

Mar/Apr 2015

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

A crown of thorns, made of dark, sharp, and tangled branches, is held up by two hands. The hands are positioned at the bottom left and bottom right of the crown, with fingers gripping the branches. The background is a plain, light color, possibly white or light grey, which makes the dark thorns stand out. The overall composition is centered and symmetrical.

**LIVING ON
THE RIGHT SIDE
OF EASTER!**

ALSO: GETTING (BACK) INTO SPIRITUAL SHAPE

Friends:

Lent is one of my favorite times of the church year. That should seem strange, or at least ironic, because Lent is a season of repentance. It's a time to be reminded that we are sinful, rebellious creatures who have dishonored our Father God. That's not something to celebrate. Yet I need Lent because I am prideful and need that reminder. I have to remember that regardless of what the world teaches, I am as good as dead in my sin—and only the love of God redeems me. Taken by itself, Lent is a countercultural, pride-popping thorn in the flesh. But Lent is not alone—Easter comes, and I am further reminded that Christ died for me and has fully paid for all my sin. Thanks be to God!



So for Lent this March, Norman Brown first leads us in cultivating spiritual disciplines that remind us of our need for a Savior and prepare us to celebrate Easter.

Then, in April, Art Schoonveld leads us in celebrating Easter, receiving the forgiveness and adoption that we do not deserve but that God grants anyway. He further explores with us how we should live on the right side of Christ's resurrection.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Steven Koster".

—Steven Koster

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**“Lent: Getting (Back)
into Spiritual Shape”**
Norman F. Brown



**“Living on the Right
Side of Easter”**
Arthur J. Schoonveld

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reFRAME MEDIA

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Lent: Getting (Back) into Spiritual Shape

Norman F. Brown

Lent is the 40-day period leading to Easter. Since Sundays are weekly celebrations of the resurrection, they are not counted in the 40 days. So Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, 46 days before Easter. Lenten observers often use this time to “give up” something as a spiritual discipline. More often than not they “sacrifice” snack or junk foods, or perhaps television. By giving up something so tangible, they intend to remind themselves also to give up sin.

But if the goal is to grow closer to Christ by getting into better spiritual shape, why not (re)learn to exercise the basic spiritual disciplines, such as daily Scripture reading, meditation, prayer, fasting, and worship? Our readings this month will lead us through several spiritual disciplines, so that by the time Easter comes, we’ll not only be ready to celebrate our Lord’s resurrection but we’ll also be in better shape to serve him.

Chaplain Norman F. Brown graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, in 1969. He served aboard destroyers during the Vietnam conflict and ashore in San Diego, Calif., as an instructor. By then God had made clear his call to work in pastoral ministry, and Norman entered Calvin Theological Seminary, graduating in 1980. Chaplain Brown pastored churches during his ministry career but spent most of his time as a navy chaplain. During one assignment he served three years at Holy Loch, Scotland, where he and his wife, Ruth, encountered the Iona Community and their emphasis on spiritual disciplines. Chaplain and Mrs. Brown have three married children and nine grandchildren.

FOLLOWING JESUS

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”
—Mark 8:34

Jesus demands a lot from us to be his disciples: bearing our own crosses. In other words, being a Christian doesn't just mean we believe the right things about Jesus, or even claim to love him. He demands a life of sacrificial service—not to gain his favor, of course, but out of gratitude for what he has gained for us—forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

On this second Sunday in the season of Lent, we are at a good starting point to learn about denying ourselves, taking up our own crosses, and following Christ. Jesus came to give us real life, and we can find that by turning our lives over to him. Getting in spiritual shape to follow Christ takes daily discipline, “crucifying” (or, dying to) our selfishness to be freed to serve him.

My naval service taught me the necessity of discipline: from staying physically fit to learning

the skills and knowledge to do my best every day. It took dedication. These lessons apply as well to following Christ Jesus. Discipleship takes discipline, spiritual discipline.

Lent is an annual opportunity to get (back) into spiritual shape for Christ. This month we'll look at spiritual disciplines so that by the time Easter comes, we can be fit disciples to carry our crosses for Christ.

Lord Jesus, you gave your life on the cross to pay for our sins and to give us new life. Teach us how to take up our crosses as we journey through Lent this year. In your name we pray. Amen.

WALKING THE ANCIENT PATHS

"Ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls." —Jeremiah 6:16

Always on the frontier of the future, we strain to peer through the veil to see what's coming—but, of course, we can't. Cell phones, laptops, tablets: even the best technology cannot help us see what will happen next. The path ahead is shrouded in the fog of the future.

God's people have always been prone to wander from the path he prescribes (see Exodus 20:1-17; Mark 12:30-31). Lent calls us back to "the ancient paths," to the good life of learning to love God and live together (Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Leviticus 19:18). God's "ancient paths" point the way to salvation.

God's way also leads to what the writer of Hebrews called: "a Sabbath-rest for the people of God" (see Hebrews 3:1-4:11). Lent calls us to give up life on our terms and to receive with gratitude what cannot be

earned—God's grace, which is "rest for [our] souls."

Jesus says, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). God's way began in the Garden of Eden, before Adam and Eve went astray, and it leads all the way to heaven. Jesus died at Calvary and rose from his tomb to put us back on track. He's given us a way to stay there and, when we wander, to correct our course, with his help through the Holy Spirit. This is the life of a spiritually disciplined disciple.

Lord, show us the ancient paths, the way back to you, and how to follow your leading to eternal life, through Christ and by your Spirit. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

TO WHAT IS JESUS INVITING YOU?

Jesus . . . called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that they might be with him . . .

—Mark 3:13-14

I once went on a private retreat with a spiritual director. My prayer was that he'd help me get back on track with Jesus. The schedule was simple: we would meet each morning for an hour. Then I'd spend the day contemplating the Scripture he'd assigned and keep a journal of my reflections.

At our first meeting he assigned a psalm. The day was beautiful, and I wandered the grounds, peacefully contemplating. The next day I expected to share my thoughts from the day before, but he just asked how my aloneness was going and assigned a new text. Every day was the same. I grew impatient, wanting to discuss my reflections. On the last morning he asked, "What is Jesus inviting you to?" I replied, "To do or to be?" He just smiled.

I've spent the past 20 years wrestling with God over this question (see Genesis 32:22-32). But the answer came from Jesus' calling his apostles "that they might be with him."

Jesus calls us to be with him and work with him in his mission. Just as he eventually sent out his apostles, he also sends us. But he promises, "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20). He is with us, and he wants us to be with him (see John 17:22-24). Discipleship is more than obedience to Jesus. It means walking with him, being with him, living with him every day.

Lord Jesus, give us the desire to be with you every day. Make us conscious that we're always in your presence, and help us to live accordingly. In your name, Amen.

WHEN JESUS SHOWS UP

As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.

—Luke 24:15-16

In today's reading we find Cleopas and his companion, perhaps his wife, trudging home from Jerusalem to Emmaus on Easter Sunday. Crucified on Friday, Jesus' body turned up missing from his tomb on Sunday morning. Our friends on the Emmaus road are two dejected disciples with nothing left to do but head home.

As they discuss these strange events, a stranger joins them. We know he is Jesus resurrected, but they don't. Jesus asks what they're talking about, and they tell him what little they know. Even before the whole drama unfolds, we learn an important lesson: when we least expect it, Jesus can show up, uninvited, unrecognized, and perhaps even unwelcomed—at least at first.

Our friends have been talking about Jesus, and now they are

walking with him. One danger of discipleship is talking the talk without walking the walk. Even the most serious saint can at times be overwrought and unaware of Christ's presence.

Here's the good news for Lent: no matter how discouraged or distracted we may get, Jesus walks with us. Maybe he shows himself in the moment, but I find that he's more often "seen" or "heard" in hindsight. As the Emmaus travelers are about to learn, we can improve our faith journey by looking for him in the past as well as the present.

Heavenly Father, give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to burn with faith and joy today as we walk and talk with Jesus. In his name, Amen.

JESUS EXPLAINS HIMSELF

Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

—Luke 24:27

In high school my favorite subject was geometry. I just “got it” because it made sense. The logic was based on sound premises.

In college I came to believe in Christ because the gospel was explained to me logically. I was shown how the gospel fulfilled the history of God’s people; all God’s promises and prophecies in the Old Testament pointed to the coming Messiah (Christ), the great deliverer of God’s people. Everything anticipated the birth and life of Jesus and the purpose of his death to save us from sin. I finally “got it.”

Today many folks value emotional experience over reasonable faith in Christ. “God is love” is all they want or think they need. But God’s righteous love and care for us go far beyond emotional highs.

Our friends on the Emmaus road were looking for more than solace for their grief. They needed a sure hope. Jesus could have walked up and given them hearty hugs and reassuring words. But that wouldn’t have been enough. Instead he reminded them of all the Old Testament promises about the Messiah. They needed a foundation for their faith and a rekindling of hope in God’s ancient promises. They needed Jesus to explain himself clearly. And as he did, their hearts burned within (Luke 24:32). Is your faith well-grounded and your heart burning for Christ?

Lord Jesus, explain your Word to us and guide us to study it, that we may be faithful, impassioned disciples. Amen.

HEARTS BURNING

"Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" —Luke 24:32

Discipleship is more than knowing who Jesus is and obeying his commands. It involves our emotions too. Take our two friends traveling on the road with Jesus. When they arrive at their home, they ask him to come in and have dinner with them. Still, they have not recognized him. Then a strange thing happens. Did you notice?

A dinner guest doesn't usually act as the host. But that's what Jesus does. He serves the bread and gives thanks. As a minister, I'm often asked to give thanks at dinners with friends and family, which I gladly do. But it would be presumptuous to take over as host. Jesus, however, is unique. He's our provider.

After Jesus serves the bread and offers thanks, the others finally recognize him. All the joy, enthusiasm, and excitement they have experienced with Jesus in

the past come flooding back. Then suddenly Jesus disappears. So immediately they return to Jerusalem to share their news. They realize their hearts have been burning again, and the others have to know!

That fire in their hearts has never gone out. It has spread from believer to unbeliever as more and more have heard the good news that Jesus died to pay for our sins and rose from the dead to give us new life.

During this Lenten season let's learn how spiritual disciplines can fan the flames in our burning hearts too.

Spirit of the living God,
set our hearts on fire today.
Renew our faith and
feed our souls as we practice
the life of discipleship.
In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen.

THIRST QUENCHED

“Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst.”

—John 4:13-14

The Sons of Korah were a school of psalm writers in Israel. One wrote, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” Believers have cried these words with hearts burning and souls more desperate for God than a desert-parched tongue is for water. And Jesus has revealed that he is the only one who can quench our soul-thirst.

It was high noon when a travel-weary Jesus came to a community well in Samaria. A local woman who needed to fill her water jars came there too. She was naturally wary. Religious and racial differences with the Jews had led to prejudice. And she was a woman. No Jewish man, especially a teacher, would converse with a Samaritan woman.

But Jesus did: “Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst.” She soon realized she

was speaking with the Messiah. He knew everything about her and was full of grace, truth, and love. She was thirsty when she came to the well, but now she was parched for living water.

We all thirst for God. The water Jesus offers is the only thing that will satisfy. We need to acknowledge our thirst and accept his offer—regularly. Like our Samaritan friend who drew buckets of water daily, we need to drink daily from the Lord’s well, his Word. That takes daily spiritual discipline.

We are parched, Lord, desperately thirsty for the living water found only in you. By your Word and the well of the Holy Spirit, satisfy our thirsty souls today, we pray. In your name, Amen.

ZEALOUS JESUS

After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

—John 2:22

It's the third Sunday of Lent. In our Scripture for today, John portrays an angry Jesus. If you've dealt with angry people, or your own anger, you know how unpleasant it can be. The apostle Paul warns, "In your anger do not sin" (Ephesians 4:26). Jesus got angry when he saw what was happening in the temple courts. And yet he did not sin.

Jesus wasn't upset about local vendors providing worshipers something for a fee. But he was zealous that God's temple should be a place of worship. There wasn't room for people to pray. "Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" he said. Only later did the disciples connect his zeal with Psalm 69: "Zeal for your house will consume me."

Christ's passion for God's holiness made him zealous to save

us. We are made in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27). And in Christ we are the new temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16). Christ's passion carried him to the cross to make us "living stones," drawn together as God's temple (1 Peter 2:5).

Jesus was undeterred. He was heading for the cross to fulfill God's mission. God's image would be restored in us only through the work of his Son (Philippians 1:6; Colossians 3:10). If Jesus is so zealous for the holiness of God in us, shouldn't we be also?

Holy God, the passion of your Son inspires and scares us. May his zeal for your holiness inspire us to be his disciplined followers, your faithful people. In his name, Amen.

SOWING AND REAPING

Whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.
—Galatians 6:8

“You reap what you sow!” Maybe you have heard this saying before. Parents, teachers, and others use it a lot. It comes from this passage written by the apostle Paul: “A man reaps what he sows”—and Paul drew it from other ancient wisdom (see Proverbs 22:8; Hosea 10:12-13). Life’s circumstances often prove the warning true.

Our great hope, Paul writes in Colossians, is “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Remember, Jesus was called Immanuel (“God with us”—see Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23). And eventually the Holy Spirit came to live in the hearts of all believers (Acts 2). This means God is recreating his image in us.

This calls for our cooperation. As the farmer must sow seeds, pull weeds, and fertilize and water his plantings to reap a harvest, so we must cooperate

with the Spirit to grow the good fruit of Christlike living. Sowing to please the Spirit means our work is done out of love for God and our neighbors (Mark 12:30-31), love for one another (John 13:34-35), and even love for our enemies (Luke 6:35).

The Holy Spirit’s guarding, guiding, inspiring, and working within us bears fruit that pleases God. We just need to learn how to sow and tend his crops. Spiritual discipline practiced every day will grow a great harvest of good in us that will please our Lord. Are you ready to sow with God?

Lord God, how can we ever please you? By the power of Christ and your Spirit, help us tend to the good we’re called to do. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

WARNING: SHARP EDGES!

The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow
—Hebrews 4:12

Warning notices seem to be everywhere. At the bottom of the TV screen we're warned not to drive our car like the one being advertised—as if we could or would. As I read a warning not to use a toy tool to do real work, our son, a lawyer, mutters, "Lawyers!"

But there is a serious warning not found on the packaging of the Bible. Deep inside Scripture we read, "Sharper than any double-edged sword." We might rephrase this to say, "Warning: Sharp Edges!"

Jesus grabbed my "college-student" heart by surprise at a youth meeting and in a moment gave me faith in him. I'd felt no need to meet him and didn't expect to. But the focus of my life suddenly shifted from myself to the Savior and King (Colossians 3:1-3). Life changed. New friends got me

into Scripture, where I learned the joy of loving God above all and others as myself (Matthew 22:37-40).

Eventually I read the warning in the book of Hebrews. God's Word cuts deeply. Reading, reflecting, studying, and meditating on Scripture exposes sin, especially to the sinner. Scripture can cut like a surgeon with a scalpel or like a warrior with a two-edged sword. The Spirit seeks to cut out sin and recreate God's image in the hearts of believers.

Will we yield to the Great Physician's scalpel and accept our Savior's victory over sin?

Thank you, God, for the gift of Scripture. Give us the courage to study your Word. In Jesus, Amen.

STUDYING WHAT GOD INSPIRED

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. —2 Timothy 3:16

The apostle Paul tells Timothy, a young pastor, that God expresses himself in Scripture to show us eternal life and teach us how to live with him today. The apostle wanted this young minister to know not only how he should follow Christ but also how to mentor others.

These verses reveal three essential truths: (1) Scripture—the Old Testament that Paul and Timothy knew and the New Testament we know today—reveals Christ and is God’s message to us from his heart; (2) Scripture teaches us who God is, rebukes us for our sin, corrects us, and trains us in the right way to live; and (3) Scripture equips disciples to do the good works God has prepared for us (Ephesians 2:10).

But this good news comes with a caution. Richard J. Foster (*Celebration of Discipline*) writes, “We come to the Scripture to

be changed.” At this point we should hear echoes of Hebrews’ warning: “sharp edges!” Transformation is never painless.

We’d like God to transform us instantaneously, but that’s not the way it happens. He totally involves us in his project to make us his disciples. Like athletes who must stay in shape, studying God’s Word requires daily discipline. Don’t speed-read today’s passage and message. God has personally expressed himself to give us eternal life through his Son and to tell us how to live righteously. Shouldn’t we listen very carefully?

Lord God, tell us what we need to hear. And may we heed all that you say, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

LIVING IN THE LIGHT OF GOD'S WORD

Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.

—Psalm 119:105

As a new believer, I learned from mentors that Scripture memorization is vital to following Jesus: "I have hidden your word in my heart." Memorizing helps with internalizing God's Word. I also learned that memorizing Scripture requires discipline.

Psalm 119:105 is the first verse I learned. The Word in our hearts enlightens and enlivens life. God's Word is "alive and active" (Hebrews 4:12) and "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16). The Word in our hearts also gets into our heads, affecting our thoughts, words, and actions.

As a young naval officer, I had to memorize procedures for navigating our ship, firing its guns, and dealing with emergencies. By knowing procedures by heart, I didn't need written instructions in urgent situations. Scripture serves a similar purpose. I know I am

to love God, my neighbor, my wife and family, and even my enemies. When I'm tempted to be unloving, the Spirit often brings to mind a fitting word of Scripture to resist the wrong.

The Word in my heart reveals that Christ in me is my "hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). The Spirit who inspired the writing of the Word uses Scriptures I've learned to make me more like Christ.

Practice the spiritual discipline of memorizing Scripture so that you can live in the light of God's Word.

Father, give me the discipline to get your Word into my head, heart, and soul so that by its light I can live. In your name, O Lord, Amen.

GETTING AWAY FROM THE NOISE

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.

—Mark 1:35

Jesus loved people. But Mark notes that Jesus also needed to get away to spend time with God. So, early in the morning he found a quiet place to pray. Mark's account is instructional: get away and go be with God. I've learned the importance of that practice firsthand.

For several years I served as a navy chaplain in Scotland. We lived a half-day's journey from the Church of Scotland's retreat at Iona, on the site of St. Columba's mission. We visited regularly. Before breakfast one morning I found a small chapel, perfect for getting away. The only sounds I could hear were seagulls calling and waves lapping. God's presence was unmistakable in the quiet solitude.

I'd responded to Jesus' invitation: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew

11:28). He invites us not just to escape but also to discover his Word, as Psalm 119 exclaims: "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long." I discovered the importance of meditating in quiet.

So leave life's noise and find a quiet place. At first you'll hear interior noise: extraneous thoughts and reminders of obligations. Keep listening. God speaks in the silence. Getting away regularly to listen for God was Jesus' discipline. And if he needed to do that, don't we?

Father, we're immersed in an ocean of noise. Teach us to answer Jesus' invitation and find a quiet place where we can hear you so that we can walk more closely with you each day. Amen.

LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

“When you pray, say: ‘Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us Forgive us And lead us’

—Luke 11:2

Many people know this prayer by heart. In worship, believers often recite it in unison. Both Matthew (6:9-13) and Luke recorded Jesus’ prayer lesson for his disciples. We call it “The Lord’s Prayer,” but it could also be called “The Disciples’ Prayer,” since Jesus was teaching them how to pray.

Even before Jesus begins this prayer, Luke makes an important point. “One day Jesus was praying in a certain place.” His disciples saw that Jesus was a man of prayer. And they knew he could teach them.

As a discipline, prayer goes with solitude and meditation. The disciples wanted to know how to commune with God when they were alone with him. Interestingly, Jesus doesn’t say, “Just memorize this brief prayer.” Nor does he claim that it covers all we should ask of

our Father. But it does convey the essence of prayer and is well worth memorizing.

Notice that the first petition doesn’t ask anything for ourselves, but only for God’s honor: “Make your name holy” (“hallowed”). Above all, disciples seek to uphold God’s holiness and pray that his kingdom will come. Then come requests for the basics: daily needs; forgiveness as we forgive; and leading away from evil to full life in God’s kingdom.

Do you want to get closer to Jesus? Learn this prayer.

Father, hallow your name in our lives! Provide all we need in order to be the people you call us to be for your kingdom here on earth. In Jesus, Amen.

GOD SO LOVED

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

—John 3:16

John 3:16 is one of Scripture's most famous passages, and it follows from Jesus' explanation about Moses lifting up "the snake in the wilderness." Jesus made a connection to that story to describe the effects of our poisonous, deadly sins.

Freed from slavery in Egypt but then having to live in the desert, God's people complained that the Lord didn't provide for them. So God sent poisonous snakes to punish their complaining, but he also provided a way to be spared. When bitten, the people could look at the image of a bronze snake set up by Moses and live.

That event in Israel's history pointed to Jesus' death on the cross for our sake. He died to save us from all the sin emerging from the snake pit in our souls.

Daily we confess our snake-like deadly sins, and we turn to Christ for forgiveness. God has so loved us since before creation (Ephesians 1:3-10) that he sent his Son to save us from all our venomous sins.

Someone has said God loves in 3D: in breadth, the whole world; in length, from eternity past to eternity to come; and from the depths of hell to the heights of heaven. As Jesus puts it, "Everyone who believes may *have* [present tense] eternal life." New life with God begins now—today! We're not the victims of our poisonous sins—"for God so loved . . .!"

Lord, we confess our sins, like poisonous snakes bent on destroying us. We look to Jesus to save us and give us eternal life *today!* In his name, Amen.

ASK FOR ANYTHING YOU WISH!

"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."
—John 15:7

Wow! Ask for anything, and God will give it to us? This statement can sound too good to be true. Of course, we have to look at Jesus' statement carefully, and that is a helpful exercise for engaging in the discipline of prayer.

Jesus' conditions are the key: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you . . ." He's not offering to dole out anything we want.

Later Jesus goes on to say, "Whatever you ask *in my name* the Father will give you." We must know the significance of Jesus' name and be sure that we are in tune with him as we pray. And in gratitude for all he has done for us, we'll want to seek his will. (See also 1 John 5:14-15.)

When we are in sync with Christ, we will pray as he did

when he was about to give up his life for our sake. Faced with his impending death to save his people, Jesus pleaded with his Father for relief, but added, "Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39).

The apostle Paul wrote, "We are co-workers in God's service" (1 Corinthians 3:9). We want whatever contributes to God's cause.

Our prayers are answered as we walk in step with Christ. God will provide all we need in order to do all he wants and to become all he means us to be. And he knows that our response will be a grateful "Wow!"

Lord, we want to do your will and live by it, serving in your kingdom. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

A FAST SECRET

When you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting.

—Matthew 6:17-18

Fasting and prayer are often mentioned together in the Bible (for example, Luke 5:33). While fasting is not required for prayer, the purpose of fasting is *to pray*. People fast when they plead with God (Ezra 8:21-23), repent of sin (Nehemiah 1:4-7), ask God's blessing (Acts 13:2-3) and worship (Luke 2:36-38).

Jesus prayed before breakfast, an overnight "fast" (Mark 1:35). After an incredible 40-day fast, he was confronted with more temptation than we'll ever know (Matthew 4:1-11), and he countered the tempter with quotes from Scripture.

Fasting is not dieting, though it is healthy. Fasting does not earn any reward from God. We cannot say God requires fasting; it's just assumed. "When you fast . . ." Jesus says. He also instructs God's people to hide their fasting from public view;

it's private between the one who fasts and the heavenly Father, who, Jesus adds, "will reward you."

Fasting and prayer are God's challenge to discipline our spirits and be transformed into his image. God invites intimacy as we set aside all distractions. Then we'll find our fast more satisfying than any feast. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry" (John 6:35). Fasting doesn't earn anything; it's to honor God and help us focus as we enter his presence. That's our fast secret.

Father, in our fasting, help us feel our hunger for you. Transform us by your Spirit. In Christ we pray. Amen.

THE SIMPLE LIFE

I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.
—Philippians 4:12

The spiritual disciplines are tools that help us work with the Holy Spirit as he transforms us, through faith, to be more like Christ (see 2 Corinthians 3:18).

Jesus said, “Do not worry about your life. . . . For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes” (Luke 12:22-23). Jesus modeled a life of simplicity. Paul learned to be content in all situations.

Jesus and Paul also warned against greed. If we fall into patterns of greed, we fail to trust “our Father in heaven” (Matthew 6:9) for what we need in order to do all he wants us to do. When we lack trust in God, we try to “buy” security, but that can’t be done (see Luke 12:16-21).

Grace transforms greed into gratitude, focusing on the Giver of “every good and perfect gift”

(James 1:17) and not on his gifts. Simplicity keeps things in perspective. It frees us from hoarding, and we learn to accept with thanks and contentment all we are given.

We’re especially grateful for God’s grace and spiritual blessings to us in Christ (Ephesians 1:3). The Spirit’s work in us keeps us focused on what’s most important so that we can have an attitude of gratitude to God “in all circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). That’s the discipline of simplicity. By God’s grace, may we know the peace and joy of the simple life in Christ!

Gracious God, thank you for redeeming us. Teach us the discipline of simplicity, that we may have full life in you. Amen.

LIVING THE CROSS-LIFE

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

—Mark 8:34

Jesus’ call is not what many think. “We all have our crosses to bear,” people sometimes say when trying to explain someone’s personal struggles. Everyone has challenges of some sort. But cross-bearing has to do with submission to Christ.

This teaching is not extremely popular as the church tries to attract people to Jesus. Marketing methods tell us to make the church appealing, but bearing a cross for Jesus’ sake doesn’t sound attractive. Jesus, however, challenged his followers to bear their own crosses daily in sacrificial service to God’s kingdom. Richard Foster calls this “the cross-life;” willing submission and voluntary servanthood to Christ.

Jesus asks his disciples to go where they’d rather not go, beyond their personal comfort zones. For example, he had his fishermen disciples take him

in their boat across the Sea of Galilee. Though storms could be expected, they submitted, and they paid a price. But in the end they gained a much greater faith (Mark 4:35-41).

Living the cross-life is challenging but not complicated. Submission means, of course, loving God and our neighbors, caring for the needy, and living God’s way (Exodus 20:1-17; Mark 12:30-31; John 15:9-17). We are also called to use our talents, gifts, and interests in his service.

There are many ways to submit to Jesus. Have you taken up *your* cross?

Lord, thank you for the calling to submit to you. It’s possible only in your strength. Help me today. In your name, Amen.

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

—Philippians 2:8

Jesus challenges us to take up our own cross and follow him. He calls us to the spiritual discipline of submission. Paul says we must “have the same mindset as Christ Jesus,” who submitted to God the Father all the way to “death on a cross.”

Some disciples become martyrs, but most must sacrifice only their self-interest for the good of others, which is hard enough. So we look to the courageous Christ, the epitome of submission (see Luke 22:39-46). Paul’s advice is that if we take “encouragement from being united with Christ” and “have the same mindset as Christ Jesus,” we will have all we need to follow Jesus wherever he is going.

We learn Christ’s mindset from Scripture, especially from passages like today’s reading. Jesus gave us many examples of submissive service, such as heal-

ing, teaching, caring, and even washing his disciples’ feet (John 13:1-15).

God the Son submitted to the Father from the beginning (John 1:1-5, 9-14), knowing he would eventually die on the cross. Now we are called to submit to our Savior. This isn’t easy, and it’s for life, but this is the glorious way of his coming kingdom.

Have you answered the call to the cross-life?

Lord God, you call us to the discipline of submission through bearing our own cross. Give us the encouragement we need each day to answer your call to the cross-life. In your name, Amen.

GREAT SERVICE

“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant . . . just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve”

—Matthew 20:26-28

Service is a self-evident spiritual discipline. The Son of Man set the lowest benchmark possible to challenge our ideas of authority. He washed his disciples' feet and willingly died for them. When we think we've done enough, remember Jesus.

In today's verses, we read of a proud mother intervening for her sons to get prime positions in Jesus' kingdom. “Whoever wants to become great among you,” Jesus responds, “must be your servant.” And basically being a servant can be summed up in doing whatever it takes for whoever needs it. Jesus went so far as “to give his life as a ransom for many.”

We can serve in many ways. Jesus washed his disciples' dirty feet. I once witnessed a well-known Christian leader bend down to pick up trash on a retreat. Perhaps you mow an

elderly neighbor's lawn, or just refuse to bear false witness against her. It's also a service to receive gratefully from someone serving you.

As we grow in the grace of serving, we'll find more opportunities to serve. We can know we're mastering this discipline when we find ourselves serving without a second thought. Serving will have become second nature. Then, perhaps, our neighbor will ask us why and we can point them to Christ Jesus. They may want to know him too—and that would be a *great* service indeed!

Lord Jesus, you served us by dying for us. Help us to serve you by serving our neighbors. Make us humble, we pray, in your name. Amen.

“WE WOULD LIKE TO SEE JESUS”

“Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. —John 12:21-22

In today’s verses, some Greeks who believe in the God of the Jews ask to meet Jesus. He took the occasion to reveal what lay ahead, and God his Father dramatically confirmed it. Jesus *would give* his life; the cross wasn’t a surprise. And he *had to die* to save us; it wasn’t enough to tell us how to live. And—glorious news!—salvation is not just for the Jews. Jesus said, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all people* to myself.”

Spiritual disciplines enable us, like Philip and Andrew, to introduce others to Jesus. “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15). We can’t bring our friends to meet Jesus in the flesh today, but they can meet him through us. And we have the Bible. With

our friends, we can learn all about the person and work of the Savior.

Lent is a journey of faith to get to know our Lord—learning of him in Scripture, spending time with him in prayer, and developing our relationship with him. His Spirit can transform our hearts and minds (Romans 12:1-2). Then others can meet Christ in us (Colossians 1:27).

Now, how can we prepare to respond to folks who would like to meet Jesus?

Lord Jesus, we want to know you thoroughly, through your Word and by your Spirit, so that others will see you in us and believe. We pray in your name. Amen.

OUR FOOTWASHING LORD

He poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

—John 13:5

As a navy chaplain I led a retreat for about 25 people. They were hurt, broken souls hoping for God's healing. The planning team decided our closing worship should include footwashing. Everyone sat in a circle and, after singing and prayers and a brief message on John 13, I washed the feet of the person to my left. She then did the same to the next person—and so on around the circle.

We thought some in the group might have difficulty washing someone else's feet. But instead, several could hardly bear to have their feet washed.

In that exercise I learned a great lesson: it's painful to receive grace. That's why Peter didn't want Jesus washing his feet. Back then people walked dusty roads and wore sandals everywhere. Hospitable hosts usually had a servant wash their guests'

feet. So Peter protested, not being able to grasp that Jesus would serve him with such grace. Dirty-footed and filthy-souled sinners need his grace.

For the discipline of service, Jesus is our role model. He stooped to wash not only his disciples' dirty feet but also the souls of sinners. By following Christ's example, we find that in our humblest acts of service we have also served Jesus, our Servant-King who first served us.

Humble, gracious Lord, you have set the bar of service for us to emulate. Grant us the grace and humility to serve even the least of your brothers and sisters. We pray in your name. Amen.

CONFESSION: GOOD FOR THE SOUL

Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

—Psalm 51:2-3

The organist spoke of his passion for his church's grand pipe organ: "You not only hear the music; you *feel* it. It resonates with your heart." Psalm 51, written by Israel's King David, resonates in penitent hearts.

Confession as a spiritual discipline must be mastered. It's the foundation of our relationship with God. Confession requires an honest self-awareness without which we cannot grow spiritually. Otherwise we're just fooling ourselves, trying to keep secrets from God by ignoring our sins within. Psalm 51 was David's confession after the prophet Nathan pointed out the king's sins of adultery and murder (see 2 Samuel 11-12). David knew he had to confess.

The pronouns "me," "my," and "I" emphasize taking *personal* responsibility, not slipping by with a general "prayer of confession."

This is not groveling in self-pity or trying to get by with denial. We honestly own our sins because God graciously forgives.

Disciplined confession reminds us that all sin is against God. We apologize to people we offend, but we confess to God that we've offended his image in others. Then God cleanses us from the inside out and restores us to the joy of salvation. Do you need to weep Psalm 51 like David did?

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." Amen.

CONFESSION: GOOD FOR THE BODY

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. —1 John 1:9

Just as confession is good for the soul, it is also good for the body, the church of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27). When we admit our sins to one another, we become accountable and gain renewed assurance of God's forgiveness. We can be honest with God, with one another, and with ourselves. We grow spiritually because it's hard to look someone in the eye and lie.

Together at the cross we can find not guilt, condemnation, and shame, but affirmation of God's forgiveness. We become what Peter calls "a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9), assuring each other of God's forgiveness: "He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." God accepts Christ's sacrifice for our sins and credits us with his righteousness through faith

in Jesus as our Savior (Romans 3:21-26).

Sadly, we often cover up our sin and pretend all is well when we are among members of the church. Whom in the church can we trust? But since God tells us, "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other," he will provide people we can trust to pray and care for us. It's good for us; it's good for Christ's body. Imagine what your church could be if its members could be honest with each other. Why not begin with some members you can trust today?

Lord Jesus, you died for our sins so that we could become your people. Help us to help each other know your mercy and grow into your image. We pray in your name. Amen.

IN THE SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH

"A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth." —John 4:23

In today's verses we find Jesus in conversation with a Samaritan woman at a well. She is there to get water; he speaks of living water that provides eternal life. She recognizes he is a prophet of the Jews and tries to argue *where* worship should be. Jesus says it's not about *where* but about *who* is worshiped.

John 4:23 issues a warning that could fill us with great fear and trembling. But the good news is that God *wants* our worship; otherwise, why would he call us *to* worship? What's more, Christ qualifies us to worship him.

The call is to worship God "in the Spirit and in truth." The Spirit gives us faith *in* God (Ephesians 2:8-9), and Scripture gives us the truth *about* God (Hebrews 4:12-13) so that we can *know* the God we worship. "Spirit and truth worship," then, is *genuine* worship. Being spiri-

tually disciplined enables us to worship by knowing who God is, as well as who and whose we are.

We can and should worship privately, but we need to worship with others as well. We worship not because of the great things he's done for us, but because God is great, glorious, good, gracious, and *worthy* of worship. Worshiping regularly with others orients the rest of our lives around God. Together believers make the gospel visible to the world and encourage each other that the risen Christ is real. Where will you worship this week—and whom will you worship?

Lord God, we need your Spirit to teach us the truth about you and to inspire our worship, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

A GLIMPSE OF THE HOLY

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple.

—Isaiah 6:1

Spiritual disciplines prepare us to worship God. Worship brings us into God's presence. We can't expect to see God like Isaiah did. God keeps his glory hidden for our own good (Exodus 33:19-23) so that it won't destroy us. But we might catch a glimpse of his holiness.

Isaiah's response is instinctive and instructive. Seeing God surrounded by angels singing "Holy, Holy, Holy," a terrified Isaiah exclaims, "Woe to me! . . . I am . . . unclean." Isaiah feels hopeless and helpless, as good as dead and justly condemned. He makes the appropriate response: an awe-filled confession.

Isaiah offers no excuses. He knows he is guilty of sin. Then an angel purifies his lips painfully with a smoldering coal, and Isaiah is a forgiven sinner.

Isaiah's vision demands that we practice disciplined daily confession. Then, when we worship with fellow believers, we will catch a glimpse of God in his glorious grace and join the chorus singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy!"

God then asks, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" With confession as our daily discipline and worship as a weekly practice, God calls us to make his holiness known. God knows people won't understand, but he still calls us to tell what he's shown us. We've caught a glimpse of his glory; how can we help but tell?

Holy Lord, may we glimpse your glory in the lives and worship of your people. Guide us to confess our sin and proclaim your holiness. Amen.

SEEKING THE MIND OF THE SPIRIT TOGETHER

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

—Acts 13:2

Think of it—those disciples “heard” the Holy Spirit speaking. How often in my ministry have I prayed that the Spirit would give me the words to say and the people ears to hear? But what would he demand?

Worship is a vital spiritual discipline. The incident in today’s verses is instructive. The followers of Jesus in Antioch had come to faith as the good news of salvation in Christ had spread far and wide after Pentecost (Acts 2). Now their faith remained alive as the Holy Spirit led them to worship the resurrected Christ.

They formed a community to encourage one another, suffered persecution, saw their arch-persecutor Saul converted, and sought to spread the good news of Christ to new places. Worshiping together put them

into the right frame of heart to hear the Spirit speak.

When we worship Jesus, do we expect the Spirit to speak? And if we “hear” him, will we answer his call? Worship is a discipline because we know he’ll stretch us beyond our “comfort zones.” But that’s how we “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). The good news is that as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-31) we’re in this together. Are we ready to listen?

Spirit of the living Christ, inspire us to worship God with our fellow disciples. Give us ears to hear and hearts to heed your instruction. Then motivate us to missions. We pray for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

PALM SUNDAY: “HOSANNA”?

*“Hosanna!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”
 . . . “Hosanna in the highest heaven!”* —Mark 11:9-10

The Prince of Peace enters the “City of Peace” (“Jerusalem”) as the people cheer, “Hosanna!,” which means, “Save!” Do they know what’s happening? Probably not. “Hosanna!” will become “Crucify him!” by the end of the week. Perhaps their “Hosanna” needs a question mark.

The crowds took their salvation cry from Psalm 118:25-26. They wanted Jesus to overthrow the Romans and take back their capital city (see John 6:15; Acts 1:6). Had they forgotten his prophecy about going to Jerusalem to suffer and die for their salvation (Mark 8:31; 9:30-32; 10:32-34)? Easter’s victory would be impossible without Good Friday’s surrender to death.

And what of the two disciples Jesus sent to get the colt? Were they honored to do this for Jesus? Thankfully, they did as

directed, and their obedience challenges us to be obedient disciples. What about the other disciples? Did Jesus even need cheerleaders (Luke 19:37-40) and crowds waving branches and throwing cloaks to carpet the way for the Messiah?

Sadly, the crowds’ cheers would soon turn into jeers. So it goes when a hero—even God—doesn’t give us what we want.

But today we know who Jesus is and who and whose we are. Do our “Hosannas” ring true? Do we believe in and honor the one who saves?

Lord, too often we cry for you to save us on our own terms. Please save us and mold us to honor you—on your terms and for your glory. In your name we pray. Amen.

FINDING FREEDOM

Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

—John 8:31-32

Taking a Bible verse out of context can lead to misunderstanding and may even prove perilous to spiritual health. John 8:32 is one of Jesus' most misunderstood and misapplied statements. People often misuse this as a justification for telling you a painful truth you already know about yourself. But that just hurts without helping.

So let's look at this in its context. Jesus has stated plainly that he is the Messiah. He has been preaching, teaching, and miracle-making to proclaim, instruct, and demonstrate the kingdom of God for three years. He has declared that if anyone believes, they will be freed to live with God now and forever. That's the truth.

We've been spending Lent with Christ as our discipler, mentor, and trainer in the faith. We've learned how to live each day

as disciples through Scripture study, prayer, meditation, service, and worship. We've learned that Christ is our liberator, not only by the way of the cross but also as we intentionally live each day with him. All this and more make up the truth that sets us free.

Have we found the freedom Christ has promised? If so, the only question remaining is, Will we live liberated lives for our Savior?

Lord Christ, you bring us the truth that liberates—the truth of the kingdom of God. And you are Lord of that kingdom. Give us daily faith to follow in your truth. Amen.

PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

—Philippians 4:9

We've reached the end of our study of the spiritually disciplined life. It's the middle of Holy Week. We've enjoyed Palm Sunday, and soon we will visit the painful, yet crucial, events of Good Friday, leading to Easter's unequaled joy. What shall we say today?

Two thousand years after these events, we rededicate ourselves to taking what we've learned and, as Paul wrote, "put it into practice." Our intentional and dedicated discipleship has never been more important. These are troubled times; the evil one has doubled down on his assaults on the church and on every follower of Christ (1 Peter 5:8). Life is perilous for people of faith.

What's the answer to the dangers confronting us? It's not to run. There's no place to go. We still must deal with our old

nature (Ephesians 4:22). And we don't want to run from our Lord, who with grace and mercy saves us to enjoy new life with God forever. Salvation is not earned (Ephesians 2:8-9). We need to run *to* the Savior, the one who redeems us not only for eternity but for every day as we live with and for him.

By being spiritually disciplined every day we will put into practice all that Scripture has to teach us. And by living dedicated and disciplined lives, we'll find ourselves embraced by the God of grace and peace.

Lord, today we dedicate ourselves to your discipline. Help us to live as you want each day. For Christ's sake, Amen.

april

Living on the Right Side of Easter

Arthur J. Schoonveld

In April, Christians everywhere will join to observe two of the most momentous events in history: the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. In this month's devotions we'll walk with the risen Savior as he meets with his disciples, and then we'll turn to see how he continues his work on earth through his followers. We'll note how Jesus has changed the course of history by rising from the dead, and how, even today, the risen Savior can make a difference in the lives of us all. It is our prayer that as you read these meditations you too will meet the Savior, and, in the words of the apostle Paul, "know the power of his resurrection" (Philippians 3:10).

Art Schoonveld is a retired pastor who served churches in California, Illinois, and Michigan. Since his retirement he has worked part-time for the Christian Reformed Church in North America and has served as an interim pastor. He and his wife, Anita, have four married children and eleven grandchildren.

THE SUFFERING SAVIOR

He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.
—Isaiah 53:5

Several years ago our family went to see the film *The Passion of the Christ*. It was controversial because of its extreme violence and some apparent contradictions with the Bible. Some church leaders warned their members not to watch it.

Taking these matters into account, we still found the movie worthwhile and deeply moving. We walked out afterward in total silence because there was nothing to say. Several questions came to mind, though: Did Jesus really suffer all of that; were his beatings and crucifixion really as horrendous as the film portrayed them? And how could God the Father allow human hands to treat his only Son the way they did?

Some 700 hundred years before the crucifixion took place, the prophet Isaiah predicted and described Jesus' suffering.

According to Isaiah 53 this event was carefully planned by God himself. It is beyond human comprehension that the Son of God should willingly allow and accept such humiliation.

And he did it all for us: "He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities." In the words of a hymn, knowing what he suffered for our sake can cause us to "tremble, tremble, tremble."

Take time today to read Isaiah 53 again. As you do, ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand all that Jesus bore for your sake, for your salvation.

Lord Jesus, thank you for your willingness to suffer and die for us. Fill us with gratitude and awe for your great love. Amen.

LOVE WITHOUT LIMIT!

Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.
—John 13:1

You probably could have heard a pin drop when Jesus wrapped a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin, and began to wash the feet of his disciples. A rabbi washing the feet of his followers was totally unheard of. That was work for servants and slaves!

Even more amazing, this rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, was the Son of God. Imagine, if you can, that the sinless Son of God stooped in front of his disciples to wash their dirty feet—feet that would soon run away when soldiers came to arrest him. One of those disciples was about to betray him, and before dawn another would deny him three times.

But that's what Jesus did to show his love and to set an example. He said, "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet." Have we

understood what he is saying? At worship services this week, some will reenact what Jesus did so many years ago. Some of us have fasted during this season, or given up something else for Lent to remind ourselves of our need for salvation.

But have we gone out of our way to "wash someone's feet" by reaching out to people who need God's love and who need forgiveness? If not, let's not wait! Our Lord calls us to follow his example by humbling ourselves and serving others in his name.

Lord Jesus, teach us how to reach out to people who need your love. We ask in your name. Amen.

CRUCIFIED!

When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there
—Luke 23:33

“They crucified him”! These few words describe one of the most awesome events in history: the crucifixion of the Son of God. According to historians, crucifixion was one of the most brutal, degrading, and humiliating ways to be put to death. It was Rome’s favorite method, intended for the worst criminals.

The sinless Son of God was crucified between two criminals. It’s far beyond our human comprehension to understand how God the Father allowed his Son to be crucified, for death on a cross was cursed by God himself (Deuteronomy 21:23). But this was God’s way of saying to each of us, “The curse you deserve is placed on my Son.”

Jesus was crucified at “the place called the Skull,” also known as Calvary (from Latin), or Golgotha (Aramaic), a place of many executions, to let us

know that his cross stood in the midst of human suffering and misery. Through the cross of Christ, God himself entered into our broken lives in this world.

For those who wonder whether God cares about our suffering, here is God’s answer. Look at the cross and reflect on the words “they crucified him there.” Be assured that God cares more than we will ever know. He cared enough to let his Son be crucified, taking our place.

How will you respond to this love today?

Lord Jesus, your “love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.” Amen.

SECRET FOLLOWERS

Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders.
—John 19:38

A story is told about a Christian college student who spent his summer in the Yukon working with a lumber crew. Most of the workers did not seem to believe in God or in much of anything. When he returned to school, someone asked if it had been difficult to be the only Christian in a group of mostly unbelievers. His answer: "It was not difficult at all. I never told them I was a Christian."

Sometimes fear, embarrassment, or ridicule can influence us to hide the fact that we are followers of Jesus. For Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two prominent religious leaders, fear of the other Jewish leaders influenced them to keep their belief in Jesus a secret. But after Jesus' death, they stepped forward and asked Pilate for permission to bury the Lord's body.

In this way they showed their respect and love for him.

Sometimes it seems more comfortable to keep our relationship with Jesus a secret. Perhaps you find yourself at school or work or elsewhere surrounded by unbelievers, and you are hesitant to state that you are a follower of Christ. Perhaps you are afraid of losing a friend or of being ridiculed. If so, let go of your fear. Jesus said, "Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven" (Matthew 10:32).

It's never too late!

Father in heaven, fill us with courage to be willing to confess you wherever we may be. Because of Jesus, Amen.

CHRIST IS RISEN!

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said."

—Matthew 28:5-6

On the first Easter Sunday morning, two women were in for the surprise of their lives. Instead of finding a closed tomb, they found an open grave, and an angel greeting them with the words "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said." For them and for every follower of the Lord Jesus, life would never be the same. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead changed the course of history.

The resurrection is God's way of announcing that our life does not have to be a one-way journey to the cemetery. God is saying we don't have to be stuck in our past. The risen Savior has hit the delete button on our sins. We don't have to wonder who's in charge, because this Savior has been given all au-

thority in heaven and on earth. And we don't have to wonder what's ahead, because nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

So let's celebrate today! If your church sings this song, sing it out: "Christ the Lord is risen today! Alleluia!" And if you are not able to attend church, take some time to praise God that Jesus is alive. With Christians around the world we can say, "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!"

Risen Savior, on this day we worship you and thank you for your power over death. Help us to experience in our lives your resurrection power. Amen.

HAS EASTER MADE A DIFFERENCE?

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."
—John 16:33

Yesterday Christians everywhere celebrated the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Some of us sang the words, "I serve a risen Savior, he's in the world today." And our hearts resonated with every word.

Today we're back to school or work or at home facing the pressures of everyday life. But the risen Savior may not seem nearly as close today, and little may seem to have changed. We're still faced with that lingering disease, that broken relationship, those financial problems, or those hardships that come with growing older. We hear about poverty and persecution, about war and conflict in so many countries, and we might ask, "Has Easter really made a difference? Has anything changed in the past 2,000 years since Jesus' resurrection? Are things any better in the 21st

century than they were in the first century?"

Though nations, technology, and social institutions have changed a lot since then, the human condition is much the same. God's imagebearers are still addicted to sin. Jesus warned his followers, "In this world you will have trouble." But because he has overcome the world, we can have new life in him and peace in spite of our struggles. We can strive to enact God's restoration in our daily lives. We can share his love with others and look forward together to the day when the risen Savior will return!

Lord Jesus, help us to trust that you have overcome the world and will come again, making all things new. Amen.

BELIEVING THE UNBELIEVABLE

They did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.
—Luke 24:11

Some time ago I heard two people on a radio program talking about Christianity. One was sure that no thinking person could possibly take the Christian religion seriously, and to him the teaching of a physical resurrection was religious nonsense. I found his words very upsetting.

But it should not come as a surprise that millions of people find it hard to believe in a physical resurrection. According to today's verses, even Jesus' closest disciples, who had been with him for three years, had trouble believing it at first. Several women told them they had seen Jesus alive again. But in the words of our text, "Their words seemed to them like nonsense." Some of the disciples did not believe until they had seen the Savior in person.

It takes God's gift of faith to accept the fact of Jesus' resur-

rection. We need the eyes of faith to catch a glimpse of the risen Savior and believe that he is alive. If you find it impossible to believe that Jesus of Nazareth came back to life, read the gospel accounts and ask the Holy Spirit to convince you. And if you know someone who refuses to believe, pray for that person and ask the Spirit to open their eyes. Reason with them, and share with them the resurrection discussion in 1 Corinthians 15 so that, for them also, the unbelievable can become believable!

Father in heaven, help us to believe that Jesus rose from the dead, and make us your instruments in leading others to know you. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

PRAYING FOR OPEN EYES

They were kept from recognizing him. . . . Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him. . . . —Luke 24:16, 31

The two travelers to Emmaus were deeply disappointed. The person they had believed to be the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, had been put to death. To add to their confusion, they were told earlier that day that the tomb where Jesus had been buried was empty. And when a stranger joined them on their way home, they didn't recognize that it was "Jesus himself," risen from the dead.

We often have difficulty recognizing that Jesus is with us. It's possible to spend an entire day and not realize that Jesus has been right there. It's possible to read our Bible and not hear him speak. It's possible to go through the motions and words of prayer without paying attention. It's possible to sit in church and profess our faith and celebrate communion—and still not realize we are in the presence of our Savior and Lord.

On the Emmaus road Jesus walked with the two travelers and taught from the Scriptures. He even went in to eat with them. But they did not recognize him till he opened their eyes as he broke bread and gave thanks.

You and I can experience Jesus' presence today because he has promised to be with us always. Take a few moments today and ask yourself if anything is keeping you from recognizing the presence of the Savior. Ask him to open your eyes so that you can see him at work in your life.

"Open our eyes, Lord; we want to see Jesus." Please help us to experience your presence here and now. In your name, Amen.

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

When the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"
—John 20:19

You would not have known by watching the disciples that first Easter Sunday that something special had taken place. There were no celebrations, no special worship services, no one singing, "We serve a risen Savior." There were just a handful of fearful disciples hiding in a room.

The disciples likely felt that hiding was safer because of what might happen to them if they went out. They might be put to death, like their Teacher. Sitting behind closed doors seemed much more secure than venturing outside where people might laugh at you, avoid you, or, even worse, persecute you. It was only with the coming of the Holy Spirit that the disciples gained the courage to face danger for their faith in Christ.

Today's church spends a lot of time behind closed doors.

During my ministry I've sometimes done that instead of reaching out to people who needed me. For seven years I served a church near a rescue mission without ever meeting the people who lived there.

If you or your church spend too much time and effort behind closed doors, ask the Lord to forgive you. Ask him to open your eyes to the needs around you, and pray for courage to reach out to people who need to hear about the risen Savior.

Lord, our God, please give us the courage to step out of our comfort zones. Help us to serve where you want us to serve. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

DO CHRISTIANS DOUBT?

[Thomas] said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

—John 20:25

Thomas could not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. It was all too much, too overwhelming. He wanted physical proof, so he said, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

He's not alone. Many Christians have doubts at one time or another. Not long ago a close relative told me that as he gets older, he often has doubts. A young woman, shortly before she died, asked me, "Can I really believe what you have said about life after death?" Many of us would love to have proof that what the Bible teaches is true. Some of us have felt like the father who cried out to Jesus, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

Often we are afraid to admit we have doubts because of what

others might think. But don't be afraid to talk about your doubts and admit them to the Lord. He understands. He did not rebuke or shame Thomas. He helped him overcome his doubts by giving him the proof he asked for.

The Lord Jesus still wants to help us overcome our doubts. Turn to his Word and hear him say, "Stop doubting and believe." Talk to someone who can help turn your doubts into faith. Most of all, ask Jesus to help you trust in him.

Lord Jesus, come to us as we struggle with our doubts, and give us the assurance we look for. In your name we ask this. Amen.

WHEN YOU FAIL SOMEONE YOU LOVE

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" —John 21:15

Peter had been so sure that he would never deny his Lord. He really meant it when he had said, just a few days earlier, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you" (Matthew 26:35).

But Peter failed the one he loved by denying him three times (John 18:15-18, 25-27). And now he knew that he could never take back what he had done.

The only one who could make things right was the risen Savior. And that's what Jesus did.

When Jesus appeared to his disciples by the lake, he confronted Peter—not to humiliate him but to restore him. Instead of pointing out how Peter had failed him, Jesus asked a simple question: "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

Peter's answer is his confession: "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Three times Jesus asked the same question, and three times Peter confessed his love this way. His arrogance and self-reliance were gone.

We have all failed our Lord in some way. We may have done this by failing someone else in our lives, or perhaps we denied Jesus by our lifestyle. The only way for things to be right again is to respond to the Savior's call (since he is always with us), admit our failing, and confess that we love him. And, by his grace, he gives us a new beginning!

Lord Jesus, I confess that I have often failed. Please forgive me, and grant me a new beginning so that I can live for you. Amen.

THE PROMISE OF POWER

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

—Acts 1:8

The book of Acts is the fascinating story of how Jesus, the risen Savior, continues his work on earth through his disciples and his church. This is the story of a small band of Jesus' followers who were able to keep witnessing in spite of persecution. Eventually the good news of Jesus spread throughout the Roman Empire, and it continues to reach toward "the ends of the earth" today.

The book of Acts poses some important questions for today's Christians and the church. "What was their secret? How could one sermon bring in 3,000 converts? Why are many churches today shrinking instead of growing? And why are we often reluctant witnesses?" The answer is found in today's verse, Acts 1:8. The secret of the early church was Jesus' promise to fill them with the Holy Spirit's power.

Today too the church and Christians everywhere can claim the promise of the Spirit's power. The apostle Peter said in his Pentecost sermon, "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off" (Acts 2:39). When we claim that promise, we will be heard. Jesus said, "If you . . . know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13). Claim his promise today for yourself and your church!

Lord and Savior, fill us with the power of your Spirit so that we can bring your good news everywhere. In your name, Amen.

WITNESS THROUGH SHARING

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.
—Acts 2:44-45

Tertullian, a church leader in the second century, noted that unbelievers would say, after observing the lives of Christians, “See how they love each other.” As we read in the book of Acts, Christians in the early church expressed their love for Christ by making sure “there were no needy persons among them” (Acts 4:34).

These believers witnessed through sharing. Their generosity and compassion toward the needy pointed to the generosity and compassion of their Lord, who, “though he was rich,” became poor for our sake, so that we “through his poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). They understood what the apostle James wrote: “Faith without deeds is useless” (James 2:20).

Some Christians are reluctant witnesses because they think

they don’t know what to say. Regardless of how we feel about witnessing, or whether we feel inadequate, all of us can witness through sharing and by showing Christ’s love. My mother never had much opportunity to witness to unbelievers, but she witnessed by sharing from the little we had with a family that had even less.

You and I who serve the risen Savior can feed the hungry and reach out to the needy. Ask yourself today, How can I share? How can I be a living witness to the grace of Christ? Actions speak louder than words!

Lord, give us the grace to follow your example; help us to be your witnesses by sharing your love with others. Amen.

SPENDING TIME WITH JESUS

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. —Acts 4:13

Some years ago I heard someone comment that schools that train men and women for ministry should be attracting “the best and the brightest.” Thankfully, the Lord also uses some of us who don’t fit that description! In fact, according to the apostle Paul, “Not many [who were called] . . . were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth” (1 Corinthians 1:26).

Jesus’ disciples were ordinary people without an advanced education. But they had been taught by the Lord Jesus himself and were empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The Lord used these ordinary people to spread the good news about the risen Savior. And because of that they stood out. Those who questioned them “were astonished and . . . took

note that these men had been with Jesus.” That’s the key: they had been in Jesus’ presence.

Sometimes we may wonder, “Am I good enough to talk about the Lord? Do I know enough? Will others accept what I have to say?” The answer: Of course, if only we spend time with Jesus by listening to him and walking with him. If we do, it will become clear to the people around us, and they will recognize that we have been with Jesus. Are you willing to give it a try?

Lord our God, draw us into your presence, and help us to spend time with you so that others will see through our lives that we have been with Jesus. Amen.

REJOICING IN SUFFERING?

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. —Acts 5:41

Several years ago I had the privilege of preaching in a Christian church in Cairo, Egypt, among Sudanese Christians who had left their country because of persecution. Seeing how they worshiped, you would not have guessed they had suffered for their faith. They rejoiced in their suffering.

Their response was like that of the apostles. They had been arrested, questioned, threatened, and beaten for no other reason than that they shared the good news about Jesus. In spite of the threats of religious leaders, the apostles had the courage to say that they would obey God rather than people. And when they were let go, they rejoiced “because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” of Christ.

Those of us who live in countries where we have freedom

of religion find it almost impossible to imagine how millions of persecuted Christians today not only persevere but even rejoice in their suffering. And yet it happens every day.

There are many stories and testimonies of Christians who suffer daily for the name of Jesus Christ, and continually they thank the Lord for counting them worthy to suffer for his sake.

Only the power and presence of the risen Savior makes that possible!

Lord Jesus, today we pray for all who are persecuted for your name’s sake. Give them and all of us the grace to persevere—and even to rejoice. In your name we pray. Amen.

DOES SOMEONE NEED YOU?

“Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?”

—Acts 8:30-31

Commenting on this Bible passage, a preacher noted that almost every day there's someone, somewhere, who may need us. It could be someone who's struggling with an addiction or who suffers from depression. It could be someone who's trying to make sense of life or a person who's trying to find their way to the Lord. It could be someone who doesn't understand the teachings of the Bible. That preacher challenged us to listen to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and to tune in to the needs of the people around us.

It happened to an evangelist named Philip. He had been teaching about the Lord Jesus in Samaria when an angel of the Lord told him to leave there and go into the desert. Philip did as he was told, and because he listened to the Spirit's prompting, he was able to ex-

plain the suffering and death of Jesus predicted by the prophet Isaiah. Because of that encounter a government official from Ethiopia went home rejoicing, able to share the good news with others.

Perhaps today you'll meet someone who needs you, someone who needs to meet Jesus. It may be someone you have never met or someone you have known for a long time. Listen closely to the Spirit's prompting and follow his direction. He is eager and delighted to work through you!

Lord, help us listen to the prompting of your Spirit, and open our eyes to the needs of others around us. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

SURPRISED BY THE SAVIOR

Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. . . . "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

—Acts 9:3, 5

If ever someone hated Christianity and all it stood for, it was Saul. He "began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison" (Acts 8:3).

But now, on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians there, Saul was in for the surprise of his life. The risen Savior met him along the way and asked, "Why do you persecute me?" So the persecutor became a powerful ambassador for Christ, a missionary to the Gentiles, living proof that even the most hardened unbeliever can be changed.

That's why we can't ever give up on anyone. Not even the greatest sinner is beyond the Savior's reach. Shortly after World War II a close friend of my father became a believer. He was in his fifties and had been an un-

believer his entire life. During the war one of his sons died in a German concentration camp, but before his death he was able to write home about his faith in the Lord Jesus. Slowly the Spirit began speaking to the father. A short time later, when his wife on her deathbed had a vision of Christ, the man became convinced that Jesus is alive, and soon he confessed his faith.

The risen Savior is bringing people to himself today—perhaps through you and me. Are we willing to be used by him?

Father in heaven, help us to represent you so that through us someone may come to know the Savior. In his name, Amen.

RESTORED VISION

"The Lord . . . has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again.

—Acts 9:17-18

When Ananias brought the Lord's message and Saul received the Holy Spirit, Saul "could see again"! The blindness he had experienced for three days was gone—and so was his spiritual blindness. Before he met Jesus on the road to Damascus, Saul had been sure he had perfect vision and all the answers about God. Saul had been a Pharisee, part of an elite group of Jewish legal experts who believed they had special status with God.

Some Christians go through life thinking they have all the answers. Some are convinced they know more than anybody else. When it comes to finding God, they think they have 20/20 vision and can answer all your questions. Of course, none of us has perfect vision, and no one has all the answers. Even Old Testament Job, who

was "blameless and upright" according to the Bible, had to admit that there was much he did not understand. He confessed that he had limited vision, saying to the Lord, "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:5).

We too need to humble ourselves before the Lord and ask him to remove any "scales" from our eyes so that we can see him and serve him faithfully.

Lord God, give us humility and help us to see you clearly so that we can live fully for you. Forgive us for acting as if we know everything about things we don't understand. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

WHAT IF?

If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless, and so is your faith. . . . If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

—1 Corinthians 15:14, 19

In 1 Corinthians 15 the apostle Paul uses logical arguments to teach about resurrection and faith. He asks, in effect, What if the resurrection never happened? What if the Lord Jesus had not risen from the dead? What if we have fooled ourselves into believing we serve a risen Savior?

Then, in response, Paul says, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.” If Christ has not risen from death, we are to be pitied because our life is without meaning. Without the resurrection, everything will come to an end, and life is a one-way journey to the cemetery. Without the resurrection, we have no future—no hope of eternal life. Our past will catch up with us, and when we die, we will stand condemned before God.

But through Christ’s resurrection our sins are forgiven, we have purpose in life, and we have a future. In one of our confessions the question is asked, “How does Christ’s resurrection benefit us?” The answer is this: “He has overcome death, so that he might make us share in the righteousness he obtained for us by his death. . . . By his power we too are already raised to a new life. . . . Christ’s resurrection is a sure pledge to us of our blessed resurrection.”

Thank God that Christ has risen from the dead! Do you have new life in him?

Lord Jesus, thank you for the power of your resurrection. Thank you that even today we are being raised to new life. Amen.

NO CONDEMNATION

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
—Romans 8:1

One evening, after a Bible discussion at a local rescue mission, a young resident asked me if we could talk. He told me about some of the things he had been involved in and how he had made a mess of his young life. With tears in his eyes he asked me if God could ever forgive him. His guilt was tearing him up inside.

Guilt can rob us of our peace of mind and take the joy out of our lives. In Psalm 32 King David outlines what guilt did to him—and what it can do to any of us. David writes, “When I kept silent [in the guilt of my sin], my bones wasted away Day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped”

But because of Jesus’ resurrection, we can get rid of our guilt. We don’t have to go through life looking over our shoulder, afraid that our past will catch

up with us. We don’t have to live with guilt; we can get rid of it by confessing whatever we have done.

The apostle John affirms, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins” (1 John 1:9). The apostle Paul says virtually the same thing: “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

If you are burdened with guilt, come to the Savior, confess, and ask for forgiveness. If you don’t know how to pray, ask someone to pray for you. There’s forgiveness for all who come to him.

Lord Jesus, thank you for paving the way so that we can be forgiven. Forgive our sins today, we pray, in your name. Amen.

FEELING TRAPPED?

What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? . . . This too is meaningless.

—Ecclesiastes 2:22-23

Imagine a group of people being placed in a room without any exit. As much as they might try, there is no way out. They are trapped!

Today untold numbers of people feel trapped in the situations of their lives.

Some feel trapped in the everyday routine of running a household and raising children. A young mother with three preschool children told me that she was “climbing the walls” from boredom. Others dread going to work to face a never-ending round of “the same old thing.” Still others find themselves trapped in a wheelchair or a bed, unable to get out.

In 1 Corinthians 15 the apostle Paul admits that life is meaningless without the risen Savior. Paul even says that if Christ has not been raised, we may as well

live it up, as the Epicurean philosophers of his day suggested: “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Corinthians 15:32). Only the risen Savior can help us see that there is more to life than meets the eye.

If you feel trapped, turn to the Savior and ask him to open the door to the freedom he has come to bring: new life that we can live fully and forever with God!

Lord Jesus, we pray for all who feel trapped in their lives. Please bring someone to lead them to you and help them see that you alone can bring meaning to our lives. In your name, Amen.

THAT'S WHY WE SING

*"Death has been swallowed up in victory." . . . Thanks be to God!
He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

—1 Corinthians 15:54, 57

At almost every memorial service I have led throughout my years of ministry, I have read today's verses. When people were faced with the reality of death, it was my privilege to say for all to hear, "Death has been swallowed up in victory." Sometimes the congregation would respond with a song that includes these words: "Death cannot keep its prey—Jesus, my Savior; he tore the bars away—Jesus my Lord."

That is the reality for all believers who find themselves mourning in a funeral home or beside a grave, faced with what the apostle Paul refers to as "the last enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:26).

We can be sure of this because of Jesus' claim at the grave of his friend Lazarus: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live,

even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die" (John 11:25-26).

Take the time to memorize or reread these words of our Lord Jesus and of the apostle Paul, because someday each one of us will face death. Remember these words when you find yourself standing before an open grave. Give your life to the Lord Jesus, the risen Savior who assures us that death has been swallowed up in victory. He is our guarantee that death will not have the last word!

Thank you, Lord Jesus,
that death does not have
the final word. Thank you
for overcoming death for
us. In your name we pray.
Amen.

LIVING ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF EASTER

Since . . . you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God . . . not on earthly things.
—Colossians 3:1-2

Several years ago someone made the comment that too many Christians are living on the *wrong* side of Easter. Too many Christians, he said, are living as if Christ was not raised from the dead. They go through life without joy or peace, without showing the fruit of the Spirit Paul talks about in Galatians 5:22-23.

In today's verses we find that it does not have to be that way, because as Christians we have been raised with Christ. Says Paul, "*Since* you have been raised with Christ . . ."—not "if" or "when." The resurrection of the Lord Jesus is not just something that happened in the past; it affects every follower of Jesus also today. As one of our confessions puts it, by Jesus' power we "are already raised to a new life."

Because of Christ's resurrection power in our lives, we can learn

to set our hearts "on things above." We can learn to loosen our grip on "earthly things." The Lord Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matthew 6:19-20).

You and I have to learn to live on the right side of Easter by claiming the power of the risen Savior every day. Ask yourself, "Which side of Easter am I on?"

Lord Jesus, fill us with your power, and give us the grace to show that power in our lives. In your name we pray. Amen.

IS IT REALLY POSSIBLE?

Put to death . . . whatever belongs to your earthly nature . . . You must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language. . . . —Colossians 3:5, 8

Some things are easier said than done. Some things look good on paper but don't always work in everyday life. The apostle Paul tells us to put to death whatever belongs to our earthly nature. But is that really possible? Ask people struggling with an addiction, and they will tell you how hard it is to overcome. A resident in a rehab facility said that as long as he was there, everything was fine, but as soon as he got out, he was back to doing the same thing.

Some Christians teach that when you give your life to Christ, your problems will be solved. Surrender to the Lord's power, and your cravings will be gone. Ask Jesus into your life, and there will be no more lying, no more cheating, no more profanity. Unfortunately it's not that simple!

Putting to death our earthly nature is a lifelong struggle. The only way to win the battle is to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit and to make use of the means he provides. For some people that means a rehab center, and for others it means attending meetings for a lifetime. And all of us need the church, the workshop of the Holy Spirit, to help us put off our earthly nature and put on good things, such as "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness," forgiveness, and love (see Colossians 3:12-14). Are these things a part of your life?

Father, fill us with your power to put away the things that trip us up. Guide us to people and facilities that can give us the support we need. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WHATEVER YOU DO

Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

—Colossians 3:17

The other day I heard someone ask another person, “What do you do?” The person answered by saying, “Oh, I’m just a housewife.” Perhaps you too have heard someone say, “I’m just a farmer,” or “I’m just a secretary,” or “I’m just a factory worker,” or “I’m just a country preacher.” In any culture we have our rankings, and our sense of worth is often measured by the work we do. The more impressive your career, the more “important” you are. Celebrities especially get lots of attention when something happens in their lives.

Thankfully the Bible does not measure our worth by how high we have climbed the social ladder or how much education we have. In today’s verse we read, “*Whatever you do . . . do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.*” When life on earth comes to an

end, what matters is not how high we climbed, but whether we were faithful to the Lord in whatever calling we pursued. What counts is whether we clothed ourselves with compassion, humility, patience, and other fruitful signs of Christ’s work in our lives.

My father was a farm laborer most of his life. He never served on a board or received recognition. But he was faithful in his calling, and he served the Lord as he raised his family. Whatever he did, he tried to do it in the name of the Lord. And that’s what counts!

Father in heaven, make each one of us faithful in our calling, and help us to do all things “in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Amen.

OUR LIVING HOPE

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. —1 Peter 1:3

Mother Teresa was a faithful mission worker in Calcutta, India, and she described her work of mercy with the poorest of the poor in these words: “We want to create hope for the person . . . we must give hope, always hope.” She was determined to pass along something of the living hope she had through her Lord Jesus Christ.

Two thousand years earlier the apostle Peter did the same thing in a letter that is now part of the Bible. He wanted to share with other believers that we have “new birth into a living hope” through Jesus’ resurrection. He wrote to people who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Because of persecution for their faith in Christ, many had left their homes and lost their possessions.

Peter reminded his readers that in spite of hardships and chal-

lenges, they had a living hope because of Jesus Christ. They had received a new identity through their new birth into Christ’s family. Those believers who had given up everything for Jesus had an inheritance that, unlike the things they had owned before, could “never perish, spoil or fade.”

If you find yourself somewhere in life without much hope, re-read today’s Bible passage and be assured that because of Jesus Christ you too can have living hope.

Father in heaven, thank you for the hope we have because of Jesus Christ, your Son, the risen Savior, in whose name we pray. Amen.

REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. —1 Peter 2:9

During an interview at a church service a Christian actress was asked how she could live and work in Hollywood and still be true to her convictions. Her answer was quite simple: "I always try to remember who I am." For her the most important thing was to keep her identity as a Christian, no matter what.

It's easy to forget who we are. For a student at a public university, surrounded by people skeptical about Christianity, it can be awkward to hold to your beliefs and try to live God's way. At a wild frat party with friends, it may be tempting to forget that you have committed to live for Jesus. When working with people who have little use for religion, it may seem safer not to mention that you are a Christian. On a business trip with little to do at night it may seem easier to go along with

others who engage in immorality than to resist because you are a Christian.

It would have been easy for the early Christians to forget who they were in Christ. Life had become difficult for them because they were followers of Jesus. That's why Peter wrote to them—and to us—"You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession." It's only when we remember who we are that we can call others out of darkness into the light of Jesus.

Lord our God, help us to remember who you have made us to be, and help us to praise you through our lives. Amen.

OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST

Since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses.

—Hebrews 4:14-15

Occasionally I'm asked to lead a worship time at a local assisted care facility for people who can no longer care for themselves. Some of the residents have frequent visitors, but others spend their days without family or friends. They are often lonely because few people other than the staff pay attention to them. Once a resident whispered to me, "I have no one!"

It's been a privilege to talk with them about the great high priest who, in the words of the writer of Hebrews, is able "to sympathize with our weaknesses."

The risen Savior is able to feel what we feel. He can feel our pain, he sees our tears, and he knows our sorrow. He also knows about loneliness.

But talk is cheap. The lonely people in our lives need more

than talk. They need to sense the presence of the great high priest through us.

The great high priest wants to use you and me to represent him, to remind them, through our presence, of his care.

Take some time today to think of people you know who have no one and who need to be reminded of the presence of the risen Savior. Then make time to write or call or visit.

Lord Jesus, be with those who have no one in their lives, and move us to be willing to represent you. For your sake and in your name we pray. Amen.

GOD IS ALIVE!

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. —Revelation 1:4-5

In the movie *God's Not Dead*, a university professor who is an avowed atheist insists on the first day of class that all of his students sign a statement saying, "God is dead!" Everyone signs the statement—except for one student, a Christian, who sets out to convince the class that God is not dead. He uses several Bible passages to back his claim.

Today's verses tell us in clear and unmistakable language that the God of the Bible, the God we serve, is alive. He is the God "who is, and who was, and who is to come." These words serve notice to everyone that this God who lives in eternity is also in charge of the universe. He is "the ruler of the kings of the earth." He has come to us through his Son, the Lord Jesus

Christ, "the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead."

Someday, perhaps sooner than we think, the ruler of the universe, the Lord our God, will come again. And on that day every eye will see him, and every knee will bow, even the knees of those who refuse to believe in him.

Today this Lord still offers his grace and peace to each one of us, and he invites us to acknowledge him as Lord of all.

Have you recognized Christ as the Lord of all?

Dear Lord, please use us to spread the good news that you are alive forevermore. And come soon, Lord Jesus, we pray. Amen.

BECAUSE HE LIVES

Stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

—1 Corinthians 15:58

In worship services around the world, Christians have often sung these words: “Because he lives, I can face tomorrow; because he lives, all fear is gone; because I know he holds the future, and life is worth the living *just because he lives.*” In today’s verse the apostle Paul expresses the same thought: Because of Jesus’ resurrection we have every reason to live life to the fullest.

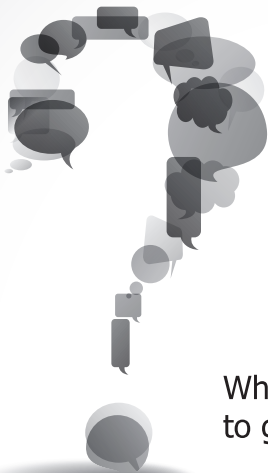
Of course, that’s easier said than done. Sometimes we wonder about the truth. Sometimes we doubt. So many things in life can shake us up, and sometimes our everyday struggles have a way of moving us away from the Savior, keeping us from experiencing his presence.

Still, the risen Savior gives his power and peace to help us stand firm in spite of setbacks in our lives.

Just this past year I heard an eighth-grade student speak of the power of Jesus in his life. He has spent his entire life in a wheelchair because of a debilitating disease. But he said, “Some people see me at school, or at the movies, or shopping, and they think, ‘Why isn’t he walking?’ They might feel sad. But I don’t feel sad, because I feel happy every day. Jesus has given me kind friends. God has blessed me!” This young boy has experienced the power of Jesus’ resurrection, a power that’s ours for the asking!

Father in heaven, may we all experience the power of the risen Savior. For his name’s sake, Amen.

Have questions about faith?



What do I say when my friend is hurting?

How does God want me to live my life?

Is God testing my faith?

Why do bad things happen to good people?

Dig deeper into scripture -- join the conversation at groundworkonline.com

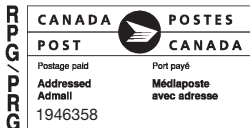
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