

A Lenten journey through the Life of Christ



IN HIS STEPS

RAY PRITCHARD

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**A Lenten Journey
Through the Life of Christ**

by Ray Pritchard



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From Christmas to Easter

In the calendar of the Christian year, Easter always comes a few months after Christmas. We are told that the earliest possible date for Easter is March 22 and the latest is April 25. That means Lent (the six and a half weeks of spiritual preparation leading to Good Friday and Easter) could begin as early as February 4 or as late as March 10.

Some years Lent starts in the dead of winter. Other years it begins closer to springtime.

It is good that Christmas and Easter are not far apart because we cannot understand one without the other. If Christmas tells us why Jesus came, then Easter tells us he fully accomplished his mission.

In between those two events we have the whole life of Christ. That's our focus as we walk "In His Steps." Between now and Easter we will cover many of the places Jesus visited while he was on the earth. I hope in taking this journey together, we will come to know Christ better and to love him more.

The forty-seven devotionals take us from Ash Wednesday all the way to Easter. Since the dates of Lent change each year, we have numbered the days so this devotional will fit during any

Lenten season.

No one who met our Lord ever stayed the same. The same is true today. May these Lenten devotionals help us all to say, “Lord Jesus, I am ready to follow you!”

Day 1



Nazareth: The Great Journey Begins

“In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary” (Luke 1:26-27).

These two verses set the historical framework for the birth of Jesus. They tell us that this episode is not the figment of some writer’s imagination.

In the history of the church Mary has often been portrayed as a kind of misty, other-worldly figure. If you look at some of the great paintings of Mary, they make her look so peaceful and beatific you almost forget she was a real person. That’s a shame because Luke makes it clear that she was very real, with very real doubts, very real questions, and very real faith. Nowhere is this seen with more clarity than in verse 38:

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

Without exaggeration we could call this one of the greatest statements of faith in all the Bible. We read it so often we forget how great it really is. Without warning she meets Gabriel who announces that she will become pregnant by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the Son of God. When she asks how, he says, “Don’t worry about it. The Holy Spirit will cover you like a cloud and you’ll end up pregnant. That’s all there is to it.” What do you say to that?

Mary said yes. Yes to God, Yes to the impossible, yes to the plan of God. When the angel said, “*Nothing is impossible with God*” (v. 37), Mary took a deep breath and replied, “*May it be to me as you have said*” (v. 38).

And so the great journey begins.

Grant us faith, O Lord, to believe all that you have spoken, even that which seems impossible to us. Amen.

Day 2



Bethlehem: Birthplace of a King

“But you, Bethlehem . . . though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel” (Micah 5:2).

If it wasn't the least likely place, it was very close to it.

Bethlehem was an “on the way” place. You passed through Bethlehem because you were on the way to or from Jerusalem. Two thousand years ago there was not much there. Bethlehem was indeed a “little town” as described in the familiar Christmas carol by Phillips Brooks. Although well-known as the birthplace of King David, the town itself was home to a few hundred permanent residents. Because it was close to Jerusalem, we can assume the various inns and guest rooms were full of pilgrims making their way to and from Jerusalem on their way to various ancestral hometowns to pay the census tax required by Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1-3).

When God chose Bethlehem as the birthplace for his Son, he was teaching us something about the values of heaven. If God

had wanted worldly pomp and ceremony, Jesus would have been born in Rome. If he had wanted good standing for his Son, he would have chosen Athens. If he had wanted religious acclaim, he would have chosen Jerusalem.

Or he could have chosen Alexandria or Antioch. The Roman Empire was filled with great and famous cities.

But he chose Bethlehem, a truly out-of-the-way location. Even in Israel, Bethlehem was “least among the clans of Judah.”

But our God is not a frontrunner. He doesn't need worldly power to accomplish his purposes. When Jesus was born, the world paid no attention to a young couple giving birth in a stable in some tiny village in a backwater province of the Roman Empire. No one noticed the baby wrapped in rags sleeping in a feeding trough.

In such an unlikely way, God moved into our neighborhood and became one of us. God's ways are not our ways. If you doubt that, take another look at that sleeping baby. He will one day rule the world.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!

Lord God, you are indeed the God of great surprises. Thank you for sending Jesus to save us from our sins. Amen.

Day 3



The Fields: Where the Shepherds Worked

“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night” (Luke 2:8).

Shepherds generally came from the base elements of society. In that day they were so distrusted that a shepherd’s testimony would not be accepted in a courtroom. Most shepherds were considered on par with vagrants and con men. Plus shepherds were on the lowest rung of the economic ladder and had little or no formal education.

That makes the story all the more remarkable. First they heard and saw the spectacular angelic revelation. Then when they went to Bethlehem they discovered the Savior of the world in a feeding-trough. The birth and the revelation didn’t seem to go together. Yet there it was, all from the hand of God.

On that night in Bethlehem, the shepherds were the only

people in the world (besides Joseph and Mary) who knew Christ had been born. After the “400 silent years,” God now speaks through angels to lowly shepherds on a remote hillside outside a tiny Judean village.

It wasn't a likely way to win the world. Certainly not the way we would have done it. If we had planned it, Jesus would have been born in Jerusalem, to a wealthy family, welcomed by the high and mighty. That way no one would doubt the Son of God had come to earth.

But God's ways and ours are not the same. He chose to reveal the news to the shepherds first. After their initial fear, they responded in faith. They immediately went to Bethlehem and found the baby Jesus. Everything was just as the angel said it would be.

What did they do then? They told everyone they met what they had seen and heard.

I wonder if we would have been as obedient? Would we have believed? Would we have gone to Bethlehem in the middle of the night? Would we have been as quick to tell the story? What the shepherds did, we all can do. You need no authority, no permission, and no special training to witness for Christ. Simply tell what you know to be true. Talk about Jesus. Tell who he is and what he has done for you. Share your story and invite others to come to Christ.

Good news is for sharing. That's what the shepherds did. That's what all of us are called to do.

Grant us the same faith the shepherds had so that we might go and tell everyone about Jesus. Amen.

Day 4



The East: Home of the Wise Men

“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?’” (Matthew 2:1-2).

The story of the visit of the Magi is found only in Matthew’s gospel. Matthew 2 tells us all that we know about them. They show up in verse 1 and disappear in verse 12. The term “Magi” refers to a special class of priests in the Persian Empire. Because of the mystery and the unanswered questions, great legends grew up about them.

We know from other sources that the Magi had existed for hundreds of years before the time of Christ. They had their own religion (they are usually thought to have been followers of Zoroastrianism), their own priesthood, and their own writings. They were the professors and philosophers of their day. They were brilliant, highly educated scholars who were trained in medicine, history, religion, prophecy and astronomy. They were also trained in what we would call astrology.

They may have been descendants of the “wise men” of Babylon. I believe that God used Daniel (while he was in captivity in Babylon), to teach these men about future events, including the birth of the Savior of the world. Daniel 5:11 tells us he was put in charge of these men.

The Magi were pagans who had been drawn to Jesus. They had seen a star and they knew a baby called “the king of the Jews” had been born. Yet with nothing more than that, they risked everything and left their homeland to find the baby, bring him gifts, and worship him. They didn’t know very much about Jesus but what they knew spurred them to action.

The coming of the Magi has traditionally been seen as a picture of the Gentiles coming to Christ. While Jesus was still an infant, his light shines and the “wise men” come to worship him.

Jesus stands at the end of life’s road for all of us. In the end there can be no middle ground. To ignore him is the same as to hate him because you end up without him either way. Perhaps hatred is nobler than casual disinterest because when you hate, you at least must pay attention to the object of your hatred. That very attention may someday lead to a change of heart. To ignore Jesus altogether means to live as if he doesn’t matter at all. But no one can ignore him forever. We all have an appointment with Christ sooner or later.

Christ never turns away from any heart that is open to him. Those who seek him will find him every time.

*Lord, may we have faith like the Magi to seek
the Lord Jesus until we find him. Amen.*

Day 5



Egypt: Jesus' Temporary Home

“And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I called my son’” (Matthew 2:15).

When Charles Spurgeon preached on this verse, he began his sermon this way:

“Egypt occupies a very singular position towards Israel. It was often the shelter of the seed of Abraham. Abraham himself went there when there was a famine in the land of his sojourn. To Egypt Joseph was taken that he might escape from the death intended for him by his envious brethren, and become the foster-father of the house of Israel. Into Egypt, as we all well know, went the whole family of Jacob, and there they sojourned in a strange land. There Moses acquired the learning which was so useful to him.”

He points out that while God sometimes sent his children to

Egypt to protect them, he always delivered them from Egypt later. So Moses and the children of Israel came “out of Egypt” in the great passage through the Red Sea. They needed Egypt for protection, but they were never meant to stay there forever.

We don’t know how long Jesus and his parents stayed in Egypt, or where they stayed, or how old Jesus was at the time. But those details don’t really matter. What we do know is that God protected Jesus by sending him to Egypt at just the right moment in order to spare his life.

One writer called this the “cross-handed” providence of God because a desperate flight to escape Herod turns out to be a great mercy from the Lord. But it would only be seen in reverse.

So it is for all of us. God often sends us to “Egypt” to protect us and to prepare us for what is to come.

Do not despair if you feel like you are in “Egypt” today. What seems like a punishment or a detour may turn out to be a great gift from the Lord. As Egypt was the temporary home for Jesus, even so our trials when seen through the lens of God’s providence turn out to be a gift from heaven. This is true even though at this moment our trials may seem like a great burden.

God knows what he is doing even when we can’t see it.

Father, help us to trust you when the way forward seems unclear. Give us faith to take the next step with you even if it seems to lead to Egypt. Amen.

Day 6



At the Temple: Born Under the Law

“When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord” (Luke 2:22).

Jesus was born “under the law” (Galatians 4:4). Today we would say he was raised in an Orthodox Jewish household. We know this because Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. Even though they were poor, they still kept the law by offering two doves as a sacrifice (Luke 2:24).

Years later Jesus himself would say, *“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”* (Matthew 5:17). It was absolutely necessary for our Lord to be 100% obedient to all of God’s commands. The first of those commands was circumcision (Luke 2:21). The second was the presentation to the Lord (Luke 2:22-24). This was a way of saying to the world, “O Lord, this child belongs to you, and we his parents covenant to bring him up

according to the Law of Moses.”

Jesus was born a Jew and lived his whole life among the Jewish people. Remember the very first verse of the New Testament: “*A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham*” (Matthew 1:1). Jesus was the ultimate “son of Abraham.”

As an observant Jew, Jesus knew all about the sacrificial system and the priesthood that sustained those sacrifices. In the great plan of God, he must keep the law down to the last detail; he did this by living under its demands, fulfilling in himself the true meaning of both the priesthood and the sacrifices. As the great high priest, he opened a way into the very presence of God. As the great sacrifice for sin, he made atonement for our sins, paying the price in his own blood.

We don't keep the law because he kept it for us.
We are free from the law because he lived under the law.

A gospel song by Philip Bliss captures this truth:

Free from the law—oh, happy condition!
Jesus hath bled, and there is remission;
Cursed by the law and bruised by the fall,
Christ hath redeemed us once for all.

*Lord Jesus, by your obedience to the law you
have freed us from the law. Now we are free at
last. Glory to your name forever! Amen.*

Day 7



In the Temple Courts: Simeon's Song

“Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God” (Luke 2:27-28).

Forty days have passed since the birth of Jesus. Here come Mary and Joseph into the temple precincts, ready to present their firstborn son to the Lord. There was nothing to mark them as anything other than another poor young couple coming with their newborn son.

At this point Simeon enters the story. Aside from what we are told in Luke 2, we know nothing about him. We don't know his background, hometown, education, or occupation. He simply appears on the stage of history as a bit player in the drama surrounding the birth of Christ. After his part is over, he fades from the scene, never to be heard from again. When Simeon held the baby Jesus in his arms, he called him *“a light of revelation to the Gentiles”* (Luke 2:32).

This is a huge piece of good news. He came to shine the light of God into every nation, every tribe, and every culture. He's the Savior of the whole world: rich and poor, young and old, black and white, Jew and Gentile, American and Japanese, healthy and handicapped. All people are included in his coming. He didn't come for a small group. He came for the whole wide world.

I received a phone call from a dear friend who was watching a loved one slowly die. When my friend called me, he made a very telling comment: "At a time like this you realize what's really important. When you watch someone die before your eyes, you realize that the things of the world aren't that important. The money and the power and the big career, they all just wash away. At the end the only thing that matters is to know Jesus Christ."

He's the Messiah of Israel.

He's the Savior of the world.

He came for you. Do you know him?

Lord Jesus, nothing is more important than knowing you. Open my heart to welcome you as my Lord and my King. Amen.

Day 8



Nazareth: Growing Up a Carpenter's Son

“He went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: ‘He will be called a Nazarene’” (*Matthew 2:23*).

This is the second time Nazareth has been highlighted in this Lenten series. There are a handful of places repeatedly mentioned in connection with Jesus’ life and ministry: Nazareth (where he grew up), Capernaum (the center of his Galilean ministry), Jericho (which he visited more than once), Bethany (where he loved to stay with his friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus), Jerusalem (the center of Jewish life), and the temple itself (the center of Jewish worship).

In this case we are looking at Nazareth as Jesus’ boyhood home. Nazareth was indeed an obscure village. Recently archeologists have discovered the remains of a home in Nazareth from the time of Jesus. Nazareth itself was evidently “a small hamlet with

about 50 houses populated by poor Jews.”

One of those poor Jews was a carpenter named Joseph. He made his living with his hands, using tools like an ax, a chisel, and a saw. Most likely he was poor all his life. This means Jesus grew up in a blue collar home. He wasn't born with a silver spoon in his mouth. No doubt Joseph taught Jesus how to spot a good piece of wood, how to measure it properly, and how to make a good cut. I'm sure Jesus spent many hours learning at his father's side. He knew what it was like to be raised in a poor family. It prepared him for later years when his message would spread like wildfire among the common people of Israel. They loved him because he was one of them.

But his neighbors had no use for him. They had him in the “Nazareth box,” but he wouldn't stay there.

The final tragedy is to know Jesus so well that you don't know him at all. We must not make that mistake or we will be as guilty as the people of Nazareth who did not know they lived next door to the Savior of the world.

Lord Jesus, though you were rich beyond all imagination, you became poor so that you could live among us. Forgive me when I have taken you for granted. Open my eyes, Lord, to see you as you are, my Savior and my God. Amen.

Day 9



At the Temple: About His Father's Business

“After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions” (Luke 2:46).

What was Jesus like as a boy?

This paragraph offers us the only glimpse we have into Jesus' childhood. The biblical record moves from his infancy to the beginning of his public ministry at the age of 30 with only this episode in between. While there are many things we would like to know about Jesus as a young boy and as a teenager, this is all we are given.

It's fairly easy to imagine that a child might disappear for a few hours in the great crowd of family and friends making the long journey from Jerusalem to Nazareth, only to reappear at supper time. That part of the story is understandable. It's also

conceivable that a mischievous boy would hide or even run away.

But that's not what Jesus did. He stayed behind in Jerusalem to discuss weighty matters with the "doctors of the law." They were the scribes and priests who spent a lifetime studying the written law and the oral commentary.

Jesus' reply to his worried mother reminds us about the higher priorities of life: "*Didn't you know I had to be about my Father's business?*" (Luke 2:49). We aren't surprised when the next verse tells us they didn't understand what he was saying.

It was a solemn reminder that even as a young boy Jesus was conscious of God's divine call on his life. At this point, we do not need to inquire into how much Jesus understood about his future destiny. On the divine side, he certainly knew all things. On the human side, he grew in knowledge as he grew up. Even at the age of twelve, he knew he was not like other boys. He was called to his "Father's business," and that must be attended to, even if his parents did not understand.

We also must be about our Father's business. Here is a good question we should ask ourselves: "Am I busy doing my Father's business? Am I walking in the steps of Jesus?" As J. C. Ryle says, "Never is a church in so healthy a condition as when its believing members aim high, and strive in all things to be like Christ."

*Lord Jesus, help me to follow your example by
doing my Father's business today. Amen.*

Day 10



At the Jordan: The Spirit Came Like a Dove

“At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove” (Mark 1:9-10).

At Christ’s baptism the Holy Spirit descended upon him “like a dove.” The dove is a particularly appropriate symbol because it is a graceful bird. In Matthew 10:16, Jesus told His disciples to be “as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” The word dove implies a guileless, open-book, “what you see is what you get” heart attitude. *Applied to the Holy Spirit, it means that the Spirit himself is pure, open, and honest, and he produces the same qualities in the people he touches.* As the dove descended from heaven, even so the Holy Spirit comes down from heaven to bless the people of the earth. Note that the dove rested on Christ, symbolizing the peace that the Holy Spirit brings.

The fact that the dove came directly to Christ shows the personal relationship the Holy Spirit has with each believer. Finally, the dove resting on Christ demonstrates the Father's divine approval of the Son's mission on earth. Once the dove landed on Christ, the voice from heaven said: "This is My Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Thus, all three persons of the Trinity were represented at the baptism of Jesus.

This symbol of the Spirit has a great deal to say to us about the effect of the Holy Spirit on our lives. When the Holy Spirit comes: (1) He brings peace to our souls; (2) He comes quietly, without fanfare; (3) He establishes a personal relationship with us; (4) He produces gentleness within, not a harsh and critical spirit; (5) He leads us toward purity, honesty, and a truly "harmless" life; (6) He brings God's divine approval that we are indeed His children; (7) He leads us toward a beautiful, grace filled Christian life.

Over 300 years ago Isaac Watts wrote a hymn based on this text called Come, Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove. The first four verses spell out our need for the Holy Spirit because our hearts are cold. We seek joy in earthly trifles and try in vain to sing God's praise. But when the Spirit comes in power, all is changed, as the fifth verse makes clear:

Come, Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove,
With all Thy quick'ning powers;
Come, shed abroad the Savior's love
And that shall kindle ours.

Spirit of God, as you descended from heaven upon Jesus, descend on me today that I might know the fullness of your power. Amen.

Day 11



Nazareth: Can Anything Good Come From There?

“Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” Nathanael asked” (John 1:46).

This was not a compliment.

Nothing much came from Nazareth, an obscure village tucked away in the hills of Galilee. Every country and state and province has a place like Nazareth, a place so remote that nothing ever happens there, no one of importance comes from there. That’s why Nathanael said, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” It seemed highly unlikely that the Messiah would come from a place like that. If you were looking for the one the prophets talked about, you would expect him to come from Jerusalem.

For every Jerusalem, there are a hundred places like Nazareth. The world is filled with unlikely places where nothing much

ever seems to happen, where there is no great university, little towns without much commerce, places off the beaten path, tiny villages and hamlets where few people live.

Nathanael represents the “big city” attitude that prevails today. He speaks for the people of New York, Rome, London, and Singapore. How could anything good come from Nazareth?

Our God is not a front runner. He doesn't design his coming around the prejudices of city-dwellers. Not that he has anything against big cities. He loves the great, teeming, bustling, busy cities of the world. But Jesus was not ashamed to come from Nazareth.

Notice what Philip said, how he responded to Nathanael's prejudice.

“Come and see” (John 1:46).

At every point along the way, God upends human prejudice and overthrows our preconceptions. He doesn't play to our expectations. If you are willing to let go of your backward way of thinking, you too can be saved.

Can anything good come out Nazareth?
Come and see.

*Open our eyes, Lord, to see you as you are,
and not as the world sees you. Amen.*

Day 12



Under the Fig Tree: I Saw You There

“I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you” (John 1:48).

Jesus saw Nathanael before Nathanael saw him.

That statement reveals a huge spiritual truth:
Salvation is of the Lord.

Salvation doesn't start with us. It always starts with God. It is a work of God from first to last. We need this truth because it's easy to fall into a man-centered way of thinking. We often speak of “finding” the Lord, and that is true. But it is equally true that if Jesus did not find us first, we would never find him on our own.

Jesus was moving to call Nathanael before Nathanael knew who he was.

This ought to give us great confidence in our prayers and in our

evangelism. We have a part to play because God has ordained both the means and the ends of his work on the earth. We pray for the lost precisely because we fully expect God to work in the hearts of the lost long before they come to faith in Christ. We can't say in advance exactly how God will work or when or where. We don't need to know that part. It is enough to know that salvation is a gift of God, and that every part of salvation is "not of ourselves" (see Ephesians 2:8-9).

Think of it this way:

Philip still had to say to Nathanael, "Come and see" (v. 46). Nathanael still had to come.

When Nathanael came to Jesus, he discovered Jesus had been watching him all along. Let this thought encourage you as you think about friends who are far from the Lord. Jesus sees them too. He knows where they are. He prepares them to respond so that when they are invited, at just the right moment, they will come to Christ.

We all have friends who are "under the fig tree" right now. If they seem unreachable, remember Nathanael and do not lose heart. Jesus sees the lost, he knows where they are, and he calls them by the Holy Spirit.

Keep believing, and keep on praying. You never know what God will do.

Give us faith, O Lord, to believe your Word, and to keep on praying for our friends who do not know you. Amen.

Day 13



By the Shore: Follow Me!

“Then Jesus said to Simon, ‘Don’t be afraid; from now on you will catch men.’ So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him” (Luke 5:10-11).

“Fear not and follow me.”

These five words sum up the call of Christ to each of us. We must set aside our worry about the future and our fear of what others may think of us. Until we do, we can never truly follow Jesus.

For Peter and the other disciples, following Christ meant leaving behind the old life (including the incredible catch of fish), giving up their boats, their nets, and their livelihood, and following Christ into an unknown future. Dietrich Bonhoeffer described it this way: “They must burn their boats and plunge into absolute insecurity in order to learn the demand and the gift of Christ.”

Letting go must always come first. Anything that hinders our

walk with Christ must go. Even some good things must go in order that better things may come from the Lord. We can't have it both ways.

The word for "followed" means "to walk the same road." That's what a disciple does—he walks the same road as Jesus. He gets on the "Jesus road" and follows it wherever it may lead. No guarantees, no deals, no special promises. He simply walks that road every day, following in his Master's steps.

Don't be afraid to follow Jesus. You'll never regret starting down the "Jesus road." You will only regret that you waited so long to do it.

Are you ready to follow Jesus wherever he leads? That's where it all begins. The rest is just details.

Lord Jesus, let faith rise to replace our fear. May we gladly leave all to follow you and not hold back, not even a little bit. Amen.

Day 14



Gerasa: Go Away Jesus

“When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. . . . Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region” (Mark 5:15, 17).

This is the most severe case of demon possession in the Bible. It is also one of the most amazing miracles Jesus ever performed.

Jesus met a man filled with demons when he visited Gerasa, in Gentile territory, on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee. After Jesus cast out the demons, he allowed them to possess the pigs who ran down a cliff and into the sea. Meanwhile the man sat at Jesus’ feet, calm, clothed, and in his right mind. The response of the townspeople is telling: *“They were afraid”* (v. 15). So they begged Jesus to leave their region. Jesus left and as far as we know, he never returned.

Ponder this thought for a moment. After Jesus works an amazing miracle, the townspeople ask him to leave.

When people looked at the man, there was no doubt that a miracle had occurred. Evidently the pigs mattered more than the man. But to Jesus the man mattered more than the pigs. They couldn't handle the transformation. Instead of rejoicing, they were afraid. Of what? Of the man? Possibly. Of Jesus? Definitely! *They were afraid of anyone with that kind of power.* What will he do next? To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, Jesus is not safe, but he is good. He does not always do what we expect, but what he does is always for the best.

The people who came to investigate the miracle asked Jesus to leave because he was bad for business. They were right! When Jesus comes into your life, it will never be business as usual again.

Before his conversion, Augustine said he sometimes prayed, "Save me, O Lord, save me, but not now!" He is not the first or the last person to pray that way.

Lord Jesus, may we not be afraid of your power. Change us from the inside out, even if it makes us uncomfortable. Amen.

Day 15



Cana:
A Quiet Miracle
Saves the Day

“On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus’ mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding” (John 2:1-2).

Two things stand out to me in this story of Jesus turning water into wine. First, Mary expects her son to do something about the wine running out. No doubt for a long time Mary had wanted to share with others the secret about Jesus. She wanted them to know that he was no ordinary child, that he was the “Son of the Most High” who would one day establish a kingdom that will never end. But that grand achievement seemed very remote on that day in the little village of Cana when the wine ran out before the wedding was over.

Her request is, “My son, do something about this.” She meant, “You have power they know nothing about. Use it to solve this problem.” Was she expecting Jesus to work a miracle? If so, she

could hardly be faulted for wanting others to know the truth about Jesus.

Second, we see in this miracle the reticence of our Lord. He does not work a miracle of new creation by creating wine out of nothing. When the miracle is done, he lets the servants announce it. During his earthly ministry Jesus was always conscious that his hour (the time of his suffering) had not yet come. He would not unnecessarily reveal himself nor create a public stir. So he turns the water into wine, but he does not make a great display of it. Later miracles (such as the feeding of the 5000) would be more public. This first miracle adds to the joy of the wedding but does not distract from the purpose of the day.

Did the newlyweds know that Jesus had turned the water into wine? Perhaps, but we can't be certain. Did they become believers? Again, we don't know. But this miracle benefits everyone who came to the wedding. They drank the "good wine" even if they didn't know where it came from.

Mary will live to see her wish come true as multitudes believe in Jesus. But for now, this first miracle brings joy to a wedding feast. Those who understand believe in him.

A "quiet miracle" saved the day at Cana. It is a harbinger of much more to come.

*Lord Jesus, open our eyes to see you at work all around us.
Thank you for giving joy that can never be taken away. Amen.*

Day 16



The Temple Courts: Jesus Makes a Ruckus

“He made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables” (John 2:15).

Sometimes you’ve got to clean house.

In this case Jesus decided to clean his Father’s house.

It happened during Passover when Jerusalem was crowded with Jewish pilgrims. Some of the local merchants (supported by the High Priest and his friends) decided this was a chance to make some big money. So they set up stalls near the temple where they charged exorbitant rates for the animals being offered for sacrifice.

The money changers inflated the exchange rate for temple currency in order to gouge the poor pilgrims who had no other option if they wanted to worship at the temple. Jesus cleansed the temple because its leaders were corrupt and greedy. The priests made money off the backs of the poor people who had

no other option. They had turned the temple from a house of prayer into a noisy, money-grubbing circus.

Jesus hated that.

He hated the businessmen who took advantage of the poor.

He hated the priests who were in on the deal.

He hated those who acted unjustly while claiming to worship the God of justice.

Jesus despised what these profiteers were doing.

Injustice is always wrong, but injustice in the name of God is doubly evil. Jesus would not stand for it.

A plaque at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. contains this quote from Yehuda Bauer: “Thou shalt not be a victim, thou shalt not be a perpetrator, but, above all, thou shalt not be a bystander.”

Good words to ponder as we journey with Jesus toward the cross.

Are we bystanders as life passes by?

Or will we care enough in Jesus’ name to get involved?

Lord, forgive us for caring so much about ourselves that we care so little about the hurting people of this world. Give us eyes to see, a voice to speak, and the will to act. Amen.

Day 17



Levi's House: Hanging with a Bad Crowd

“Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them” (Luke 5:29).

This is evangelism at its best.

Levi the tax collector follows Jesus.

He holds a banquet for Jesus at his home.

He invites his tax-collector friends to come.

Evidently it was a grand occasion.

Naturally the super-religious types hated it. Why would Jesus associate with riff-raff like that? Didn't he know that tax collectors were notorious cheats who were in cahoots with Rome? A young man on the rise (which Jesus certainly was) ought to know better than hang around with that crowd.

But Jesus felt at home with tax collectors and prostitutes. They got along just fine with Jesus because he knew what they were like and loved them anyway. He enjoyed their company, laughed with them, listened to them, and made himself available to them. As for the religious types, they viewed Jesus as a nuisance at best and as a threat at worst. Eventually they would conspire to put him to death. In the meantime they treated him with low-grade hostility. That's why they peppered his disciples with questions and took every chance they had to trip him up.

Jesus loved the Pharisees and would have spent time with them. It's that they didn't want to spend time with him. So he spent time with those who welcomed him. Jesus explained all this in terms that the Pharisees probably missed altogether:

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (vv. 31-32).

If a man thinks he is healthy, he won't go to the doctor even though he has a tumor growing on the inside. As long as he denies his problem, he won't seek help even if it kills him. Jesus came to help those who know they need help.

The first step in getting well is to admit you have a problem. That's why Jesus hung around with the wrong crowd. He always gets along well with people who know they need him.

Gracious Lord, purge from my heart a judgmental spirit. May I not be ashamed of you or of the people you came to save. Amen.

Day 18



Capernaum: *Right through the Roof*

“Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk?’” (Mark 2:9).

This is a trick question, sort of. It was Jesus’ way of making his critics think and think some more. Anyone could *say*, “Your sins are forgiven.” It’s not hard to utter those four words. But how would anyone know those words had power? Jesus healed the paralytic so that his critics would know that he had the power to forgive sin.

The teachers of the law were right on one point. Only God can forgive sin (v. 6). And if Jesus is not God, then he is indeed a blasphemer and should be stoned. But if he is truly God, then he can both heal and forgive.

Which is precisely what he does.

There are two miracles in this story—one visible, the other invisible. It’s good to heal a paralytic, but it is far better to have

your sins forgiven. The healed paralytic will still die someday and go out into eternity to face the Lord. What then?

In that day it won't be enough to say, "Jesus healed me."

Healing of the body is temporary.

Healing of the soul is forever.

By the order in which he does things, Jesus is teaching a crucial lesson. *Our greatest problems are spiritual, not physical.* As important as healing is, it is not as important as forgiveness.

The healing itself is instantaneous and complete. The four who brought the paralytic could testify how sick he had been; the whole crowd could testify how well he was now. The healing was so complete that the man picked up his bed and began to walk home. As he did, the crowd parted to let him through. The point is very clear. Both healing and forgiveness flow from the word of Jesus. He has authority to do both because he is the Son of Man.

What does your heart say? Who is this man? Is he just a carpenter or is he something much greater? Is he just another religious leader or is he the Son of God from heaven?

If he is a blasphemer . . . then join the crowd that crucified him.
If he is the Son of God . . . then crown him the Lord of your life.

*Our Father, open our eyes and help us see Jesus as he really is.
Grant that we may give him the honor that is his due. Help
us to crown him King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Amen.*

Day 19



The Temple Courts: Casting the First Stone

“But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her’” (John 8:6-7).

No one knows what Jesus wrote on the ground.

There are times in reading the Bible when we wish we had a little bit more information. What did Jesus write when he stooped twice to write on the ground with his finger? After all the speculation is over, we simply don't know the answer. Evidently what he wrote isn't crucial or we would have been told what it was. The word for “write” is only used here in the New Testament and can mean something like “doodle” or it can mean to make a list. Some have thought he wrote the Ten Commandments to remind the men of their sins. Others have suggested he wrote the names of the accusers by the Commandments they had broken: “Sam—Adultery,” “Joe—Murder,” “Jacob—Coveting,” and so on. More than one writer

has suggested that he wrote in the dust the names of their girlfriends. This last suggestion has the advantage of explaining why they cleared the area so quickly.

Jesus' words are meant to remind them of the seriousness of their charges. Motives matter. In essence he is saying, "Before you pick up that stone, take a good look in the mirror. Make sure you are morally qualified to put this woman to death. Make sure there is no malice, no deceit, no trickery, no dishonesty, and make sure you are not guilty of the same crime yourself." He is reminding them that if they testify maliciously or deceitfully, they are signing their own death warrant.

In Jesus' mind, the issue wasn't the woman; it was her hypocritical accusers. They wanted to talk about the Law as it relates to outward behavior. He wanted to talk to them about the Law as it related to their hearts.

There is much more in this story, but let's content ourselves with one simple thought.

Before you pick up the stone, look in the mirror. Before you condemn, do some confessing of your own sin. The world would be a better place if we cleared our own conscience before we start throwing stones.

*Lord Jesus, show me the truth about myself so
that I can deal honestly with my sin before I
dare to examine the sins of others. Amen.*

Day 20



Korazin: The Danger of Knowing Too Much

“Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes” (Matthew 11:21).

Once it was an important city, but today it lies in ruins.

In Jesus’ day, Korazin was part of the “Orthodox triangle.” The other two parts of the triangle were the nearby towns of Bethsaida (home to Peter, Andrew and Philip) and Capernaum. Those three towns were filled with devout Jews who took the Law seriously.

During our last visit to the Holy Land, we spent some time visiting Korazin. Unlike many other biblical sites in Israel, there isn’t anything else in Korazin. Certainly the ruins suggested quite a few wealthy people lived there. In the lower section of

the town (not all of it has been excavated), one could see more modest homes. No doubt the weather here was agreeable, they could get fish from the nearby Sea of Galilee, and they could easily travel west to Nazareth or around the lake to Tiberius, and for the appointed feasts, they could easily make their way along good roads to Jerusalem.

The people of Korazin knew Jesus, and Jesus knew them. Jesus worked miracles in Korazin. Note the plural. Miracles. Not just one but many. We don't know which ones because the New Testament doesn't tell us. But this much we do know. They heard his words, listened to his message, knew who he was, and they saw the miracles he performed. Yet they did not repent.

They knew too much and believed too little.

This is a warning for religious people for whom Jesus is optional.
He is not an option.
He is the Lord God of the universe.
Bow down and worship him!

It is better not to have a miracle than to have a miracle and not repent.

It is better to be sick and not cured than to be cured and not give the glory to God.

It is better not to experience God than to experience God and stay the same as you were.

Help me not to take you for granted, Lord Jesus. May my knowledge lead to belief and my belief to worship. Amen.

Day 21



Samaria: The Place Jesus Must Visit

“Jesus had to go through Samaria” (John 4:4).

Geography helps us understand this story.

In Jesus’ day there were three regions stacked on top of one another. There was Galilee in the north, Samaria in the middle, and Judea in the south. The easiest and quickest way to get to Galilee from Judea was to go due north right through Samaria. John 4:4 says that Jesus “had to” go through Samaria. Now why did he have to do that? The answer is, he didn’t. There was another route he could have taken. Some pious Jews would go east, cross the Jordan River, enter the region of Perea, then go north, and re-cross the Jordan River. Then they would be in Galilee. This was out of the way but it meant they wouldn’t have to go through Samaritan territory.

Why did Jesus “have to” go through Samaria when the Jews either didn’t go there at all or passed through as quickly as possible? The answer is simple and profound: Jesus went because he intended to meet the woman at the well. He knew she would be coming to the well at precisely the moment he was sitting there weary from his journey. Nothing happens by chance in this story. Every detail is part of the outworking of God’s will. That is a hugely important point. The woman isn’t looking for Jesus. All she wants is water. But Jesus is looking for her. You have to go to Samaria if you want to reach Samaritans. He doesn’t avoid Samaria and he doesn’t hurry through it. Though she does not know it, this woman has a “divine appointment” with the Son of God.

From this we can take a very important principle for evangelism. Reaching people for Christ is not always comfortable and may at times be difficult, but you have to go where people are if you want to reach them. Comfort is not the issue. The firefighter goes into the burning house to rescue those inside. He can’t stand outside and say, “Come on out before the house burns down.” Jesus intended to save this woman so he went where she was.

Jesus didn’t take the easy way out. He didn’t pander to the prevailing Jewish prejudice against the Samaritans. He “had to” go through Samaria because he wanted to reach this one woman, and through her, reach her whole village.

What a Savior!

He loves the people the world loves to hate.

Lord Jesus, thank you for caring enough to find us when we were far from you. Give us your heart for the lost. Amen.

Day 22



A Samaritan Village: One Thankful Man

“Now one of them, when he saw that he had been healed, turned back, glorifying God in a loud voice. He fell on his face, giving thanks to Jesus. And he was a Samaritan” (Luke 17:15-16).

As Luke tells the story, Jesus heals ten lepers, but only one came back to give thanks. Luke says he fell on his face before the Lord. He had what some people would call a “shouting session.”

And why not? He’s been healed of leprosy. For twenty years he was a leper living in this remote corner, separated from his family, forgotten by his friends, and cut off from his own people.

Suddenly, the disease vanishes and with it the twisted limp, the crooked fingers, the atrophied muscles. In less time than it takes to tell the story the disease and all its ugly tentacles are pulled from his body, with not a trace left behind. He stretches his arms high above his head and then picks up a stone to see

how far he can throw it. He begins to walk and then runs and finally leaps into the air.

He is whole again. Healthy again. Clean again. No longer an outcast.

No wonder he shouted. I would too!

When Luke adds, “He was a Samaritan,” the shock is such that we ought to read it this way: “Think of it. A Samaritan.”

Remember, Jesus was a Jew and the Jews thought Samaritans were half-breed traitors. To make matters worse, he is a Samaritan leper. To a Jew, a more repulsive combination could not be found. He was from the wrong race, he had the wrong religion, and he had the worst possible disease.

Ten men were healed that day, but only one came back to give thanks. Are you living with the nine or with the one? Far too many of us take our blessings for granted and groan about duties. Does that sound like you? It doesn't have to be that way.

Praise is a choice. A thankful heart is a choice you make. No one is forced into bitterness. You choose the way you live. The one who returned to give thanks chose not to forget what Jesus had done for him. The secret of a thankful heart is a conscious choice not to forget what God has done for you.

Lord Jesus, how often I take your blessings for granted. May I open my mouth to glorify you so that others will know what you have done. Amen.

Day 23



In the Villages: How Many Will Be Saved?

“Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, ‘Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?’” (Luke 13:22-23).

We never tire of this question, do we?

The last presidential election raised the question once again: “Is so-and-so a ‘real’ Christian?”

You can fill in the “so-and-so” yourself because the question has been asked about every candidate. But as Jesus’ reply makes clear, the issue is less “Will so-and-so be in heaven?” but “Will I be in heaven?” Before we get too focused on the salvation of certain public figures (a laudable concern, to be sure), first take a look at the man in the mirror. That’s what Jesus means when he says, *“Make every effort to enter through the narrow door”* (v.

24). Before I get so judgmental about anyone else, let me make sure I have responded in saving faith to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The door of salvation will not be open forever, and many religious types will find themselves left out on the Last Day (vv. 25-28). But there is some very good news here also. Many will come to Christ from all parts of the earth. Verse 29 anticipates the vast crowd from every tribe and every nation that will one day stand before the Lamb (Revelation 7:9). The “last” who will be first (v. 30) are those who today seem to be very unlikely candidates for salvation, and the “first” who will be last are those self-satisfied religionists who think their religion somehow substitutes for a genuine knowledge of Christ.

I was once asked if I believed that only members of the church I pastored were going to heaven. I responded no, I didn't believe that, and anyway, “I'm in sales, not administration.” That line always gets a good laugh, but I think it is also good theology. Let's be careful about passing final judgment on who will and won't be in heaven.

God can take care of that himself.

Be sure you have trusted Christ as your Lord and Savior.

And remember that God's family is much bigger than we imagine.

Father, we thank you that your heart encompasses the whole world. Thank you for making a way through your Son for anyone to be saved anywhere, any time. Amen.

Day 24



Tyre: Crumbs for the Dogs

“Yes, Lord,” she said, “but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table” (Matthew 15:27).

This episode takes place in “the region of Tyre and Sidon” (v. 21), two Gentile cities located north of Israel in Phoenicia, in modern-day Lebanon. They were often condemned in the Old Testament because of their association with Baal worship. Those cities deserved their long-held reputation for idolatry, but the God they had rejected had a heart for them nonetheless. The woman Jesus met proves the point. At first he refused her request to heal her demonized daughter, saying that he had come for the lost sheep of Israel (v. 24). But falling on her knees, she begged the Lord to help her. Something about her desperate plea moved the Lord Jesus. When he compared the Gentiles to “dogs,” he used a term that would have offended many people.

But when you need a miracle, you can’t be choosy. Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table. By saying that, she was in effect accepting that as a Gentile, she was outside

the covenant God made with Abraham. But she believed that somehow, some way, Jesus could heal her daughter. When the woman went home, she found her daughter lying in bed and the demon gone.

This ought to give us great hope as we pray for the lost. We all have friends who seem to be living in “Tyre and Sidon,” apparently far from God. But that distance is only from our point of view. It takes no more grace for God to save an idol-worshiping pagan than to save someone raised in the church. Desperate times call for desperate prayers born of desperate faith. Ponder these words of J. C. Ryle:

“We are sometimes tempted to think that we get no good by our prayers, and that we may as well give them up altogether. Let us resist that temptation. It comes from the devil. Let us believe, and pray on.”

These are good words for all of us today. “Let us believe, and pray on.”

Lord Jesus, give us the faith of this woman who received a great answer to her prayers. Grant us faith to believe, and to pray on. Amen.

Day 25



Pool of Bethesda: Do You Want to Get Well?

“Do you want to get well?” (John 5:6).

Strange question.

Of course he wants to get well.

Or maybe not.

Jesus had come to Jerusalem during one of the yearly feasts. Thousands of pilgrims came from throughout Israel. While he was there, he paid a visit to a place called Bethesda, “the house of mercy.” It was a pool near the Sheep Gate in the northeastern section of the city. Five colonnades (or porches) were built by the pool. As one writer put it, it was the Jewish Lourdes of that day. The Jews believed an angel would periodically come and stir the waters. The first person to enter the water after it had been stirred would be healed of his disease.

So hundreds of sick people gathered around the pool, waiting

and hoping for the water to be stirred. When Jesus passed by, he met a man who had been an invalid for 38 years. When he found out how long the man had been paralyzed, he asked only one question, “Do you want to be well?”

On the surface it seems to be a bizarre question. Why else would the man be there? Of course he wanted to be well. Was Jesus insulting his intelligence? No, not at all. He was asking a very serious question. He was asking because it was entirely possible the man did not want to get well.

Change is scary.

Sometimes it's easier to stay the way you are.

A few years ago a friend gave me a piece of insight that explains why we are the way we are.

“Everyone wants progress. No one wants change.”

Change is hard even when we know we need to change.

We get used to being dysfunctional and we can't imagine life any other way.

Jesus is saying, “Do you really want to be changed?” If the answer is yes, then miracles can happen. If the answer is no, even Jesus cannot help you.

Thank you, Lord, for being the Divine Disturber of the Peace. Thank you for not leaving us as we are. We pray for the courage to be changed by the Holy Spirit. For too long we have made excuses for the way we are. We want to get well. Heal us, O Lord. Amen.

Day 26



Caesarea Philippi: Are You All In?

“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mark 8:35).

You have to make up your mind sooner or later.

That’s always true, isn’t it? You can think about a job offer for a while, but eventually you’ve got to say yes or no. You can interview at six different colleges and be accepted by four of them, and then you can agonize over your decision. But sooner or later you’ve got to say yes to one and no to all the others. You can dream about where you’re going to move, and you can even visit Rock Springs, Charleston, St. Paul, or Norwalk, but somewhere along the line, you’ve got to choose a city.

You can’t sit on the fence forever.

The same is true in the spiritual life. Jesus is meeting with his men at Caesarea Philippi, a city outside the borders of Israel. There Peter makes the great confession: *“You are the Christ, the*

Son of the Living God” (Matthew 16:16). Jesus then reveals the fact of his coming crucifixion in Jerusalem. What’s left to say? Only one thing.

We all have just one life to spend. The challenge for all of us is the same. In the few years we have on planet earth, what will we do with the life God gave us?

You can “save your life” now only to lose it later or you can “lose your life” by following Jesus only to save it in the end. Here’s the kicker. You’ve got to decide, and when you do, everything will change for you.

At some point you’ve got to go “all in.” The martyred missionary Jim Elliot said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

If you live for your career, what difference will it make ten seconds after you die? If you spend your life in the service of the kingdom of God, the road may not be easy, but 10,000 years from now you’ll never regret your decision.

So what’s it going to be? Are you “all in” for Jesus?

*Lord, may we not be ashamed of you, not even a little bit.
Grant us courage to go “all in” on following you today. Amen.*

Day 27



On the Mountain: More to Come!

“There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light” (Matthew 17:2).

Sometimes chapter divisions comes in bad places. This is a good example of that.

At the end of Matthew 16, Jesus reveals to his disciples the truth about his coming crucifixion.

Peter flatly denied such a thing was possible. But soon they would all know the truth. We should read the account of the transfiguration in light of the shocking news about the coming crucifixion. Jesus is transfigured as a sign to his followers that there was more to the story than they had ever imagined.

When the early church fathers wrote about the transfiguration, they stressed that Jesus did not cease to be human when he was transfigured. The light shining was light from within, light that had always been there, light that suffused his being from the moment of his earthly conception.

Jesus was always the light of the world.

During his days on earth, that light was largely hidden from men so that he seemed to be just a man and nothing more. The transfiguration reveals the essence of his divinity that was always there but mostly invisible.

There is always a danger we will underestimate Jesus. On the mountain, just for a brief moment, the Father pulls back the curtain and says, "This is my Son from heaven. Listen to him!"

We need to hear this word today. Most days are like today, a day of routine busyness. Off we go to do what we have to do, checking things off our list one by one by one. But there is coming a day when "business as usual" will be no more. In that great day Jesus will return in great glory, and the world will see him as he truly is.

The Lamb of God will be revealed as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. When authors write mystery stories, they end each chapter on a cliffhanger, as if to say, "More to come!" On the mountain Jesus is transfigured, and God says, "This is my Son. Do not take him for granted. There is more to come!"

*Lord Jesus, open our eyes so we might see you as you are.
Help us to live in great hope of your coming glory. Amen.*

Day 28



Down from the Mountain: Suspend Disbelief

“Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’” (Mark 9:24).

They called it one of the greatest upsets in the history of March Madness.

It happened on March 16, 2012 when the Lehigh Mountain Hawks played the Duke Blue Devils.

To say Duke was heavily favored is putting it mildly. No one really gave Lehigh much of a chance. Duke is a perennial powerhouse, led by Coach Mike Krzyzewski, winningest coach in the history of men’s college basketball (Division 1). But somehow Lehigh managed to defeat Duke 75-70. After the improbable upset, a TV reporter asked Lehigh coach Brett Reed what he had told his team before the game. He said he simply asked his team to do one thing: Suspend disbelief.

That’s good advice for basketball players and its good advice for the followers of Jesus. Sometimes you have to suspend disbelief

in order to believe. How else are we to understand the miracles of the Bible? How else will we face the overwhelming trials of life?

As Jesus came down from the Mount of Transfiguration, he was met by a man whose son (his only child) had been under the control of a demonic spirit. When he asked the disciples to help his son, they could not. Now he turns to Jesus as his last hope. Distraught over a hopeless situation, the man bares his heart with its mixture of pain, faith, fear, hope, and doubt.

“If you can do anything to help us, have compassion on us” (v. 22). To which Jesus replies (partially quoting the man): *“If you can!” All things are possible for one who believes*” (v.23). Then the father utters some of the most honest words any man ever spoke: *“I believe. Help my unbelief!”* (v. 24).

It is easy to look down on this poor, tired father who saw no hope for his afflicted son. But he deserves our respect. The words “Help my unbelief” expose his inner turbulence. He believed but he also doubted. Hope and fear raged a fierce battle in his soul. When Jesus healed this man’s son, he was made whole that very hour. It was a marvelous display of Christ’s power over demonic invasion and human despair.

The man got the miracle he sought because he willingly suspended disbelief. Sometimes we have to suspend disbelief in order to believe. When we do, we discover that Jesus can change the most hopeless situations.

Lord Jesus, may I reckon my problems in the light of your power and my weakness in the light of your strength. Help me to suspend disbelief so I may trust you more. Amen.

Day 29



Nain: A Funeral Interrupted

“Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, ‘Young man, I say to you, get up!’ The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother” (Luke 7:14-15).

Only Jesus could do this.

Death has such vast power that we read this story of Jesus and the dead son of the widow of Nain (a small village a few miles southeast of Nazareth), and we wonder if it could be true.

Only Jesus could do this.

Death frightens us because we have no power against it. No matter what we do to avoid it, death lies at the end of the road for all of us. The statistics are sobering. One out of every one person dies.

Only Jesus could do this.

We are now just a little over two weeks from Easter. The end of our Lenten journey is in view. But the road to Easter goes through Good Friday. Before the Resurrection, there is Crucifixion. Jesus himself will soon experience what the widow's son went through. He will fully taste death. But he will not stay dead.

Only Jesus could do this.

Here is God's final answer to the problem of death. He will enter the realm of death himself and will come out on the other side. The world knows all about death, and so does Jesus. But the world knows nothing about resurrection. Jesus will change all of that.

For the moment the widow of Nain rejoices with her son who has come back to life. *"They were all filled with awe and praised God,"* and they concluded that *"God has come to help his people"* (v. 11).

What a Savior!

On that happy day in Nain, Jesus did what only Jesus can do.

Lord Jesus, you even interrupt funerals because you have conquered death. Why should we fear anything now? Amen.

Day 30



A Samaritan Village: Let Go and Move On

“When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, ‘Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?’ But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village” (Luke 9:54-56).

Let’s be clear about one thing.
The Samaritans had a rotten attitude.

They hated the Jews so much that they didn’t welcome Jesus because he was on his way to Jerusalem.

That ticked off James and John (the “sons of thunder”).
So they said, “Let’s ask God to burn down this village.”

Who looks worse?

The Samaritans with their prejudice or James and John with their spite?

It’s a pretty close call because both groups had stinky attitudes.

But these two brothers should have known better. After all, they had been with Jesus for a long time. They should have remembered the Golden Rule, “*Do to others what you would have them do to you*” (Matthew 7:12).

The disciples looked worse because they knew better. Knowledge matters. If you know what is right and seek vengeance anyway, you have greatly sinned against God. Note that Jesus doesn’t absolve the Samaritans of their unkindness. He did not say, “That doesn’t matter.” He’s dealing here with his inner circle, the men he had personally chosen and trained. James and John had just witnessed the Transfiguration. It’s almost as if Jesus is saying, “Forget about the Samaritans. Your attitude is worse than theirs because you know me so much better.”

God can deal with our enemies better than we can. Leave the job to him. Let’s move on to the next village. Someone there needs to hear about Jesus.

Lord, set us free from the need to get even with those who have hurt us. Give us grace to let go of our anger so we can keep on following you. Amen.

Day 31



Sea of Galilee: When Christ is in the Boat

“There arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by the waves; but he was asleep” (Matthew 8:24).

I ran across a message by Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “Overcoming Fear” taken from *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. He preached it a scant fifteen days before Hitler came to power in 1933. Bonhoeffer took his text from Matthew 8:23-27, the story of Jesus calming the sea. Jesus was asleep in the boat during the storm. When the disciples wake him, he rebukes them for their lack of faith and then calms the sea. As Bonhoeffer develops his sermon, he makes the following observation:

“When Christ is in the boat, a storm always comes up. The world tries with all its evil powers to get hold of him, to destroy him along with his disciples; it hates him and rises up against him. Christians surely know this. No one has to go through so much anxiety and

fear as do Christians. But this does not surprise us, since Christ is the Crucified One, and there is no way to life for a Christian without being crucified.”

That first sentence really got my attention. We tend to think if Christ is with us, things will go smoothly.

Wrong.

When Christ is in the boat, a storm always comes up.

Is Christ in your boat today?

Is he traveling with you, walking with you, present with you?

Good.

Get ready for trouble.

Jesus can still the storm, but he stirs it up first.

Just a reminder for those hoping for a calm boat ride with Jesus.

O Lord, increase my faith to trust in you even when the waves rise and my little boat is about to sink. Amen.

Day 32



Perea:

What Camels Can't Do

“How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:24-25).

They must have laughed when Jesus said it.

Camels can't go through the eye of a needle. Totally impossible. Not just difficult but totally, absolutely, 100% impossible.

Equally absurd is the idea of a rich man going to heaven.

We are more like the rich young ruler man than we would like to admit. Many of us would secretly agree with the fellow who said, “It doesn't matter whether you're rich or poor just so long as you have a lot of money.”

We must not try to wiggle out of this. When Jesus says the eye of a needle, he means the eye of a needle. Like the needle you do sewing with. When he says camel, he means a big camel that you ride across the desert. He says, “Look at a camel and the

eye of a needle. It is easier to get a big camel through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to go to heaven.”

Why? Because rich people trust in their riches. A poor person says, “If Jesus doesn’t come through for me, I’m sunk.” A rich man says, “If Jesus doesn’t come through for me, that’s okay. I’ve got my pension. I’ve got my stocks and bonds. I’ve got my options. I’ve got my golden parachute. I’ve got my safety net. If he doesn’t come through, it doesn’t matter. I’m taking care of things myself.”

But even rich people can be saved if they will give up their trust in their riches. Money can do many things, but it can’t take you to heaven. Once you realize that, you can be saved.

This leads to two simple yet profound conclusions:

First, as long as you make money the measure of your life, you will be empty and unfulfilled.

Second, whenever you stop trusting in money and turn your life over to Jesus Christ, then and only then will your heart be satisfied.

Use your money but don’t fall in love with it. That’s the message for today.

Gracious Lord, you have already provided everything I need. Thank you for a salvation that cannot be purchased with silver and gold. Amen.

Day 33



A Solitary Place: Give Them Something to Eat

“He said to them, ‘Give them something to eat.’ They said, ‘We have only five loaves of bread and two fish’” (Luke 9:13).

The location of this miracle is described in various ways:

“A desolate place” (Matthew 14:13).

“A solitary place” (Mark 6:32).

“A town called Bethsaida” (Luke 9:10).

“The far shore of the Sea of Galilee” (John 6:1).

From this we gather that Jesus and his disciples crossed the Sea of Galilee from west to east, landing near the village of Bethsaida, in a remote area, near a hillside, where thousands of people gathered to hear him speak. The fact that 5000 men (not including the women and children who must have been part of the crowd) followed Jesus to this desolate area shows the

magnetic appeal of our Lord to the masses.

When Jesus said, “Give them something to eat,” the disciples were astounded and embarrassed because they did not have the means to meet such a request. No one could feed such a vast multitude! “Send them away, Lord, so they won’t starve here in the wilderness.” Jesus wants his men to realize that without him they can do nothing. They must be forced to realize their own inadequacy for the task at hand. As long as they think they can feed the crowds on their own, why would they need Jesus? You only need a miracle when you can’t do it yourself.

We still need this lesson today. Without Jesus’ active involvement, all our plans are doomed to fail. Until we see that our human resources are bound to fail, we will depend on *our* money, *our* organization, *our* staff, and *our* connections to make things happen. But when we at long last come to the end of our hoarded resources and cry out, “Lord, this is impossible. Help me!” all heaven comes to our aid.

The twelve baskets left over tell an important story. If we will trust Jesus, there will be plenty for those we serve, and more than enough left over to feed us also.

Jesus is always more than enough for those who dare to trust in him.

Lord, thank you for showing us our weakness that you might show yourself strong to meet every need we have. Amen.

Day 34



In the Villages: The Harvest is Plentiful

“Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest’” (Matthew 9:37-38).

A few years ago we bought a banner at a Christian scroll shop in China. It contains the Mandarin translation of Matthew 9:37-38 along with a painting of Chinese farmers bringing in the harvest.

The banner reminds me of a solemn, joyful truth. The harvest is plentiful all over the world. Right now, while you are reading these words, the harvest is plentiful in Finland, Slovenia, Thailand, Paraguay, Bangladesh, Iran, Libya, and, yes, the harvest is vast in China.

The problem has never been with the harvest. The problem is with the workers. We don't have enough of them. We've got good workers, hard workers, dedicated workers, kind, sincere, Christ-loving, gospel-preaching, Spirit-filled workers. We just

don't have enough of them. So the harvest rots in the field because there are not enough workers. What should we do about it?

Our way and God's way are not the same way. We want to organize to get more workers for the harvest field, but Jesus said, "Pray earnestly."

First we pray. Then we preach.

First we pray. Then we organize.

First we pray. Then we go.

Prayer comes first because the harvest belongs to the Lord. It is quite literally his harvest. He knows where the harvest is, he knows when it is coming in, he knows how many workers are needed, and he knows who is needed and when and where.

As we think about the worldwide harvest, remember that Jesus is Lord of China, he is Lord of the Ukraine, he is Lord of Uganda, and he is Lord of Vietnam. All the nations are his. So, then, let us pray with great confidence to the Lord of the harvest that he might send forth more workers. While we are at it, let's ask the Lord to send us anywhere we might be useful to help bring the harvest in.

*Lord of the nations, we see the vast harvest before us,
ripening every day in every nation. Raise up workers for
the harvest fields around the world. Send us anywhere
you need us to help bring your harvest in. Amen.*

Day 35



On the Road: No Turning Back

“Still another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.’ Jesus replied, ‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God’” (Luke 9:61-62).

Let’s call this fellow the Divided Disciple, which is a contradiction in terms, if you think about it.

In military terms, this man is a weekend warrior. He’s ready to serve the Lord but he wants to tie up some loose ends at home first. And his request does seem reasonable. All he wants to do is to say goodbye to his parents, his friends, maybe his girlfriend, and so on. Maybe they will throw him a farewell party and make speeches in his honor. No doubt there will be tears shed and a few people will question his decision. But that’s to be expected, isn’t it? So why can’t he go home and bid his family goodbye?

Evidently this man wanted to keep the back door open. Perhaps he wanted to make a deal to protect his family. Certainly he

wanted their approval. None of this is wrong in itself. But remember the words of Jesus in Luke 14:26 *“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.”* You can check the word “hate” in the Greek and you’ll discover that “hate” is exactly what it means. But the “hate” of this verse doesn’t refer to personal animosity. Being faithful to Jesus Christ and following his call on your life may mean you will do things from time to time that seem to your loved ones as if you hate them. You don’t hate them at all, but your obedience to Christ may cause them to think that you hate them. Such is the price we all must pay to be a disciple of Christ.

The real meaning of our text is quite plain. Following Jesus is the most important thing in life. Everything else pales by comparison.

It is not an emotional, spur-of-the moment decision.

It is not a decision that can be postponed till later.

It is not a phase we go through while we keep our options open.

Following Jesus means signing away the rights to your own life. You sign on the bottom line and let him fill in the details. It means Jesus first. No conditions. No delays. No buts. No excuses.

Lord Jesus, I pray for the courage to follow you without delay, whatever it costs, no turning back, wherever you lead. Amen.

Day 36



Jericho: A Little Man with a Big Problem

“Zacchaeus, come down immediately” (Luke 19:5).

He was a little man with a big problem. Jesus was coming to town but the crowds kept Zacchaeus, who was a short man, from seeing him. A familiar Sunday school song tells the story:

Zacchaeus was a wee little man
And a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree
For the Lord he wanted to see.

As the chief tax collector of Jericho, he was not a popular man. Since he had cheated many people, he had many enemies. So climbing up in a sycamore tree was both ingenious and prudent. The same Sunday school song explains what happened next:

And as the Savior passed that way

He looked up in that tree
And He said, “Zacchaeus, you come down!
For I’m going to your house today
For I’m going to your house today.”

Zacchaeus climbed the tree because his heart told him he needed what Jesus had to offer. Deep inside he knew he needed forgiveness and a new life. Jesus came to the house of the most hated man in town because he did not follow public opinion. He will eat with a Pharisee or a tax collector (or with anyone else, for that matter) because he came to seek and to save the lost (v. 10).

Jesus made the first move (v. 5). That’s grace.
Zacchaeus welcomed him gladly (v. 6). That’s faith.

Salvation could not be simpler than this. When Jesus calls, receive him gladly. Zacchaeus made a lifetime of mistakes and had many things to make right, but he was smart enough to come to Jesus. The little man with a big problem turns out to be the smartest man in town.

*Gracious God, you are amazing! You save people
who don’t deserve it. Thank you for making
room for me in your family. Amen.*

Day 37



Across the Jordan: Waiting for Lazarus to Die

“When he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days” (John 11:6).

Why did he wait two more days?
Why not come now, right now, while Lazarus is alive?
If he really loved Lazarus, why delay at all?

It’s easy to understand the disciples’ confusion. “Lord, this man is your friend. We’ve seen you heal people you didn’t even know. Lazarus loves you, and you love him. Why are you waiting?”

When at last Jesus arrives in Bethany, Lazarus has already died. He is met by Martha, sister of Lazarus, who speaks her mind to the Son of God:

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (v. 21).

Martha is partly right. Jesus could have healed Lazarus, but she was wrong on one point. Jesus could have healed him from the

other side of the Jordan River. He's the Son of God. He didn't have to personally come to Bethany to work a great miracle.

But that's precisely what he does.

Strange as it may sound, Jesus stayed away from Bethany so that after Lazarus died, he could raise him from the dead, bringing great glory to God, and confirming his own words when he said, "*I am the resurrection and the life*" (v. 25).

The Bible explicitly says that Jesus loved Lazarus, yet he let him die. He delayed returning so that Lazarus would die. That too was an act of love.

We will never understand this unless we see that Jesus always intended to raise Lazarus from the dead. The disciples didn't see that, the sisters didn't see that, but Jesus had it in mind from the beginning.

This teaches us something about the "delays" of life. Although God may seem slow to us, he is never "slow," but he does move according to his own purposes. We will rarely understand in advance why things happen the way they do. As we will see tomorrow, there is more to this story. For the moment, let's remember God's love comes in many varieties, and he loves us even when nothing he does makes sense to us.

Lord Jesus, some of us desperately need your comfort right now. Forgive us for doubting your purposes. Help us trust even when we don't understand. Amen.

Day 38



Bethany:
A Dead Man Rises

“Lazarus, come out!” (John 11:43).

Lazarus was already dead for four days when Jesus arrived in Bethany.

He had been dead long enough for his body to begin decaying.

Now Jesus is here. What will he do? Lazarus has been dead so long that any thought of an immediate resurrection is out of the question. But that doesn't seem to be on Martha's mind. She thought Jesus could heal Lazarus, and she also believed he would be raised on the last day. It apparently never occurred to her that Jesus could raise Lazarus right then and there.

Jesus wept.

He ordered the stone removed from the entrance of the tomb. He declared that this would be for the glory of God. He called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth!”

Someone has commented that if Jesus had not said the name Lazarus, every dead person in the world would have been raised. Certainly the raising of this one man proves Jesus can raise every person.

Death has no power over him, but he has absolute power over death.

There's an old gospel song called Since Jesus Came into My Heart. One of the verses contains this phrase, "There's a light in the valley of death now for me, since Jesus came into my heart."

That light is Jesus.

If you know him, you need not fear death. To borrow a phrase from John Stott, death has become a "trivial episode" for the believer. It doesn't seem trivial to us at the moment, but Jesus has taken the sting from death. One day we will live in a land where death no longer reigns.

Lord Jesus, what would we do without you? Where could we go but to the Lord? You alone have the words of eternal life. Thank you for the hope we have that goes beyond the grave. Amen.

Day 39



Ephraim: The Only Safe Place

“Therefore Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the Jews. Instead he withdrew to a region near the desert, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples” (John 11:54).

No good deed goes unpunished.

Raise a man from the dead, and they want to kill you.

That’s what happened to Jesus after he raised Lazarus. While many believed in him as a result of the miracle, others reported the miracle to the Pharisees who called a meeting of the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of Israel.

Bottom line: Jesus must die!

Partly they were motivated by jealousy of his popularity with the people, partly by worries about a general uprising, and partly by fear of what the Romans might do if things got out of hand. They would kill him to get rid of him. But he would die on behalf of others. Meanwhile Jesus retreated to Ephraim, a small

village about 12 miles from Jerusalem. There he would rest and prepare for the tumult leading up to his own crucifixion.

In all of this, we can see several factors at work: First, Jesus will not rush ahead of God's plan. He knew with perfect certainty that he was going to die in Jerusalem. But it must happen at the right time and in the right way. By withdrawing he removed himself from unnecessary controversy. Second, all things move forward according to God's predetermined plan. From the outside it appears Jesus is being carried along by a chaotic series of unconnected events. It might even seem he was a victim of forces he could not control. But he retreats to Ephraim as part of God's plan so that in a few days he might meet his predetermined fate on a bloody Roman cross outside the city walls.

Let no one say the cross was an accident. There was nothing accidental about it. It was a criminal act, perpetrated by wicked men who acted on their own, out of craven cowardice and rank envy. But in a stunning display of God's sovereignty, the Father accomplished redemption through the wicked acts of wicked men who murdered his Son.

Meanwhile Jesus waits in Ephraim until the time comes for his final trip to Jerusalem.

Our Father, how great is your love, how vast is your wisdom that you should design the death of your Son so that through his sacrifice we might be saved. All your ways are perfect, always. Amen.

Day 40



Bethphage: A Donkey for Jesus

“They brought the donkey and the colt; then they laid their robes on them, and he sat on them” (Matthew 21:7).

The story of Palm Sunday really begins with a donkey. Most of us have heard how Jesus sent his disciples to the village of Bethphage with instructions to bring back a donkey. When you read Matthew’s account, you realize that the two disciples actually brought back two donkeys—a mother and her young colt that had never been ridden. Jesus rides into Jerusalem on the young colt with the mother walking alongside.

Matthew also tells us that by riding a donkey into Jerusalem Jesus was fulfilling an ancient prophecy from Zechariah 9:9. Those words—written 575 years earlier—predicted that when the Messiah came to Israel, he would come riding on a donkey.

“Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey” (v. 5).

Nothing would have seemed more unlikely than for a king to come riding on a donkey. Jesus could hardly have chosen a more unlikely way to present himself to the nation. It's not hard to imagine the Romans laughing as they watched the spectacle. A pauper king, riding on a borrowed donkey, his saddle a makeshift layer of cloaks, attended by an unruly mob whose only weapons were palm branches.

On Palm Sunday we worship the One whose kingdom is not of this world, who offered himself to his people while riding on a borrowed donkey. The hymn "From Bethany, The Master" says it well:

The King of Love, in triumph
Rides through the city's gate;
Rejected, scorned—yet Victor,
The Conqueror of hate;

O wave your green palm branches!
Exalt His matchless worth!
This King of Love shall conquer
The nations of the earth.

Lord Jesus, you knew fully the pain of our rejection. You came as a king, but we would not have you. Grant that we might follow you to the cross and count it all joy for your sake. Amen.

Day 41



The Temple Courts: Shake Us Up, Lord

**“My house will be called a house of prayer
for all nations” (Mark 11:17).**

Jesus would not put up with some things. We have seen over and over again his compassion for the hurting and his outreach to the forgotten. He cares for those the world forgets. But he has little patience with religious people who use religion to hurt others. In this case, Jesus was incensed that the moneychangers were doing it again. By “again” I mean that this is the second time Jesus cleansed the temple, the first time being in John 2, at the beginning of his public ministry.

He cleanses the temple as he starts his ministry.
He cleanses the temple as he closes his ministry.

This is not by chance. He means to reveal the utter sterility of the Israelite system of worship. God always intended that his temple in Jerusalem should be a house of prayer for all nations. Even though it was uniquely the Jewish temple, all nations were invited to pray there. But no prayer could take place because

the profiteers had completely taken over the outer courts. They made their money charging exorbitant fees to buy animals for worship and to exchange money into the special temple currency.

Business was good, and that made Jesus angry. The fact that he cleansed the temple twice shows how deeply sin is embedded in the human heart. It also helps us see why Jesus had to die. It was not enough to take over the tables and drive the money-grubbers out. The very hearts of the people must be changed.

For that to happen, Jesus must die. And in his death, he opened a way for every person to come directly to God. No longer will they have to travel to Jerusalem. Now every heart is a temple where Jesus reigns as Lord. Through him the weakest believer enters into the presence of God.

From both cleansings we see how much our God yearns for fellowship with us. He loves us so much that he will overturn the tables and shake us up so that once again our hearts belong to him.

What a Christ we serve!

He loves us too much to leave us as we are.

Shake us up, Lord Jesus. Overturn the tables of greed, sloth, pride and lust. Do whatever it takes so our hearts will be fully in tune with you. Amen.

Day 42



The Temple Courts: A Trick Question

**“He is not the God of the dead but of the living,
for to him all are alive” (Luke 20:38).**

Ever met a Sadducee? Me neither.

That’s not surprising considering the last one died 2000 years ago. And even back then, there were never very many of them. *It was always a very select group, like a club for the very wealthy.* If you lived in Jericho, you were much more likely to run into a Pharisee than a Sadducee. They were a very small group with some very strange views.

The Sadducees came to Jesus with a trick question involving a woman whose husband died, whereupon she proceeded to marry the other brothers one at a time, following the death of the previous brother. Finally she was a widow seven times over. The question was, “In the resurrection whose wife will she be?”

It’s a silly question designed to make you laugh.

Jesus' fundamental answer goes back to the character of God himself. The question is not, 'Can we still believe in life after death?' but "Can we still believe in God?" If he is our God and we are his people, death is not the end of the story. *A better day, a brighter day, a glorious day of resurrection awaits all the people of God.* In the meantime, between now and then, we go to be with the Lord. This is what Paul meant when he said, "To die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When death comes to us, we can know this much for certain. The Lord who has been with us throughout our earthly journey will not abandon us when we need him most.

All that we believe about life after death rests on the faithfulness of God. We do not trust in what our eyes can see because all that we see testifies to the overwhelming power of death.

But thanks be to God, a day is coming when death will be no more. Those who know Jesus have entered into a relationship that even death cannot sever. Our hope for the future is as secure as the promises of God. For the Christian, death is not the end but the beginning of life forever with the Lord.

Living Lord, we rest all our hope in you for you alone have conquered the grave. Make us strong today and bold in our faith, knowing that when the time comes to leave this earth, we will be with you forever. Amen.

Day 43



The Temple: Not One Stone Will Be Left

**“They will not leave one stone on another,
because you did not recognize the time of
God’s coming to you” (Luke 19:44).**

Jesus loved Jerusalem.

When he uttered these words, he was weeping.

No doubt his hearers didn’t take him seriously when he said the great temple in Jerusalem, Herod’s Temple, would someday be torn down. On that bright and warm day in early April, it must have seemed impossible that anyone could or would destroy the temple.

Who would do such a thing?

The answer would come in 70 AD when the Roman army captured Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. The Romans

evidently took their work seriously because when they were done, there was no temple. It was gone, destroyed, burned down, all the way to the massive foundation stones.

It happened because Israel “did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.” Another term for this is the “Day of Visitation,” a moment in history when God comes in blessing and power. When Jesus came, God was “visiting” his people. He showed himself in word and in deed to be mighty Son of God from heaven, the long-awaited Messiah. But his own people would not listen to him.

They could have known. They should have known.

There is a message for us for those with ears to hear:
If we do not respond to God’s call, we will one day face his judgment.

If we brush aside his blessings, we will answer for it eventually.

If we think we have forever to say yes to Jesus, we will one day be rudely surprised.

The jumbled pile of rocks sends a message to those who read these words.

Don’t let this happen to you.

*Let us be warned, O Lord, so we will not miss
the day of God’s coming to us. Give us eager
hearts to respond when you call. Amen.*

Day 44



Gethsemane: The Traitor's Kiss

“Jesus asked him, ‘Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?’” (*Luke 22:48*).

When we study the four gospels, we find a remarkable series of facts about Judas:

- He was personally chosen to be an apostle by Jesus Christ.
- He forsook all to follow the Lord.
- He spent 3 1/2 years traveling the length and breadth of Israel with Christ.
- He saw the miracles of Christ in person.
- He heard Christ give all his famous discourses.
- He watched as Christ healed the sick, raised the dead, and cast out demons.
- He, along with the other apostles, was sent out to preach the gospel.
- He was one of the leaders of the apostolic band.
- No one ever suspected him of treason.

That's what makes his story so perplexing. *What would make a man follow Jesus so closely for so long and then betray him at the end?* The Bible itself gives us some tantalizing hints but no final answer to that question. We don't know all that motivated Judas to go to the Jewish leaders with his evil plan. Was it envy? Was it disappointment? Was it misplaced patriotism? Was it greed? Was it some backhanded attempt to force Jesus to lead a revolution against Rome?

Perhaps the motives in his heart were as mixed as ours often are. In the end the only thing that matters is that he betrayed Jesus. For that one act his name will live forever in infamy.

What he did, I could do. If I think otherwise, then I have missed the point of this story. *Judas is a lot like us and we're a lot like him.* In fact, the more religious we are, the more like Judas we are. After all, you can't get much more religious than being an apostle. He was as "in" as any person could ever be.

And yet he betrayed the Lord. The story of Judas is in the Bible for many reasons, not the least of which is that before we take anything for granted, we should at least ask the question the other apostles asked that fateful night:

"Lord, is it I?"

Search me, Lord Jesus, and see if there be any Judas in me. Would I betray you, Lord? Reveal the truth and then heal my soul lest I for thirty pieces of silver should betray you again. Amen.

Day 45



Golgotha: Were You There?

“They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull)” (Mark 15:22).

It's Friday morning, 9 A.M. Killing time in Jerusalem.

Outside the Damascus Gate is a road and on the other side of the road is a flat area near the spot where the prophet Jeremiah is buried. Up above you can see a rocky outcropping that, if studied at a certain angle, looks like a skull. Eroded into the limestone are two sockets for the eyes, a place for the nose and maybe a place for the mouth.

Skull Hill, they called it. Golgotha.

Consider these three words from Mark 15:25, *“They crucified him.”* The word “they” speaks of the people who crucified our Lord. The “they” included the Romans, the Jews, and it includes you and me. We all had our share in the death of Jesus.

The word “crucified” speaks of the painful death he suffered.

Crucifixion was the ultimate punishment in that day. It represented the final judgment of the world on Jesus: “This man deserves to die.” Though he had done no wrong, they crucified him anyway.

The word “him” speaks of the person who died that day. This was no ordinary man. As the centurion cried out when Jesus died, “Surely, this was the Son of God!”

I heard a story recently about a man who visited Golgotha and the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem. Overwhelmed, he began to weep. “Have you ever been here before?” someone asked. “Oh, yes,” he replied. “I was here 2000 years ago.”

The song *Were You There?* asks a question we ought to ponder today:

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

*Lord Jesus, we tremble to think of what you endured
for our salvation. May we never be ashamed
of Jesus or what he did for us. Amen.*

Day 46



Behind Closed Doors: Waiting

“Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment” (Luke 23:56).

The four gospels do not tell us much about what happened on the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. We know that after Jesus died, the disciples stayed behind locked doors for fear of the Jewish leaders (John 20:19). Their fear was well-founded because on that Saturday, the chief priests and the Pharisees met with Pilate and asked him to order the tomb sealed to prevent the disciples from stealing Jesus' body (Matthew 27:62-66). After the resurrection, those same religious leaders would bribe the guards so they would spread the rumor that the disciples had indeed stolen Jesus' body from the tomb (Matthew 28:11-15). In a bizarre twist, Jesus' opponents had a greater belief in his resurrection than his disciples. The only other detail we know about Saturday is that because it was the Sabbath, the women who were with Jesus at the cross rested according to the commandment (Luke 23:56).

One thing seems clear about that Saturday. No one was expecting a resurrection. All four gospels tell the same story of shock and confusion when the women discovered the empty tomb on Sunday morning. Whatever else they did on Saturday, no one was saying, “I can’t wait until tomorrow when Jesus rises from the dead.” Even though he had said he would rise, the brutal events at Golgotha made that prediction seem like wishful thinking.

The message of Holy Saturday is, “Get ready. Something is about to happen. But it hasn’t happened yet.” Thank God, we’re not moving back toward the crucifixion. It may be Saturday but we’re moving toward Easter. Sunday’s coming. All we’ve got to do is hold on a little while longer and Sunday will soon be here.

Keep the faith, brothers and sisters. Yesterday our Lord was crucified. Today his body lies in the tomb. Tomorrow he rises from the dead. Saturday can seem like a long day—and it is—but be of good cheer. The crucifixion is behind us, Saturday will not last forever. Sooner than we think, Sunday will be here. As one writer put it, when Jesus walked out of the tomb, all his people came out with him.

We are Easter people marching from Good Friday through Holy Saturday on our way to Easter Sunday. We’re not quite there but we’re moving in the right direction.

It’s Saturday, but Sunday’s coming. Let that thought give strength to your heart today.

O Lord, waiting is so hard. And waiting is what this day is all about. Grant us faith while we wait so we will not lose heart but will be ready to rejoice when Sunday finally comes. Amen.

Day 47



In the Garden: Not the Gardener

“‘Woman,’ he said, ‘why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?’ Thinking he was the gardener, she said, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him’” (John 20:15).

Why didn't Mary recognize the Lord? The text doesn't say but several answers come to mind. Certainly she was not expecting to see him. All of us have "contexts" in which we place our friends. We have people we know from work or from the neighborhood or from a family reunion. Pastors get to know people because they tend to sit in the same place every Sunday. But if the pastor runs into some of those same people at the grocery store on Thursday afternoon, he is likely to draw a blank because they are out of context.

Certainly Jesus was "out of context" for Mary that morning. And she had been weeping and was overcome with emotion. But the main reason seems to be that Jesus deliberately veiled his own identity much as he did with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). Jesus did not want Mary

to recognize him at first so he could teach her an important truth. She had to learn he is always present even when he is invisible to the naked eye. We must learn that same lesson. Our Lord is often closest to us when we feel the most alone. Many times while going through a dark valley, we think God has abandoned us. But if only our eyes could be opened, we would see the Lord walking with us every step of the way. Just because we don't see him doesn't mean he isn't there.

Note the question Jesus asked: “Who are you looking for?” Not “What are you looking for?” That's a different question. Mary was looking for a what, a dead body. She was looking for something; Jesus pointed her to someone. The answer to our deepest needs is not something, but someone, the Lord Jesus Christ.

On this happy Resurrection Morning, we celebrate because Jesus lives today.

He is risen!

He is risen indeed!

*Open our eyes, Lord Jesus, to see you as you truly are.
We are glad that death has been defeated. May our
hearts overflow with resurrection joy. Amen.*

We hope you have enjoyed this journey through the Lenten season with us!

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