What’s so great about Yahweh’s altar?’ But isn’t it wrong to offer animals that are blind, crippled, or sick? Just try giving those animals to your governor. That certainly wouldn’t please him or make him want to help you. I am Yahweh God All-Powerful, and you had better try to please me. You have sinned. Now see if I will have mercy on any of you.” Malachi 1:6-9

Malachi noticed that God was being treated differently than the governing officials. The priests acted as though God cared little for the quality of sacrifices and offerings presented. They acted as though God were blind, incapable of action, or simply did not care for the quality of their service and the offerings they brought to the altar.

They knew their rulers would consider the kind of gifts brought to the palace a reflection of the respect, dignity, and quality of allegiance offered by those who brought them. When it came to bringing offerings to God, they did not consider the quality of their sacrifices to matter.

Malachi makes an interesting point about our treating God differently than we treat our rules. In one sense, perhaps it is more accurate to say we treat them the same. We are loath to pay our taxes, yet we pay them to avoid fines or imprisonment. As we do not fear retribution from God, we slip on our tithes and offerings. We race past the speed limit signs on the highway, slowing down when we see a patrol car. We follow God’s directions when they are convenient, or when we fear getting caught.

If the offering specified is a goat of sheep that is to be burned and not eaten, why not take the sick or crippled one, instead of the healthiest in the flock? A life was a life, was a life, wasn’t it? The blood of each was no different! Prune the herd by sacrificing the lesser animals and there would be healthier animals to sacrifice in the future! It just made sense! Sense, that is, if we forget the rest of the message.

The sacrifices and offerings to God were expressions of trust in God’s faithfulness. No king would accept a half-hearted allegiance. No king would be expected to approve a gift from a herd’s culls. Expecting God to be pleased was expecting God not to exist. It was expecting God to have no bearing on providing for one’s welfare, no impact on the direction of one’s life. It was to ignore God and keep him at bay.

The same is still true with regard for our tithes and offerings to God. God’s requirement that we return a tenth of all we receive has not changed. Well, it has in one regard, only. That is that in Christ Jesus we are called to give God our all, not just a portion. Tithes and offerings are a confession of trust in God’s provision. God expects no less than our earthly creditors, though God’s offers much more in reply. Do we respect God at least as much as the bill that comes in the mail?

All we have belongs to God. Determine where the use of your resources may fail to display trust in God’s care and provision.

“Lord, remind me that my life is in your hands. Help me respect you in my giving and service.”

Fortieth Day:

“When the two women ran from the tomb, they were confused and shaking all over. They were too afraid to tell anyone what had happened.” Mark 16:8

Fear is a powerful motivator. It so often controls our actions, even when we know there to be a better way of doing. Fear is often irrational, but at times it is the very rational aspect of fear that keeps us from living according to faith. The women’s word was almost pointless in the day’s courts. It took the word of two women to equate the word of one man. No one would believe them if they told the story. Perhaps it was just a ruse to locate the disciples and kill them along with Jesus. They were afraid and their fear ran with them, silencing their message of good news.

Mark’s gospel originally ended with this verse. It was an unsettling ending. It was troubling. It was not the way the story was supposed to end. What about the happily ever after? Apparently, the text was changed by editors and copyists to reflect that the resurrection story did get told. They wanted the text to speak more of Jesus’ resurrection than Mark’s ending. His ending was uncomfortable, after all. It was unsatisfying. The women go to the tomb, find Jesus, then slip away quietly in fear. Mark’s was a brilliant literary device. It is effective. It stirs our emotions. It makes us question the women, but also ourselves. Too often, however, we read the text as those early editors, seeking a reinforcement of the message we want to share or hear, so we miss Mark’s point.

This is the most fast-paced of the gospel narratives. Mark presents Jesus teaching and doing. We are at one place, then another. We hear Jesus’ words and see him act. He takes the disciples on a journey of action-packed discovery. We find Jesus healing and touching the lives of all kinds of people in order to continue the task of teaching the disciples in memorable ways. He leads us to the cross, then the tomb. Here we are faced with the seemingly unreasonable news that Jesus has risen from the dead.

This is the climax of Mark’s account. We have been introduced to Jesus and his teaching the disciples. We have watched the disciples fail to understand the gospel time after time. They were always missing the point behind Jesus’ words and actions. They worried over food when Jesus had just fed thousands of people. They battled Jesus over how to be messiah and argued against the possibility of his death. They argued over the wrong definition of greatness in the messianic reign.

It is easy to accuse the disciples of falling down on the job. Mark casts them as easy targets—dense fishermen who were always missing the boat. As these women come to the tomb, however, it is no longer the disciples who must respond to Jesus. All have abandoned him—the crowds, the twelve, Peter, and the other women who stood by the cross. They had all departed, and only the women are left to care for him. As they approach to hear the news of Jesus’ resurrection, they also fail and run away. Now we are the only ones left. Now we are the ones faced with the question of how we will respond. What will we do? Will we run away in fear, or announce the message of the risen Lord?

Give the risen Christ center place in your life. Allow his resurrection to live in you.

“Lord, grant me the courage to see how I have failed to understand your gospel, the to proclaim your word in the character of Christ Jesus, crucified, yet risen from the dead.”

—Christopher B. Harbin