

**MAKING  
CHRIST  
*your*  
KING**

**DR. JIM DENISON**

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# *Introduction*

The Crown Jewels of England are valued at more than \$30 million. They are worn when a new king or queen assumes the throne and for other significant affairs of state. The rest of the time they are kept in the Tower of London under very heavy security.

There has been one nearly successful attempt to steal them. In 1671, an Irish thief named Colonel Blood fashioned an elaborate plot. Passing himself off as a clergyman, he won the friendship of the Assistant Keeper of the Jewels, a retired soldier named Talbot Edwards. When he asked to see the jewels, Edwards kindly obliged. Blood and his gang then stabbed and gagged the elderly man and made off with the jewels. Edwards' son happened to return at that moment and raised the alarm. Blood and his gang were captured and all the jewels recovered.

Monarchs come and go; kingdoms rise and fall; but the King of the universe is still on his throne. His Son came to bring his Kingdom to the world he made. Jesus' first sermon announced that "the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17). He taught us to "seek first the kingdom and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33). When he returns he will be known across his creation as "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" (Revelation 19:16).

Is he your King today?

During Lent, billions of Christians around the world prepare to celebrate the resurrection of Christ the King. This guide has been

prepared to help you join this sacred season. By following its daily readings we will walk with Jesus through the Gospel of Matthew. Each day we will explore a faith question which will lead us to make Jesus our King. When we reach Resurrection Sunday, we will crown the risen Christ together.

On April 12, AD 29, more than two million people were crowded into Jerusalem for Passover. As Jesus of Nazareth approached the Holy City, a “very large crowd” made him their King: “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” (Matthew 21:8, 9). This Lenten season, let’s join them.

# *Ash Wednesday*

## **Why must we repent to enter God's Kingdom?**

Read: Matthew 4:17

A pastor on vacation in the Colorado mountains embarked on a day-long hiking expedition with some friends. Their guide had grown up in the area. Grizzled in appearance and rough in language, his manners contrasted greatly with the piety of his hiking clients.

That is, until they reached the summit of the mountain. The group came up the back side, shielded from the wind. When they reached the top, the excited pastor ran to the peak and stood, looking over it. The guide caught up with him just as a gale-force wind swept up from the valley and over the mountain. He pulled the pastor down behind a massive rock and shouted, "On your knees! You're safe up here only on your knees!"

Ash Wednesday reminds us to come to God on our knees. Today marks the formal beginning of Lent, observed each year on the seventh Wednesday before Easter Sunday. Its name comes from the ancient practice of placing ashes on worshippers' foreheads as a sign of humility. They are made from palm branches used in the previous year's Palm Sunday and call us to mourn for our sins, remembering that they caused the death of Jesus.

Why is such repentance necessary to experience God's presence more intimately? Because he is "holy, holy, holy" (Isaiah 6:3;

Revelation 4:8). His “Holy” Spirit is grieved by the sins of unholy people (Ephesians 4:30). So, whether you place ashes on your forehead today or not, use this historic tradition to come to God in humility, repentance, and gratitude for his “grace that is greater than all our sin.”

***For reflection***

Jesus began his public ministry with the pronouncement, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matthew 4:17). Unless you have crowned Jesus your King today, you are ruling on the throne of your life. Do you need to begin Lent with repentance?

# *Day 2*

## **Can God use you?**

Read: Matthew 1:1-17

All most of us know about Mardi Gras is the parties in New Orleans we see on television each year. It's hard to imagine that something spiritual is connected with all the revelry and irreverence. But it is.

The day before Ash Wednesday is sometimes called "Fat Tuesday" ("Mardi Gras" in French), since it was historically the last day of feasting before Lent begins. It is also called "Carnival," Latin for "farewell to meat," so named because there was a day when many Christians gave up meat for Lent.

What was once a time of solemn spiritual preparation has become a party we watch every year on the news. Fortunately, some communities are trying to return Mardi Gras to its historic spirit. In Brazil, for instance, Carnival parades focus on national and cultural history in an attempt to move away from the drunken revelry for which Mardi Gras is infamous.

We see the same contrast between the spiritual and the sinful at the very beginning of Jesus' story. Matthew gave us his genealogy to prove to his Jewish readers that Jesus was descended from Abraham and David and thus eligible to be the Messiah. But he included infamous characters such as Rahab (v. 5) and Bathsheba (v. 6) as well.

Do you sometimes wonder if God can use your life with all its failures and flaws? Jesus was the only baby who chose his ancestors, and he chose “outlaws for in-laws.” If he could use them, he can use you today.

***For reflection***

God seeks not ability but availability. Have you made yourself fully available to him today?

# *Day 3*

## **Why does your soul need silence?**

Read: Matthew 1:18-25

Some of you are on spring break this week. Others will be off next week. I don't remember ever getting such a break from school, but my sons considered this holiday their inalienable constitutional right. When they were growing up we could sooner sell the television than abolish spring break at my house. And understandably so—students need a break.

Lent is spring break for our souls. This is an annual season for renewal and reflection, worship and commitment. “Lent” is specifically a forty-day period of spiritual renewal and preparation for Easter. The term is derived from an old Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic word “Lencten,” which means “spring.”

The practice of setting aside 40 days each springtime to prepare for Easter began very early in Christian history. Remember the significance of the number 40 in the Bible. Jesus fasted 40 days in the wilderness when he began his public ministry. He also lay 40 hours in the tomb before his resurrection. The Jews wandered for 40 years in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. Rain fell for 40 days during the flood of Noah. Moses stayed on Mt. Sinai for 40 days when he received the Law from God. And Elijah fasted for 40 days as he fled to Horeb.

Note the pattern of solitude for Noah, Moses, Elijah and Jesus. Silence can be good for our souls, a fact illustrated by Joseph, the husband of Mary. As Matthew continues with the infancy narrative of Jesus, he introduces us to our Lord's adoptive father. This righteous man took Mary to be his wife even though she was pregnant with a child who was not his. He forsook his family and home when he fled to Egypt, and risked his life when he returned to Israel. And through it all he spoke not a recorded word in Scripture.

Why does your soul need silence before God? Because it's hard to listen when you're talking. Mother Teresa said that when she began her spiritual life she spent 90% of her prayer time talking to God. At the end of her life, she spent 90% of her prayer time listening to God.

***For reflection***

When last did you make time to be silent before your King, listening to his Spirit? When will you again?

# ***Day 4***

## **Why should you sacrifice to your King?**

Read: Matthew 2

For most of my life, I've heard of people "giving up" something for Lent. One person I know gives up chocolate for Lent each year. Another person gives up television (the chocolate of the brain). I'd like to give up committee meetings for Lent. Where does this tradition originate?

In early Christianity, a Lenten-like fast before Easter was strictly observed. Only one meal a day was allowed, to be eaten at night. Meat and fish were forbidden. Eggs and milk products were also excluded by most churches.

In the ninth century this tradition began to relax in the West, as the hour for breaking the fast was moved to 3:00 PM. In the thirteenth century, light food was allowed at supper. Fish was permitted beginning in the Middle Ages. By the fifteenth century, even monks ate at noon during Lent and milk products were allowed.

On February 17, 1966, the Roman Catholic Church released a document entitled *Paenitemini*. It restricted the obligation of fasting during Lent to the first day of the season and Good Friday. In the Eastern Church, however, abstinence from meat, fish, eggs, and milk products during Lent is still practiced widely.

So, what should you give up for Lent? Let the Magi be your guide.

These Persian priests and astrologers were descended from royalty. They sacrificed months, perhaps even years in their trek to worship the Child of Christmas. They brought him their best: gold, a gift for a king; frankincense, an incense used by priests; and myrrh, an embalming fluid used for sacrifices. Somehow they knew that Jesus came to be their priest, sacrifice, and King.

Why join them in giving your best to your King? Not because he needs what you have, but because you need to give it. Only then can he use it for his glory and your good. He always gives to the best to those who leave the choice with him.

***For reflection***

When last did it cost you something significant to serve your King?

# *Day 5*

## **Why do you need to confess your sins?**

Read: Matthew 3

Have you ever wondered why Easter moves around so much? Why can't we pick a specific date for Easter, as we do with Christmas? Or, if we want Easter to be on Sunday each year, why not specify the second Sunday in April or something similar?

The ancient Jews observed Passover on the fourteenth day of the month Nisan (the first month of their year, occurring in March-April on our calendar). The first Christians apparently celebrated Easter immediately after Passover, whether the day fell on a Sunday or not. But others wanted Easter to be on Sunday each year.

The Council of Nicea (AD 325) settled things for Western Christians. It determined that Easter would be celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal equinox. "Vernal" means "spring." The "equinox" is the time when the sun crosses the equator, making night and day of equal length in all parts of the earth. In the northern hemisphere, the vernal equinox occurs each year around March 21.

So Easter comes on the Sunday after the first full moon after March 21, unless that full moon is on a Sunday (in which case we wait a week). We then back up seven weeks to Ash Wednesday and begin the Lenten season. The Eastern church does it differently, but that discussion would confuse us even further.

The date of Easter may be confusing, but its purpose is not. Jesus came “to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). He began that mission with his baptism by John, identifying with sinners who came to the Jordan River in repentance. He still identifies with repentant sinners today: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Why do you need to confess your sins to him? Not to tell him what he already knows, but to admit your failures and seek his forgiveness. He can heal only what you allow him to touch.

***For reflection***

Ask the Holy Spirit to bring to your mind anything in your life which displeases God, and confess all that comes to your thoughts. Claim Jesus’ forgiving love, and serve your King today with gratitude for his grace.

# *Day 6*

## **What should you do with temptation?**

Read: Matthew 4

Many churches use colors to observe Lent. Purple is displayed for most of the season, symbolizing Jesus' suffering and royalty. Good Friday colors are black, recalling the darkness brought into the world through our sin and the death of Jesus which was its result.

Black is used throughout Holy Saturday as well. Then white is unveiled on Easter Sunday, celebrating the victory we have through Jesus' resurrection.

Of all the colors of this season, only one will endure forever. One day there will be no Lent, no fasting, no sacrifice, and no purple or black. One day, every day will be like this: "I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count . . . standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes" (Revelation 7:9). All who have made Christ their Lord will join them.

But our victory comes at an unspeakable cost. Before he died for our sins, Jesus faced them personally. He "has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). In the wilderness, Satan tried to get him to use his powers for his own benefit rather than his Father's glory. Our enemy tempts us in the same way.

Here's the good news: Jesus' strength and victory can be yours. Scripture promises:

“God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Corinthians 10:13). So bring your temptation to Jesus the moment it attacks. It will never be easier to trust it to your Lord than it is today.

***For reflection***

What temptations do you face this morning? Will you give them to your King now?

# *Day 7*

## **Why does God desire humility?**

Read: Matthew 5:1-12

Julius Caesar was assassinated by his good friend Brutus on this day in 44 B.C. Brutus feared that Caesar was becoming too powerful, endangering the elected government of Rome. But his actions had the opposite effect, sparking a power struggle which culminated in the reign of Caesar's nephew Octavian, crowned by the Senate as Emperor Augustus. What had been a republic soon became an empire dominated by despots.

In stark contrast to such power-driven rule, Jesus established his Kingdom on principles of humility and service. His first beatitude laid the foundation for the rest: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3).

"Blessed" translates *makarios*, a sense of well-being which transcends circumstances. "Poor" translates *ptochos*, which means to be absolutely destitute, with no idea where your next meal will come from. To be "poor in spirit" is to admit that you are spiritually bankrupt before God. The New English Bible translates the phrase well: "Blessed are those who know their need of God."

The Lenten season emphasizes humility, reflection and submission to God. Why does he value humility? Because self-sufficiency is spiritual suicide. God cannot do for us what we try to do for

ourselves. When we admit that we need Jesus to be our King, we have taken the first step into his Kingdom.

***For reflection***

What are your goals and ambitions for this day? Have you submitted them to Jesus yet? Will you seek to glorify him in all you do today?

# *Day 8*

## **Why obey God's word?**

Read: Matthew 5:13-48

St. Patrick's Day is tomorrow. Green hats and parades will dominate the day. Everyone will be Irish for a day, but not everyone knows why.

Patrick was born around A.D. 389 in England. His father was a deacon and his grandfather a priest. The Roman Empire still claimed Britain, but their demoralized armies were unable to protect the island from Irish invaders. Farms were pillaged and teenagers enslaved.

Patrick was kidnapped at age 16. An Irish farmer bought him as a slave and put him to work tending sheep. Somehow Patrick came to personal faith in Christ in the midst of his pain and suffering, and later wrote, "The Lord opened to me a sense of my unbelief, that I might be converted with all my heart unto the Lord."

Patrick received a vision from God when he was 22, a clear signal to run from Ireland for his home. Risking his life, he was able to evade his captors and return to his family. But his heart was heavy for the spiritual condition of his Irish captors. Following another vision, Patrick devoted himself for seven years to Bible study and then returned to Ireland, now as a missionary. The Irish were almost completely without Christ. They worshiped the elements and spirits in trees and stones, and engaged in magic and even human sacrifice. Patrick went to work, and the

results changed the history of Ireland, as we'll see tomorrow.

St. Patrick believed Jesus when he claimed in the Sermon on the Mount, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17). To him, obeying and teaching God’s word was a cause worth his life.

Theologian J. I. Packer described the Bible as “God preaching.” Why obey what he says? Because we must obey his word to experience its power and results in our lives. Oswald Chambers was right: We only understand our Lord to the degree that we obey him.

***For reflection***

Jesus taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). He is your King only if you are obeying his word and will. When last did reading the Bible change your life in a practical way?

# *Day 9*

## **How can you win over worry?**

Read: Matthew 6:1-24

Over 1,550 years ago, St. Patrick was enslaved by the Irish, escaped to his native England, then responded to God's call in returning to Ireland as a missionary.

When his career was done, Patrick had established some 200 churches in Ireland and led more than 100,000 to faith in Christ, despite more than a dozen attempts on his life. Today he is the patron saint of Ireland. His death on March 17, 461 is remembered each year as St. Patrick's Day.

In his *Confessions* Patrick wrote, "I am greatly a debtor to God, who has bestowed his grace so largely upon me, that multitudes were born again to God through me. The Irish, who had never had the knowledge of God and worshiped only idols and unclean things, have lately become the people of the Lord, and are called sons of God."

Patrick was one of the greatest missionaries and spiritual leaders in history. He took enormous risks to make Jesus' priorities his own: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:19-21).

How can you win over worry? By trusting your fears and problems unconditionally to your Father. Paul the Apostle was convinced that “my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19). The will of God never leads where the grace of God cannot sustain.

***For reflection***

If Jesus is your Lord, you are the child of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. This King knows how to provide for his subjects. What worries will you entrust to him today?

# ***Day 10***

## **How can you know you are God's child?**

Read: Matthew 6:25-34

A few years ago I visited a rural village in Bangladesh. The people there were extremely gracious. One evening, we met with village leaders, all of them Muslim, who were very warm and welcoming. The next morning we heard the Muslim call to prayer at 5:30 A.M. People across the village rose at dawn to pray, hoping to please Allah with their sacrifices.

Islam, like all world religions, is a system based on our performance. Muslims hope that if they do enough for God, he may allow them into his perfect paradise. Christianity is unique with its emphasis on grace rather than works. Our salvation is not dependent on what we can do but on what Jesus has done.

Today he invites us to make him our King for this day, trusting our salvation and problems to his sovereign grace. He assured us, "Do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" For the pagans run after these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need him. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt. 6:31-33).

This King knows how to provide for his subjects. How can you know that you are his child? If you have asked Jesus to forgive your

sins and made him your Lord, you are in his hand. Now there is no one who can snatch you out of his hand (John 10:28). You're not holding onto him—his omnipotent hand is holding onto you.

***For reflection***

Have you asked Jesus to forgive your mistakes and failures, turning your life over to him as your Lord and King? If not, please talk with a Christian about your need for salvation today. If you have trusted Jesus as your Lord, have you thanked him today for your eternal life?

# *Day 11*

## **How can God hear our prayers?**

Read: Matthew 7:1-12

John Wesley believed that God does nothing except in answer to prayer. His logic makes sense. God created us to worship him; worship requires a choice; so God has given us free will. He chooses to limit himself at the point of our freedom, so that he will not force his love upon us. As Jesus told the Laodiceans, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20).

We do not always open the door to Jesus when he knocks, but he will always open to us: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matt. 7:7-8). Think of it: billions of Christians praying in hundreds of languages to the same God, all assured that he hears and answers us. How is this possible?

C. S. Lewis had the answer. He reminded us that God created time and transcends it. If we think of time as a line on a page, God is the page. As a result, he has all of eternity to answer your next prayer. What’s more, he knows today about prayers you will offer to him next week and can act accordingly. As a result, your prayers can literally change events in the past, present and future.

It's no surprise that "very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed" (Mark 1:35). His Father is your Father. Is there a greater privilege in the world than time alone with him?

***For reflection***

Do you have a regular appointment to meet with your King in prayer? Do you keep a prayer list? What was the last prayer your Father answered? What needs would you place in his hands today?

# *Day 12*

## **Why submit to your King?**

Read: Matthew 7:13-29

My favorite hiking trail takes me to the top of a plateau overlooking Possum Kingdom Lake, an hour west of Ft. Worth, Texas. On the way down the trail passes through a flat, open sandy field. If I were camping in the area, I might pick this area as an ideal spot to pitch my tent. Until a rainstorm came, that is. Then this field would become a flash flood zone. Torrential rains would sweep away anyone and anything in their path. Though it is much harder to pitch a tent on the rocky ledges higher up the plateau, they are the only safe place to camp.

This is the image behind the conclusion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: "Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash" (Matthew 7:24-27).

In his Great Commission Jesus instructed us to "make disciples of all nations" by baptizing them as believers and "teaching them

to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). Disciples are not made by knowing God’s word, but by obeying it.

James made this principle clear: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does” (James 1:22-25).

Why submit your life to Jesus as your King? Because he is your King only when you obey his words. And he can lead you into his perfect will only if you will follow.

***For reflection***

Is there an area of disobedience to God’s word in your life today?

# *Day 13*

## **How can you deal with guilt?**

Read: Matthew 8:1-4

Leprosy is the most dreaded disease in human history. Hansen's Disease, as it is properly called, causes the nerves to die. Extremities wither and decay, some falling from the body, as the person ceases to function normally. Until recent times there was little understanding of this disease and no effective treatment. So lepers were quarantined from their families and friends and the disease began to ruin their lives.

When Jesus finished the Sermon on the Mount, as large crowds followed him in amazement, "a man with leprosy came and knelt before him" (Matt. 8:2). This was an act of great courage, as the man left his isolation to risk an encounter with Jesus. He could have been punished or even killed by the people in Capernaum. But Jesus "reached out his hand and touched the man" (v. 3), the first human contact he had felt since his affliction began. Our Lord cleansed him of his leprosy and returned him to his family and society, a miracle so astounding that it is recorded in Scripture for all time.

Where has spiritual leprosy found you? What shame or guilt from the past do you carry in your soul today? What temptations consistently defeat you? What relationships are damaged or strained? What fears for the future plague you now? What can you do about them?

Bring your pain to the only One who can touch it and heal your soul. Say to him with the leper of Capernaum, “Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean” (v. 2). Feel his touch and claim his healing grace.

Then tell others what Jesus has done. As the leper showed the priest that he had been healed (v. 4), so we are to offer the grace we have received to our hurting world. Everything our Lord has ever done he can do today, for “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). He is still the Great Physician.

***For reflection***

Have you experienced God’s healing, forgiving grace recently? Will you share your story with someone who needs hope today?

# ***Day 14***

## **Why does God require faith?**

Read: Matthew 8:5-34

God made Gentiles so there would be firewood in hell, or so many Jews believed in Jesus' day. Gentiles had been persecuting their nation since the children of Israel were enslaved by Egypt 15 centuries earlier. Assyrians destroyed their ten northern tribes; Babylonians enslaved their remaining peoples; then they lived under the heel of Persians, Greeks, and now Romans.

The Caesars made life in Israel miserable. Their tax collectors demanded exorbitant sums from the people, all under the protection of the Roman military. Their leaders governed under Roman authority. Their lives became a struggle for survival under the grinding poverty of their day. The backbone of the Roman military occupation of Palestine was the "centurion," a commander of 100 soldiers. He was the sergeant of their system, the man in charge of Roman rule in towns and villages across the country.

Now, to the shock of all, the centurion of Capernaum came to a Jewish rabbi for help: "Lord, my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering" (Matt. 8:6). Unlike the other Jewish authorities of his day, Jesus had compassion for this man's need: "I will go and heal him."

Then the cursed Gentile said something which amazed even Jesus:

“Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it” (vs. 8-9).

Jesus was “astonished” and told the crowds that he had not seen such faith in all the land of Israel (v. 10). Then he assured the centurion that “it will be done just as you believed it would” (v. 13). And his servant was healed “at that very hour,” proof that Jesus had performed a miracle for the ages.

### ***For reflection***

Why have faith like the centurion? Not to earn God’s favor, but to receive it. Faith positions you to experience all your Father wants for you. Do you believe that “with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26)? Who needs your intercession today?

# *Day 15*

## **Why bring people to Jesus?**

Read: Matthew 9:1-8

Who brought you to faith in Christ? My journey began when Tony McGrady and Julian Unger knocked on our apartment door and invited my brother and me to ride their bus to church. If they had not brought me to worship, I would never have come on my own.

Before God used a bus, he used a mat. Jesus returned to Peter's home in Capernaum, his ministry base in Galilee, where "some men brought to him a paralytic, lying on a mat" (Matt. 9:2). Mark tells us that the home was so crowded with people who wanted to hear Jesus that "there was no room left, not even outside the door" (Mark 2:2). The typical Galilean home had a flat mud roof covered with thatch. So these men "made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralyzed man was lying on" (v. 4).

In response to such faith, Jesus healed this man. The astonished crowds "praised God who had given such authority to men" (Matt. 9:8).

Why bring people to Jesus today? Because many, like the paralyzed man, cannot come to him without help. Surveys indicate that the vast majority of unchurched people would attend worship if someone would invite them. Your family, friends and neighbors are

especially likely to attend services during the Easter season. But they need your help. Just as you would probably not know how to visit a Buddhist temple or Muslim mosque, so most unchurched people feel uncomfortable visiting your church uninvited.

Jesus calls us to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19), beginning “in Jerusalem,” where we live (Acts 1:8). You can fulfill your commission by praying specifically for the unchurched people you know, asking God to use you in bringing them to faith in Jesus. Then you can take the initiative to invite them to Easter services with you.

***For reflection***

There is no greater privilege than helping someone spend eternity in heaven. Who will you bring to Jesus this Easter season?

# *Day 16*

## **Will your life count for eternity?**

Read: Matthew 9:9-13

Who are the most despised people in your community? Drug dealers? Gang leaders? In Jesus' day, tax collectors would have been everyone's answer to the question.

Turncoats and traitors, they charged exorbitant taxes from their fellow Jews to give to the hated Romans, taking huge cuts for themselves. Since Capernaum was a significant and thriving town, it was a very lucrative place for a tax collector like Matthew. He paid the highest price of any disciple in following Jesus' call: "As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me,' he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him" (Matt. 9:9).

When he abandoned his "tax collector's booth," Matthew gave up his profitable job with no way to regain it. There were always people waiting in line for positions like his, so the Romans would immediately assign his office to someone else.

As long as he remained in his job, Matthew could count on the protection of the Roman soldiers stationed in his town. When he left his booth, however, he left their security. Now fellow Jews enraged at his corruption over the years had every opportunity to seek revenge. Matthew risked his future and even his life when he chose to follow Jesus.

But this despised tax collector did more than join Jesus' apostolic band—he led his friends to his new Lord as well: “While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and ‘sinners’ came and ate with him and his disciples” (v. 10). An evangelist has been defined as “one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread.” Matthew is our best model for such ministry.

Can your life count for eternity? If Jesus would call Matthew to follow him, he would call anyone. If he would use Matthew to reach others, he would use anyone.

***For reflection***

Who is the individual in your community least likely to become a minister of the gospel? Would you today pray for this person to become a Matthew?

# *Day 17*

## **Do you have the heart of Christ?**

Read: Matthew 9:14-38

“Compassion” is associated with no deity in the world except the God of Scripture. The Greek’s Zeus thundered from Mt. Olympus at his wary subjects; the Muslim’s Allah is remote and unfeeling; Buddhists and Hindus have no concept of a personal, individual Lord of the universe. Only the Bible describes God as a Person who feels for us and with us, a trait made clear by the event we’ll explore today.

As he continued his ministry in Galilee, “Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness” (Matt. 9:35). He was one with his people, living among them and seeing their problems and pain. Then he revealed his heart: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (v. 36).

So he called his disciples to join his ministry of compassion by praying to “the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field” (v. 38). They would soon answer their prayer: “He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness” (Matt. 10:1).

Now we are Jesus’ hands and feet, his body for ministry today (1 Corinthians 12:27). Your life is the only sermon many people may hear.

### ***For reflection***

Do you have Jesus' compassion for the lost and hurting people you know? If not, will you ask him for his help today? The most transforming prayer I know is this: "Lord, break my heart with what breaks your heart."

# *Day 18*

## **What is the greatest sin of the church?**

Read: Matthew 10:1-39

Galilee was the northern hill country, looked down upon by the sophisticated urbanites in Jerusalem. They had the Temple and Sanhedrin; the Galileans had fishing boats and fields. They had rabbinic schools; the Galileans had an itinerant carpenter. But the eleven Galileans who followed Jesus changed the world.

The day came when our Lord “gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness” (Matt. 10:1), and they used that spiritual power to spark the mightiest spiritual force the world has ever seen. Eleven men have become two billion Christians around the world. Today the mighty Roman Empire which enslaved their nation is consigned to the dust heap of history, while the movement they sparked grows stronger every day.

Their secret: they traded self-reliance for Spirit dependence.

In our text, Jesus told these men where to go (vs. 5-6) and what to say (v. 7) and do (v. 8). They trusted him, not their resources or abilities (vs. 9-10). And God met their needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19).

What is the great sin of American Christianity today? Self-dependence. Our culture measures us by what we do and how well we do it. We learn at an early age to rely on ourselves, believing

that we can do anything if we get up earlier, stay up later, work longer and try harder. But human words cannot change human hearts. Only when we are led and empowered by the Spirit can we make a difference which lasts.

Dr. John Haggai is the founder of a missions organization which has equipped tens of thousands of leaders to advance the Kingdom around the world. He became a mentor to me when I was his pastor in Atlanta, Georgia. I will always remember his life credo: “Let us attempt something so great it is doomed to fail unless God be in it.”

***For reflection***

You can do all things through Christ who gives you strength (Philippians 4:13). What is your next step of faith in serving your King?

# *Day 19*

## **What is the source of your personal worth?**

Read: Matthew 10:40-42

What is the greatest compliment you can remember receiving? The more you respect the source, the more you value what he or she thinks of you. Consider three compliments which Jesus has paid to you. First, he called you a “prophet,” someone who delivers his message to the world: “He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward” (Matt. 10:40-41a).

Second, he called you a “righteous” person: “Anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man’s reward” (v. 41b). God is the “Righteous One” (Acts 22:14). When we follow Jesus we belong to the Righteous God and take on his character. As righteous people we will be rewarded by the Lord, as will those who accept our message.

Third, he called you “my disciple”: “And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward” (v. 42). We belong to Jesus. Anyone who gives us even the smallest blessing will be rewarded by the Lord we serve.

You are valuable because you are loved by God and belong to him.

When you speak his word, you are his prophet; when you live by his truth, you are his righteous person; when you follow him, you are his disciple.

Can you receive higher compliments than these?

***For reflection***

When I was in high school, my youth minister gave me the best single piece of advice I've ever received: "Always remember the source of your personal worth." Where do you find your value today?

# *Day 20*

## **What do you do with doubts?**

Read: Matthew 11:1-19

John the Baptist fascinates me. Jesus' cousin by birth, he risked his life to prepare the way for our Lord's public ministry. He baptized Jesus, witnessing the Holy Spirit's descent upon God's Son and the Father's voice of affirmation (Matt. 3:16-17). Jesus said of him, "Among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist" (Matt. 11:11).

Yet there came a time when John questioned everything he believed about Jesus. He had been imprisoned for challenging Herod's illegal marriage, and would soon be beheaded by this cruel despot. When John "heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'" (Matt. 11:2).

Jesus was not at all offended by John's question. He responded by reciting his Messianic deeds: "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor" (v. 5). With this encouragement: "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me" (v. 6).

John was not the first follower of Jesus to have doubts, nor the last. Matthew tells us that after Jesus' resurrection, "the eleven

disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted” (Matt. 28:16-17). The Lord invited us, “Come now, let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18). “Reason together” in the Hebrew is literally, “argue it out.”

Frederick Buechner, the great theologian and novelist, described doubts as “ants in the pants of faith—they keep it moving.” You are called to love God “with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37). What do you do with doubts? Bring them to the Lord and his word and people. The One who is “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6) welcomes them. The only bad question is the one you won’t ask.

Your King promised, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32).

***For reflection***

What faith questions do you have for Jesus today?

# *Day 21*

## **Who is leading your life?**

Read: Matthew 11:20-30

Jesus was a “carpenter” like his adoptive father (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3). The word translates *tehton*, “one who works with his hands.”

There is an ancient tradition that Jesus specialized in ox yokes. These heavy wooden implements were vital to the economy of his day. If they chafed the ox or broke during the day, the farmer would lose valuable time and money. According to the tradition, there was a sign above Jesus’ carpenter shop which proclaimed, “My yokes fit well.”

Whatever the truth of this tradition, there is no question that Jesus makes the best spiritual yokes: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30).

Who is leading your life today? Are you “weary and burdened” with your problems and worries? Take Jesus’ yoke upon you—submit to his will and purpose for your life as an ox submits to the farmer who directs his work. “Learn” from him by spending time in his word and worship. You will discover that he is “gentle and humble in heart,” and that he will give you “rest for your souls.”

His yoke is “easy” (“good” in the Greek) and “light,” for it fits your shoulders perfectly.

Your King’s will for your life is “good, pleasing and perfect” (Romans 12:2). He has “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11). But you must wear his yoke to know his will. This is a decision only you can make, every day.

***For reflection***

Have you put his yoke on your soul yet today?

# *Day 22*

## **Are you religious?**

Read: Matthew 12:1-14

When I was teaching in Bangladesh, it was my great privilege to spend two evenings with Muslim imams and other leaders from the nearby villages. They were very gracious, welcoming our team to their area and asking kind questions about our faith.

They had seen Christians at work, feeding the hungry and helping the poor, and they did not understand our motives. One of them said, “My brother lives next to me, and often goes to bed without food. The Qur’an tells me to help him, but I do not. You Christians care for the poor more than I do. Why?”

As I explained to them, it is the difference between religion and relationship.

Consider the events of Matthew 12. His disciples picked heads of grain and ate them, breaking the Sabbath regulations of their day and earning the wrath of the Pharisees. Rather than rebuke his followers, Jesus rebuked the authorities. He reminded them that the temple priests who serve on the Sabbath break its prohibitions against work, then claimed, “One greater than the temple is here” (v. 6).

Even more astonishing, he then pronounced himself “Lord of the Sabbath” (v. 8). When he proved his superiority to their Sabbath regulations by healing a man on the Sabbath, “the Pharisees went

out and plotted how they might kill Jesus” (v. 14).

Are you religious? I hope not. Religion is our effort to climb up to God; Christianity is God’s decision to climb down to us. Each of the world’s religions shares a kind of legalism, a set of prescribed actions which are intended to produce spiritual results. Jews observe the Torah; Buddhists follow the Four Noble Truths and Eight-fold Noble Path; Muslims try to keep their Five Pillars; Hindus spend their lives in ascetic discipline.

But all our efforts cannot earn us a place in God’s perfect paradise. When we make Jesus our King, he transforms us into his image and character (Romans 8:29). Then others will see him in us, and want what we have.

***For reflection***

Do your neighbors see Jesus in you?

# *Day 23*

## **How do you handle skeptics?**

Read: Matthew 12:15-50

Jesus' brothers were among his earliest critics. His half-brothers were named James, Joseph, Simon and Judas (or Jude); he had half-sisters as well (Matt. 13:55-56). Surprisingly, their response to Jesus during his earthly ministry was consistently negative.

When Jesus was speaking to the crowds on one occasion, “his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him” (Matt. 12:46). Told of this, he replied, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” He then called his disciples “my mother and my brothers,” with the explanation, “For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (vs. 49, 50).

Mark's version of this event is even more striking. When Jesus entered this house, such a crowd gathered that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, “they went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind’” (Mark 3:20-21).

His brothers apparently did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God until after his resurrection (cf. John 7:3, 5). Eventually “he appeared to James” (1 Corinthians 15:7), his oldest brother (Galatians 1:19). James eventually became the pastor of the church in Jerusalem and author of the letter bearing his name (cf. Acts 12:17; 15:13).

After Jesus' ascension, the rest of his family joined his movement as well: "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers" (Acts 1:14). Jude, the author of the letter bearing his name, was most likely one of his half-brothers; he calls himself "a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James" (v. 1).

How should you respond when your family and friends do not understand or accept your faith? Do not be discouraged. And do not give up on them. When a dear friend of mine left Islam for Christianity, his father placed a warrant for his arrest and his family rejected him. He did not see them for 11 years. Today each of them is a believer, and his three brothers are all deeply involved in his ministry to Muslims.

***For reflection***

Who in your family most needs your prayer support and ministry today?

# *Day 24*

## **How does God measure success?**

Read: Matthew 13:1-23

Charles Spurgeon was England's best-known preacher in the latter half of the nineteenth century. His sermons and writings constitute the largest volume of books ever published by a single author. His ministry at London's Metropolitan Tabernacle attracted global attention. Many consider him the finest pastor in Baptist history.

As he grew older, Spurgeon became more and more a mentor to younger ministers. One of them, struggling in his first pastorate, asked the "prince of preachers" why it was that more people did not respond when he preached the gospel. Spurgeon asked him, "You don't expect people to respond every time you preach, do you?" The young pastor quickly assured the great pastor that he did not. "That's why they don't," Spurgeon replied.

The "parable of the sower" in Matthew 13 is Jesus' word of encouragement: when we sow the word of God, it will find good soil and souls. We seldom know when, how, or how much, but it will happen.

Some people are hardened to God's word, like the "path" which the farmer walked each day until it was beaten, concrete-like earth. Others are like "rocky places" which are spiritually shallow—they may receive God's word but do not stay faithful when hard

times come. Still others have spiritual thorns in their lives, sins and priorities which choke out God's word and will. But some are "good soil," producing a great harvest—"a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown" (v. 8).

The soils all look the same to the farmer, so he sows the seed across his field. Spiritual farmers are the same. We cannot convict of sin, save souls, or change lives. Our only responsibility is to give the word of God to others, trusting the Holy Spirit to do the rest.

***For reflection***

How does your King measure success? By obedience. How successful in his eyes are you today?

# *Day 25*

## **What is your next step with God?**

Read: Matthew 13:24-58

In my experience, mustard comes in jars and plastic bottles. You spoon it onto hot dogs or squeeze it onto bread. When I was in Bangladesh I discovered the truth: mustard is a yellow-flowered plant which produces seeds so tiny you can scarcely see them in your hand.

The Bengalis harvest these plants, lay them in the sun until they are dry, and walk cows over them to dislodge the seeds from their husks. Women then scoop the seeds and remaining husks into wooden baskets, tossing both into the air so the breeze will carry away the husks and leave the seeds. They sell these seeds to merchants who turn them into the mustard we have in our kitchens.

It seems impossible for such tiny seeds to grow and propagate so quickly, but they do. In fact, if the Bengali farmers leave their mustard plants alone they will grow into “a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches” (Matt. 13:32) and eat its seeds.

Tiny things often have value all out of proportion to their size. Our most powerful bombs are made by manipulating atoms. Diamonds are far more valuable than oranges. Microchips are the engines of our computers. The violin, not the bass drum, is the lead instrument of the orchestra.

You cannot measure the eternal significance of present faithfulness.

When you are led by God's Spirit, every word you speak and every step you take will bear fruit forever. God's word never fails to accomplish his purpose: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:10-11).

***For reflection***

What step of faithfulness is your King calling you to take today?

# *Day 26*

## **Is your lunch too small?**

Read: Matthew 14:1-21

An unknown monk in a tiny German town was upset by abuses he found in the church. Who knew Martin Luther would spark a Reformation which would change Christianity forever?

A teenage boy walking the streets of London in a blizzard stumbled into a tiny Methodist chapel for shelter. The preacher couldn't get to the church, so an illiterate farmer preached. He simply quoted Scripture, then pointed a bony finger at the teenager huddled in the back of the room and said, "Look to God and be saved." Who knew that Charles Spurgeon would become the greatest Baptist preacher in history?

When Dwight Moody came to Christ, he was functionally illiterate. The church asked him some simple Bible questions which he could not answer, so they refused him membership. Who knew he would preach to 10 million people?

In our text, a "great crowd of people" has been following Jesus. Now the hour is late and they are hungry. Jesus wants to feed them but his disciples have no food. Andrew finds a small boy with an even smaller lunch, five thin crusts of bread and two sardine-like fish. In Jesus' hands they become a magnificent feast, so that "they all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve

basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over” (v. 20). To make sure we don’t miss the significance of the miracle, Matthew adds this note: “The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children” (v. 21).

God can hit straight licks with crooked sticks. He can do much with little. Your King can do miraculous things with your lunch, but you must first put it in his omnipotent hands.

***For reflection***

Do you feel insufficient to the responsibilities or problems of your life today? Place your challenges and resources in Jesus’ omnipotent hands. Trust him to transform your sacrifice into a great banquet for his glory and your good. Have you given your “lunch” to him yet today?

# *Day 27*

## **Why take a risk for Jesus?**

Read: Matthew 14:22-36

The Sea of Galilee is the most beautiful body of water I've ever seen. On a clear day, its blue waters are stunning and clear. At night you can shine a flashlight into the Sea and see fish teeming in its waters.

But this small lake, seven miles wide by 15 miles long, can be extremely dangerous. Storm fronts move quickly across the Galilean hills. Northwest of the Sea are the Cliffs of Arbel, jagged mountains which form a natural wind tunnel. Gale-force storms can suddenly sweep from land over water, threatening to capsize everything in their path.

So it was on the night Jesus sent his disciples across the Sea while he climbed a nearby mountain to pray. Soon their boat was "buffeted by the waves, because the wind was against it" (v. 24). "Buffeted" translates a Greek word which means to be "tortured."

Then, "during the fourth watch of the night," 3 AM, "Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake" (v. 25). Don't rush past Matthew's statement. For the first time in human history, a man walked on a storm-tossed sea. Jesus' disciples, most of them veteran fishermen, cried out in fear.

Then our Lord made an astounding statement: "Take courage! It

is I. Don't be afraid." "It is I" is literally, "I Am," God's personal name for himself (Exodus 3:14). Peter then began walking on the water to him. But "when he saw the wind," turning his eyes from Jesus to his circumstances, he began to sink. He then cried the shortest prayer in Scripture: "Lord, save me!" The original language says simply, "Lord, save!" And Jesus did.

The other disciples witnessed Jesus' miraculous power, but Peter experienced it personally. Why take a risk for Jesus? Because to walk on water, you must first get out of the boat.

***For reflection***

What storms have found you today? What "boats" are you tempted to trust? What would it mean for you to walk on the water to your King?

# *Day 28*

## **Are you waiting on God**

Read: Matthew 15

Why do our prayers sometimes seem to go unanswered? I am praying for a paralyzed woman I know, asking God to heal her, but so far he has not. I am interceding for a dear friend with cancer, but so far he is not improving. You have similar stories to tell.

It has taken me years to learn that God always does what we ask or whatever is best. Sometimes his timing is different than ours, so that we will see tomorrow the answers he is preparing today. Sometimes our request is not what is best for us, so that our Father must refuse his child's prayer because he loves us. It is usually hard for us to see why our omniscient and all-loving Father's "no" is better than "yes," but it is.

Sometimes our Father uses silence to grow us spiritually. Consider the Canaanite woman in today's reading. She came to Jesus crying for mercy, asking him to heal her demon-possessed daughter. Since she was a Gentile, Jesus' disciples urged him to send her away. He told the woman that he had been sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Then he made what seems a cruel statement: "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs" (v. 26); "dogs" was a common Jewish description of Gentiles.

She replied, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that

fall from their masters' table" (v. 27). Jesus was so pleased with her response that he said to her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And "her daughter was healed from that very hour" (v. 28).

By waiting to answer her request, Jesus led this Canaanite woman from demanding his help to accepting whatever "crumbs" he might choose to give her. Are you waiting on God today? Whenever your Father seems silent, know that he intends to redeem this time for his greatest glory and your greatest good.

***For reflection***

What prayers are you waiting for your King to answer? Would you ask him to teach you the lessons he intends you to learn while you wait?

# *Day 29*

## **How do we win in spiritual warfare?**

Read: Matthew 16:1-20

The scene is one of the most dramatic in all of God's word. The Galilean carpenter stands on a massive outcropping of rock, 1150 feet above sea level, dwarfed by the gigantic cliff which towered above it. Just a short distance away stands the brilliant white marble temple built to the worship of Caesar, hence the name of the place, Caesarea.

Behind it is the cavern where the Greeks claimed their god Pan was born. In Jesus' day it led to a shaft which bored so deeply into the earth that its bottom could not be measured. The ancients called it "the gates of hades." Scattered around the hilly countryside are 14 temples to Baal, the Canaanite god where the Syrians worshipped. And nearby is one of the origins of the Jordan river, the holiest river to the his own Jewish people.

In the midst of these religious traditions, surrounded by every kind of deity known to his culture, he asks his followers, "Who do you say that I am?" And one of them declares, "*You* are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." The carpenter from Nazareth responds, "On this rock I will build my church" (v. 18a). And the Church is born.

Then Jesus makes a remarkable statement: "and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (v. 18b). His words are better translated,

“and the gates of Hades will not withstand its assault.” How do we win in spiritual warfare? By taking the offensive. The Church is not a fortress built to withstand the attacks of hell—we are an army called to attack its gates. When we do, we will always win the victory in the power of our King.

One of my favorite posters pictures a ship at sea battling the winds and waves. The caption reads: “Ships are safest in the harbor, but that is not what ships are for.”

***For reflection***

What are you doing to attack the gates of hell today?

# *Day 30*

## **Does God love you?**

Read: Matthew 16:21-28

Bangkok, Thailand boasts the greatest collection of Buddhist temples in the world. One of the smallest, and most spectacular, is the Temple of the Golden Buddha. Its statue weighs approximately 5,000 pounds and is made of solid gold worth well more than 100 million dollars.

This statue was discovered in 1957 when a clay statue had to be moved to make way for a new highway. The clay cracked and a week of rain revealed the secret hidden inside. Apparently the golden statue was coated with clay to protect it from Burmese invaders four centuries ago, and was hidden all the years since.

Easter is the day when the clay, human shell worn by Jesus Christ was cracked and broken, and the glorified, exalted, risen Lord was revealed to the world. As we walk with Jesus ever closer to Resurrection Sunday, we now watch him begin focusing even more explicitly on the events soon to come: “From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life” (Matt. 16:21).

The cross was always part of God’s plan for his fallen world. A

thousand years before Calvary, the Holy Spirit inspired David in Psalm 22 to describe Jesus' crucifixion in remarkable detail:

- “All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads: ‘He trusts in the Lord; let the Lord rescue him’” (vs. 7-8).
- “My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth” (v. 15).
- “They have pierced my hands and my feet” (v. 16b).
- “I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me” (v. 17).
- “They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing” (v. 18).

Jesus knew at Caesarea Philippi that he would face all this and more if he returned to Jerusalem. But he chose to die so that you could live. In fact, if you were the only sinner in human history, nothing about Calvary would have changed.

***For reflection***

Do you wonder if you are loved today? How does the cross answer your question?

# ***Day 31***

## **Are you awed by God?**

Read: Matthew 17:1-13

More than 50 years ago, one night around midnight, an older African-American woman was standing on the side of an Alabama highway in a drenching rainstorm. Her car had broken down and she was soaking wet as she tried to flag down a car. To her surprise, a young white man stopped to help her, a kindness unheard of in those racially charged days. The man took her to safety, helped her get assistance and put her into a taxi cab. She seemed to be in a big hurry but wrote down his address and thanked him as she left.

Seven days went by. A knock came at his door. To his surprise, a giant console color television was delivered to his home. A note was attached which read, “Thank you so much for assisting me on the highway the other night. The rain drenched not only my clothes but my spirits. Then you came along. Because of you, I was able to make it to my dying husband’s bedside just before he passed away. God bless you for helping me and unselfishly serving others. Sincerely, Mrs. Nat King Cole.”

We never know when we’ll meet someone famous. Neither did Peter, James, and John. In today’s reading Jesus took them with him to a high mountain. There “he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light” (Matt. 17:2). Then Moses and Elijah appeared with him,

representing the Law and the Prophets and showing that Jesus would fulfill both with his death and resurrection.

Then “a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!’” (v. 5). When the disciples heard the voice of God, “they fell facedown to the ground, terrified” (v. 6). But “Jesus came and touched them. ‘Get up,’ he said. ‘Don’t be afraid.’ When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus” (vs. 7-8).

***For reflection***

When was the last time you were still and silent before your King, listening to his Spirit’s voice in your soul? When last did you hear him speak from his word to your mind and heart? When last were you awed by God?

# *Day 32*

## **How can you pray with power?**

Read: Matthew 17:14-27

Andrew Murray said, “Most churches don’t know that God rules the world by the prayers of his saints.” John Wesley was even more specific: “God does nothing but in answer to prayer.” E. M. Bounds claimed, “The church upon its knees would bring heaven upon the earth.” But there are times when we don’t know what or how to pray. On those days, remember the story we’ll study today. Here you’ll find my favorite prayer in Scripture.

Jesus and his inner core of disciples came from the Mount of Transfiguration to the demon-possessed valley below. An agonized father fell before him, begging him to heal his demoniac son (Matt. 17:14-16). Jesus then “rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment” (v. 18).

In between, however, a conversation occurred which Mark records: “Jesus asked the boy’s father, ‘How long has he been like this?’ ‘From childhood,’ he answered. ‘It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.’ ‘If you can?’” said Jesus. ‘Everything is possible for him who believes’” (Mark 9:21-23). With this response: “Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, ‘I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!’” (v. 24). This is my favorite prayer in Scripture.

If you struggle to believe, you can ask God to help you. If you are dealing with doubts about God's power and purpose in your life, you can give them to him in prayer. Jesus healed this father's soul before he healed his son. He will do the same for you.

***For reflection***

The less you want to pray, the more you need to pray. Are you struggling to find the faith to give your pain or problem to God? Remember my favorite prayer in the Bible and make it your own.

# *Day 33*

## **What is your true identity?**

Read: Matthew 18:1-9

One of the most moving experiences in traveling the Holy Land is visiting the Church of the Nativity. Built over the cave where Jesus was born, it is the oldest church building in Christendom. In the twelfth century, riders on horseback often broke into the church and pillaged its possessions. So the members made the door into the church so small that those who enter must do so on their knees. It is called the Door of Humiliation.

Anyone can come to the birthplace of Christ to worship him. But only on our knees.

Satan has only one strategy: to tempt us “to be like God” (Genesis 3:5). Every sin is a variation on this theme, an attempt to replace God’s will with our own. Friedrich Nietzsche, the perceptive 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, claimed that the “will to power” is the basic drive in human nature. I’m convinced he was right.

The antidote for pride is a proper sense of ourselves before God. After Jesus’ disciples asked him their prideful question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven,” our Lord “called a little child and had him stand among them” (Matt. 18:1, 2). In his day children were the possessions of their parents, without rights or individual status of any kind. But not to Jesus: “I tell you the truth,

unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (vs. 3-4).

A man stood at a busy street corner, asking the hundreds of people who passed him, “Who are you?” Each person responded with what he or she did: “I’m a teacher,” or “I’m a student,” or “I’m a doctor.” The next time someone asks you who are you, say that you are a child of the King. That’s your true identity.

***For reflection***

Do you see yourself as God sees you today?

# *Day 34*

## **How can we make peace with others?**

Read: Matthew 18:15-20

A “Dear Abby” column once carried this essay:

My name is Gossip. I have no respect for justice. I maim without killing. I break hearts and ruin lives. I am cunning and malicious, and gather strength with age. The more I am quoted the more I am believed. My victims are helpless. They cannot protect themselves against me because I have no name and no face. To track me down is impossible. The harder you try, the more elusive I become. I am nobody’s friend. Once I tarnish a reputation, it is never the same. Even my name hisses. I am called Gossip.

Social psychologist Nicholas Emler has concluded that gossip forms as much as 80% of a normal person’s daily conversation. What cures this disease of the tongue and soul? Jesus tells us: “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over” (Matt. 18:15). In other words, we have no right to talk about each other, only to each other.

What else did Jesus say about problem people?

- Initiate reconciliation: “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23-24).
- Refuse to retaliate: “Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles” (Matt. 5:39-41).
- Pray for those who hurt you: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:44-45).

How different would our lives and society be if we obeyed these simple life principles?

***For reflection***

Who are the problem people in your life? What will you do to make peace with them today?

# *Day 35*

## **How do we forgive those who hurt us?**

Read: Matthew 18:21-35

Lewis Smedes wrote the wonderful book *Forgive and Forget*. Here's how it begins:

Somebody hurt you, maybe yesterday, maybe a lifetime ago, and you cannot forget it. You did not deserve the hurt. It went deep, deep enough to lodge itself in your memory. And it keeps on hurting you now. You are not alone. We all muddle our way through a world where even well-meaning people hurt each other. When we invest ourselves in deep personal relationships, we open our souls to the wounds of another's disloyalty or even betrayal.

There are some hurts that we can all ignore. Not every slight sticks with us, thank God. But some old pains do not wash out so easily; they remain like stubborn stains in the fabric of our own memory. Deep hurts we never deserved flow from a dead past into our living present. A friend betrays us; a parent abuses us; a spouse leaves us in the cold—these hurts do not heal with the coming of the sun. . . . Forgiveness is God's invention for coming to terms with a world in which, despite their best intentions, people are unfair to each other and hurt each other deeply. He began by forgiving us. And he invites us all to forgive each other.

What is forgiveness?

It is not pretending you were not hurt, or excusing the behavior, or trying to forget that it happened. Biblical forgiveness is *pardon*, choosing not to punish. When a governor pardons a criminal, he does not pretend the crime did not occur, excuse the behavior or forget about it. Rather, he chooses not to punish the criminal as the law allows.

How often must we pardon others? According to Jesus, “seventy-seven times,” symbolic of unconditional forgiveness (Matt. 18:22). Why? Because we have been pardoned unconditionally by God. As our text teaches, we owed God a debt we could never repay, so he forgave it. By comparison, the debts which others owe us are slight. When we pardon their crimes against us, we free ourselves to live without anger, pain or revenge. When we offer the gift of forgiveness, we receive as much as we give.

***For reflection***

Who needs your pardon today?

# *Day 36*

## **Are you surrendered to God?**

Read: Matthew 19

I once heard George Gallup talk about his personal faith. In the course of his message he read this quote from John Stott, the wonderful pastor and theologian:

When we meet some people we know immediately and instinctively that they are different. We are anxious to learn their secret. It is not the way they dress or talk or behave, although it influences these things. It is not that they have affixed a name tag to themselves and proclaimed themselves the adherent of a particular religion or ideology. It is not even that they have a strict moral code which they faithfully follow. It is that they know Jesus Christ, and that he is a living reality to them. They dwell in him and he dwells in them. He is the source of their life and it shows in everything they do.

These people have an inner serenity which adversity cannot disturb; it is the peace of Christ. They have a spiritual power that physical weakness cannot destroy; it is the power of Christ. They have a hidden vitality that even the process of dying and death cannot quench; it is the life of Christ.

How can we experience this life?

In Matthew 19 we meet the “rich young ruler.” All he owned was not enough to ensure his salvation, so he asked Jesus, “what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” (v. 16). Jesus focused on the great obstacle between him and God: “go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (v. 21). At this the man “went away sad, because he had great wealth” (v. 22).

The key to spiritual victory lies in surrender. Each day we submit our lives to the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18), our Father will do far more with us than we can do with ourselves.

Here is what Billy Graham says of himself: “I have often said that the first thing I am going to do when I get to Heaven is to ask, ‘Why me, Lord? Why did You choose a farmboy from North Carolina to preach to so many people, to have such a wonderful team of associates, and to have a part in what You were doing in the latter half of the twentieth century?’ I have thought about that question a great deal, but I know also that only God knows the answer.” He has preached to more people than anyone in Christian history.

### ***For reflection***

Have you made Jesus your King yet today?

# ***Day 37***

## **How do we respond to grace?**

Read: Matthew 20:1-19

Yellowstone National Park is one of the most amazing natural environments in the world. When our family visited it several years ago we could still see burned, charred trees from the 1988 fires which consumed more than 300,000 acres.

After the fires were finally put out, forest rangers began exploring the damage. *National Geographic* reported one discovery: a ranger found a bird literally petrified in ashes, perched on the ground at the base of a tree. He pushed the dead bird over with a stick. When he did, three tiny chicks ran out from under their dead mother's wings.

Their mother could have flown to safety but refused to abandon her babies. When the fires arrived and the heat singed her small body, she could have flown away but refused. Because she was willing to die, those under the cover of her wings would live.

You and I live under the shelter of the Almighty, forgiven by his grace. We serve Jesus because he loves us, not so he will. We work for his Kingdom because he has blessed us, not to earn his favor but in gratitude for his grace.

Our text makes this fact clear. In Jesus' parable, those who worked all day were paid the same amount as those who were employed at the last hour of the day (Matt. 20:1-18). The landowner's decision

to hire the men and to pay them was motivated by grace. God owes us nothing but gives us everything, including his Son's death for us (vs. 17-19). We can each sing with John Newton, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."

***For reflection***

What was the last gift you received from your King? Sin forgiven, prayer answered, direction given? How will you respond to such grace?

# *Day 38*

## **Are you great in the eyes of God?**

Read: Matthew 20:20-28

Charles Spurgeon, in the preface to his collected sermons, made this statement about himself: “Recollect who I am, and what I am—a child, having little education, little learning, ability, or talent . . . Without the Spirit of God I feel I am utterly unable to speak to you. I have not those gifts and talents which qualify me to speak; I need an afflatus from on high; otherwise, I stand like other men, and have naught to say. May that be given me, for without it I am dumb!” And God used him to preach to 10 million people across his ministry.

D. L. Moody was the son of an alcoholic who died when Moody was four years old. He completed seven grades of school. He said of himself: “I know that other men can preach better than I can. All I can say is that when I preach, God uses me.” And he did—more than a million came to Christ through him.

What did they have in common? Each gave his best in humility to Jesus and others.

By contrast, the mother of James and John asked Jesus that her sons “may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom” (Matt. 20:21). The others “were indignant with the two brothers” (v. 24), perhaps because they had not thought to seek such promotion themselves. Jesus seized the teachable moment,

explaining to them that “whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave” (vs. 26-27). Are you great in the eyes of your Lord?

***For reflection***

The night of his betrayal, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, an act so lowly that no Jew could be made to do it. Then he told them to do for each other what he had done for them (John 13:1-17). When we stand before God one day, he will not inspect our title but our towel. How dirty is yours?

# *Day 39*

## **Is God waiting on you?**

Read: Matthew 20:29-34

The Golden Gate Bridge was completed in 1937 at a cost of \$35 million. It stands directly over the San Andreas Fault, yet it can withstand an earthquake measuring 7.0 on the Richter Scale. Why? Its two great cables contain enough strands of steel wire to circle the globe three times. The concrete in its piers would pave a five-foot wide sidewalk from New York to San Francisco. But its cables and concrete are not the secret to the bridge's great stability.

Every part of the bridge, from the concrete roadway to the steel railings and cross beams, is related ultimately to two great towers and two anchor piers. The towers are deeply imbedded into the rock foundation beneath the sea. In other words, the entire bridge is totally committed to its foundation.

When we stand on the rock of Jesus' lordship, nothing can shake us. He meets our present needs and guides us into a future filled with hope. For example, in today's reading two blind men asked him for sight. In response, "Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him" (Matt. 20:34).

Do you have a regular time each day to meet with your Father? Do you keep a prayer journal with specific requests you have made of

him? Scripture cautions us, “You do not have, because you do not ask God” (James 4:2).

Jonathan Edwards, the leader of America’s First Great Awakening, was asked the secret to this extraordinary movement of God. He said, “Promote explicit agreement and visible union of God’s people in extraordinary prayer.” Andrew Murray explains why: “The man who mobilizes the Christian church to pray will make the greatest contribution to the world’s evangelization in history.”

***For reflection***

Is God waiting on you?

# *Palm Sunday*

## **Are you grateful for grace?**

Read: Matthew 21:1-11

Conquering kings in the ancient world returned home on majestic white steeds, surrounded by their victorious armies and followed by their captives. Grateful subjects welcomed their heroes by laying palm branches on the ground before them. When the King of Kings and Lord of Lords rode into his Holy City in triumph, his victory parade could not have been more different. His armies were peasant disciples; his steed was a lowly donkey.

Scripture predicted this scene centuries earlier: “See, your king come to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9). Rather than waging war, he would “proclaim peace to the nations.” Now “his rule will extend from sea to sea . . . to the ends of the earth” (v. 10).

Matthew 21 records the remarkable fulfillment of this prediction. As Jesus entered the city, “A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road” (v. 8). Then the crowds shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” (v. 9). Each action showed their allegiance to Jesus as their Messiah.

Jesus could have captured the Holy City as its triumphant King.

When he returns, he will come like this: “Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter.’ He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS” (Revelation 19:15-16).

But when he made his triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, our King chose to come as a suffering Savior, entering Jerusalem so he could die there for your sins.

***For reflection***

How will you express your gratitude to him today?

# ***Day 41***

## **How can you be right with God?**

Read: Matthew 21:12-46

When you were a child, how did you picture Jesus? Kind and gracious, “meek and mild”? Not on Monday of Holy Week. After announcing himself to the crowds as the Messiah on Palm Sunday, he returned to the suburb of Bethany for the night. On Monday morning, he and his disciples walked back into the Holy City.

In the Temple, he found moneychangers charging exorbitant rates to convert Roman money into the currency required to buy animals for sacrifice. Then they demanded unfair prices for the only animals the priests would accept. In anger, Jesus drove these corrupt merchants from God’s “house of prayer” (Matt. 21:13). His action infuriated and embarrassed the religious authorities who profited by their extortion. Then he rejected the racial prejudice of his culture by welcoming Gentiles who wanted to meet him.

Now you are the temple of God’s Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). Jesus is as concerned for the purity of your life as he was for the purity of his temple. Take a moment today to conduct a spiritual inventory of your life. Ask the Holy Spirit to bring to your mind anything in your life which displeases God, and write down your thoughts. Then confess each sin you have written with a repentant heart.

Claim the promise of Scripture that God forgives all you confess to him (1 John 1:9), separating your sin as far from you as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12), burying it in the depths of the deepest sea (Micah 7:19) and remembering it no more (Jeremiah 31:34). The sooner you confess your sins to him, the sooner his grace can set you free.

***For reflection***

Are you right with God today?

# ***Day 42***

## **Are you in love with God?**

Read: Matthew 22

Tuesday was one of the longest, hardest days in Jesus' earthly life. His rejection of the moneychangers on Monday inflamed the authorities. As he returned to the Holy City, his enemies were waiting for him, their trap baited.

Their question seemed simple: "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (Matt. 22:17). But their challenge forced Jesus to take a stand on the most dangerous controversy of the day. Rome required every subject to pay the "poll tax" to the Empire, using a coin which praised Caesar as divine. If Jesus supported such idolatry, the adoring crowds would turn into an ugly mob and reject him as their Messiah. If he rejected the tax, the Roman soldiers standing guard would arrest him in an instant. Either way, his enemies would be rid of the Galilean and his threat to their authority.

Jesus' answer stunned his opponents: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (v. 21). We are to be loyal to our country, but first we are to be loyal to our Lord. Now your Father wants you to love him "with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind," and to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37, 39). Take some time to examine your spiritual health:

- Do you love God with all your "heart," committing your life to him as your King?

- Do you love him with all your “soul,” surrendering yourself to his Spirit each day with intimacy and passion?
- Do you love him with all your “mind,” growing daily in his word and worship?
- Do you love your neighbor as much as you love yourself?

***For reflection***

Will you ask your King to help you give him all he deserves today?

# ***Day 43***

## **How do you listen to God?**

Read: Matthew 23-25

Wednesday is the silent day in Holy Week. The Bible doesn't record a single event of this day. Jesus was staying with his disciples at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany (a suburb of Jerusalem). How did he spend the day?

Probably teaching his followers about tomorrow's trials, preparing them for the shock and pain they will soon face. He likely comforted his close friends on the eve of his arrest. And he prepared himself to go to the cross for us. As Jesus often prayed early in the morning (Mark 1:35) and late at night (Luke 6:12), so he spent this day in communion with his Father.

Our Savior could still escape Jerusalem and flee to the safety of his Galilean homeland. But he chose to stay and die, and spent this day getting ready.

When last did you spend time listening to your King? Take a few minutes to be alone with your Father. Visualize Jesus at Bethany surrounded by his disciples and friends, yourself among them. Picture him in the center of the room, and sit at his feet. As you rest in his presence, thank him for what he will do for you this week. Praise him for his love and grace. Commit to him your grateful obedience. And decide to meet him each morning in his word and worship.

***For reflection***

Will you ask God to help you see Jesus so clearly that others can see him in you?

# *Maundy Thursday*

**How can you show Jesus you love him?**

Read: Matthew 26

“Maundy Thursday” comes from the Latin word for “mandated.” This night of Holy Week, Jesus washed his disciples’ feet and instructed them to love each other in humble service (John 13). So that we would remember his love for us, he then initiated the Lord’s Supper. After Judas slipped away to bring the authorities, Jesus encouraged his disciples (John 14-16) and prayed for their faith (John 17).

He knew the authorities were afraid to arrest him in the city because of his popularity, so he then withdrew east of Jerusalem to the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mt. of Olives. There he prayed and waited for Judas at the one place where he knew the traitor could find him.

What followed was one of the most illegal proceedings in history:

- The religious authorities participated in Jesus’ arrest, though they were supposed to remain impartial judges.
- Jesus was bound by the soldiers, though Jewish law permitted authorities to bind the prisoner only if he was attempting to escape. Otherwise the accused would appear guilty before his trial was completed.

- The Sanhedrin (the Jewish supreme court) convened at night, an explicit violation of their statutes. Jesus was taken to the home of Annas, the former high priest, while the court was gathered. Here he was deposed in private, another violation of Jewish legal proceedings.
- Caiaphas then presided over the Sanhedrin after seeking witnesses against the accused, violating his impartial position.
- He tried to force Jesus to testify against himself (Matt. 26:63), something no Jewish prisoner could be made to do.
- The Sanhedrin pronounced sentence against Jesus this night, though the court was not allowed to convict a prisoner on the same day he was tried. They gathered again the next morning to create the pretense of legality for their proceedings.

All of this Jesus chose to endure, for you. That night in Gethsemane, he watched the soldiers as they carried their torches out of the city and down the Kidron Valley. He watched as they climbed up the Mount of Olives toward Gethsemane. He watched as they came to the place where he waited for them. He could have fled at any moment into the night and avoided the cross.

Instead he chose to stay, and suffer, and die. He did it all for you. He bore the punishment you deserved, so that “by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24).

### ***For reflection***

Your King washed your “feet” when he chose to be crucified for your sins. Who will see his love in yours today?

# *Good Friday*

**Have you experienced Jesus' amazing grace?**

Read: Matthew 27:1-56

Rome would not allow the Jews to execute their criminals, so the religious authorities were forced to bring their prisoner to Pontius Pilate, the governor of their region from AD 27-37. Jesus' Roman trials, like his Jewish ordeal, occurred in three phases.

First he stood trial before Pilate. The Sanhedrin knew that the Romans would not care about their conviction for blasphemy, so they brought three different charges against Jesus: "We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king" (Luke 23:2).

Pilate would already have known if Jesus had been subverting the nation or opposed payment of taxes, but the charge of claiming to be a "king" was extremely serious. Sedition was the unpardonable sin against Rome. So Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" (John 18:33). Our Lord explained that "my kingdom is not of this world" (v. 36), so that he was no threat to Pilate or the Romans. With this reply, Pilate wanted to release Jesus but feared a backlash from the religious authorities.

When he learned that Jesus was from Galilee, he thought he had a solution: he sent him to Herod Antipas, his enemy (Luke 23:12). But Herod could find nothing with which to charge Jesus, so he returned him to Pilate.

At this third phase, Pilate tried again to release Jesus. He offered the crowds an opportunity to choose him over Barabbas, a notorious criminal, but the authorities prompted the crowds to demand Barabbas' release instead. So Pilate collapsed beneath their pressure and finally condemned Jesus to be crucified (John 19:16).

It is important that we understand Jesus' innocence. The Roman authorities repeatedly concluded that he had committed no crime. If he had, his death would have paid a penalty owed by his sins and could have no effect for us. Because he was the sinless "Lamb of God," he could take away the sin of the world (John 1:29).

***For reflection***

When did you make Jesus your Savior and King? Have you thanked him today for his amazing grace?

# ***Holy Saturday***

**Are you ready for eternity?**

Read: Matthew 27:57-66

What happened to Jesus when he died? Before his physical death he prayed, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). He promised the believing thief at his side, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (v. 43). When he died physically, he moved instantly to his Father’s side in heaven, then returned to his resurrected body on Easter Sunday.

Because he rose from the grave, we will never die. Scripture promises that “the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:52). Jesus assured Martha as she grieved for her brother, “whoever lives and believes in me will never die” (John 12:26).

When the great Puritan John Owen was on his deathbed, a friend wrote a letter in his name, stating, “I am still in the land of the living.” Owen asked him to change the letter to read, “I am still in the land of the dying, but I hope soon to be in the land of the living.” As Richard Baxter, another Puritan leader, lay dying, a friend asked him

how he was doing. He whispered back, “Friend, I am nearly well.”

When we take our last breath here, we take our first breath there. When we close our eyes on earth we open them in heaven. A poet captured the scene well:

*Think of stepping on new ground and finding it heavenly,*

*Of breathing new air and finding it celestial,*

*Of hearing new music and finding it angelic,*

*Of feeling a touch and finding it God’s.*

C. S. Lewis was right: you have never met a mortal. When the sun and moon and stars are gone and the mountains and seas have disappeared, you will still be alive. If Jesus is your Lord, your place in paradise is secure. Because Jesus died, you will live forever.

***For reflection***

Are you ready for eternity with your King?

# *Easter Sunday*

## **Will you make Jesus your King?**

Read: Matthew 28

Eleven words changed human history: “He is not here; he has risen, just as he said” (Matt. 28:6). The stone that sealed the tomb of Jesus was but a pebble compared to the Rock of Ages inside.

There is no natural explanation for the empty tomb of Christ. The disciples could not have overpowered the Roman guards or convinced 500 eyewitnesses that a corpse was alive, nor would they have died for a lie. If the women went to the wrong tomb, the authorities would have corrected their error. If the authorities stole the body, they would have produced it. If Jesus did not die at the cross, he survived a spear thrust to the pericardial sac around his heart and three days in a mummified air-tight burial shroud. In his emaciated condition he then shoved aside the stone, appeared through locked doors, and did the greatest high jump in history at the Ascension.

Easter is the foundation of the Christian faith. Paul was right: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17). Because he rose from the dead as he predicted, Jesus must be divine. If he is divine, his words must be true. If he claimed to be our Savior and Lord, it must be so.

Now the risen King calls you to serve in his Kingdom. My favorite confession of faith was written by an African Christian, a man later

martyred for his faith. I have quoted it often, and have been asked by many for a copy. Let's close our Lenten season by making its commitment our own:

I am part of the 'Fellowship of the Unashamed.' I have Holy Spirit power. The dye has been cast. I've stepped over the line. The decision has been made. I am a disciple of His. I won't look back, let up, slow down, back away, or be still. My past is redeemed, my present makes sense, and my future is secure. I am finished and done with low living, sight walking, small planning, smooth knees, colorless dreams, tame visions, mundane talking, chintzy giving, and dwarfed goals.

I no longer need pre-eminence, prosperity, position, promotions, plaudits, or popularity. I don't have to be right, first, tops, recognized, praised, regarded, or rewarded. I now live by his presence, lean by faith, love by patience, live by prayer, and labor by power.

My face is set, my gait is fast, my goal in heaven, my road is narrow, my way is rough, my companions few, my guide reliable, my mission clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, diluted, or delayed. I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of adversity, negotiate at the table of compromise, pander at the pool of popularity, or meander in the maze of mediocrity.

I won't give up, shut up, let up, or slow up until I've preached up, prayed up, paid up, stored up, and stayed up for the cause of Christ. I am a disciple of Jesus. I must go until he comes, give until I drop, preach until all know, and work until he stops. And when he comes to get his own, he'll have no problems recognizing me—my colors will be clear.

### ***For reflection***

As a result of your Lenten season with Jesus, how will you serve your King more fully than ever before?