



Lent

A 40-DAY DEVOTIONAL GUIDE

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Ash Wednesday through Palm Sunday

Introduction

Much of the Christian world will be observing the *Lenten season*, 40 days of prayer and fasting. During this season, starting the day after Fat Tuesday or Mardi Gras, known by some as Ash Wednesday, we are seeking to humble our hearts before God, repent of any known sin, and renew our spiritual vitality and commitment.

I remember Ash Wednesday as a child because I was one of the few in the Canutillo, Texas, schools who did not have a cross made of ash on my forehead as I entered the school that morning. Almost all of my classmates were Roman Catholic. They visited their local churches before school where their pastor placed a cross on their foreheads to remind them of this season of sackcloth and ashes, fasting and repentance.

Many of us do not observe this practice, of course, but more than a billion people in Catholic, Anglican, Episcopal, and Orthodox churches around the world, the great majority of Christendom, observe Ash Wednesday as the beginning of Lent.

A season of prayer and fasting is a good idea as we approach Holy Week—the week of Jesus' Triumphal Entry, the cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem, the initiation of the Lord's Supper, his agonizing prayer in Gethsemane, the betrayal, the arrest, the trial, and Jesus' execution by crucifixion.

The devotional posted here for each day March 2-April 10 includes a meditation on the trial and death of the Lord Jesus Christ from chapters 22 and 23 of Luke's gospel.

I hope you will be attending worship weekly at your church during this season, and I hope you will be taking advantage of other prayer meetings, Bible studies, Life Groups, and Sunday School meetings provided by your church.

Prepare for Crucifixion Day and Easter Sunday by meditating on these scripture texts during personal devotions.

Please share!

I am happy for you to forward this introduction or any of the 40 devotionals to your friends on Facebook or elsewhere. You can invite your friends to send me a friend request if they are interested in accessing the 40-Day Guide daily.

Thank you, all of you, for being my Facebook friends! And thank you to the more than a thousand of you who follow me on Facebook!

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WEDNESDAY, MARCH 2ND

Reading: Luke 22:1-6

Many years ago I had in my church a man with severe mental problems. He became dangerous to himself and his family. The county law enforcement officials did not respond to his wife's desperate calls because they believed her home was in the city limits. The city police confirmed that the home was actually outside their jurisdiction.

Curiously, it fell to the pastor to somehow lure this unstable man into the city limits so that he could be put in protective custody. And that is what I did. When the police arrived, I helped them immobilize my friend, and then I helped them force him into a jail cell. I handed him over to the authorities.

I felt a little like Judas. The deranged man knew what I had done and promised to kill me when they released him, a threat I am sure he did not even remember making.

Judas literally handed over his friend, Jesus, to the authorities. He did it for money. He probably was disappointed, too, that Jesus was not a military Messiah. I suspect that Judas had given up on Jesus.

Our betrayals of Jesus are not generally so obvious, but they are just as real. Any time that we abandon the way of Christ for an easier, safer way, we betray the Savior. We begin these 40 Days of Prayer by examining our own hearts for signs of such betrayal.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me to see the ways in which I have betrayed you and your way. Show me my own heart. Take away the pride, sloth, and greed that draw me away from you.

THURSDAY, MARCH 3RD

Reading: Luke 22:7-13

My father-in-law, Jack, brought into the house a newborn kid he found lying on the ground stiff and cold. The tiny goat seemed to be dead at first, and I was confident that we could not revive it.

Jack put it in a cardboard box next to the wood-burning stove and began to rub it vigorously. Suddenly I detected a tiny movement under that white blanket of mohair. We got a coke bottle of warm milk and tried to get the baby goat to drink. She was too weak to stand, so I propped her chin on the side of the box. Her lips moved in tiny sucking efforts, and she managed to ingest a little milk.

The baby goat survived and thrived. We named it Nancy Reagan, after the first lady, of course. She was a "pet" for several years and would come out of the flock to receive special attention.

Sacrificing a young lamb is a sober and serious thing. These Passover lambs were separated from the flock several weeks beforehand. I am sure the families became attached to them just as we were attached to that tiny kid goat. What a powerful lesson about the seriousness of sin! The Passover lamb was sacrificed, and the blood was placed on the threshold of the home. "Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin." An innocent lamb died for the guilty family members.

Jesus is our Passover lamb, as the scripture teaches. He gave his life on our behalf.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for sending your only Son, Jesus, to be the satisfaction for our sin.

FRIDAY, MARCH 4TH

Reading: Luke 22:14-19

Mealtime in my family of origin, with 12 brothers and sisters, was always interesting. Mother baked a dozen loaves of bread and 200 dinner rolls each Monday. That bread lasted less than a week. We often ate mounds of mashed potatoes, fixed in a roasting pan, and big pots of beans.

We did not have a lot of money, but we had each other. Mealtime, chaotic as it was, gave us a chance to sit next to each other, face each other, talk to each other, and serve each other.

I think that is why Jesus initiated what we call the “Lord’s Supper.” It is an effort to help his people sit next to each other, face each other, talk to each other, and serve each other. When you think about it, the dining table is the only piece of furniture that forces us to face each other.

Fellowship is very important to our church family. You will notice us talking to each other in the halls before and after worship services. We love one another, and we enjoy each other’s company.

The fellowship during the Lord’s Supper is very special. It reminds us that love and unity in the church are built upon the sacrifice which Jesus made for us. Because he was willing to lay down his life, we are able to truly live and love.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for providing us with the Lord’s Supper. Thank you for its deep and rich meaning. Help our church family to grow in love and fellowship as we deepen our relationship with you.

SATURDAY, MARCH 5TH

Reading: Luke 22:20-23

My family took in a stranger and befriended him. He lived in quarters provided by our family, ate at the table, and enjoyed leisure time with family members. He literally was received as a part of the family.

We did not do a background check on him, of course, and we did not know his past. Opening the home to him was an act of hospitality consistent with the teachings of the Lord Jesus.

This man betrayed the family. Family members discovered that he was lying about various things. He was not honest in financial matters. He took what did not belong to him. And finally, he left.

Judas was received into the company of the Twelve. He was entrusted with the money. He sat down at the table with Jesus and the others. He was received and treated with love and respect. Jesus loved Judas, but he knew that Judas would betray him.

The betrayal by Judas is a lesson for all who grow up in the church, who enjoy the fellowship of God's people. We can be very familiar with the people of God and yet not be one of them. We can be in the group and even at the table without truly trusting Christ.

Today is a good day to ask the question, "Have I ever received Christ into my life and been born again?" If the answer is no, Christ invites you to call on his name. You may pray this prayer of repentance and faith:

Prayer: Dear God, I know that I am a sinner. Please forgive me for my sin and come into my life. As best I know how, I open my heart to you, and I give you my life from this day forward. (Let me know if you have prayed this prayer for the first time, and I will send you free of charge my book, First Principles)

SUNDAY, MARCH 6TH

Reading: Luke 22:24-30

The first time I saw it, I could scarcely process the information. I guess that is why it made such a deep impression on me. After the first time, I got used to seeing the gray-haired man with the wooden trailer that he pulled with his car.

He came to the church on Saturdays, after a busy week as CEO of his company, got out his weed-eater and lawnmower, and manicured the lawn around the church buildings. He was the wealthiest man in our church. He could easily have paid to have this service done. Yet he did it himself, not because he had nothing else to do, but because he wanted to do it.

He was a servant—a servant of Jesus Christ and of his church. He did not stop his service when the lawn was mowed. He served in multiple capacities. He drove the church bus and picked up children for Sunday School. He watched the work of the church carefully, noting what needed done. And then he did it.

Jesus tells us that we are not to be like the worldly rulers who love to “exercise authority” over others. Instead, we are to follow His example: “I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27).

We live in a day when we expect to be waited upon promptly. We expect the service to be quick and courteous. Sometimes we think that we come to church to be served, that we continue to be consumers when we arrive for worship. Jesus would suggest that we turn that idea inside out and upside down.

Prayer: I want to follow your example, dear Lord. I want to be a servant. Show me the way to servanthood, and forgive me for letting pride stand in the way of service.

MONDAY, MARCH 7TH

Reading: Luke 22:31-34

My father built a home on the outskirts of El Paso near a little community called Canutillo. He built the home out of materials found in the arroyos in the desert: stones, gravel, and sand.

Dad bought an old Army truck which he used to transport the rock and gravel. Arroyos are places where the rainwater runs from the mountains to the valleys, in this case, the Rio Grande valley. He searched carefully in the arroyos for gravel pits that were clean and contained fine sand.

The gravel was used to make concrete foundations, floors, and walkways. But the mortar between the stones could not be made with gravel. Mortar required sand. Dad built a large screen box that we boys used to sift the gravel, remove the stones, and produce fine sand for the mortar. The sifting process involves shaking the screen vigorously. The agitation causes the stones to release the sand and forces the sand through the screen.

Jesus tells Peter that he is about to be sifted like wheat. This is a reference to the process the ancients used to separate the grains of wheat from the chaff—the straw and other debris that was not useful for food. Satan is sure that if Peter and the others are sifted, agitated, tested, they will prove to be chaff, not wheat.

Jesus does not tell Peter that he will avoid the sifting. Instead, he tells Peter that he has prayed for him, that he will turn back and strengthen the brothers. Following Jesus, let's pray for one another so that we will hold up in the sifting.

Prayer: Make my friends and family strong, dear Lord, so they will prove faithful in times of testing. Help our church as a whole to be faithful through the decisions and pressures ahead.

TUESDAY, MARCH 8TH

Reading: Luke 22:34-38

Have you heard a rooster crow recently? When we were in Nicaragua with a group of young people on a mission trip, the roosters seemed to crow all night. Our sleeping quarters were open to the night air, having no windows or doors, and the roosters kept us up at night sometimes.

One of the young people listened curiously to the shrill crowing and asked, "Why do they do that?" That is a good question for which I have no good answer. I have assumed they were simply announcing their existence to the world.

We have roosters on our farm in Goldthwaite. I actually like the crowing they do, but it can be startling and loud.

Jesus told Peter that he would deny him before the rooster crowed that morning. Peter thought that he could be faithful under any pressure. Jesus knew better. The rooster's crowing would be a wake up call for one weak disciple.

Jesus could probably predict the same thing about us. We are frequently susceptible to temptations of various kinds. Sometimes we are tempted to deny that Jesus is our Lord so that we can "fit in," just as Peter wanted to do. At such times of temptation, we need to remember that the cross we bear is public identification with Jesus as Lord.

Think now of the temptation before which you are most vulnerable. Think of the ways in which giving in to that temptation really denies that Jesus is Lord in your life.

Prayer: Dear Lord, give me the strength to be faithful to you when I am tempted. Help me to see the betrayal of you that happens in my sin. Thank you for loving me anyway.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 9TH

Reading: Luke 22:39-42

Jesus is God in the flesh. He meets every temptation and manages to remain faithful to the Father in Heaven. He never sins, even under the greatest pressure. How does he do it?

He has a habit, and he has a place. His habit is this—to make his way regularly to the place of prayer. His place of prayer is on the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem, in the Garden of Gethsemane.

I don't know how frequently Jesus made it to this place, but Luke records that it was his customary pattern to go there and pray. Jesus was the Son of God, but he had to find the place of prayer on a regular basis. His devotion to the Father, as evidenced by his prayer life, was the reason that he could handle temptation without caving in.

The test that stood before Jesus that night was truly terrible. It was an awful "cup," and he prayed that the Father would let it pass from him. Yet he surrendered himself to the Father's will, and he accepted the cup that his Father gave him.

Have you accepted the cup that your Father in Heaven has given you? Perhaps by no choice or fault of your own, you are now in a difficult situation. You are chafing under a circumstance from which you cannot escape. You have begged God to remove it, but he has not granted that request. Perhaps you are being called to be faithful even when the cup is bitter.

Prayer: Dear Lord, give me the faith and patience to do the right thing even when it is very difficult. Give me peace about my situation. Help me to trust you even though I don't understand it all.

THURSDAY, MARCH 10TH

Reading: Luke 22:43-46

My grandmother prayed the most anguished prayers I have ever heard. She came to visit us when I was a boy, and she stayed in a bedroom upstairs next to mine. She prayed and wept so loudly that she could be heard throughout the house.

I did not know what troubled my grandmother, but I knew that her pain was as deep as pain can go. Yet she prayed in faith, trusting God even when she could not change the difficulty she was in.

I heard another anguished prayer one night on the expressway in New Orleans. I was a reporter for The Times-Picayune newspaper at that time. The night editor sent me to cover a fatal car accident. I arrived and found the body still encased in a mangled vehicle. The brother of the deceased arrived. He put his hands on the hood of that ruined vehicle, looked up into the night sky, and cried out, "Why, God, why!"

The anguish of Jesus that night when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane is simply indescribable. We cannot comprehend it. He was facing execution, not by lethal injection, which takes a few minutes, but by crucifixion, which sometimes took three days. The Romans used this method because it was an excruciating way to die.

Our perfect Lord would become the sin offering for the whole human race. "He who knew no sin became sin that we might become the righteousness of God in him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Prayer: Dear God, help me to trust you in my pain. Help me to have faith even when I am hurting. Let your Holy Spirit minister to my need today, and comfort me in my trouble. I know you love me, and I long to be faithful, just as you are to me.

FRIDAY, MARCH 11TH

Reading: Luke 22:47-48

Crowds come in all shapes and sizes. The blind beggar hears the crowd go by day after day, sitting by the roadside. He breathes the dust raised by passing feet. He hears the creaking of the oxcart and the sound of the lash. He smells the hot draft animals, weary from travel and ready to rest.

The crowd usually pays him little mind. But one day, he gets the attention of the crowd. He cries out to Jesus and will not be silenced. Only when he is permitted to speak to Jesus does he cease his shouting. After Jesus heals him, he follows Jesus. Now the blind man who can see is part of the crowd, passing along the road where once he could only sit and beg.

A crowd followed Jesus out of Jericho, and a crowd pursued him into Gethsemane. A crowd ate the five loaves and two fish, and a crowd cried, "Crucify him!"

The angry mob arrived in the garden with Judas at their head. You cannot trust the crowd. They will lay palm branches in your path one day and spit on you the next. Jesus never entrusted himself to the crowd (*John 2:24-25*). He always entrusted himself to the Father.

The wisest thing a person can do is to forget the successes that the crowd applauded and the failures that the crowd jeered. Please the Father who made you, and let the crowd go where it will.

Prayer: Forgive me, Lord, when fame and popularity entice me into poor behavior and unwise decisions. Help me keep my head when the mob makes its move. Lord, I want to please you. Make me a God-pleaser rather than a crowd-pleaser.

SATURDAY, MARCH 12TH

Reading: Luke 22:49-51

Peter loses his head, and Malchus loses his ear. The disciples ask the question of Jesus, but before he can give an answer, Peter has already sliced off the ear of the servant of the High Priest.

Malchus may be a troublesome sort. Possibly he has been visible in the opposition to Jesus. We know that the high priest wished to have Jesus put to death. The plots against him have been going on for some time. Peter might have seen in this man one of the key enemies of our Lord.

Jesus has never been willing to resort to violence to accomplish his purposes. The only event in his life that comes close to this is the cleansing of the Temple, and here he is enacting a parable and teaching a truth. The cleansing of the temple is certainly not about military opposition to the authorities.

Jesus heals the ear of his enemy. This act of compassion is a precursor to further acts and words of love directed toward his persecutors. He is teaching how to turn the other cheek, to go the second mile. He is teaching us what it means to love your enemies and do good to those that hurt you. Jesus wants to heal our enemies. He died to make them spiritually whole.

Peter misunderstood his task. He thought that God needed his swordplay. On the contrary, Peter, God needs your patience.

Prayer: We confess, Lord, that sometimes we intentionally hurt one another with words and deeds. Forgive us. Make us more like yourself. Take the anger out of our souls. Cure us of the quick temper, the thoughtless retaliation.

SUNDAY, MARCH 13TH

Reading: Luke 22:52-53

The arrest of Jesus happens with swords and clubs. Jesus tells the mob, "But this is your hour—when darkness reigns" (*Luke 22:53*). He addresses these words to the chief priests and the elders as well as the temple guards. The religious leaders have joined their military in this act of apprehension and arrest.

The apostles later noted that Jesus was handed over to this crowd in the garden "by God's set purpose and foreknowledge" (*Acts 2:23*). But they also insisted, "You handed him over to be killed" (*Acts 3:13*). God has not lost control in the garden. He is allowing the anger and hatred of men to work for his own eternal purposes. In using such sinful motives, God does not dignify their hatred. These men are still wicked men who are responsible for their moral choices. Yet God is not at a loss because of their sin. He is able to take their actions and work it into his plan.

We often make choices that we later regret. We act in haste and anger and hurt someone. God expects our confession of such sin, and our repentance—turning from that sin. But we can be comforted in knowing that even our evil deeds can end up being used for God's good purposes. As Joseph told his brothers who sold him into slavery, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (*Genesis 50:20*).

Prayer: Sovereign Lord, I praise you because you are powerful enough to turn my missteps into steppingstones. I thank you that your grace is far greater than all my sin.

MONDAY, MARCH 14TH

Reading: Luke 22:54-57

A fire in the cold of night draws people. Once started, the fire becomes the center of activities. You have witnessed this in camping expeditions and retreats. People come to the fire to warm their hands and fight the night chill.

Peter is following at a distance. They have arrested Jesus and taken him to the house of the high priest. Peter has decided not to be right next to Jesus. Instead, he is distancing himself from Jesus. He doesn't want to end up being arrested himself.

The fire draws him, and he ends up seeking warmth with a group of people in the courtyard. The fire that warms is also the fire that lights up the night. Peter has walked into the circle of light cast by the fire, and a servant girl recognizes him. She says, "This man was with him," pointing to Peter and telling her friends.

"Woman, I don't know him," Peter insists.

Is this the same Peter who only hours before drew his sword and attacked the servant of the high priest? Is this the same bold Peter who said, "I am ready to go with you to prison and to death"? (Luke 22:33). How can one man behave in such different ways?

We all know. Our hearts are just as fickle as his. Our loyalties are just as shallow. We are capable of this and more.

Prayer: Forgive us, Lord, for we have been cowardly and not courageous. We have passed up many opportunities to identify with you. We have remained anonymous when we should have proudly revealed ourselves as your followers. Forgive us, Lord.

TUESDAY, MARCH 15TH

Reading: Luke 22:58-62

My family lived in Minnesota and El Paso during my first 14 years. When we moved to Central Texas, my classmates thought I was a foreigner. “Why do you talk like that?” one of them asked me. “Are you from England?” He did not know much about accents. But he knew that I had learned to speak somewhere besides San Saba County.

Peter sidled up to the fire. When people accused him of being with Jesus, he denied it. Yet his speech was betraying him. Galilee was distant from Jerusalem, and Galileans talked with a distinctive accent that many people in Jerusalem could identify. Peter’s denials just helped to confirm what the other people at the fire believed—he was “one of them.”

Peter sounded his most vehement protest, punctuated with a curse, Mark tells us (*Mark 14:71*), and just then the rooster crowed. When Peter heard that mournful crow, sounding it seemed in the dead of night, he realized what he had done. He had betrayed his Lord, just as Jesus predicted he would. And in so doing, he had betrayed himself and all of his best intentions.

The bitter tears that Peter shed expressed a deep disappointment in himself, a frustration with his weakness, and a terrible grief for the wound he had inflicted upon his friendship with Jesus. But Jesus will restore Peter with a poignant confrontation by the sea.

Prayer: God, we are frail and weak human beings. We are frustrated by our own failings and disappointed with the shallowness of our loyalties. Thank you for your patience and grace, for calling us to follow you even though you know our limitations.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 16TH

Reading: Luke 22:63-65

You have been to the carnival and seen the man who can guess your weight within 10 pounds. You have watched the sword-swallowers and the fire-breathers. You know the magic booth in the mall where the magician does amazing card and coin tricks.

The soldiers who are guarding Jesus think he is a carnival sideshow. They rank him with the astrologer who sits on a metal chair in front of St. Louis Cathedral and lays out the tarot cards. They think he's a joke, a fake, an impostor.

They think he's a false prophet. And that's where the rub comes. No one wants to execute the carnival trickster, but the fake preacher, now that's another story. He has misled people. He has made himself out to be something he is not. He has beguiled the unsuspecting masses.

The guards are permitted to beat Jesus, not just mock him. They ridicule him, and they strike him. They feel justified in their actions because they have been led to believe that this man is the worst kind of criminal—an insurrectionist who has put the nation at risk. The trial of Jesus is all about who he really is. That is why Peter's betrayal is so sad. Here is a man who saw the miracles with his own eyes and refuses to testify.

Our refusal to publicly identify with Jesus results in the same misjudgment. The true identity of Jesus remains a mystery to so many, and so many "followers" are unwilling to stand forth.

Prayer: We have been reluctant to publicly identify with you, Lord, especially in the hostile crowd. Forgive us and give us courage to share what we know to be the truth about you.

THURSDAY, MARCH 17TH

Reading: Luke 22:66-71

I enjoyed the cliffhanger presidential election of 2000, Bush vs. Gore. I read the newspaper thoroughly every day and tuned in to network television news for the latest updates. It was a wild ride and most interesting. It's the election where "hanging chads" became a cultural metaphor.

The Florida Supreme Court and the United States Supreme Court of that year were called upon to make decisions on a highly compressed schedule. Processes that normally take months were squeezed into hours. The high courts met, heard arguments, deliberated, and rendered decisions faster than I ever thought possible. Given sufficient motive, even a cramped and creeping judicial system can make a speedy call. George W. Bush won, and Al Gore conceded.

The high court of Judaism was the Sanhedrin. Some of them were up all night trying to decide what to do with Jesus. At the crack of dawn, they assembled to render a verdict. Their motivation was clear—they wanted Jesus out of the way. They were in a hurry. They believed he was a threat to their way of life.

Jesus was tried by the religious authorities and found guilty of blasphemy. He claimed to be the Son of God. This was the true issue in the trial of Jesus—his identity. Once Jesus declared that he was the Son of God, they cut the trial short and dispensed with further testimony. The case was closed.

Prayer: Dear God, give me an opportunity today to share the truth about Jesus with someone who needs you. Give me the words to speak. Fill me with your Holy Spirit and help me to be ready.

FRIDAY, MARCH 18TH

Reading: Luke 23:1-2

Jesus is now passed from the religious authorities, who have given him the death penalty, to the political authorities represented by Pilate and Herod. Here the charge will be insurrection rather than blasphemy, for the political authorities have no interest in religious crimes. The priests and elders accuse Jesus of subverting the nation, of opposing payment of taxes, and of setting himself up as a king competing with Pilate.

The truthfulness of these charges is irrelevant to the religious rulers who want Jesus out of the way. They have tried him by their religious law already. If they were empowered by the Roman government to execute people, they would have already stoned Jesus to death. They did not have such authority, however. Only the Romans had the official power of execution. Therefore, the chief priests had to find a way to convict Jesus of a capital offense against the government.

Every generation, including our own, has an interest in removing Jesus from the public square. He is a nuisance to the worldly authorities of every age. Jesus makes exclusive claims about being the Messiah, the Savior of the world. He claims to be one with the Father. What culture can tolerate such misplaced zeal, such religious arrogance. When Jesus' followers make such claims they become as repulsive to their culture as Jesus was to his own. He warned that would be the case.

Prayer: Dear Lord, do not let us be frightened or intimidated by the disapproval of the world. Help us to continue to share the good news with boldness, knowing that Jesus Christ is, indeed, the way, the truth, and the life! (John 14:6).

SATURDAY, MARCH 19TH

Reading: Luke 23:3-5

I have half a dozen large tubs that I use as water troughs for the sheep and chickens. Usually, I keep these full of water with a garden hose. Periodically I pour out the water and replace it with new, fresh water.

You would be surprised how smelly that old water becomes when it is stirred. You think the water is relatively clean until you stir it. Then it turns almost black and smells putrid.

When the chief priests accuse Jesus, saying that “he stirs up the people,” they are talking about this kind of stirring. The people are relatively calm and in control. Then here comes Jesus and whips them into a frenzy with his teaching, they would say.

I think the priests are telling the truth in this matter. I think Jesus is stirring up the people with his teaching. They are following him in droves, and that in itself can be bothersome—thousands of people camped out by the sea or on the side of a mountain. Add to this the complication of all the sick and crippled transported by friends and families to these gatherings—you can see that such a thing could get out of control.

And his teachings hold them spellbound. They marvel at his words and claim that no one has ever spoken like this before. They have little interest in hearing the local rabbis once they hear Jesus. He speaks with authority and not like the scribes.

Prayer: Stir us up, Lord. Do not let us sit calmly through your revolutionary teachings. Do not allow us to be passive about the things you proclaim with such passion. Stir our church, Lord, with the truth of your word and the urgency of our mission.

SUNDAY, MARCH 20TH

Reading: Luke 23:6-7

I remember the first time I heard of “Greyhound therapy.” I was working with some mentally handicapped people in the church, and someone used the term to describe how communities treat those who are mentally and emotionally troubled.

Greyhound therapy is a simple solution to a complex problem. The local authorities simply buy a bus ticket for the troubled person and send him to Memphis or Houston. You may think that Greyhound therapy is a myth, but I have seen it in action. Even in our schools we pass around the troubled young people, hoping they will become the problem of somebody else.

As soon as Pilate heard that Jesus was from Galilee, he saw his way out of a knotty problem. He had decided that Jesus was no threat to Roman rule and was innocent of the charges brought against him. Yet the chief priests were insisting on his guilt. He would simply transport the problem to Herod, the ruler in Galilee. Jesus belonged in Herod’s court, not Pilate’s.

Herod happened to be in town for the Passover, so the trip was very short. Herod had already beheaded John the Baptist, but he had no particular desire to kill Jesus. Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate, and Pilate would endure the unending shame of caving into political pressure and executing Jesus.

We love to run away from our problems. We ship them to parts unknown with no return address. Yet they simply come back to trouble us again. Problems need solutions, not ejection. Someone needs to do the right thing with Jesus, but no one has the nerve.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me to treat all people with dignity and respect, to practice honesty and courageously confront unjust behavior that comes to my attention.

MONDAY, MARCH 21ST

Reading: Luke 23:8-9

Herod Antipas, long-time ruler of Galilee, wants to see Jesus do a miracle. He has heard about the miracles of Jesus, but he wants to see one personally.

Herod will not become a believer if Jesus does a miracle for him. If he were open to believing, all the reports about Jesus would have convinced him. No, Herod is like the guards that mocked and beat Jesus. He is interested in the magic tricks alone, not placing his faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

Jesus did not even speak to Herod. Think of it! The Son of God stands before you and has nothing to say to you—nothing at all. Jesus does no miracle for Herod, of course, and Herod loses interest and sends him back to Pilate.

Jesus was frequently amazed at the unbelief he encountered. He asked people often if they had faith. And he pondered the question whether, when the Son of Man returned, he would find faith on the earth.

Unbelief makes it impossible for us to hear the word of God or really see the meaning of His mighty acts. Unbelief cuts off all dialogue between God and us. At its heart, unbelief is the very arrogance and self-absorption that Herod displayed in his dealings with Jesus.

Prayer: We believe, Lord. Help us with our unbelief. Increase our faith. Increase the faith within our church. Remove the pride and self-sufficiency that destroys our faith. Give us a whole new era of truly trusting you. You are our only hope!

TUESDAY, MARCH 22ND

Reading: Luke 23:10-12

Sometimes we need an answer for our critics. The Apostle Paul responded to the challenges of Felix, Festus, and Agrippa with resounding defenses of the Christian gospel. The rulers themselves were affected by his passionate appeal for faith in Christ.

Stephen launched into a long sermon when he was accosted by the religious authorities. He was stoned to death at the end of that great defense of the faith and became the church's first martyr.

Jesus did not speak in his defense when he stood before Herod. He did not resist the soldiers who ridiculed him and clothed him with a purple robe as a mock king. Sometimes it is best not to respond to your detractors, especially when their weapon is ridicule rather than reasoned argument. Jesus knew there was nothing to gain by answering the empty questions, the pointless queries and requests. Herod was not open to persuasion nor were his soldiers. Jesus quietly endured their insults without comment and without resistance.

We need to be prepared to give an answer for the hope that is within us. We must be ready when someone asks a serious question to respond with a well-reasoned answer about our faith in Christ.

We must also be prepared to quietly endure the ridicule of those who simply have no use for our Lord or our faith.

Prayer: Give us wisdom, Lord, to know when a response is needed and when silence is golden. Help us to discern the heart behind the question. Give us strength to follow your example.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 23RD

Reading: Luke 23:13-14

I think one of the most interesting passages in the Bible is the dialogue that John the Beloved records between Jesus and Pilate (*John 18:28-19:16*). Pilate's skepticism is clear in his parting volley to Jesus, "What is truth?" (*18:38*). Pilate felt that truth was not accessible for humans.

Pilate clearly did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God and the Messiah. But he also did not believe that Jesus was an insurrectionist and a threat to Rome. He examined Jesus and concluded that he was harmless.

Was Jesus harmless? History indicates that faith in Christ continued to grow despite multiple persecutions by the Roman government until finally Christianity was declared the official religion of the Roman Empire under the emperor Constantine. The ill-advised marriage of Christianity and Rome eventuated in the Holy Roman Empire. Apparently, Jesus was a threat to the social order.

Pilate did not understand the power of faith and love found in Christ Jesus and his teachings. He knew the unsettling presence of Jesus, and he did not want to be responsible for his death. But he could not appreciate the spiritual explosion that was about to take place through the Man from Galilee.

Do you understand the earth-shaking, life-changing nature of the person and work of Christ? He is more than you imagined.

Prayer: Father in Heaven, help me to grow in my understanding of Jesus of Nazareth. Keep me from false assumptions and, especially, simple neglect of Him. Give me the courage to represent him faithfully in my world.

THURSDAY, MARCH 24TH

Reading: Luke 23:13-17

“He has done nothing to deserve death,” Pilate tells the chief priests, the rulers, and the people (*Luke 23:15*). Think for a moment how very true that statement is. In fact, Pilate speaks a truth here that goes beyond his ability to understand.

The innocence of Jesus as a finding of Herod and Pilate is clear. Neither of them finds him guilty of a capital offense. Pilate finds “no basis for your charges against him” (*verse 14*).

Not only Pilate and Herod, but most observers have a tough time criticizing Jesus on any count. The historical record does not indicate even the smallest indiscretion by Jesus of Nazareth. The Roman law is not as strict as the law of God. God declares that anyone who has broken the law at any point is a lawbreaker and therefore guilty of all. If Jesus had broken the law of God at any point, he could not have been the perfect sacrifice for our sin.

Jesus faithfully kept every legitimate law of man and God. He never sinned. He never earned death. The Bible says that all of us have earned death by our sin—all of us except Jesus. Jesus is the perfect substitute for guilty people. The hand of God can be seen in all of this. God is working out his plan of redemption for us. He is making sure that we understand the complete purity and innocence of His one and only Son. The perfection of Jesus is necessary if He is to take our place and die in our stead.

Prayer: Thank you for your complete obedience, Lord Jesus. Thank you for living in such a way that you could become the satisfaction for our sin. Help us to live in such a way that, even when our enemies accuse us of wrongdoing, they know in their hearts that the charge is not true.

FRIDAY, MARCH 25TH

Reading: Luke 23:18-19

Speaking of people who deserve to die, the crowd outside of Pilate's judgment hall brings up Barabbas. He is a known insurrectionist and murderer but something of a popular hero. He is locked up in Jerusalem and scheduled for execution. The crowd wants the guilty criminal, Barabbas, released, and they want the innocent man, Jesus, executed.

We need to be careful about our heroes. Heroes of the guilty kind are everywhere. Sometimes they have become heroes because they are bold sinners, like Barabbas. We reveal something of our own inner qualities when we put scandalous sinners on pedestals.

Think what a hero Jesus makes! He is demonstrating the most startling kind of courage in the face of ridicule and scorn. He will not abort his mission even though it means his death. He is willing to obey God even to the dying point. He will not betray the principles by which he lived regardless of the punishment. He will not bend or break under the whip and club. His consistent love is evident even in the way he treats those who accuse him and eventually execute him. Jesus is a wonderful hero!

The crowd does not celebrate the goodness and love of Jesus. He makes them uncomfortable with themselves and with their sin. They prefer to celebrate the brash and brazen sins of Barabbas. "Here is a real man," the mob seems to say. As for this fellow Jesus, "Away with this man!"

Prayer: I praise you, Lord Jesus, for who you are. Your majestic goodness and love inspire me. I am amazed by your courage in completing the mission the Father gave you. Help me to be more like you!

SATURDAY, MARCH 26TH

Reading: Luke 23:20-21

My brothers and I had many disagreements when we were boys—and many arguments. We learned, like all boys do, that often you could silence your opponent if you were willing to sacrifice your own voice box. If you shouted long enough and loud enough, eventually your brother would turn loose of the toy and let you play with it.

We see the intimidation of the roaring noise all around us in nature. Dogs bark and growl, bulls snort and bellow, lions roar. These sounds are loud and alarming, and sometimes they interrupt the actions of other life forms (like rabbits or gazelles).

Sometimes people shout louder and louder until you give them what they want. A loud voice is often substituted for a good argument. Not having any logical rebuttal, the volume is the only thing to turn up.

Interestingly, Jesus did not speak to Herod nor to the crowd. The Bible says he was led like a lamb to slaughter, but he did not open his mouth (*Isaiah 53:7*). His final words were a loud prayer to the Father: “Into your hands I commit my spirit.” And then he died.

The crowd shouted down the reasoning of Pilate. They shouted down his resolve to release Jesus. They shouted until he consented to kill Jesus even though he knew he was innocent. We need to be careful how and when we use the shout, and we need to be very careful that we do not suspend good judgment in response to shouting.

Prayer: Teach me, Lord, how to respond as you would to the intimidation and demands of others. Help me keep my head.

SUNDAY, MARCH 27TH

Reading: Luke 23:22-25

I preached a three-day revival on death row in the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola. About 40 death row inmates attended the meetings, all with chains around their hands and feet. Some who were considered particularly dangerous were fitted with gloves that immobilized their fingers and thumbs.

These men are the Barabbases of our day. They have been tried and convicted and sentenced to die by legal homicide. The death penalty is a terrible sentence usually intended for only the most terrible offenders. It is also a weighty political tool in the first-century culture and also in our own.

Each man on death row at Angola lived in solitary confinement in a six-foot by eight-foot cell. They were released from their cell only for about an hour a day for exercise. Some of those men have been released from death row since my visit. Others have been executed.

Some men on death row are hard and cold unbelievers. Others have trusted Christ and become warm and faithful Christians. Several men prayed to receive Christ after we witnessed to them during our cell-to-cell visiting. Jesus can change the hardest heart and save the worst offender.

The State of Louisiana and other U.S. jurisdictions have planned executions upcoming. If any person needs the grace of God, it is those on death row.

Prayer: Dear God, be with those who are scheduled for execution. Help them to trust Christ before it is too late. Be with the families of their victims. Draw them close to you. And help our state, Lord, to always be fair and just with this penalty.

MONDAY, MARCH 28TH

Reading: Luke 23:26

A Roman soldier could demand help from the subjugated peoples. This is the fact behind Jesus' teaching, "If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (*Matthew 5:41*). The Jews hated nothing more than to help the Romans in any way. But Jesus taught them to love their enemies.

Have you ever been forced to help with something (by a parent or child or whomever) and later discovered that it was a life-changing event for you?

Simon had come in from Cyrene, a city in northern Africa, to observe the Passover. He happened to be standing nearby when it became apparent that Jesus, beaten and exhausted, could not carry his cross. The soldiers drafted Simon to help with the cross.

Mark records that Simon had two sons, Rufus and Alexander. How would Mark know that? I suppose that the family of Simon became known to the early church. In fact, Paul sends a greeting to a man named Rufus in his letter to the Romans (16:13). I suspect that Simon's forced participation in the crucifixion of Jesus ended up with his family becoming Christians.

I remember when my father forced me to sing. Singing became a way of life for me after that, and I am eternally grateful that Dad would not listen to my protests. He taught me how to sing, and in so doing, taught me the beauty of music and poetry.

Prayer: Help me to see the good in the things I am forced to do. Give me faith to believe that your purposes surpass my own understanding. Teach me your ways, Lord, even when I am a reluctant participant.

TUESDAY, MARCH 29TH

Reading: Luke 23:27

I learned in my boyhood that women were very important followers of Jesus Christ. I discovered on my own that the church of Jesus Christ often moved forward only because of the efforts of faithful women.

Luke is always very careful to let us know where the women are and what they are doing. He is the only gospel writer who mentions two of the women who followed Jesus, Joanna and Susanna (*Luke 8:2-3*). Luke tells us that there were many other women who followed Jesus, and that "these women were helping to support them out of their own means" (*8:3*).

We can safely assume that the women mentioned in *Luke 23:27* include some of these who have been introduced earlier. They were faithful to Christ. They supported him and his disciples in their itinerant ministry. And they became a strong nucleus of spiritual and financial support for the early church.

I thank God for the wonderful women of prayer and faith who have blessed my ministry through the years including my wife, Janet, my daughters, and my mother. I think also of many other women who have prayed for me, helped me understand the Scriptures, and urged my churches to walk in faith. And women have often provided the greatest financial support for my churches. This would be consistent with the experience of Jesus in his ministry.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for godly, generous women who have walked in faith and prayed for us. Thank you for the wonderful Christian women in our church. Bless their lives with your joy and peace.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 30TH

Reading: Luke 23:28-31

I saw a picture of a landslide in El Salvador that buried an entire subdivision several years ago. A man who was on top of the mountain felt the earth shaking, then heard a terrible roar. He watched as the side of the mountain thundered down upon the city below like a great tidal wave. Little children disappeared beneath the earth. People making neighborly visits were entombed where they stood. He could not see anything for 30 minutes because of the great cloud of dust. But he could hear the wails of the bereaved and the screams of the injured.

Jesus envisions a terrible catastrophe when he quotes that passage from Hosea, "They will say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us'" (*Luke 23:30*). I think that Jesus was predicting the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. The Romans leveled the city. Thousands were executed by crucifixion including on Golgotha where Jesus died. A long siege by the army of Titus brought famine to the city. The terrors that Jesus describes in these verses literally came to pass. A landslide like that in El Salvador would have been regarded as a merciful end.

Jesus is always urging us to prepare for the future, to get ready for the trumpet blast that will bring human history to its end. Are you eternally secure in Christ? Have you trusted him with your whole heart? "Oh my loving brother, when the world's on fire, don't you want God's bosom to be your pillow? Hide me over in the Rock of Ages—Rock of Ages cleft for me."

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for being our shelter in every storm. Thank you for being our security in every disturbance. Thank you for lashing us to yourself so that no wind, no matter how fierce, can tear us from you.

THURSDAY, MARCH 31ST

Reading: Luke 23:32-34

Jesus demonstrates an amazing compassion throughout the trial and execution, even in the middle of ridicule and scorn. Nowhere is this more evident than in his prayer, "Father, forgive them...."

Compassion is the "sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it."

While Jesus is on the cross he is taking care of his mother, leading a thief to salvation, and forgiving his executioners. If you were to have this kind of compassion, you would have "the ability to think of others even when you are in pain." We often want to share our pain, spread it around, make everyone in the house miserable if we have had a bad day.

The growly Papa bear just got in from work. He kicks the kids out of his way, shoves his wife aside, and collapses in a chair in front of the TV. "Don't bother Daddy," the sweet wife whispers, "he had a bad day." And now everyone else will have one, too.

Sometimes it is the frayed homemaker with two screaming children, new runners in her hose, dirty laundry piled in the washroom, and spilt milk drying on the kitchen floor. The husband gives a cheerful "Hi," and the wife says, "What are you so happy about?" In other words, get ready to join the misery in this house. Misery loves company, someone said.

Compassion of the cross kind is the ability to genuinely care for others even when your own life is filled with pain.

Prayer: Don't let the pain make me self-centered, Lord. Don't let it steal all my time and attention. Help me to keep thinking of others even though I am hurting. Teach me how to do this so that I can be more like Jesus.

FRIDAY, APRIL 1ST

Reading: Luke 23:35

The notion that the savior can always save himself just isn't true. And we know that when we think about it. Risking one's own life is often part of a rescue. Policemen and firefighters experience this daily. In fact, the greatest heroism that we know anything about is the act of saving another while laying down one's own life. When the duty is protecting others, being killed "in the line of duty" is true courage.

Jesus could have saved himself. He told the disciples this when they drew their swords in the garden and started to attack the mob. He told them that he could call on the Father, "and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels" (*Matthew 26:53*). He wanted the disciples to know that he was willingly laying down his life.

Why did he do it? Why endure such ridicule and torture? He did it for us. He could not save himself and also save us. He was completing the Father's plan for our redemption. When he cried, "It is finished" from the cross, he was saying that the divine plan was completed.

The One who walked on water, stilled the storm, and raised Lazarus from the dead was not held to the cross with nails. Love held Jesus to the cross—his love for you and me. If he had responded to the jeers and come down from the cross, we would have been without hope.

Prayer: I thank you, Lord Jesus, for dying for me. Thank you for enduring the ridicule of sinners. Thank you for bearing the pain and humiliation. Thank you for loving me so much.

SATURDAY, APRIL 2ND

Reading: Luke 23:36-37

Jesus prayed, "Let this cup pass from me" (Luke 23:42). Yet he was willing to drink the cup which his Father gave him. He prayed, "Not my will, but thine be done." Now we see on the cross again the nature of this terrible cup given to him by the Father. Jesus' tormentors offer him, not refreshing water, but wine vinegar to drink. It is not an act of compassion but a further effort at humiliation.

And it is another parable of the appalling wickedness of men and of the Savior's willingness to bear it all "in his own body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24). Our precious Lord drank the dregs of his assigned cup. He drank all of it, as he instructed the disciples to do at the Last Supper. When all his friends left, he carried through alone.

If you have the "cross" kind of determination, you hang on to God even when you are alone in the storm. Faithfulness in isolation—that is what Jesus demonstrated for us. He is looking for disciples with crossly determination--the kind that stays with him even if it means standing alone.

Jesus descends into the black night of the abyss. He is swallowed by the gaping mouth of death. He succumbs to the last enemy of humans. He is steadfastly looking to his Father as he passes into the night. He is determined to do the Father's will, to drink the cup. We see him with his jaw square as he dies.

This is our Lord. He is surprising and marvelous, the most astonishing person in all of human history. We are looking to Jesus, every one of us, through our good times and bad.

Prayer: Lord, I need your strength. I want to be faithful even when I am alone, out of town, away from home. I want to keep my commitments even when I feel isolated. Thank you for your wonderful example of faithfulness.

SUNDAY, APRIL 3RD

Reading: Luke 23:38

Pilate gets in the last lick in the sparring with the chief priests and elders of the people. They insist that Jesus be executed against his better judgment. Well then, they will have to endure the insult of having Jesus labeled “The King of the Jews.”

When they see the sign, the Jewish rulers lodge a protest and want it amended or removed. Pilate’s simple reply is much quoted: “What I have written, I have written” (*John 19:22*).

The Roman authorities often posted on the cross the reason for the execution. Passersby could look above the head of the person dying and read the reason for his sentence. Some people think this is what Paul makes reference to in Colossians 2:14: “having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.”

This “handwriting of ordinances” may have been the posted sentence upon the Roman crosses. In this case, the Apostle Paul was teaching that, in a way, the certificate nailed to the cross of Jesus was our certificate of debt—the listing of our violations of God’s law.

If we see Jesus dying because of our sin, we have perceived things correctly. Our spiritual vision is 20/20 on this point. Jesus died on our behalf as a consequence of our sin. He paid our sin debt, the indebtedness which stood between God and us and which we ourselves could not pay.

Prayer: You rescued me. You saved me. You acted with this great love toward me before I ever knew you. Thank you, God. Forgive me for the sorrow I bring to you because of my sin.

MONDAY, APRIL 4TH

Reading: Luke 23:39

We know very little about either of these thieves who are executed beside Jesus of Nazareth. We know that they both are robbers. The word translated "thief," "robber," or "criminal" in Luke has as its root the word "*kakos*" that simply means "evil" or "wicked." The Scripture is saying that two wicked, evil men were crucified with him. Mark lets us know that they are indeed "robbers" (*lestes*).

We do not know their stories. These men are probably hardened criminals, career and habitual thieves. They have received a sentence given to the lowest in society who committed the most terrible crimes. They are criminals like the death row inmates we often read about and see on the news. They deserve the death sentence. We learn this when one of them gets serious about his soul. He tells the other that they are guilty, and I believe him.

They are not only guilty of previous crimes, but both of them are reviling Christ as he hangs between them. They "heaped insults on him," says Matthew (27:44). They are reviling, reproaching, and insulting Jesus as he is crucified. They have lived a life that earned them execution. Now at their execution, they have such hard hearts that they are insulting the man on the middle cross.

What kind of man mocks another when he himself is being executed? I think the answer is—any man who elevates himself by putting down others. If this is the habit of a lifetime, it will remain so on the deathbed.

Prayer: Strip out of my soul any arrogance and conceit. Help me see myself as I really am and respect and honor others as your special creations. Forgive me when I seek to elevate myself by demeaning those around me. Teach me to be like you.

TUESDAY, APRIL 5TH

Reading: Luke 23:40-41

I led a Bible study on death row in Gatesville, Texas, every week for six years. I also did prison revivals, discipleship training, and frequent counseling of prisoners. Frankly, I feel close to Christ when I am with criminals. I know that Christ is their only real hope, and they usually know that they are in great need.

Jesus died hanging between two criminals, men who were found guilty of capital offenses by courts of law. Their presence on Golgotha with Jesus is a historical fact and a spiritual parable. It helps us understand the nature of the death of Christ.

Humanly speaking, Jesus died as a guilty law-breaker. Spiritually speaking, Jesus died on behalf of guilty law-breakers like you and me. The cross upon which he was executed was probably intended for Barabbas whom Pilate released to the Jews. Yes, the cross of Jesus was prepared for a criminal, a guilty law-breaker.

We may not be criminals according to human law. But we are criminals according to the law of God. The Bible word is “sinners,” and it declares “all have sinned” (*Romans 3:23*). Christ died for sinners.

These criminals on the outer crosses, they are not so different from you and me. They represent us. Some people, like the man who spoke first, refuse to believe in Christ. He joins with the mob in ridiculing him. Others, like the second criminal, repent of their words and cry out for mercy and grace.

Prayer: Lord, I need your grace and mercy today—and every day. Show me my kinship with these criminals. Help me know the depth of my own sinfulness.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 6TH

Reading: Luke 23:42-43

Our Lord responds to the criminal and emphasizes "today." It is the first word of the phrase. He says, "Not a thousand years hence; not a century from now; not at the resurrection on the last day; but **today** you will be with me in paradise."

Jesus wants to speak the word "Today" to you. You are hoping for some rescue in the distant future. You are experiencing the pain and suffering of today, and wishing it were over. You must prepare for His word to you—**today**. The Bible is a "today" book, and we serve a "today" Lord. He is ready to deliver the startling promise to you in the here and now.

Today is the day of rescue for the thief. Today is the day of rescue for you. It is not God who is procrastinating, but you. You must receive the promise.

A Country and Western singer croons these words: "I wish there was a big room somewhere, and they put all the time in there, all the time that got away somehow." Even as he experiences God's immediate rescue, I wonder if the thief is saying in his heart, "All the years I wasted doing other things."

"When will tomorrow get here?" our children ask. And it is an important question. When will tomorrow get here? It has already arrived, and it is today. "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart..." (*Hebrews 4:7*).

Prayer: Forgive me for procrastinating. I put off things that I know I must do. Especially forgive me for putting off spiritual things, decisions I know I must make. Help me live in this present moment with you as my Lord and Savior.

THURSDAY, APRIL 7TH

Reading: Luke 23:44-45

Have you noticed the large, heavy curtains that hang in theaters? Few of them are constructed with the physical strength and weight of the curtain in the Temple. Initially this curtain was made of blue, purple, and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen. Cherubim were part of the design worked into the cloth (*Exodus 26:31*).

The curtain in the Second Temple, or Herod's Temple, was so heavy that teams of horses could not have ripped it, the ancients claimed. The curtain guarded the Holy of Holies, the most sacred spot in all Judaism. The high priest entered that place only once a year, and then with fear and trepidation.

That heavy curtain symbolized the mystery of God and his transcendence. People did not have ready access to God under the Old Covenant. The Law, the priesthood, and the sacrificial system were all mediators of the presence of God on behalf of the people who stood aloof and afraid.

When Jesus died, this curtain was torn from top to bottom, Mark tells us (*15:38*). God reached down from heaven into the Temple and tore the curtain in two. The writer of Hebrews says that we have a new way to enter the Most Holy Place, "opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body..." (*Hebrews 10:20*). The rending of the curtain was analogous to the breaking of the body of Jesus. Through his broken body and shed blood, we enter God's presence in a "new and living way" (*Hebrews 10:19*).

Prayer: I rejoice, Lord Jesus, that you have opened the way to God for me. I thank you for tearing of that curtain. Thank you that an ordinary person such as I can come right into the awesome presence of the Creator God. Your presence is life to me!

FRIDAY, APRIL 8TH

Reading: Luke 23:46

Christ displayed courage throughout his life and in his death. He stood up to the oppressive powers of his day. He went against established traditions that were unjust. He lived under the threat of death for his teachings and his miracles. The English word "courage" comes from the French that means "more at heart."

The challenge "Don't lose heart!" occurs seven times in the New Testament. We are urged to consider Jesus so we won't "lose heart" (*Hebrews 12:3*). From the perspective of the cross of Christ, courage may be defined as "the willingness to refuse the easy way out."

We live in an age that follows the path of least resistance. "Courage" is the resolve to walk the rough road when it is the right road. We pause when we hear Jesus saying "Follow me." We pause because we know where he went and where he might lead us. Jesus walked straight into death in obedience to the Father. He committed himself into the hands of the Father in his life—and in his death.

I think of David and Goliath, Daniel and the lions' den, the Hebrew children, and the fiery furnace. In each case, godly people put their lives on the line and trusted God. When David was about to fight the giant, he said to Saul, "Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him" (*1 Samuel 17:32*).

Let no one lose heart. We have a wonderful Savior. He stayed the course for us. And he will also empower us to stay on task.

Prayer: Sometimes I feel like giving up. Sometimes I feel like I am the only one who is trying. Forgive me for feeling sorry for myself. Lift up my head so I can see my Lord. Fill me with yourself so that I can be the person you have called me to be.

SATURDAY, APRIL 9TH

Reading: Luke 23:47

A burly soldier got up while it was still dark one Friday morning. He began to prepare himself for the day ahead. It was going to be a busy day. Three executions were planned, and he was in charge.

He heard the rooster's crowing and the lowing of the oxen. The sun would be up soon. Pilate would be looking for him.

The city was filled with people, visitors from all over the Empire. He wasn't thrilled to have so many guests in Jerusalem. It only made things more complicated for those who tried to keep the peace. As he approached the Judgment Hall, he noticed that things were busier than normal. People seemed to be everywhere. What could this be?

He learned of the night's activities—the arrest and trial of Jesus, the decision of the Sanhedrin, the release of Barabbas—what? Barabbas released! And now Jesus of Nazareth to be executed? He shook his head in disbelief.

He watched the man from Galilee as he was mocked and beaten and finally hung up to die. He witnessed the dialogue between Jesus and the two thieves. He heard the words of Jesus from the cross, "Father, forgive them." The more he watched Jesus, the more impressed he became.

An eerie darkness covered the land. An earthquake shook Golgotha. Jesus cried, "It is finished!" And the centurion said, "Surely this was a righteous man!"

Prayer: Thank you, Lord Jesus, for being a righteous man, pure and holy, willing and able to be our substitute.

SUNDAY, APRIL 10TH

Reading: Luke 23:48-49

Joshua was riding beside me in the car when he was about three years old. Out of the blue, he asked me, "Daddy, can you whistle?" I whistled a little tune. He said, "When I grow up I want to whistle just like you!" In a little bit I saw him trying to snap his fingers. "Daddy, can you snap your fingers?" he asked, and I snapped a sharp rhythm. He said, "When I grow up I'm gonna snap my fingers just like you."

Joshua has indeed learned to whistle and snap his fingers better even than dear old Dad. Each of us bear the traits of our fathers. We will grow more and more like our Heavenly Father as we watch him and do what he does.

Jesus is not only the author but also the "finisher" or "perfecter" of our faith. A finisher has to know what he is striving for and how to get the material to take that shape.

Through these 40 days we have watched Our Lord, not as he whistled or snapped his fingers, but as he died. We have gathered at the trial and the cross to learn a very specific lesson: what special traits of character are here displayed that I might be perfected—be finished.

You have tremendous potential as a person to be an exceptional human being. You have the perfect example in Jesus of Nazareth, the most powerful picture of God's love. Being like Him is your lifetime assignment. The Apostle Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 2:21: Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

Prayer: I give myself to you again, Lord Jesus, to do with as you see fit. I pray that you will help me every day to "follow" you both in your mission of love and in your character and nature as a human being. I fix my eyes upon you.

