

A large, rustic wooden cross is the central focus, set against a dramatic sky with blue and white clouds. The cross is made of two thick, weathered wooden beams. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds, and the overall tone is serene and contemplative.

# Today

Mar/Apr 2016

refresh, refocus, renew

**NEAR  
THE CROSS**

**ALSO: THE EDUCATION OF MOSES**

Friends:

I once saw a sign in a coffee shop written in Latin. I've never learned Latin, but, having studied some other languages, I tried to puzzle out what the sign said. I recognized a few words and tried to guess at some others. Finally, I gave up and looked it up on the Internet. The translation: "If you can read this, you're too educated."



Maybe that's true! Education is supposed to be about preparation. We learn so that we can work and lead well in this world. The goal is to glorify God in our everyday life, and we study so that we can use our gifts in the best way possible. It's never too late to learn to serve and glorify God more.

In April, Pastor David Den Haan shows us how Moses was prepared for ministry. God gave him both formal education and hard lessons in the world. But how well was Moses prepared, and how well did he serve?

But first, in March, as we progress through the season of Lent, Pastor Tom Groelsema calls us to stand near the cross. Easter is the center of history! We'll see how the Bible—from Genesis through Revelation—points us to the cross.

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

—Steven Koster

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**“Near the Cross”  
Tom Groelsema**



**“The Education of Moses”  
David Den Haan**

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**ReFrame**  
Media

# march

## Near the Cross

**Tom Groelsema**

In March, Christians everywhere will celebrate two of the most important days in world history: the crucifixion and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. In this month's devotions we'll trace how the cross of Christ is central to the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. In the Old Testament, God promised a Savior who would come and suffer for sinners. In the gospel accounts of the New Testament we see the events of Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection. And from Acts through Revelation we discover the impact that the cross has on our life. As we read and reflect on these meditations, may our prayer constantly be "Jesus, keep me near the cross."

*Tom Groelsema is the senior pastor of a church in Byron Center, Michigan. He has served there for seventeen years, having been the pastor of a church in Minnesota before that. Tom and his wife, Sheri, have one married son and three daughters.*

## BOASTING IN THE CROSS

*May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*  
—Galatians 6:14

Nobody likes a boaster or bragger. Boasting is self-centered. It shows that we think we're better than others. When we boast, we're obsessed with ourselves and our accomplishments. But we all do it. Parents boast about their kids. Athletes boast about their awards. Students boast about their grades.

Paul boasted too. But what made his boasting unusual was that he boasted about something completely outside himself: the cross of Christ. He was obsessed with Jesus and his work on the cross. Paul had many things that he could boast about, such as his heritage and his careful obedience to the law. But he realized that the cross of Christ was his only real reason to boast. Only that could give him eternal life.

If we're looking for something to boast about, let it be the

cross of Jesus. The cross marks a new beginning for us with God. It's where our sins were put to death. It's where our forgiveness was secured. It sets a new direction for our life with new pleasures, passions, and pursuits—a life lived for God.

When our boast is in the cross and what Jesus accomplished for us there, we'll have a good start at staying near the cross. Let this be our prayer this month: "Jesus, keep me near the cross."

Lord Jesus, you gave your life on the cross to pay for our sins and to give us new life. As we journey through Lent, help us never to stray from the cross. In your name we pray. Amen.

## A PROMISE TO LIVE BY

*"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel."*  
—Genesis 3:15

Genesis 2 tells us about Adam and Eve, whom God created. It's a story of happiness and perfect fellowship between God and humankind.

In contrast, Genesis 3 is one of the most discouraging chapters in the Bible, because it describes the fall into sin. Even so, right in the middle of this chapter is the Bible's first promise of a Savior.

The promise goes this way: one of Eve's descendants would someday crush the head of the sneaky serpent. The serpent deceived our first parents to sin, bringing brokenness into all our lives. Genesis 3 explains what's wrong in our world. It explains broken relationships, illness, death, suffering, cosmic disasters, and our need to have our relationship with God made right again by a Savior.

Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise to save. He came from Eve's line, a real human who could take our place in paying for sin. His heel was struck, so to speak, as he suffered on the cross, but in so doing he crushed the serpent's head. Jesus is the one who makes right what is wrong in our world.

The Bible's first promise of salvation is a promise to live by. The whole message of the Bible points to our Savior, Jesus.

In what ways has sin brought brokenness into your life? The promise of Christ brings saving grace and restoration.

Jesus, you crushed our enemy, "that ancient serpent . . . the devil" (Revelation 12:9). Thank you for the victory we have through you. Amen.

## HE DID NOT SPARE HIS OWN SON

*“Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” . . . “God himself will provide the lamb. . . .”*  
—Genesis 22:7-8

It was a test of faith that no parent would want to face. God called Abraham to sacrifice his son.

Isaac was the one and only son God had given to Abraham and Sarah as part of the covenant promises. Through Isaac, Abraham and his descendants would be a blessing to the nations. Isaac was therefore special and dearly loved. But the promises of the covenant must have seemed to vanish with this extreme call from God.

It must have been a long, solemn walk up the mountain. Isaac wondered where the lamb for sacrifice was. Abraham, believing in God’s promises, said that God would provide the lamb. By faith, Abraham trusted God to provide. He trusted that God would somehow keep his promises. And as Abraham

raised the knife in obedience to kill Isaac, God stopped him.

It was clear that Abraham loved God. And God did provide a sacrifice in Isaac’s place. A ram, caught in the bushes nearby, became the substitute.

The near sacrifice of Isaac points to the sacrifice of Jesus. God gave us the Son he loved, his one and only Son. But at the cross, God “did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all” (Romans 8:32). He is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

Father, may we never stop being amazed at what your love for us cost you. We praise you that you did not spare your Son but gave him up for us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## SAVED BY THE BLOOD

*"The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt."* —Exodus 12:13

No event in Israel's history was more recognized and remembered than the Passover. The Feast of the Passover was celebrated every year. It recalled how the angel of death "passed over" the houses of Israel but killed the firstborn of the Egyptians. The Passover was the event that finally set Israel free from slavery in Egypt.

What made the difference between life and death? What determined whether a family's house was passed over or the firstborn died? Blood. God told the people of Israel to choose a lamb without defect and to offer it as a sacrifice. They had to smear the lamb's blood all around the door of their house, and when the angel came and saw the blood, he would pass by that house. Everyone in that house would be spared. The blood of the sacrificed lamb

would protect them. But in every home that did not have the blood of the lamb, the firstborn would die.

On the night before he died, Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples one last time. The next day he would die on the cross as the true Passover lamb. He shed his blood for us, and his blood saves us from eternal death.

Are you covered by the gift of Jesus' blood? Whom can you guide to Jesus for the salvation his blood gives?

Lord Jesus, your blood saves. We worship and love you for the way you laid down your life for us at the cross. In your name we pray. Amen.

## GOD PROVES HIS LOVE

*"I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink."*

—Exodus 17:6

Sometimes life feels like a wilderness. Life can feel barren, empty, and dry. In those times God may seem far away.

Israel went through that experience. They literally were in a wilderness, and there was no water to drink. It seemed as if God had abandoned them. They grumbled against Moses and blamed God for their desperate situation. They wanted God to prove that he still loved them.

Have you ever found yourself feeling the same thing?

God proved his love to Israel in an amazing, gracious way. God told Moses to strike a rock with his staff. This was the same staff that Moses had used to deliver God's judgment of plagues on Egypt (Exodus 7-10). God put himself at the rock as well, and the result was water for the people to drink.

At the cross of Jesus, something similar happened. Jesus put himself willingly on the cross for our sake so that we could receive the water of life (see John 4:14; 7:37-39). Paul put it this way: "[Israel] drank from the spiritual rock . . . and that rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4).

When life feels like a wilderness, how can you know God loves you? Look to the cross and see the life-giving love of our Savior, Jesus.

Father, when we question your love, may the cross convince us that your love for us is real. No one could love us more than you do. In Jesus' name, Amen.

**BECAUSE 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

A friend of mine had been exposed to so much suffering and pain that she didn't know how to deal with it any longer. The suffering wasn't so much something she experienced personally; it was from events she witnessed in the lives of others. She was around people who lost loved ones in house fires and car accidents. She reported on stories of children who were abused. All of it became too much to bear. The anguish was overwhelming. She needed hope. She needed to know that there was something good in life.

She found that hope in Jesus and his cross. She accepted an invitation from a friend to come to church. As she entered the building, she saw a cross in front of the worship space and her heart softened. The cross communicated that God loved her and sent his Son to be her

Savior. She heard the gospel. She kept coming to worship and eventually became a believer in Jesus.

As you meet for worship today, there might be a cross in your place of worship. Don't worship the cross, but do worship the Christ of the cross and be overwhelmed by God's love for you. As someone has said, "When you wonder how much God loves you, see Jesus' arms stretched wide at the cross and hear him say, 'I love you this much.'"

On this day of worship, we glorify you, crucified Lord Jesus Christ. We worship you, Father, for your great love for us in Christ. Amen.

## LOOK AND LIVE

*The LORD said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." —Numbers 21:8*

Not many people like snakes. Very few people would choose a snake as their favorite animal. Snakes slither. They're sneaky. Some of them have deadly, venomous bites.

Israel complained against God in the wilderness. The wilderness was barren, hot, and empty. It seemed to them that God had taken them to the desert to die. In response to their complaints, God sent snakes, which bit the people—and many died.

But it was a snake on a pole that brought healing. The very thing that caused people death gave life. First, Israel confessed their sin. Then God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole, and everyone who looked at it would live. They weren't told to make medicine, to educate themselves about venom, or to pray to the snake. All they needed to do was look.

They needed to look away from themselves and to believe in God's promise.

Jesus told Nicodemus that just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man would be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life (John 3:14-15). Jesus took on our sin. In fact, he became "sin for us" (2 Corinthians 5:21). He identified with our sin and was lifted up on the cross to pay for it.

God invites us to look to Jesus and live. Have you done that?

Saving God, thank you that Jesus was lifted up in our place so that by faith in him we may be forgiven, be healed, and live. In his name we pray. Amen.

## THE CURSE OF THE CROSS

*Anyone who is hung on a pole is under God's curse.*

—Deuteronomy 21:23

In Bible times, dying by crucifixion or by being hung on a pole was the worst way to die. It was a slow, painful death. It was also public. You died before a watching world, not in the privacy of your home, with loved ones surrounding you. It also meant that your death was punishment for a crime. No one died naturally by crucifixion.

The biggest reason this kind of death was so awful was that it meant you died under the curse of God. Not only were you judged by others, but you died under God's judgment. That's the most terrible way to die. There's nothing worse than facing eternity without the favor of God.

Death on a cross (hoisted up on a pole) is the way Jesus died for us. He suffered tremendous physical pain, but, even more, he died under the curse of God.

He was sinless, but he became cursed for us. He carried all our sins and was judged for them.

It's important that Jesus didn't die from natural causes or in an accident. Only by dying on a cross could he take our sin away and restore us to a saving relationship with God. No human being could do that for us.

God's plan for our salvation is perfect. Be assured that by trusting in Jesus, you can live and die with God's favor on you.

O God, we praise you that Jesus took the curse of our sin on himself. We bless you that by trusting in Jesus for salvation, we can live and die under God's forgiveness. Amen.

## WASH ME, AND I WILL BE CLEAN

*Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.*  
—Psalm 51:7

Psalm 51 is David's great psalm of confession after committing adultery with Bathsheba and arranging the murder of her husband (see 2 Samuel 11-12). It's a model psalm showing us how to confess our own sins to God. Its cries for mercy, honest acknowledgement of sin, and statements of renewed commitment to God are great examples for us to use in our own prayers.

Where did David find hope as he confessed? He wrote, "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow." Hyssop was a small, brush-like plant in Israel. It's mentioned in connection with the Passover; the Israelites used it to spread blood on the doorframes of their homes (Exodus 12:21-22). Later it was used to sprinkle blood on the tabernacle to dedi-

cate it to God and on people with skin diseases so that they would be cleansed. Hyssop, blood, cleansing, and forgiveness all go together in the Bible, and David's plea to be cleansed with hyssop was like saying, "Wash me with blood, and I will be forgiven."

The blood of Jesus is our hope of forgiveness. When we confess our sins and are washed in the blood of Jesus, we are made clean. No sin sticks to people who trust in Christ. Confess your sins and believe in him today.

Lord God, thank you that there is complete cleansing for us in the blood of Jesus. We confess our need for forgiveness, and we trust in the finished work of Christ. Amen.

## FAMILIAR WITH SUFFERING

*He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.*  
—Isaiah 53:3

Have you ever wondered whether Jesus really understands what you're going through when you suffer? Suffering can be so lonely. We sometimes wonder whether anyone, especially Jesus, knows, cares, or can relate.

Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would be well acquainted with suffering. Jesus' suffering started the first day of his life. Think about it: the Son of God was born without anyone noticing. How different it is today when royalty is born. There's a nine-month birth watch. Not so with Jesus.

His suffering continued throughout his life. He was despised, hated, and rejected. He had no place to call home. There was nothing in his appearance to draw us to him. In fact, we might even have been repulsed.

Jesus' sufferings, though, were greatest at the end of his life. He was mocked, spit on, deserted by his disciples, and ultimately crucified. He died alone, carrying our sin.

Can Jesus relate to your suffering? Yes. But don't forget that he suffered not just to relate but to save. His suffering was redemptive. He suffered for us so that our sufferings as believers might give us one more way to show we are becoming like him. Bring your sufferings to God in prayer, and know that God cares because of Jesus.

Lord Jesus, we bring our suffering cries to you, knowing that you understand what suffering is. Use our sufferings to make us more like you and to draw us closer to you. In your name, Amen.

**IN OUR PLACE CONDEMNED HE STOOD**

*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

I remember that in grade school we would sometimes have a substitute teacher who would fill in for the regular teacher. In baseball, a similar thing happens. Sometimes the coach pulls a hitter out of the game and replaces him with a pinch hitter, a substitute.

Jesus died as a substitute for us. That means he died in our place. We deserved to be pierced, crushed, and crucified for our sin, but Jesus suffered our punishment instead. He was smitten and afflicted by God, taking the judgment for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Jesus took our guilt even though he was innocent and totally without sin. And Isaiah tells us the result: Jesus received our punishment so that we could receive peace with God and be healed.

There's a story about a master and servant who took a journey together and were caught in a deadly snowstorm. For days they were missing. Finally the master was found, frozen to death facedown in the snow. Under him, the servant was found alive. The servant lived because the master covered him. The master died in his place.

Praise God—that's what Jesus did for us. Do you believe this?

Father, thank you that Jesus is the perfect substitute for us. We praise you that by faith our guilt became his and his innocence became ours. In his name we pray. Amen.

## RESCUED AT SEA

*"You, LORD my God, brought my life up from the pit. . . 'Salvation comes from the LORD.'"*  
—Jonah 2:6, 9

One of the most dramatic stories in the Bible is that of Jonah. God told Jonah to go to the wicked city of Nineveh and call it to repent. Instead, Jonah ran from the Lord and boarded a ship heading in the opposite direction. God sent a storm that threatened to sink the boat. Jonah told the sailors that if they threw him overboard, the ship would be saved. So they did, and Jonah was also saved when God sent a great fish that swallowed him and eventually spit him up on land.

Imagine praying while inside the belly of a fish! But that's what Jonah did. Jonah 2 includes a prayer song of praise and thanks to God. Jonah recognized that God saved him from death and gave him a new lease on life. Jonah said, in effect, "I sank to the bottom of the sea, but God, you raised me

up." He ended with this confession: "Salvation comes from the LKNA"

Jonah's story points to Jesus. Jonah was thrown into the sea so that the sailors would be spared. Jesus gave up his own life so that we can be spared from eternal death. Jesus also sank into the depths of a tomb, but God raised him up on the third day.

Indeed, "salvation comes from the LKNA" Have you made this same confession?

Lord Jesus, as we prepare for worship tomorrow, may we worship in the light of your death and resurrection for us. In your name we pray. Amen.

## WORTHY IS THE LAMB, WHO WAS SLAIN

*"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"*

—Revelation 5:12

Today followers of Jesus will gather to worship the Savior who was slain. Some will gather in churches or cathedrals, others will meet in homes and huts, and still others will worship in prisons. Some will worship traditionally, and others will do so with a modern bent. Many will meet publicly, and some will gather in secret. But all will worship the Savior who laid down his life for them.

At the center of Revelation 5 is a surprising, beautiful vision of Jesus. On the one hand, Jesus is described as a lion. He's strong and is able to open the scroll that contains God's redemptive plan. He alone is able to carry it out. On the other hand, he looks like a lamb that was slain. Humble and gentle, he gave himself over to death.

How could Jesus be both a lion and a lamb? The two images

don't seem to fit. The answer is that he is the King because he was willing to die. Jesus has received a crown because he carried the cross. Only by having died for us is he able to bring history to a victorious end for God and his people.

As you worship today, wherever you are, glorify Jesus for the gift of salvation. Join with fellow Christians and with the angels in heaven in shouting out, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain!"

Jesus, by your blood you purchased us for God from every tribe, language, people, and nation. We praise you that you are still saving those who trust in you. Amen.

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

*"She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."*

—Matthew 1:21

Before each of our four children was born, my wife and I spent some time thinking about what we would like to name them. Sometimes we looked through books of names, hoping one would grab our attention. Other times we heard a name that we liked. We also thought about relatives' names. Each time we found a name, we would rehearse it with our last name to make sure it sounded good.

Joseph and Mary didn't choose Jesus' name. It was given to them by an angel of God. The angel said, "Give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." The name Jesus means "Savior." It reflects the mission Jesus came to accomplish. There was no doubt, from the very beginning of his life, what he would do. The Father sent Jesus to "save his people from their sins." This

was his life's goal. Everything in his life was about preparing for and completing that task. Suffering, rejection, and the cross were always before him.

I wonder if Joseph and Mary ever thought about naming Jesus something else. Maybe they did, but they followed the angel's instructions: they named him Jesus. And just as his name describes, Jesus went on to become the Savior. There's no other name like Jesus.

Thank you, Jesus, for saving us from our sins. In your name we pray. Amen.

## BAPTIZED AND TEMPTED

*As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw . . . the Spirit descending on him. . . . And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." —Mark 1:10-11*

As we learn from Mark's gospel account, Jesus' ministry started with his baptism by John and with a time of temptation by Satan.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus was baptized by John? John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He called people to repent and then baptized all who confessed their sin.

But Jesus didn't need to repent or receive forgiveness. He was sinless. John understood that and said to Jesus, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matthew 3:14). But Jesus insisted. He didn't need a baptism for his own sin, but he needed it for ours. In his baptism, Jesus identified with us sinners. It's as if he was saying, "I need to be washed because my people's sin has become my own." Jesus is our perfect Savior

who resisted temptation and sin by the power of the Spirit and was commended by the Father.

What temptations are you facing today? What sins have you committed that you need forgiveness for? You don't need to look any further than Jesus for help. He understands temptation and forgives sin. Bring your temptations and failures to him for his strength and cleansing.

Jesus, thank you for obeying the Father perfectly, stepping into our sin and carrying it for us. We love you as the perfect Savior. In your name we pray. Amen.

## A FRIEND OF SINNERS

*"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*  
—Mark 2:17

It's interesting to think about the people Jesus would spend time with if he lived physically among us today. Would he hang out with saints or sinners? Jesus surely would not have neglected either group, but it's clear that he came for people who were spiritually desperate.

Levi (also known as Matthew) was that sort of man. He was a tax collector for the enemy Roman government. Like other tax collectors, he may also have been corrupt, growing rich by charging excessive taxes and pocketing the extra change. He was the kind of person that hardworking, respectable people didn't like. Most would have thought he had no chance with God. Yet, he was someone whom Jesus went after in his grace. Levi was just the kind of person Jesus came to save.

Jesus' words remind us that there's no one his love cannot reach. He didn't come "to call the righteous, but sinners." He came to share God's love with people who were spiritually sick and unsavory. He came for each of us, no matter our sin. And he has called us to follow him.

Jesus also calls us to reach out with his love. Are you building relationships with people in need of Christ, or only with other believers? Are our churches like hospitals where the sick and messy can find healing and mercy? May we be a friend to sinners, just as Jesus was.

Lord Jesus, thank you for rescuing the broken with your grace. May we be as loving and compassionate as you are. In your name we pray. Amen.

## KEEPING YOUR EYES ON THE CROSS

*He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and . . . be killed and after three days rise again.*

—Mark 8:31

Did you know that Jesus was “cross-eyed”? Not literally, of course. But Jesus’ eyes were always focused on the cross.

That’s what Mark 8 teaches. There was a turning point in Jesus’ ministry when he began to speak plainly about the cross. Early in his ministry he kept quiet about his sufferings and death. But then one day he didn’t do that anymore.

The way Jesus spoke about his death gives us a great example of how we can share Christ. He spoke plainly about his sufferings. We should not complicate the simple message that Jesus died for sinners. It’s a simple and wonderful truth that Jesus took our sins and was punished for them so that we can be forgiven. That good news needs to be shared plainly, without complicated words.

Jesus also spoke about the necessity of his sufferings. He said that he must suffer. There was no other way for salvation to be accomplished. This example of Jesus reminds us that the need for salvation is urgent. No one can be saved without the forgiveness Jesus brings.

There was no other way than the cross for Jesus. Peter surmised Jesus’ mission, but Jesus reminded him and us that there would be no Christ or Savior without a cross.

Father, as we look ahead to holy week and Good Friday, we keep our eyes on Jesus and his cross. May we share our hope in Jesus with others. Amen.

## THE CROSS OF DISCIPLESHIP

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

—Luke 9:23

It’s not easy to be a follower of Jesus. Often we think about the benefits and blessings of following Jesus. But there’s a significant cost in following him too.

Jesus said that being a disciple means denying ourselves and taking up our cross. Being a disciple is about more than denying ourselves *things*. It may include that, but Jesus said we need to deny *ourselves*. We need to reject anything that pleases ourselves more than him. Along with that, we need to take up our cross. The cross means suffering and rejection, and that’s what Jesus calls us to endure. Sometimes we talk about a problem as our “cross to bear,” but Jesus is talking about suffering for being his followers, his disciples.

The cost of discipleship is radical. It involves daily sacrifice and denial. Following Jesus is

not a one day a week discipline. It’s not simply devoting a part of each day to Bible reading and prayer. It means living for Christ twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week—at home, at work, at school, and in our neighborhoods. It involves letting him control our thoughts, words, and actions. And it includes everyone who claims to be a disciple.

Why would anyone consider carrying a cross for Jesus? Because he carried his cross and suffered for us. Jesus gave his life to save us. Can we live our life for him?

Lord Jesus, your love for us is amazing. Help us to love you by denying ourselves and being willing to sacrifice all for you. In your name, Amen.

## THE PATH TO GREATNESS

*“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

—Mark 10:45

The last week of Jesus' life was only a few days away. The cross was near. Would you dare ask Jesus what James and John asked, saying in effect that they wanted the best seats in his kingdom?

James and John forgot that the path to greatness involves service. They wanted power and privilege. They wanted to be served. But that would not be the path for them. They would suffer for following Jesus. They would suffer in ways like he suffered.

These words of Jesus are the theme verses of the book of Mark. They capture the essence of why Jesus came to live among us. He didn't come for greatness; he came to give his life. Serving others was his mission. Others always came first for Jesus. His service culminated at the cross, where he showed

his greatest love in laying down his life for us.

Do you find it hard to serve others? Is it hard for you to consider others' needs before your own? How is God calling you to serve? Whom is he calling you to serve? Someone in your family, at work, at school, or in your community? When we're tempted to look for greatness, we need to focus on the cross and remember how Jesus served. Then we need to be willing to lay down our lives as he did.

Holy Father, when we're tempted to want to be great in the eyes of others, steer our eyes back to the cross, where we see the great Son of God serving us through his death. Mold us into his image, we pray. Amen.

## MEEKNESS AND MAJESTY

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

Maybe you have heard or sung the song with this refrain: “Oh, what a mystery—meekness and majesty; bow down and worship, for this is your God!” What an appropriate song to sing during Lent—and especially on Palm Sunday.

On the holy day that Christians call Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem riding the colt of a donkey. The Old Testament prophet Zechariah (9:9) had said Israel’s king would come in just that way. He rode in to shouts of “Hosanna!”—meaning “Lord, save us!” The crowds took their salvation cry from Psalm 118:25-26. They hoped that their promised Messiah had finally come to overthrow the Romans and renew their kingdom.

Majesty was on display on Palm Sunday. The King of Israel had come, fulfilling the Scriptures.

But there must have been some confusion that day as well. Instead of riding a powerful warhorse, as military leaders did, Jesus rode on a donkey. To some, this must have seemed like a joke. Later in the week, many saw Jesus’ kingship that way as cheers turned to jeers and people cried, “Crucify him!” (Mark 15:13). The crowds wanted a king, but not a meek one. For too many, meek meant weak.

As you worship today, remember that Jesus is the King who is worthy of our worship because he is also the humble Servant who gave his life for us.

Jesus, you are our King and our Servant. May we see your glory not only at your triumphal entry but also in your crucifixion. We love you, Lord. Amen.

## TWO REACTIONS TO JESUS

*“Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me.”*  
—Matthew 26:10

There were many reactions to Jesus during the last week of his life, but two stand out: the devotion of a woman and the betrayal of a disciple.

The woman who anointed Jesus was probably Mary, Lazarus’s sister (see John 12:3). She was a good friend of Jesus. She loved her Lord. She showed it by taking a jar of expensive perfume and pouring it on Jesus as an act of love and devotion. One gospel says that this costly perfume “could have been sold for more than a year’s wages” (Mark 14:5). But for this devoted follower, nothing was too much for Jesus.

Contrast her devotion with Judas’s betrayal of the Lord. For three years Judas had been a disciple of Jesus. He experienced the closest relationship to Christ that anyone could hope for. But he looked for an opportunity to hand Jesus over

to the authorities. For what? Thirty pieces of silver—about four months’ wages.

If a price tag could be put on Jesus, how much would he be worth to you? Do you know how much you’re worth to him? Jesus said his anointing with perfume was preparation for his burial. Judas’s betrayal set the wheels of Jesus’ death in motion. How much does Jesus love us? Enough to die in our place. Knowing that you mean so much to him, how will you express your love in return?

Lord, during this holy week we echo the words of a hymn: “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.” May we love you with the deepest devotion. In your name, Amen.

## THE FULLNESS OF LOVE

*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

It must have been very quiet in the upper room as all eyes stared at Jesus in amazement. He wrapped a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples' feet.

No rabbi had ever washed the feet of his followers! Footwashing was something that only slaves did. Washing his disciples' feet showed Jesus' amazing love. One set of feet belonged to the disciple who would betray him. Another of these disciples would publicly deny him. Finally, these feet would carry nearly all the disciples away while Jesus suffered and died on the cross.

Washing the disciples' feet was a sign of grace. The disciples all needed to be washed of their filth—the filth of their souls as well as their feet. Soon Jesus'

blood would flow to cleanse them thoroughly.

But Jesus was also setting an example for his followers. He said, "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet."

Whose feet could you wash by reaching out in love and forgiveness? Whom have you recently served who may have nothing to give you in return? Jesus calls us to humble ourselves and extend grace, serving others in his name.

Lord Jesus, teach us how to reach out to people who are desperate for your love. May we serve you with love and grace, as we serve others in your name. Amen.

## THE PEACE OF JESUS

*"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."*  
—John 14:27

Our world needs peace. There is so much conflict going on between people groups, nations, political parties, religious groups, churches, and even individual Christians. There's internal conflict in the form of anxiety and stress. Where can we find peace?

Jesus gives us the answer. He said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you." Lasting peace comes from Jesus. His peace is deep and soul satisfying. His peace brings wholeness. It's like solving a puzzle. Jesus' peace takes the scattered pieces and puts them in order. The result is peace in a variety of ways.

First of all, we have peace with God through the covering of our sins. That leads to peace within as we know we have a Father who loves us. Then, finally, there's peace with others

as we learn to serve and be gracious and forgiving.

Jesus' peace is unique, much different from the world's kind of peace. He said, "I do not give to you as the world gives." The world seeks peace, but it only touches the surface of our lives. It may lead to a temporary end of conflict, but it cannot cure the source of that conflict—sinful human hearts.

Jesus is the great peacemaker. Do you know the peace Jesus brings? Do you want it? Trust in him today.

We worship you, Jesus, for the lasting peace your blood provides. May we enjoy peace with God and learn to live at peace with others. In the name of the Prince of Peace, Amen.

## THE CUP

*“My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”*  
—Matthew 26:42

Gardens are usually wonderful, peaceful places where we can calm our spirits and focus on what is important. But on this night in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was in pure agony.

Gethsemane means “oil press.” Gethsemane was a garden where olives were crushed and squeezed to extract their oil. In this garden, on the final night of his life, Jesus was crushed and squeezed to the limit. He was crushed in his awareness of the cup of suffering that he would drink the next day at the cross. This was the cup of God’s wrath and judgment (Isaiah 51:17).

At the cross, Jesus would have to endure God’s curse on our sin down to the last drop. That’s why he prayed that the cup might be taken from him. But he also prayed that God’s will would be done.

The next day Jesus willingly drank that cup. The sun quit shining. Darkness covered the land. Jesus cried out to God, “Why have you forsaken me?” But there was no answer. At that moment Jesus experienced the torments of hell so that we will never have to—if we trust in him as Lord.

Many churches will celebrate the Lord’s Supper today. As you take the cup, remember and believe that Jesus drank the cup of God’s judgment for you.

Lord Jesus, we are forgiven because you were forsaken by God and you bore his wrath on the cross for our sins. May you always be our first love. In your name we pray. Amen.

## JESUS IN THE MIDDLE

*There they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle.*  
—John 19:18

The picture at Golgotha is quite striking. There were three crosses, with Jesus in the middle. Our salvation could have been accomplished if Jesus had died alone. But that's not how God designed it.

Jesus died between two criminals. They died as punishment for their crimes. Like us all, they had sinned against God. These two criminals portray our condition. They picture what all of us deserve apart from faith in Jesus.

Then there was Jesus. He too died under God's curse and judgment, but he was innocent. He had no sin or guilt. Several times Pilate had declared him innocent. The sign that hung above Jesus' head listed no crimes. Even one of the criminals who died with him testified that Jesus had done nothing wrong, and Jesus forgave him.

Jesus' cross proclaims salvation. It shows us the one who carried our sins.

It's important that Jesus' cross was in the middle. The cross is at the center of God's work of salvation. We can't avoid the cross; it forces the question "What will you do with Jesus?"

On this Good Friday, where do you stand in relationship to Jesus, the Savior? Do you know that he has died for your sins? Have you accepted him as your Savior and Lord? That is my prayer for everyone who reads this message today.

Father, thank you for giving your Son so that "whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." In Jesus' precious name, Amen.

## STANDING IN FRONT OF THE CROSS

*When the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"*

—Mark 15:39

What would it have been like to stand in front of the cross of Jesus? It must have been unforgettable. Death by crucifixion was gruesome and grotesque. Shredded flesh rubbed against rough wood. Iron spikes punctured flesh and nerves. Blood dripped constantly. Breathing became labored and joints dislocated as muscles weakened, unable to support the body's weight. And all this took place in full view of a mocking mob.

That's how Jesus died, and that's what the Roman centurion in front of Jesus' cross saw. He had likely witnessed many crucifixions. But nothing had prepared him for what he experienced the day of Jesus' death. For three hours it was dark. The earth shook (Matthew 27:51). The veil of the temple ripped in two. Then there were Jesus' final words: "Father, into your

hands I commit my Spirit" (Luke 23:46). When he heard Jesus' words and saw how Jesus died, the centurion declared, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" The centurion saw that Jesus died victorious. Death didn't conquer him; he conquered death!

Standing in front of the cross, what do you see? Can you see beyond the suffering to salvation? Whom do you see? Just another man or the God-man, the sin-bearing Savior who conquered death for us?

Father, we stand before the horrors of the cross, humbled and grateful that Jesus endured what we deserve. Thank you that we're forgiven because he was forsaken. Amen.

## IMPOSSIBLE

*“God raised [Jesus] from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.”*

—Acts 2:24

Nothing seems more impossible than a person rising from the dead. Humanly speaking, resurrections don't happen. Have you ever seen one? I certainly haven't!

But a resurrection happened on the Sunday after Jesus' death. The followers of Jesus who went to the tomb to check it out did not find a body (John 20:1-10). And later that day Jesus' disciples were stunned when he appeared to them. They wondered, *Could Jesus really be alive?*

The forty days between Easter and Jesus' ascension proved that the resurrection was real. And on Pentecost, Peter preached not only that Jesus was alive but also that it was impossible for death to keep its grip on him. Death couldn't win. Remaining dead was impossible for Jesus because he had fully paid the

price of sin, which is death (Romans 6:23). When Jesus died on the cross, it was as if God the Father stamped a sign over the grave that said, “Paid in full.” Death had no power to keep Jesus in the tomb.

The joyous news of Easter is that death cannot keep its hold on believers either. Our bodies will rise again. The grave is not our final resting place.

So let's rejoice today! Sing with joy: “Death cannot keep its prey—Jesus, my Savior; he tore the bars away—Jesus, my Lord”!

Risen Lord, thank you for paying for our sin and rising from the dead. Give us hope in your power to raise us too! Amen.

## IF ANYONE SINS

*If anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.*

—1 John 2:1

Often I have opportunities to talk with people who are struggling with a certain sin and who sometimes wonder whether there's any hope of forgiveness. They feel guilty and condemned. Have you ever been in that position? If so, what do you do?

The answer the Bible gives is to rely on the blood of Jesus. When you're guilty, you need someone to argue your case. You need someone who can help you win. That's impossible for us to do on our own because the evidence of sin in our lives is damning.

But the Bible pictures Jesus as our defense attorney. Jesus speaks to God, the Judge, in our defense and pleads our case. What makes him qualified to do that? What guarantee is there that his defense will bring forgiveness and acquittal? The

evidence he brings to God is not our sins, but his sacrifice. Jesus is the Righteous One who perfectly obeyed God for us. He became the atoning sacrifice for our sins; he died to cover them. And on that basis the Father hears and pardons.

Good Friday and Easter are past, but their power and significance are not gone. What sins on your record stand against you? Have you confessed, repented, and brought them to Jesus? If so, you can know you are forgiven for Jesus' sake.

Lord Jesus, thank you that your sacrifice can cleanse me from sin. May we find assurance of forgiveness in your righteousness offered through your ultimate sacrifice for our sins. In your name, Amen.

## THE GRACE TO FORGIVE

*Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*

—Colossians 3:13

There are some hurts in life that are hard to get over. Many of us carry around grudges, anger, and bitterness toward others for some offense committed against us. It could be as minor as someone calling us a name or as major as a spouse who walks out on us.

Where do we find the strength to forgive? At the cross. The apostle Paul urges us to forgive as we've been forgiven. He wants us to see others' offenses in light of the cross. The cross reminds us that the debt of our sin has been paid. God doesn't hold our sins against us. He doesn't make us pay, and he wants us to forgive and to free others just as we have been freed because of Christ's finished work.

God's grace puts things in perspective. At the cross we remember that our debt against

God was far greater than others' sins against us. We've been forgiven, and we need to forgive.

Forgiveness is not easy. Sometimes it takes a long time. It also doesn't discount sin. Forgiveness is costly. Sin cost Jesus his life, and forgiveness will cost us our right to revenge. But it is so freeing.

Ask God to help you forgive those who've sinned against you.

Father, our sins are great, but your grace is even greater. May your grace help us to be gracious and forgiving toward others who have hurt us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## WERE YOU THERE?

*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.*  
—Galatians 2:20

“Been there, done that,” is a phrase we sometimes use if we want to say to someone, “I’ve had that same kind of experience.” It’s our way of saying that we know what the other person has felt or experienced.

In a sense, believers can say that about the death and resurrection of Jesus. By faith in Jesus, we have become united with him so that his death and resurrection are considered ours. That’s what Paul was talking about when he said, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” The result is that Paul was no longer living for himself, but for Jesus. Jesus’ life was pulsating through Paul. The same is true for every Christian.

How does this change the way we live?

First, sin does not control us. Sin is real, but it’s not our master anymore. We died to it. We can obey God because Jesus, by his Spirit, lives in us.

Second, we have a new identity. Our life is about who we are in Jesus. Our old self with its ugly record and selfish tendencies does not define us. Who we are is the person we are in Jesus. We are new creatures.

Jesus loves us and gave himself for us. Are you living out your new life for him so that you can say, “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me”?

Jesus, draw us into the power of your crucified and risen life. Daily may we die to our sin and live for you. In your name, Amen.

## THE WAY HOME

*"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."*  
—John 14:6

A story is told of a little boy who wandered from his home and couldn't find his way back. Some kind passersby noticed that he seemed lost, and they began asking questions to help locate his home.

They asked, "Do you know your home address?" The boy didn't know. Next they asked, "Do you know what your house looks like?" The boy responded without much detail: "It's white." Then they asked, "Can you tell us your father's name?" He answered, "Daddy."

The boy seemed unable to offer any assistance. But then he shared an important detail: "Near my home is a beautiful building that has a cross on it. If you show me the cross, I'll find my way home."

This month we've focused on the cross of Jesus. We've seen

how central the cross is to the Bible and to the lives of believers. We've seen how Jesus took our place by suffering and dying on the cross so that we can have eternal life. Apart from Jesus and his saving work on the cross, there is no way home to God.

Are you living near the cross? Have you trusted in Christ? Are you finding daily strength in his love?

May your prayer always be "Jesus, keep me near the cross."

Father, thank you for the gift of your Son and his sacrifice to pay for our sin. May the cross always remind us of your salvation and show us the way home. We pray in the Savior's name. Amen.

# april

## The Education of Moses

**David Den Haan**

As God prepared to rescue Israel from slavery in Egypt long ago, he trained and shaped a man to be their leader: Moses. God called Moses to lead his people out of slavery and into the promised land. As Moses served God in this leadership role, he found that he had much to learn—and God was his teacher. In the education of God's servant Moses we find truths that never grow old.

In this month's devotions we will learn along with Moses what it means to be a servant of God. We will also reflect on some fascinating lessons in Jesus' life and in the life of God's people, learning (again) along the way how much God loves us still today.

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## THE SCHOOL OF SUFFERING

*The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly.*  
—Exodus 1:12-13

Have you ever heard that suffering and hardship are training for life? I have. And I've often thought to myself, "There has to be a better way to get an education!" I have to be careful about that, though, because God often uses suffering and hardship to shape and train people for life and mission.

We see God doing just that in our text for today. The yet-to-be-organized nation of Israel lived through deep suffering as the Egyptians ruthlessly subjected them to slavery.

What did Israel learn through their suffering? The text doesn't tell us specifically, but my guess is that they learned that life under Pharaoh was not a good life. That lesson would prepare them for life under a new master, the God of Abraham. God would not only rescue them from slavery but set them up

with an important mission in the land he had promised to Abraham (Genesis 15:12-21).

This month we'll focus on Moses, whom God chose to lead that nation. He too would suffer, and God would use Moses' suffering to train him for his leadership role. God used other things to train Moses too, of course, and Moses' education will lead us to reflect on how God trains us for what will come in our life and how we can serve him.

How is God equipping you?

Lord, open our eyes to see, our ears to hear, and our hearts to obey all you have to teach us. Send us, equipped but humble, into life and mission. Amen.

## MORE ON THE SCHOOL OF SUFFERING

*“Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt . . . for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”* —Matthew 2:13

In Exodus we see Israel enrolled in the school of suffering, ruthlessly subjected to slavery in Egypt. Many centuries later the people in Bethlehem and the family of Joseph were enrolled in that same school. Likely there wasn't a person left untouched by Herod's despicable decree that all baby boys under the age of two should be killed. Their suffering taught them of the power of evil and led them to long for God to act on behalf of his people.

God was about to do that, of course. The child who was taken to Egypt, the little one named Jesus, would become the Savior of his people. He would be shaped for that role by things that the Father put into his earthly life early on—including the experience of suffering.

Imagine what Jesus learned as a young child whose family was forced to flee. Imagine what he learned as the news of Herod's massacre of children in Bethlehem reached the community in Egypt. Imagine what Jesus learned as he saw fear on Joseph's face. Imagine his longing to grow into the role his Father was preparing for him—the role of Savior and Deliverer.

Imagine what suffering equips us to do and to be. If accepted with faith, it leads us into humility and into readiness for whatever God has next.

Father, you used suffering to shape Israel, Moses, and even Jesus. Lead us to see hardship as part of *your* curriculum so that we will not resent its lessons. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## THE SCHOOL OF EXTRAVAGANCE

*When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son.*  
—Exodus 2:10

Suffering is a teacher, revealing that life is hard and that we are not able to fix life's problems on our own. Moses spent his earliest years with that teacher, living with his family in slavery to the Egyptians.

However, God had plans to educate Moses through other teachers as well. Moses' mother took him, at some point, to the house of Pharaoh, where she handed him over to Pharaoh's daughter. This Hebrew boy, who had been learning the lessons of suffering, spent the rest of his youth growing up as the grandson of Pharaoh! He was probably shaped by Egypt's best tutors and professors, taught to speak, think, and behave as a highly educated and privileged Egyptian.

Moses probably also witnessed great extravagance and power at the court of Pharaoh. Such things can wrench the fallen

human heart farther from God and deeper into the illusion that one can fix the problems of life on one's own. Did Moses remember, while in the house of Pharaoh, the lessons learned when he had lived in suffering?

If there is extravagance in your life, what is it teaching you? Do you see the generosity, creativity, and bounty of God in your life, or do you see your wealth and its blessings as products of your cleverness and planning? Have you learned gratitude—or an attitude?

Father, you used extravagance to shape Moses, the boy who would be Israel's leader. Shape us too. Keep us from selfishness and pride. Teach us joy and gratitude, and make us into humble servants. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## THE SCHOOL OF COMMUNITY

*Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.*  
—Luke 2:47

You probably know at least one young person who acts as if he or she knows everything. In our text for today we see Jewish religious leaders in the temple, talking with a young man who actually did seem to know it all! At just 12 years old, Jesus was asking questions that these teachers and scholars had not encountered in any of their students. He asked questions that these learned men only asked of one another. How could that be?

Jesus grew up in Nazareth, the hometown of his parents, Joseph and Mary, in the region of Galilee. In Galilee there were many such towns, all communities of Jews who built their lives around the laws God had given to Moses. Jesus learned life and faith in a community of faithful life. Being without sin, he could undoubtedly learn more deeply and sense God's purposes more

perceptively, but his community and its faithful life was his school.

The religious leaders in our text weren't just seeing a 12-year-old boy. They were seeing what happens when a boy grows up in a community of faithful life, in which values are not just preached but lived, in which faith and its truths are passed along to the next generation.

Do you live in such a community? Are you creating such a community?

Father, the world wants to teach its version of truth. Help us to form communities of faith where we can learn real truth, which comes from you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## THE SCHOOL OF MISTAKES

*Then Moses was afraid and thought, "What I did must have become known."*  
—Exodus 2:14

Poor Moses! He had thought that killing an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew was a good thing to do. Maybe he had thought that by killing the Egyptian he might endear himself to the Hebrews. Maybe the Hebrews would see that Moses' loyalties were with them even though he had grown up in Pharaoh's household.

But no. The Hebrews didn't trust him, and Pharaoh soon found out about Moses' murder of the Egyptian. Pharaoh then declared that he would kill Moses, and Moses found that he was not so valued a member of Pharaoh's household as he might have thought.

Lesson learned: Taking matters into his own hands was not a good idea.

Moses had had quite an education already—both the hardship

of his earliest years and the luxury of his growing-up years had shaped him. Now this mistake, the murder of the Egyptian, would become a teacher as well. It would teach Moses to wait on the Lord instead of pretending that he, Moses, was in charge.

Who is in charge of your life? Are you attempting to take control, or have you turned your life over to God?

Father in heaven, so often we want to take charge. After all, our culture often tells us to find life's answers within ourselves. Teach us trust, humility, and obedience to you, dear Lord. Amen.

## THE SOURCE OF TRUE WISDOM

*Jesus answered, "It is written..."*

—Matthew 4:4

Yesterday we saw Moses make a critical error in judgment: he figured he could take matters into his own hands, and he killed an Egyptian who had been beating a Hebrew slave.

Today's text shows another person in the prime of his earthly life: Jesus. He is also facing an enemy, just as Moses had done. But Jesus understands that his most powerful weapon is something that lies beyond himself. It is the weapon that his heavenly Father has given to him to use: the Scriptures he has studied since he was very young. He responds to the devil with three verses from Deuteronomy, reveals the devil's lies, and sends him packing.

When we come up against something challenging, we often assume that our most important resources are within ourselves—our own wisdom

and cleverness and might. We put them to use and are mystified because we don't get the results we want. Or, if things go our way, we assume that our own strength and wit made it all happen. Our hardened self-reliance will come back to haunt us later.

Scripture, prayer, God's wisdom coming to us in times of silence and meditation, the wisdom of other believers who care about us—these are the resources that God provides. The truly educated look to such things.

Father in heaven, direct our wills to surrender our pride and self-reliance. Lead us to develop the habit of looking to you and obeying your will always. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## FAILURES AND SUCCESSES

*They answered, "An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds. He even drew water for us and watered the flock." —Exodus 2:19*

Moses' attempt to rescue a fellow Hebrew in Egypt had resulted in disaster for him. But his attempt to rescue the daughters of Reuel in the far-off land of Midian had a different outcome. What was the difference?

Let's think about what God might have been teaching in each case. God had long been educating Moses for his upcoming role as Israel's leader, and that process was ongoing.

When Moses' attempt to rescue someone in Egypt backfired, he had to learn that any rescue of God's covenant people, the Hebrews, was going to come in God's perfect time rather than Moses' time, and in God's strength rather than Moses' strength. And when Moses' rescue of the daughters of Reuel in Midian succeeded, God was confirming for Moses that res-

cuing people was not a bad thing in itself. It simply needed to be done in line with God's plan and in God's strength.

Failures are wasted if we do not learn from them. So are successes. We are called to be alert to whatever God might be saying in any case. We have much to learn from our loving, powerful, creative, wise, compassionate, and holy God.

What has God taught you lately? How are you going to use his wisdom today?

God of wisdom, guide us to learn from failure rather than merely to resent it. Guide us to learn from success rather than merely to celebrate it. Open our eyes to the truth about ourselves, our world, and you, Lord. Amen.

## JESUS, EXPERT IN THE WORD

*... He found the place where it is written . . . .*

—Luke 4:17

Being God, Jesus had written the Old Testament—partnering with human authors to compose it. And then, when he became a human child, he studied and learned it with other children from the teachers in the community at Nazareth.

In our verses for today we see that Jesus studied well. He was able to use the words of Scripture expertly! He used them to defend himself and define himself.

In the first part of our reading for today Jesus used three quotations from Deuteronomy to defeat the devil's temptations. Tell these stones to become bread? No. "Man shall not live on bread alone." Worship Satan? No. "Worship the Lord your God and serve him only." Test God's love through acts of disobedience? No. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

In the latter part of today's Scripture Jesus used words from Isaiah to define himself for the people of his hometown of Nazareth. He had become a preacher of good news, a rescuer of the blind and oppressed, and a proclaimer of the Lord's favor.

Jesus knew that God's Word is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).

Moses had to learn the same things as he prepared to lead God's people. And we will be wise to use God's Word in these ways also!

Dear God, "your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path." Guide me to read, love, and use it beyond my devotional time today. Amen.

## MOSES LEARNS HE IS AN ALIEN

*Zipporah gave birth to a son, and Moses named him Gershom, saying, "I have become a foreigner in a foreign land."*

—Exodus 2:22

When you travel far from home, you learn lots of things. The things you miss teach you what is important to you. Unfamiliar experiences teach you that your familiar way of life isn't the only way to live. Your anxiety in new settings teaches you how flexible—or not—you really are. The joy of hearing your native tongue spoken by a stranger in a foreign land teaches you the beauty of things you once took for granted.

In our reading for today we see Moses living in a foreign land, learning some important things. Back in Egypt he had made terrible mistakes, and he had to run for his life—far away to the land of Midian. Could Moses consider himself an Egyptian anymore? Could he even consider himself a Hebrew? He figured that the best way to

identify himself now was as “a foreigner in a foreign land.”

What was Moses learning? The same thing that all of us learn when our lives are turned upside down: we are not in control. The illusion of the self-managed life is just that—an illusion.

God alone is forever. He alone is faithful. Only God is constant. In forty years, when Moses would be sent back to Egypt, he would need to remember what he was learning here in Midian.

Father, when life seems stable, help us to loosen our grip on the things that won't last. When life is chaotic, help us remember that you are always our solid rock. Amen.

## JESUS KNOWS WHO HE REALLY IS

*"Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"*

—Luke 2:49

Yesterday we saw Moses learn a painful truth: He was not really an Egyptian, and his identity as a Hebrew was ruined. He had become, as he put it, "a foreigner" (Exodus 2:22). That identity would clear the way for him to see his true identity in God. That would be important when God eventually sent Moses back to Egypt to lead his people out of slavery.

In today's text we see that Jesus learned his identity early. When his worried and possibly angry mother asked why he had gone to the temple without telling his parents, Jesus responded, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" That response is revealing!

You see, a Jew did not speak of God as "my Father." Individual Jews always spoke of God as "our Father." Jesus' departure from that custom revealed that

he saw himself uniquely as God's Son. And knowing that he was God's Son likely led him to understand, even at a young age, that his Father had sent him on a mission—to rescue his people.

At 12 years old, a year before he would officially become a Jewish adult, Jesus had already learned things that take most of us decades to figure out: his true identity and his purpose. Let's adore him together today for resolutely and lovingly accepting both.

We worship you today, Lord Jesus, because you not only understood who you were but you fully embraced your identity and then accepted your mission to die on our behalf. Thank you! Amen.

## MOSES' EDUCATION CONTINUES

*Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.*  
—Numbers 12:3

In Acts 7 we find Stephen preaching to the Jewish ruling council, and he describes Moses' life and work. Stephen's words reveal how first-century Jews understood the outcome of the *first* forty years of Moses' life: "Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action."

But what did Moses learn during the *next* forty years, after he "fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner"? Fleeing his homeland, tending sheep, and living as a foreigner for forty years broke down whatever pride Moses' Egyptian education had produced in him. In fact, as we read in Numbers 12:3, Moses became deeply humble, "more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth."

In the first forty years of his life Moses gained knowledge

and power in Egypt. In the next forty years Moses gained humility in Midian. In the final forty years of Moses' life, God used Moses, now sufficiently educated, to lead Israel to the promised land.

Consistent, God-honoring humility is a very difficult thing to learn. For Moses, it took forty years and lots of sheep.

How is God teaching humility to you and me?

Father, our hearts have much to unlearn: pride, self-reliance, and self-importance. Teach us to be humble. We know that may be difficult for us to learn, but we also know that your patience and love will help us to learn humility. Amen.

## WHAT YOU LEARN WHILE TENDING SHEEP

*Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian.*  
—Exodus 3:1

During the years while he lived in Midian, Moses often had to learn and practice humility. Back in Egypt he had acquired knowledge and power. Then in Midian, where he spent forty years as a foreigner and a shepherd, he realized that there were many times when he wasn't in control of his situation and he didn't know as much as he thought he knew.

The work of tending sheep taught Moses more than humility. Sheep need shepherds to lead them to green pastures and quiet waters. They need shepherds to separate aggressive sheep from timid sheep, ward off predators, and keep strays from wandering. Moses learned how to do these things for his sheep in preparation for having to do them for God's people.

Israel would need someone to lead them in a way that di-

rected their attention to God. That's humble leadership. Israel would also need someone who could lead them to food, water, and safety, and who could gather them when they wandered. That's capable leadership.

It's a mark of God's love for his people that he prepared Moses so well to be their leader. Later God showed his love by sending Jesus to lead us, through his death and resurrection, out of our own slavery from sin and into life. That's where we become recipients of his wonderful leadership, if we accept his love.

Thank you, Father, for sending us the perfect leader, Jesus Christ. Thank you, Jesus, for leading us into full life by your death and resurrection. Amen.

**“STEP INTO MY OFFICE”**

*“So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”*  
—Exodus 3:10

If you work for a boss, you may hear him or her say something like “Step into my office.” That’s often an indication that your boss has something important to say and wants you to pay close attention.

The burning bush is not a boss’s office, but it is the place where God summoned Moses for an important meeting, and where God had a crucial conversation with Moses.

It turns out that Moses’ 80-year education was preparation for the mission that God described to him at the burning bush. Moses’ very early years under his parents’ roof, his years growing up in Pharaoh’s household, and his past forty years as a shepherd in Midian provided a long training program for leading God’s people out of Egypt. Every lesson learned along the way was important for the as-

signment God was planning for Moses in the years ahead.

Has God asked you to step into his office lately? Has he been speaking to you about your life and your mission? Listen up. Pay attention. The God who saw the misery of his people Israel also sees you clearly. He knows where the training he has given will be best used for his glory. You may not need to take off your shoes, but you are called to lift your heart to God in prayer and surrender.

Here I am, Lord; send me. Use all that you have taught me, shown me, given to me. Put me where you want me, and help me to live, work, play, think, and speak for your honor and glory. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

## AN EARLIER MOSES

*“Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.”*  
—Genesis 12:1

We’ve been talking about the education of Moses for leading Israel out of slavery in Egypt. Along the way we’ve also seen how Jesus prepared for his ministry of leading God’s people out of the slavery of sin. Today let’s focus on another, earlier education: the education of Abram.

God’s education of Abram is interesting. God called Abram away from everything that was familiar. In the chapters that follow we learn that God sent him to Egypt, where his faith was tested. Later, God opened Abram’s eyes to the full breadth of the promised land. He promised childless Abram countless descendants. In the most dramatic test of all, God asked Abram to sacrifice his only son, Isaac—and then stopped him in his tracks as he was about to obey.

Abram was being trained to be *Abraham*—the father of many

nations (see Genesis 17:4-5). And one nation of descendants in particular, Israel, would be chosen to carry God’s promises to the world. Abram would be their well-trained ancestor, and the lessons he learned about God would be taught again and again to his descendants.

Today Abraham is called “the father of all who believe” in Jesus (Romans 4:11). Are we listening to God’s call in our lives?

Lord, if you want to send me away from everything familiar in order to get my full attention, so be it. If you want me in comfort that unleashes my creativity, so be it. Help me to listen and obey, wherever you have placed me. In Jesus, Amen.

## SLOW LEARNERS

*“Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”*

—Acts 1:6

Some people learn quickly how to drive a car. Others don't get the hang of it for years. Some students grasp the concepts of math in no time. Others take lots of time—and try the patience of the quick learners in class. Some piano students need only a few months' training to be able to make beautiful music. Others struggle to get beyond making terrible music.

The original “Jesus students,” the first disciples, were slow learners. Jesus taught them for three years, but at the end of his ministry on earth they still didn't have a basic understanding of who he was. In our text the disciples reveal that, after constant instruction, after Jesus' death and resurrection, they still think Jesus is merely about building an earthly kingdom through the people of Israel, the Jews. Not until the Spirit fills

them on Pentecost will the disciples see the full scope of Jesus' ministry: redemption of the nations, and the establishment of a kingdom from all peoples and nations.

The disciples' slowness makes slow learners like me glad. I'm not alone! Just as God used slow learners back then, equipping them along the way, so he uses slow learners like me today. Whew!

As slow as we are, let's take a step today to learn and grow in honor of God's patience. Are you ready?

Thank you, God, for your everlasting patience! Keep my heart close to you and train my slow mind to think, act, and speak your thoughts after you. Amen.

## ANSWERS TO MOSES' PRAYERS

*All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit . . . .*

—Acts 2:4

Many centuries before the events of Pentecost, Moses and the children of Israel had a horrible experience with fire, and Moses prayed for it to stop. You see, God had responded to the constant whining and rebellion of Israel by consuming some of the people with fire. Moses prayed that the fire would die down, and God granted Moses' request immediately (see Numbers 11:1-2).

Soon after that episode, Moses said to his coleader Joshua, "I wish that all the LKNA's people were prophets and that the LKNA would put his Spirit on them!" (Numbers 11:29). God would grant that request too, but it wouldn't be until the day described in today's reading.

At Pentecost, God's Holy Spirit came on the apostles in the form of fire. This was not a fire of destruction but a symbol of

God's purifying love and blessing. The Spirit would come on many others too, taking people from confusion about Jesus to clarity, from ignorance to repentance, from darkness to light. God through the apostles trained believers from all nations for faith, obedience, and ministry.

The Spirit's ongoing work in people today is why Scripture penetrates souls, faith in Jesus springs to life, and all of his followers can speak with authority about him. The Spirit's work in their lives makes them prophets, and that is an answer to Moses' prayer. Is the Spirit working in your life too?

Thank you for answering Moses' prayer, Lord. Make us your prophets, through your Spirit, for your glory. Amen.

## MOSES' SUPERNATURAL EQUIPPING

*"I will take some of the power of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them."*  
—Numbers 11:17

As we learn from today's reading, God told Moses to identify seventy of Israel's elders to share the burden of leadership. God followed this up with a promise to equip those seventy leaders with a portion of the Spirit that God had given to Moses.

In this way God again provided for peace in the camp of Israel, this time through the gift of the Holy Spirit to a select group of people.

Through events like this in the life of Moses and the children of Israel we gain a clear indication that God equipped Moses not just through his personal daily experiences, but also through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The many lessons of Moses' training program are not merely a collection of facts and insights. They reveal a supernatural

equipping from God for leadership.

So it is with all who have been trained by God to preach and teach and prophesy and encourage today. These people include not only pastors and teachers, but also you and me.

Whatever our education has been, it is enhanced and enlivened by the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the gifts he gives. Because of the Holy Spirit's life in us, we are equipped and empowered.

Thank you for giving us gifts, Lord, especially the gift of the Holy Spirit! Send us into ministry and service today and throughout our lives, for your sake and in Jesus' name. Amen.

## FALSE HUMILITY

*Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"*  
—Exodus 3:11

One of the lessons God had been teaching Moses for a long time is the lesson of humility. It came in an especially clear way when Moses tried to rescue Israel on his own and got himself chased out of Egypt (see Exodus 2:11-15). It also came through forty years of tending sheep in Midian—a life far different from the one Moses probably envisioned for himself when he was living in the house of Pharaoh!

Had Moses learned the lesson of humility *too* well? Maybe. At the burning bush he asked God a question that revealed his doubt that he could lead Israel out of Egypt. Only a humble person would speak of himself that way, right?

Actually, Moses hadn't learned the lesson of humility well enough. His question revealed a mistaken assumption that leading Israel was going to be

up to him. See the two "I"s in the question?

It's not quite pride. It's better described as a stubborn reluctance to trust in God. It's false humility because Moses' low image of himself doesn't result in reliance on God. It results instead in resistance to God.

Check your own ego today. Is it sufficiently tamed that you are able to obey God's call even when you feel inadequate to the task? Even when you might look foolish because of your obedience? Are you willing to rely on God to strengthen you and give you courage?

Lord, give me a soul that reaches for you, that stretches to the tasks you assign, and that rejoices in your gracious equipping. In Jesus, Amen.

## GROUP HUMILITY

*"The elders of Israel will listen to you."*

—Exodus 3:18

God wants to teach his chosen people, the Israelites, humility. He wants them to have true humility, without a sense of powerlessness, self-abasement, or shame. This will be a very important lesson for the entire nation as it prepares for life in the promised land.

Israel's teacher is going to be Moses, the leader whom God has chosen for them. Moses' job will be not merely to take Israel to a different place on the map but to a different place in their spiritual life. Moses' task will be to lead Israel to seek the Lord and to seek only him.

What a tremendous teaching responsibility! Israel has a 400-year history in a land of many false gods, so following the one, true God will be a dramatic change of direction for them. The people also have broken human natures that will lead

them to think of themselves as the gods of their lives at the first opportunity. Of course, Moses won't have to do this alone. God promises to be with him. That's why the elders of Israel will listen to him.

What teaching has God called you to do? Like Moses, we have life lessons that we can pass along to others. As you share important life lessons, you have the opportunity to direct the people around you to rely not on their own strength but to cherish their strengths while relying on God.

Go with God.

Lord, you have taught us to prize, trust, and obey you. In the lessons we share today with others, help us to model your way of living. Amen.

## FOOLISH PHAROAH

*Pharaoh said, "Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go."*

—Exodus 5:2

Moses has had a first-class education in the ways of God. He spent his earliest years in the home of his biological family, learning about hardship and about God's providence. He then grew up in Pharaoh's household, learning the ways of Egypt and of power. The transition to exile in Midian taught Moses patience and humility. There were also some leadership lessons for Moses during his forty years of tending his father-in-law's sheep. There are some similarities between sheep and people, after all.

Pharaoh could use a few lessons. The foolish man thinks he's in charge! This is a fundamental mistake that is so deeply woven into Pharaoh's soul that it will take ten plagues and much distress to unravel it.

What must Moses have thought when he heard Pharaoh's fool-

ish reply to the words of God? Did Moses leave Pharaoh's presence shaking his head, remembering what had happened when he himself had acted as if he were in charge (see Exodus 2:11-15)? Did Moses feel sorry for foolish Pharaoh?

Hopefully Moses thought, "Thank you, God, for teaching me. I would be where Pharaoh is today if it were not for the education you gave me."

God is educating you too, teaching you about himself, his world, and your place in it. Are you listening?

Lord, help me to learn the lessons you have for me. Fill my soul with your truth that sets me free to listen and to serve you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## MOSES IS STILL LEARNING

*God also said to Moses, "I am the LORD."*

—Exodus 6:2

Pharaoh became angry at God's demand to release the Israelites, and he greatly increased his oppression of Israel. That, in turn, led the Israelites to accuse Moses of adding to their problems.

Moses was now confused and wondered if God really was in charge after all. What about all the good things Moses had learned over the past eighty years about God, the world, and his place in it? Was it all a mistake?

We all have moments of doubt, don't we? The lessons we learn are challenged by events that make them seem like wispy dreams and empty promises. At such times we are tempted to think that the best way forward is to go back to our old habits of self-reliance and self-direction.

But God was teaching Moses and Israel yet another lesson,

which is also a lesson for us. Behind the scenes is the God who listens, promises, rescues, and embraces. God teaches this lesson to every one of his children. And yet it is the lesson we all most quickly forget.

It's a good thing that God is a patient teacher who doesn't give up on us when we so easily forget. Instead, he continually reminds us of his faithfulness.

Thank you, Lord, for teaching us so eloquently, for reminding us so patiently, and for accepting us so repeatedly. We are slow of heart and mind. Help us to grasp the lessons you want us to learn. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## REMINDERS OF GOD'S LOVE

*"Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance for you and your descendants."*  
—Exodus 12:24

How good is your memory? I have a password storage program that stores all of my Internet passwords because I can't remember them by myself. I'll be in trouble if I forget the password to my password storage program!

In our text for today God gives Moses and the Israelites a tool to help them remember. It's an annual festival, the Passover. God commands Israel to observe the Passover every year to help them remember their deliverance from slavery in Egypt and to note that he always keeps his promises. God wants Israel to remember!

Jesus wanted the same thing when he called his followers to baptize people and to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Baptism is God's reminder to us that he has brought us into his family through a washing, our cleans-

ing from sin through Jesus' death. As a colleague of mine often says, God put our sins on Jesus and punished Jesus in our place. We are clean! Jesus' death is brought to mind also in celebrating the Lord's Supper. The bread and cup symbolize Jesus' crucified body and shed blood.

I am grateful that God faithfully reminds me how much he loves me. We are all forgetful, but God loves us enough to help us remember! The next time you witness a baptism or celebrate the Lord's Supper, remember that God loves you.

For the memory-building tools we call baptism and the Lord's Supper, we thank you, O God! Thank you for reminding us that you are our Deliverer and Savior. Amen.

## A LESSON FROM THE SIDELINES

*At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in Egypt.*

—Exodus 12:29

Sometimes we learn by doing. Other times we learn by watching. Long ago Israel watched God do something unspeakably terrible to the Egyptians. He slaughtered all the firstborn children of Egypt. It was the last of ten plagues that God sent to persuade Pharaoh that keeping Israel in slavery was not good for Egypt's future.

Moses and the Israelites must have learned many things as they watched the plagues afflict Egypt. They saw God batter the Egyptian gods, shatter Pharaoh's claims to power, and dismantle the Egyptians' worldview. They obeyed God by putting blood on the doorframes of their homes so that they would be spared.

I think that God wanted Israel, not just Egypt, to know that there is no God but him, that other gods are only worthless idols, and that he is willing to

go extraordinary lengths to rescue his loved ones. These are lessons that Israel would need to remember as they arrived in the promised land to begin their mission of pointing the nations to God.

God is at work today too. Are you watching? What are you learning? Have you learned from what God did long ago too? Remember, he arranged to have Jesus Christ, his own firstborn son, killed in order to rescue you from slavery to sin and death. He has gone to extraordinary lengths out of his love for you!

Teach us, Lord, to have our eyes and ears open. Teach us what you would have us know for the joy of our hearts and the blessing of our world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## VALEDICTORIAN

*"In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed.  
In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling."*

—Exodus 15:13

One of my daughters graduated from high school this past spring. We watched her get her diploma, and we heard the valedictorian speak about what class members had learned in their past four years together.

Moses plays the role of a valedictorian in our Scripture for today. He summarizes some of what he and Israel have learned from God, and he talks about what lies ahead for them: God has rescued the nation from its terrifying enemy, and God will plant Israel in the land, on the mountain of his inheritance! He ends his speech by exclaiming, "The LKNA reigns forever and ever."

Moses' speech is an act of worship, an anthem of praise to God, and an encouragement to God's people. May you be blessed similarly today as you join a community of faith and bring your hearts to God to-

gether in worship. May a servant of God also stand before you and proclaim that God, through his Son, Jesus Christ, has thrown down all who oppose him, that in his strength he will guide you to himself, and that he will plant you in the sanctuary he has established.

May you, in turn, become a valedictorian like that for your family, your friends, and your neighbors. Let them hear what you have learned. Tell others about God's faithfulness, his goodness, and his love!

You are worthy of praise and thanks and adoration, O Lord! Accept the worship that we bring today, and bless us by your grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

## FORGETFULNESS

*"If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt!"*

—Exodus 16:3

An empty stomach speaks loudly. Just ask anyone who spends much of his or her life without enough to eat.

In Israel's case, the people's empty stomachs out-preached the lessons of the exodus from Egypt. God's stunning rescue of Israel was only a few weeks old when Israel found itself in the wilderness without a ready supply of food. The people heard their stomachs growling and foolishly concluded that the God who had rescued them had suddenly abandoned them. In a colossal insult to God they cried out that they would rather be well-fed and dead in Egypt than hungry in the wilderness with God.

It doesn't take much for people to forget God. The values of a pagan culture, the desires of our heart, and the struggles of life call out to us in powerful

ways. So often we foolishly listen to their messages and forget that the God who has rescued us from slavery to sin will "graciously give us all things" (Romans 8:32). We forget that God loves us. We forget that he has promised to rescue us, save us, and keep us from harm. We forget that God is faithful.

Let's recall again what we have learned about God's love. In God's unfailing love he will lead the people he has redeemed. That includes you and me, as believers in Jesus Christ. In his strength God will guide us into his very presence, where he satisfies our souls.

Father, our ears are inclined to hear and be distracted by other voices. May we hear your words, your promises, your summons to joy. Amen.

## TESTING

*"In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions."*  
—Exodus 16:4

The adventures of Israel as God delivers them from slavery in Egypt and cares for them in the wilderness are truly amazing. Again and again the Lord redeems them and keeps them safe from hunger, thirst, and danger.

In today's verses God delivers Israel from hunger *and* tests their willingness to obey him. The food that God provides requires the people to obey some specific instructions. Will they trust God enough to obey him? Gathering a surplus of food and then storing it to have enough in the future is the Egyptian way. Trusting the Lord to meet their needs every day will be Israel's new way.

Later in Exodus 16 we find that some of the Israelites gathered more than they needed, contrary to God's instructions to gather only enough for each

day. They tried to gain some security for themselves, but that backfired. Then, on the day before the Sabbath, some failed to gather enough for two days so that they could obey God's wishes for the Sabbath. But they went hungry that day and faced God's displeasure.

Many years later a substitute Israelite came, One who passed every obedience test and then laid down his perfect life for sinners. Jesus offered his life as atonement for all who have failed to obey or believe what God has told them. Thank you, Lord!

We praise you, Jesus, for facing temptation and passing the test flawlessly. We thank you for offering your perfect life in exchange for our imperfect lives. Amen.

**SHEEP NEVER ACTED LIKE THIS!**

*Moses cried out to the LORD, "What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me."* —Exodus 17:4

Part of Moses' education in his role as Israel's leader had been a forty-year course on leadership, a course that could have been called "Shepherding 101." Moses had tended his father-in-law's herds in Midian and, during that time, he had learned plenty about taking care of sheep. Many of those lessons carried over into the world of leading people such as the Israelites.

However, during those forty years in Midian no sheep had ever picked up a stone to throw at Moses, their shepherd! In that way, sheep are more well-behaved than people—and Moses didn't know what to do with the Israelites who wanted to stone him.

However, he did know what to do next: call on the Lord. In our reading today we see Moses' distress signal to the Lord, a signal to which God responds

with clear instructions about what Moses should do. And Moses, who trusts God more than the Israelites do, follows God's instructions and leads the thirsty nation to water.

Do you know what to do when you don't know what to do next? In other words, do you trust God more than your own cleverness, strength, and insight?

In this story, Moses the student becomes Moses the teacher. He teaches us to trust God always—especially when our cleverness and wit are not enough.

Trust is so hard for us, Lord. Help us, we pray. We believe; help us overcome our unbelief. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## REMINDER

*As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning.*

—Exodus 17:11

By rescuing Israel from Egypt, God had made clear to Israel that his relationship with them was based on his love for them. While other nations believed they had to please their gods with sacrifices and worship rituals, the true God showed his love by always providing and caring for his people first. It was all by grace.

In today's story from Exodus, God again made clear to Israel that he loved them. When Moses' arms were lifted up, God gave the blessing of victory over the Amalekites who had cruelly attacked Israel.

Of course, when Moses' arms were down, the blessing of victory was not given. The Amalekites started to win. What was that about? Why involve Moses' arms in that way?

God was teaching Israel more about the kind of relationship he wanted with them. When they, God's dearly loved people, obeyed in any small way, he would bless them in a significant way. In other words, it didn't take much for God to release great blessing on the people he had chosen.

God reminds us today too that he loves to bless his people, and God wants us to know that our peace and prosperity come from him. Our flourishing is not by chance or a product of our efforts. It is by grace from a faithful God.

Lord, thank you that your love for us doesn't depend on our ability to prove ourselves. Even after blessing us with rescue from sin and death, you still bless us more. Amen.

## MOSES AND JESUS

*"You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven."*  
—Exodus 20:22

The Israelites were camped at the very mountain where Moses, before joining them in Egypt, had spoken with God at the burning bush (Exodus 3). Now Israel too could see God's fire and hear God's voice through Moses.

Moses had become God's mediator, his chosen spokesman. He brought Israel the news of God's love, God's plans, and God's instructions. Moses represented God, and, on God's behalf, he led Israel to freedom and mission in the promised land.

Centuries later, on the mount of transfiguration, the disciples also saw God's fire—in Jesus' face and in his clothing. Jesus' face "shone like the sun, and his clothing became as white as the light" (Matthew 17:1-2). The disciples also heard God's voice there and in Jesus' teachings and, later, through his sac-

rifice. Jesus is God, and he leads his people to freedom from sin and sends them out to make disciples of all nations.

This message is for each of us as well. I invite you to listen deeply. You can hear God's voice in the words of Scripture, in God's creation around us, and in the worshiping faith community. The Holy Spirit, symbolized in Acts 2 as tongues of fire, helps us to hear God's voice in all of these ways. It's important that we follow God's instructions, and that we obey his words.

We praise you, Lord and Holy Spirit. You are God. We hear your voice and see your love. Help us not only to hear but also to follow and obey. Thank you! Amen.

## SIGNING OFF

*"These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you."*  
—Deuteronomy 6:1

Moses knew that his time with Israel was coming to an end. Can you imagine what was going through his mind during this final stage of his career as Israel's leader? Was he reflecting on how God shaped him for this role throughout his life? Was he remembering all the ways God had used him to lead Israel for so many years?

Now it was time to sign off. I'm sure Moses was happy to hear God calling Israel to remember all that God had done for them. Moses knew that these people were forgetful. They often forgot who God was and what God had done. They forgot the commands, decrees, and laws that God had given to equip Israel to live holy lives that would point other nations to God.

I need regular reminders, and I'm sure you do as well. I am

glad for the wedding ring on my finger, the "to do" list on my computer, daily devotions, weekly worship, and annual holidays. I am glad too for the story of Moses.

Reminders help us to see everything in life as grace—special gifts from God. We can also see that everything in our life is training for whatever mission God has for us in this life and the next.

May we too recall and show our thanks for all that God has done for us.

Train us as you trained Moses, Lord. Shape us as you shaped Israel. Shower us too with grace, and send us as your witnesses into your beautiful but broken world! In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.



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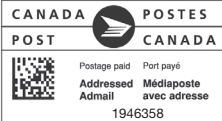
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