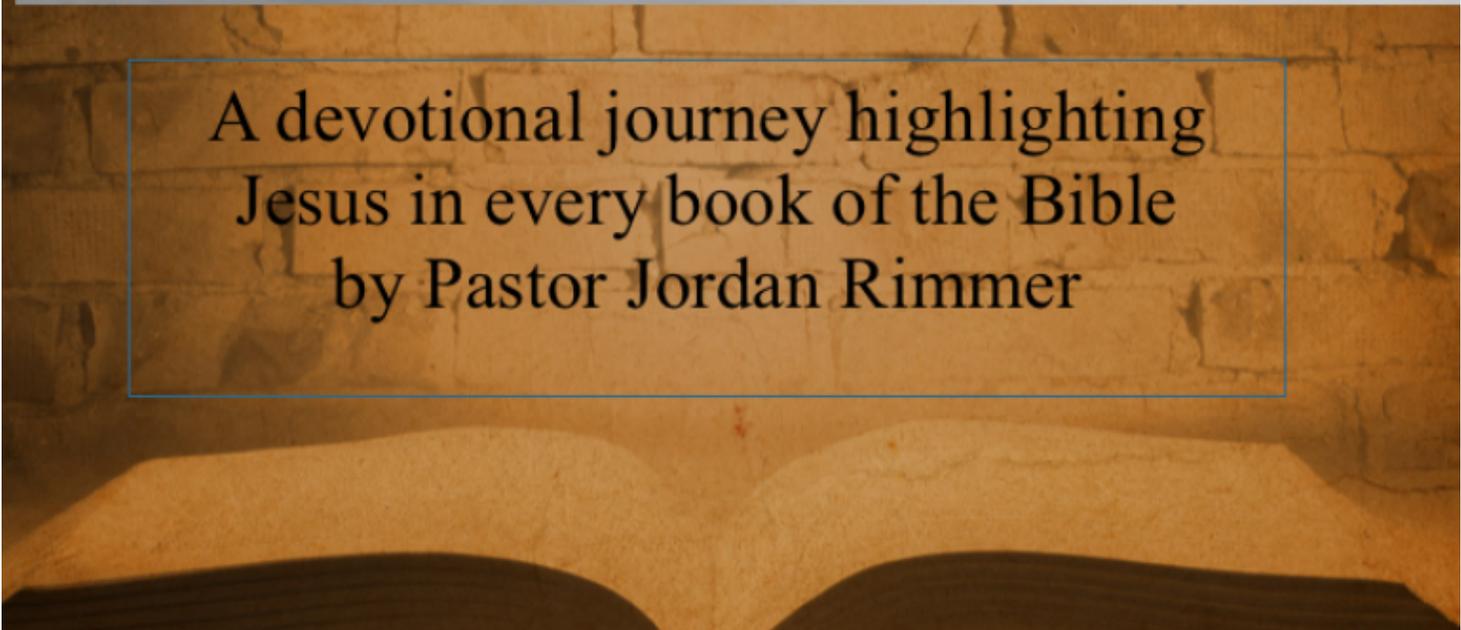


# Through the Bible Through Lent



HOLY THE  
OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT  
CONTAINING THE  
TRANSLATED OUT OF THE  
AND WITH THE FOR  
DILIGENTLY C



A devotional journey highlighting  
Jesus in every book of the Bible  
by Pastor Jordan Rimmer

# Introduction

The goal of this devotional is to give an overview of the Bible. I am hoping to expose you to whole of scripture with a particular interest in Jesus' death and resurrection. I will give you an introduction to each book of the Bible, share a key text that particularly relates to Jesus, and a short reflection on what that connection is. My hope is that by the end you get a better grasp on the Bible as a whole and gain a better sense of the centrality of Jesus in it.

For each book I will give a brief introduction to the book. I am not concerned with the academic or critical background of who wrote it, was it edited, and that sort of thing. If you want that information you need to get yourself a good commentary or study Bible. I am here interested in exposing you to the content of the book and especially to the key themes related to the whole of scripture.

I will in a number of circumstances combine books and either treat them together or do two books in a single day. I do this for two reasons. First, some books naturally fit together and are written to be read as a single book. This includes any books that have a number in front of them (For example—I Kings, II Samuel, III John...). Second, some books are short enough or similar enough to be considered on the same day. Finally, there are 66 books of the Bible and fewer days than that in Lent, so for it to fit some must be combined.

After a brief introduction there will be one or two texts from the books being considered. These are not necessarily key texts from the book. Rather, I chose texts related to Jesus and his death and resurrection to fit within the theme of Lent. The goal is to see Jesus throughout the Bible. For instance, when we get to the Gospels we will look at the passion narrative—the betrayal from Matthew, the trial in Mark, the Crucifixion in Luke, and the Resurrection in John.

There will then be a short paragraph about the text highlighting its connection to Jesus. This will not be a detailed commentary, but rather a devotional reading of the text for you to think about. Finally there will be a quick sentence of something from the text for you to pray about today.

Why this connection to Lent? Lent is the period of time beginning on Ash Wednesday and leading up until Easter. It is set aside as a solemn time of preparation for Easter. The church emphasizes repentance, penance, fasting, and study. The goal is for us to realize our need for Jesus' death and resurrection so that Easter seems more powerful and potent. Often the church has historically had new members and baptisms on Easter. It is a great time to dive into the scriptures and search for Jesus there.

My prayer for you: May you see the Bible as a love letter to you. May you fall in love with God's Word as you learn of how much God loved you.

# The Books of the Bible

Here are the books of the Bible in order. The italic titles are heading for the various types of book. I suggest each day that you review the list and see if you can learn them all in order by the end of Lent.

## Old Testament

### *The Law*

Genesis

Exodus

Leviticus

Numbers

Deuteronomy

### *OT Historical Books*

Joshua

Judges

Ruth

1 Samuel

2 Samuel

1 Kings

2 Kings

1 Chronicles

2 Chronicles

Ezra

Nehemiah

Esther

### *Wisdom Literature*

Job

Psalms

Proverbs

Ecclesiastes

Song of Songs

### *Major Prophets*

Isaiah

Jeremiah

Lamentations

Ezekiel

Daniel

### *Minor Prophets*

Hosea

Joel

Amos

Obadiah

Jonah

Micah

Nahum

Habakkuk

Zephaniah

Haggai

Zechariah

Malachi

## New Testament

### *Gospels*

Matthew

Mark

Luke

John

### *NT History*

Acts

### *Epistles by Paul*

Romans

1 Corinthians

2 Corinthians

Galatians

Ephesians

Philippians

Colossians

1 Thessalonians

2 Thessalonians

1 Timothy

2 Timothy

Titus

Philemon

### *General Epistles*

Hebrews

James

1 Peter

2 Peter

1 John

2 John

3 John

Jude

### *Apocalyptic*

Revelation

## Ash Wednesday

Genesis is a book of beginnings. The name comes from the Latin translation of the scriptures meaning “origins.” This is a great title because that is exactly what Genesis is. It is first of all a book of the origins of the world. It is about the origins of human beings. It catalogues the development of sin and the growing problem of sin in the Flood and in the Tower of Babel. Most importantly, it shows the origins of God’s plan to take care of the sin problem. God called apart a man named Abraham and his family to be a blessing to the nations. This blessing would ultimately be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. We see multiple generations after Abraham, ending up with Joseph saving his family in Egypt.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.

He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

The LORD God said to the serpent,  
“Because you have done this,  
    cursed are you above all livestock  
    and above all beasts of the field;  
on your belly you shall go,  
    and dust you shall eat  
    all the days of your life.  
I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
    and between your offspring and her offspring;  
he shall bruise your head,  
    and you shall bruise his heel.” (Genesis 3:1-15 ESV)

This is the story of the Fall. God goes on to curse Adam and Eve for their parts in this story. What is fascinating for us today I this last line: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and

between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” This is a prophecy that one of the offspring of Adam and Eve will be hurt by the serpent but that the man would crush the serpents head. The serpent is Satan and the offspring that would be savior is Jesus. The rest of the Bible is the unfolding of this promise.

*Pray today that as you look at the Bible in this study God would get you excited about His plan to save you.*

## **Thursday**

The book of Exodus begins with God’s chosen people Israel, having been saved in Egypt, coming into slavery. God raises up the reluctant Moses, called by the burning bush, to lead the people out of Egypt and into the promised land. God works through the 10 plagues and the parting of the Red Sea to get the people out of Egypt. God gives them the 10 commandments and other instructions to set up their identity as a people.

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, “This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.

“Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted, its head with its legs and its inner parts. And you shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD's Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt. (Exodus 12:1-13 ESV)

This text is the critical point of Exodus. Pharaoh will not let the people leave until all the first born in Egypt are killed. The Israelites are saved by the blood of a lamb put around the doorposts of their homes. The New Testament calls Jesus the Lamb of God. Further, this event was celebrated by Jesus at his Disciples just before Jesus was crucified. The cup after supper, which represents the blood of the lamb, is the cup Jesus took to represent his blood at communion. He claims that He is that Lamb and that His blood saves us.

*Pray for areas in your life where you feel like a slave and for others in the same position. Pray that God would bring an Exodus in those areas.*

## **Friday**

Leviticus, on the surface, appears to be a blood and brutal book. When you read it you will find out more about the blood of animals than you ever wanted to know. The real issue of Leviticus is not the rules or the blood. It is really about the holiness of God and how we relate to God from within our sin. There are important laws of behavior and cleanliness. Some of these rules would have been essential for the health of Israel such as dietary and cleanliness rules. There are sacrifices and priests to take care of those sacrifices. There were also festivals given to remind Israel of their history and give them a chance to celebrate God's love for them.

The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD and died, and the LORD said to Moses, "Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die. For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat. But in this way Aaron shall come into the Holy Place: with a bull from the herd for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. He shall put on the holy linen coat and shall have the linen undergarment on his body, and he shall tie the linen sash around his waist, and wear the linen turban; these are the holy garments. He shall bathe his body in water and then put them on. And he shall take from the congregation of the people of Israel two male goats for a sin offering, and one ram for a burnt offering.

"Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. Then he shall take the two goats and set them before the LORD at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And Aaron shall cast lots over the two goats, one lot for the LORD and the other lot for Azazel. And Aaron shall present the goat on which the lot fell for the LORD and use it as a sin offering, but the goat on which the lot fell for Azazel shall be presented alive before the LORD to make atonement over it, that it may be sent away into the wilderness to Azazel. (Leviticus 16:1-10 ESV)

We see here two goats that are to be sacrificed. One is slain on the altar. The other is allowed to live and is sent into the wilderness as a reminder of God's grace. It is fascinating to think that Jesus is both the sacrificed goat who is killed and the lamb who lives (called the scapegoat) which lives as a testament of grace. He dies and he lives. He does both. Jesus is the perfect sacrifice—taking care of the problem and also reassuring us of grace.

*Pray that God will help you to take more seriously His holiness and approach Him and His worship with more caution and respect.*

## **Saturday**

Numbers is aptly named because it involves what seems like an extreme amount of counting. Please understand that counting is very important for 2 reasons. First, it shows the fulfillment of God's

promise to Abraham to make him a great nation. Second, it is important in the story for logistics and for military response. Moses has to know where people are to organize their movements and to respond to military threats. The book of Numbers also continues the story for us. The people finally get to the Promised land and are sent in to spy it out. The people are afraid of the inhabitants. Because of their lack of faith, God makes them wander the dessert for 40 years until that generation had passed on. In the dessert, Israel has a tendency to complain and God keeps providing for them.

Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, “Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.” These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the LORD, and through them he showed himself holy. (Numbers 20:10-13 ESV)

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. (Numbers 21:4-9 ESV)

These are both very interesting pictures that are alluded to in the New Testament related to Jesus. Jesus is living water for those who need a drink (John 4&7). If you want to live, you have to drink of Jesus. Jesus also speaks of Himself being lifted up (John 3). This language for crucifixion also alludes to people looking to Him for healing as it did in Exodus. Even in ordinary details of the Old Testament stories we sometimes see how Jesus is throughout the Bible the perfect savior and healer.

*Pray that God would help you to see Jesus more in the everyday aspects of life.*

## **First Sunday of Lent**

The title Deuteronomy is taken from the Greek and means “second law.” It is a retelling of the law to a new generation of Israelites by Moses before they enter the promised land. It is the end of the life of Moses and includes several speeches made at the end of this life as well as his death. Moses retells a number of stories, retells the laws and festival, and challenges Israel to remain faithful to God.

This finishes the 5 books of the law that begin the Bible. Not that they are all law, rather they are the story of the law as well as what the law is.

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9 ESV)

“And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and return to the LORD your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. And the LORD your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. And the LORD your God will put all these curses on your foes and enemies who persecuted you. And you shall again obey the voice of the LORD and keep all his commandments that I command you today. The LORD your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your cattle and in the fruit of your ground. For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, as he took delight in your fathers, when you obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that are written in this Book of the Law, when you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. (Deuteronomy 30:1-10 ESV)

This first text is used as a daily Jewish prayer called the Shema. It helps orient the central focus of this book and the previous ones. Namely, who God is lies at the heart of this law and these stories. God is complete, perfect, and to be loved with everything we have. Jesus summarized this as the greatest commandment. We can see its importance in this second passage from a speech of Moses. Moses gives shares the importance of giving priority to God and God’s word in the lives of those would-be followers. As post-Jesus readers we understand the centrality that Jesus plays in both our understanding of God and in God’s Word itself.

*Pray that you would remember the importance of God and God’s Word in your life as Moses said at the end of his life.*

## Monday

Joshua is called to follow Moses as leader of Israel. What big shoes to fill! The people finally may enter the Promised Land, but they will have to fight the inhabitants of the land. God tells them to remove all of the people, but Israel does not do so and will have problem because of this. They do have a number of exciting battles. Probably most memorable is their battle with Jericho which was won merely by walking around the walls and yelling. After the land is won, the land is divided up between the people. Finally, Joshua instructs the people on how they should conduct themselves in the land.

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' assistant, "Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun shall be your territory. No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:1-9 ESV)

A long time afterward, when the LORD had given rest to Israel from all their surrounding enemies, and Joshua was old and well advanced in years, Joshua summoned all Israel, its elders and heads, its judges and officers, and said to them, "I am now old and well advanced in years. And you have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations for your sake, for it is the LORD your God who has fought for you. Behold, I have allotted to you as an inheritance for your tribes those nations that remain, along with all the nations that I have already cut off, from the Jordan to the Great Sea in the west. The LORD your God will push them back before you and drive them out of your sight. And you shall possess their land, just as the LORD your God promised you. Therefore, be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left, that you may not mix with these nations remaining among you or make mention of the names of their gods or swear by them or serve them or bow down to them, but you shall cling to the LORD your God just as you have done to this day. For the LORD has driven out before you great and strong nations. And as for you, no man has been able to stand before you to this day. One man of you puts to flight a thousand, since it is the LORD your God who fights for you, just as he promised you. Be very careful, therefore, to love the LORD your God. For if you turn back and cling to the remnant of these nations remaining among you and make marriages with them, so that you associate with them and they with you, know for certain that

the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations before you, but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a whip on your sides and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from off this good ground that the LORD your God has given you. (Joshua 23:1-13 ESV)

We peer into both the beginning and end of the life of Joshua. God calls Joshua and tells him not to be afraid and to be faithful. At the end of his life, Joshua calls the people and tells them not to be afraid and to be faithful. He also here warns them to be sure not to mix with the people I the land because the will become a snare and trap. As Christians I think the call is still the same—do not be afraid and be faithful. While God does not demand that we earn our salvation, God does call us to respond by living our lives differently. We have the grace of Jesus. Our debt to sin has already been paid. Still, we must “go and sin no more.” (John 8:11)

*Pray that you would have the confidence of Joshua. Pray that God would take away your fears and help you to be faithful.*

## **Tuesday**

In Joshua we see that Israel does not listen to God and instead allows other nations to remain in the Land. We see in the book of Judges that this is not good. Israel struggles with the temptation to worship other gods. God has to raise up a Judge every couple of generation. They typically take action and do might acts to defeat other people in the Land and call the people back to the worship of God. They also rule like kings in their day. The Judges include Othniel, Eud, Deborah, Gideon and his small army, Ibzan, and Samson and his might strength just to name a few.

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals. And they abandoned the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the LORD to anger. They abandoned the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. Whenever they marched out, the hand of the LORD was against them for harm, as the LORD had warned, and as the LORD had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress.

Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, and they did not do so. Whenever the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he said, “Because this people have

transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers and have not obeyed my voice, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, in order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the LORD as their fathers did, or not.” So the LORD left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and he did not give them into the hand of Joshua. (Judges 2:11-23 ESV)

This text shows how the Judges worked, but the book of Judges leaves two lasting questions. First, why does Israel need a Judge generation after generation? The answer is that the Judges, like the law, cannot actually fix the sin problem. Only Jesus can—our perfect Judge and sacrifice. Second, why are the Judges so flawed? Gideon has to test God. Samson is arrogant and is foolish in trusting a deceitful woman. The fact is that God likes to work through broken people. It comes up again and again in scripture. But again I would emphasize how the broken leaders of Israel are meant to make us long all the more for Jesus who is without flaw.

*Thank Jesus for His perfect sacrifice and for the honor it is to be used by Him despite your flaws.*

## **Wednesday**

Ruth is often read as a beautiful love story in the Old Testament, but it is so much more. It is the story of two women in a male dominated society—one of them a hated foreigner—who God saves through the kindness of a man. Naomi goes with her husband and sons only to see them all die there. She is left with nothing except a daughter-in-law named Ruth who will stick with her through whatever life throws at them. They are saved by the kindness of Boaz. He is a relative who takes Ruth on in marriage at great expense to his reputation and his wealth. Ruth and Boaz have a son who ends up being a forefather of David and of Jesus.

Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!” Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall

be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. (Ruth 1:6-18 ESV)

So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.” Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. (Ruth 4:13-17 ESV)

Jesus is pictured in the lives of both Ruth and Boaz. Ruth’s persistence in going with Naomi and following after the one true God is a great picture of Jesus’ love and pursuit of us—a pursuit that led him to take on flesh and go to the cross. As Boaz was a kinsman who redeemed (paid for) Ruth, so to Jesus became our kinsmen and, at great cost to Himself, paid for us. He paid for us with His very life.

*Pray and thank Jesus for the great lengths He went to for your redemption.*

## **Thursday**

The Hebrew Bible keeps the books of Samuel together as it does the books of Kings and Chronicle. Our Bible has them split because the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint did so. There is merit to splitting them, but due to time will consider them in combination

First and Second Samuel gives the history of the beginning of Israel as a monarchy. Though God rules Israel, the people desire to have a king. God calls a prophet named Samuel to anoint a king. He anoints Saul. When Saul is unfaithful, David is anointed though he serves Saul and is forced to run from Saul for some time. As Second Samuel begins, Saul dies and David is finally made king. He establishes Jerusalem as the capital. We also see that David is not perfect. He falls into sin with Bathsheba and numerous other times. Still, David is lifted up as the ideal king in Israel to which all other kings are compared.

Now when the king lived in his house and the LORD had given him rest from all his surrounding enemies, the king said to Nathan the prophet, “See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent.” And Nathan said to the king, “Go, do all that is in your heart, for the LORD is with you.”

But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, “Go and tell my servant David, ‘Thus says the LORD: Would you build me a house to dwell in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. In all places where I have moved with all the people of

Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?”” Now, therefore, thus you shall say to my servant David, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.’” In accordance with all these words, and in accordance with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David. (2 Samuel 7:1-17 ESV)

This text is God’s covenant with David when his throne is established in Jerusalem. Notice the promise of his throne being established forever. David does not live forever nor does his family rule Israel forever. This part of the covenant is fulfilled in Jesus who is from the lineage of David and is truly the perfect king and who will reign forever.

*Pray that you would obey and worship Jesus in your life as the eternal king.*

## **Friday**

The book of Kings is a history of the period of Israel’s monarchy after David. It follows the rule of Solomon and then various other kings. It also follows the story of the nation of Israel as it is divided into two kingdoms called Israel and Judah. Each kingdom goes through a number of kings but generally move of both king and kingdoms are away from God. Throughout the book the prophets Elijah and Elisha work to try to call the kings and the kingdoms back to God. Despite their work, the unfaithfulness of Israel eventually leads to the downfall of nation Israel by the fall of the kingdom of Israel and then the kingdom of Judah. The lands are taken over and most of the people are sent into exile throughout the conquering nation’s land.

When the house was built, it was with stone prepared at the quarry, so that neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron was heard in the house while it was being built.

The entrance for the lowest story was on the south side of the house, and one went up by stairs to the middle story, and from the middle story to the third. So he built the house and finished it, and he made the ceiling of the house of beams and planks of cedar. He built the

structure against the whole house, five cubits high, and it was joined to the house with timbers of cedar.

Now the word of the LORD came to Solomon, “Concerning this house that you are building, if you will walk in my statutes and obey my rules and keep all my commandments and walk in them, then I will establish my word with you, which I spoke to David your father. And I will dwell among the children of Israel and will not forsake my people Israel.”

So Solomon built the house and finished it. He lined the walls of the house on the inside with boards of cedar. From the floor of the house to the walls of the ceiling, he covered them on the inside with wood, and he covered the floor of the house with boards of cypress. He built twenty cubits of the rear of the house with boards of cedar from the floor to the walls, and he built this within as an inner sanctuary, as the Most Holy Place. The house, that is, the nave in front of the inner sanctuary, was forty cubits long. The cedar within the house was carved in the form of gourds and open flowers. All was cedar; no stone was seen. The inner sanctuary he prepared in the innermost part of the house, to set there the ark of the covenant of the LORD. The inner sanctuary was twenty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and twenty cubits high, and he overlaid it with pure gold. He also overlaid an altar of cedar. And Solomon overlaid the inside of the house with pure gold, and he drew chains of gold across, in front of the inner sanctuary, and overlaid it with gold. And he overlaid the whole house with gold, until all the house was finished. Also the whole altar that belonged to the inner sanctuary he overlaid with gold. (1 Kings 6:7-22 ESV)

Solomon builds the temple and God’s presence settles there, but it is conditional. If they will walk in the statutes and follow the commandments, God will dwell in Israel. The rest of Kings is about the epic fail of Israel’s attempt to follow through. Can we ever be faithful? We are so reliant on God to do something on our behalf. Jesus comes and lives the perfect life so that we can accept by faith.

*Pray to feel the Lord’s presence in a new and exciting way in your life.*

## **Saturday**

If you read Chronicles immediately following Samuel and Kings, you will feel like *déjà vu*. The reason is that Chronicles is essentially a retelling of the most of the same stories from a different vantage point. It is written after the exile of Israel in part from other previously written histories. The point of the book is first to show that Israel’s exile was because of Israel’s actions. It also emphasizes how God’s covenant with David remains a basis for the continue life of Israel.

Zedekiah was twenty-one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD his God. He did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke from the mouth of the LORD. He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear by God. He stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the LORD, the God of Israel. All the officers of the priests and the people likewise were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations. And they polluted the house of the LORD that he had made holy in Jerusalem.

The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy.

Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or aged. He gave them all into his hand. And all the vessels of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his princes, all these he brought to Babylon. And they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels. He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years. (2 Chronicles 36:11-21 ESV)

This passage is just about at the end of 2 Chronicles. Notice the clear way the author recounts the problems originating with the people who are “exceedingly unfaithful” and polluted the house of the Lord. It cannot be said that God was weak or unaware when other nations came in to take over the land. In fact, God brought the foreign leaders to punish Israel. This idea is important in the New Testament when Jesus is crucified as well. It is clear from the words of Jesus that He knew the cross was coming and chose the cross.

*Pray and thank Jesus for his power in this world. Ask God to give you faith for those areas where you have felt God was not there.*

## **Second Sunday of Lent**

The Jewish people were taken into exile by Babylon in 586 B.C. In 539 B.C. Persia overthrew Babylon and a year later allowed the Jewish people to return to their land. When the people return, they have lost touch with their culture, their identity, and their worship. Their cities and their temple lay in ruins. The book of Ezra centers around a priest who helps rebuild the temple and reestablish the worship and the ethical purity of Israel. The book of Nehemiah centers around a man who helps rebuilds the walls of Jerusalem and calls the people to again follow the covenant.

Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice. And at the evening sacrifice I rose from my fasting, with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God, saying:

“O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt. And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today. But now for a brief moment favor has been shown

by the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our slavery. For we are slaves. Yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to grant us some reviving to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem.

“And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken your commandments, which you commanded by your servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land that you are entering, to take possession of it, is a land impure with the impurity of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations that have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.’ And after all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt, seeing that you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved and have given us such a remnant as this, shall we break your commandments again and intermarry with the peoples who practice these abominations? Would you not be angry with us until you consumed us, so that there should be no remnant, nor any to escape? O LORD, the God of Israel, you are just, for we are left a remnant that has escaped, as it is today. Behold, we are before you in our guilt, for none can stand before you because of this.” (Ezra 9:4-15 ESV)

Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good. (Nehemiah 13:30-31 ESV)

It would have been easy for the returning Jews to believe that God had abandoned them, but Ezra and Nehemiah both say otherwise. They work to call the people back to God because God had not forgotten Israel. God waits with grace for those who would humble themselves before Him and calls them to holy lives. In Jesus, God still does the same thing. We all are guilty, but God calls us and forgives us anyway.

*Pray that God would show you how guilty you have been of falling away from Him so that you would appreciate His grace even more.*

## **Monday**

The story of Esther takes place during the exile. A man named Haman plot to kill the Jews. This seems to be a likely possibility. But a Jew named Esther has become queen. At risk of her own life, Esther speaks of the issue out of turn with the king and ends up saving the people of Israel. Her relative Mordecai ends up as an advisor to the king and helps assure Israel’s safety for several generations.

On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. And the

king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

Then Esther spoke again to the king. She fell at his feet and wept and pleaded with him to avert the evil plan of Haman the Agagite and the plot that he had devised against the Jews. When the king held out the golden scepter to Esther, Esther rose and stood before the king. And she said, “If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?” Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, “Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he intended to lay hands on the Jews. But you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring, for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked.”

The king's scribes were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day. And an edict was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded concerning the Jews, to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language. And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed it with the king's signet ring. Then he sent the letters by mounted couriers riding on swift horses that were used in the king's service, bred from the royal stud, saying that the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, children and women included, and to plunder their goods, on one day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. A copy of what was written was to be issued as a decree in every province, being publicly displayed to all peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day to take vengeance on their enemies. So the couriers, mounted on their swift horses that were used in the king's service, rode out hurriedly, urged by the king's command. And the decree was issued in Susa the citadel.

Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a robe of fine linen and purple, and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor. And in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them. (Esther 8 ESV)

The book of Esther does not really talk about God. God does not speak or take action specifically in the book. Yet it is apparent from the story that God was at work the whole time. God was working in circumstances to bring salvation. God often does this. Many Christians have looked back in hind sight and seen God at work behind the scenes to bring salvation.

*Pray for assurance that God is at work in your life even if you cannot see Him or hear Him right now.*

## Tuesday

The book of Job is a story of tragedy surrounding this man Job. God is in His heavenly court talking to all the angels about what an upstanding man Job is. Satan challenges God to allow Job to suffer. Job loses his great life and then his health. Much of the book shows Job wrestling with what is happening and talking with his wife and his friends. Often they tell him to curse God, but Job keeps on praising God. In the end he is restored, though it involves him submitting to God and to the things he does not understand.

Then Job answered the LORD and said:

“I know that you can do all things,  
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.  
‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’  
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,  
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.  
‘Hear, and I will speak;  
I will question you, and you make it known to me.’  
I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,  
but now my eye sees you;  
therefore I despise myself,  
and repent in dust and ashes.”

After the LORD had spoken these words to Job, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite: “My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves. And my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.” So Eliphaz the Temanite and Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite went and did what the LORD had told them, and the LORD accepted Job's prayer.

And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends. And the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before. Then came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and ate bread with him in his house. And they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him. And each of them gave him a piece of money and a ring of gold.

And the LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning. And he had 14,000 sheep, 6,000 camels, 1,000 yoke of oxen, and 1,000 female donkeys. He had also seven sons and three daughters. And he called the name of the first daughter Jemimah, and the name of the second Keziah, and the name of the third Keren-happuch. And in all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters. And their father gave them an inheritance among their brothers. And after this Job lived 140 years, and saw his sons, and his sons' sons, four generations. And Job died, an old man, and full of days. (Job 42 ESV)

What do we do with suffering? Does our suffering come from God? From Job we find out that the “why” is something that is worked out on the heavenly realm. Notice that Job does not ever get a full explanation of why all of this happens to him. What we can say from Job is that God does care about our suffering. In fact, in Jesus we can say even more because God enters our suffering. He does not leave us alone but comes to be with us. He sends the Holy Spirit who is often called the Comforter.

*Pray for your sufferings and for the sufferings of those around you. Give them to Jesus and pray for good friends for the journey.*

## **Wednesday**

Psalms is really the Hymnal of the Bible. Most Bibles do not label them the same way they do the chapters of the Bible but instead they are labeled as psalms (Psalm 1, Psalm 2....) There are different types of psalms. For a couple examples—royal Psalms are written for the inauguration of kings. Songs of lament are songs of complaint against God. Songs of ascent are written to be sung while travelling to Jerusalem (which is on a hill). They can be sung or chanted. They may not sound like songs or poetry to our ears. That is because our ears think of songs and poetry rhyming. Hebrew poetry connects more by rhyming thoughts, connecting sounds in the words (in Hebrew so it is not as helpful in English), creative structuring of the lines, and by repetition.

Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
for his steadfast love endures forever!  
Let Israel say,  
“His steadfast love endures forever.”  
Let the house of Aaron say,  
“His steadfast love endures forever.”  
Let those who fear the LORD say,  
“His steadfast love endures forever.”  
Out of my distress I called on the LORD;  
the LORD answered me and set me free.  
The LORD is on my side; I will not fear.  
What can man do to me?  
The LORD is on my side as my helper;  
I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.  
It is better to take refuge in the LORD  
than to trust in man.  
It is better to take refuge in the LORD  
than to trust in princes.  
All nations surrounded me;  
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!  
They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side;  
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!  
They surrounded me like bees;

they went out like a fire among thorns;  
 in the name of the LORD I cut them off!  
 I was pushed hard, so that I was falling,  
 but the LORD helped me.  
 The LORD is my strength and my song;  
 he has become my salvation.  
 Glad songs of salvation  
 are in the tents of the righteous:  
 “The right hand of the LORD does valiantly,  
 the right hand of the LORD exalts,  
 the right hand of the LORD does valiantly!”  
 I shall not die, but I shall live,  
 and recount the deeds of the LORD.  
 The LORD has disciplined me severely,  
 but he has not given me over to death.  
 Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
 that I may enter through them  
 and give thanks to the LORD.  
 This is the gate of the LORD;  
 the righteous shall enter through it.  
 I thank you that you have answered me  
 and have become my salvation.  
 The stone that the builders rejected  
 has become the cornerstone.  
 This is the LORD's doing;  
 it is marvelous in our eyes.  
 This is the day that the LORD has made;  
 let us rejoice and be glad in it.  
 Save us, we pray, O LORD!  
 O LORD, we pray, give us success!  
 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!  
 We bless you from the house of the LORD.  
 The LORD is God,  
 and he has made his light to shine upon us.  
 Bind the festal sacrifice with cords,  
 up to the horns of the altar!  
 You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;  
 you are my God; I will extol you.  
 Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
 for his steadfast love endures forever! (Psalm 118 ESV)

This is a very rich Psalm in which to look for Jesus. First, Jesus is the ultimate proof of the steadfast love of God. Second, the reference to a gate is an interesting one, since Jesus would later identify Himself as the gate to the sheep's pen in John chapter 10. He identifies Himself as the way we enter into righteousness. Finally, the line about the stone that the builder rejected becoming the

cornerstone is also used of Jesus. It is used in Matthew 21, Mark 12, Luke 20, Acts 4 and I Peter 2. Jesus, though rejected by the religious leaders of His day, is now the cornerstone of what it means to be right with God.

*Pray that Jesus would be the cornerstone of your life.*

## **Thursday**

Books in the genre of “wisdom literature” like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are very interesting to read. They are books of wisdom quotes and sayings. The truths are not necessarily meant to be taken universally and some even contradict each other. We might say that “birds of a feather flock together” and also that “opposites attract.” Both are true even though they say opposing things. Proverbs sets out to share wisdom with Israel that begins with “the fear of the Lord” (1:7). This wisdom includes things like taking direction, working hard, and the need for sexual purity. Ecclesiastes, while similar in style, has a different message. It is written more from a sense of despair about the vanity of all things except what God does. There are cycles and seasons to life so we need to be humble and live where we are. While Ecclesiastes can sound rather depressing, it also expresses the reality of dark and fruitless times in our life very keenly.

The words of Agur son of Jakeh. The oracle.  
The man declares, I am weary, O God;  
I am weary, O God, and worn out.  
Surely I am too stupid to be a man.  
I have not the understanding of a man.  
I have not learned wisdom,  
nor have I knowledge of the Holy One.  
Who has ascended to heaven and come down?  
Who has gathered the wind in his fists?  
Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment?  
Who has established all the ends of the earth?  
What is his name, and what is his son's name?  
Surely you know! (Proverbs 30:1-4 ESV)

What gain has the worker from his toil? I have seen the business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God's gift to man.

I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away. (Ecclesiastes 3:9-15 ESV)

In Proverbs 30 the writer calls out wondering who and where the Lord is. He asks for the Lord's son's name. This is not a text looking forward to Jesus but rather a text that says that no human being has ever known the Holy One in the full sense. We can look back and see that this is exactly who Jesus is and what Jesus does for us. He is the Son who knew the Holy One completely but came down to earth anyway to show us the Father. Jesus said in John 14—"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." It is in this way that God's love will endure forever. We should take the advice of Ecclesiastes and enjoy Jesus more.

*Pray that God would help you to enjoy Jesus and your life lived in Jesus even more each day.*

## **Friday**

Song of Solomon (Sometimes called Song of Songs) is a set of love letters between two lovers. It can be quite sexual—so much so that young Jewish boys were not permitted to read the book until they were older. Several aspects of the book are worth noting. First, the lover's relationship is within the context of marriage (Ch. 8). Second, several times in the book the lovers say that they belong to one another (I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine). This is a great way to express the Biblical idea that marriage is two people becoming one flesh. Finally, Song of Solomon is also used in Jewish prayers and songs as a model of language for God's love for Israel and Israel's love for God.

The voice of my beloved!  
Behold, he comes,  
leaping over the mountains,  
bounding over the hills.  
My beloved is like a gazelle  
or a young stag.  
Behold, there he stands  
behind our wall,  
gazing through the windows,  
looking through the lattice.  
My beloved speaks and says to me:  
"Arise, my love, my beautiful one,  
and come away,  
for behold, the winter is past;  
the rain is over and gone.  
The flowers appear on the earth,  
the time of singing has come,  
and the voice of the turtledove  
is heard in our land.  
The fig tree ripens its figs,  
and the vines are in blossom;  
they give forth fragrance.  
Arise, my love, my beautiful one,

and come away.  
O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,  
in the crannies of the cliff,  
let me see your face,  
let me hear your voice,  
for your voice is sweet,  
and your face is lovely.  
Catch the foxes for us,  
the little foxes  
that spoil the vineyards,  
for our vineyards are in blossom.”  
My beloved is mine, and I am his;  
he grazes among the lilies.  
Until the day breathes  
and the shadows flee,  
turn, my beloved, be like a gazelle  
or a young stag on cleft mountains. (Song of Solomon 2:8-17 ESV)

Here the lovers talk about their love with the metaphor of a garden. Its springtime and everything is in bloom and going well. They do not want the foxes or any other pest to come in and spoil their love. They are at one with one another.

Christians are inevitably uncomfortable talking about sex. This is because we are sinful and easily ashamed. But the Bible talks about sex quite a lot. The question is—does the saving work of Jesus in His death and resurrection fix our problems with sin or not? Jesus loves us. Jesus is love. Jesus pursues us as a lover even dying for us. This means that we can get other areas of our lives in line with God’s will. It means we can talk about difficult things.

*Pray that any foxes that are spoiling your relationship with Jesus would be caught.*

## **Saturday**

Today we move into the lengthy section of the Bible relating to the prophets. The role of the prophetic books relates to speaking God’s word to the people in calling them to different living or explaining what God is doing. Prophets often relate to particular areas including the kingdoms of Israel as well as foreign cities.

Isaiah covers a long length of time. The first parts of Isaiah deal with the sins of Judah and Israel and the coming threat of invasion. The second part is written from the exile. The last part includes more universal prophecies about God’s work in the world. Isaiah’s message given through visions and speeches is that God is a holy judge who will deal with sin and pride. The message is also a hope that God would also bring restoration with a savior (messiah) that is coming in the future. Many of these prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus. Isaiah is quoted or alluded to in the New Testament quite often.

Who has believed what he has heard from us?  
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?  
For he grew up before him like a young plant,  
and like a root out of dry ground;  
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,  
and no beauty that we should desire him.  
He was despised and rejected by men;  
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;  
and as one from whom men hide their faces  
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.  
Surely he has borne our griefs  
and carried our sorrows;  
yet we esteemed him stricken,  
smitten by God, and afflicted.  
But he was pierced for our transgressions;  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,  
and with his wounds we are healed.  
All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have turned—every one—to his own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.  
He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he opened not his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
so he opened not his mouth.  
By oppression and judgment he was taken away;  
and as for his generation, who considered  
that he was cut off out of the land of the living,  
stricken for the transgression of my people?  
And they made his grave with the wicked  
and with a rich man in his death,  
although he had done no violence,  
and there was no deceit in his mouth.  
Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;  
he has put him to grief;  
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,  
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;  
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.  
Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;  
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,  
make many to be accounted righteous,  
and he shall bear their iniquities.  
Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,

and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,  
because he poured out his soul to death  
and was numbered with the transgressors;  
yet he bore the sin of many,  
and makes intercession for the transgressors. (Isaiah 53 ESV)

This passage is sometimes called the passage of the “suffering service.” It is saturated with prophecies fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus grew up as an ordinary person without the beauty He had in heaven. He was rejected and despised. He took our griefs, sorrows, and iniquity on the cross. The idea of Him being pierced is amazing when you think that several hundred years later Jesus would be nailed to a cross. While Jesus was on trial He said nothing to defend Himself. He died for us. Go back and read that text again and see all the numerous ways Jesus was absolutely the fulfillment of this prophecy.

*Pray that God would continue to wow you with how accurate the Bible is.*

## **Third Sunday of Lent**

Jeremiah was a prophet who prophesied through the downfall of Israel. His ministry began during the reign of King Josiah--the last king to really serve God and call the people to faithfulness. After Josiah's death, Israel falls into the downward spiral of nations coming up against them. Israel tries to align themselves with other nations for help but they do not really call out to God. Jeremiah calls for Israel to return to a deep spiritual connection with the one true God as well as prophecies against the other nations who would attack Israel. Jeremiah also includes a lot of autobiographical material about his own prophetic ministry. He may have been the author of Lamentations as well. It is a book of 5 songs lamenting the state of Israel and calling for a return to God.

“Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!” declares the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: “You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the LORD. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD.

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’

“Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when they shall no longer say, ‘As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,’ but ‘As the LORD lives who brought up and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.’ Then they shall dwell in their own land.” (Jeremiah 23:1-8 ESV)

But you, O LORD, reign forever;  
your throne endures to all generations.  
Why do you forget us forever,  
why do you forsake us for so many days?  
Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored!  
Renew our days as of old—  
unless you have utterly rejected us,  
and you remain exceedingly angry with us. (Lamentations 5:19-22 ESV)

Jeremiah critiques the work of the shepherds of Israel. The priests of Israel were called shepherds. Also, David was a shepherd so the metaphor is used for the kings as well. Jeremiah is not all doom and gloom. He also looks forward to the future where God will make all things right. This is promised to be one of "David's branch." This is why the New Testament books of Matthew and Luke makes such a big deal out of the genealogy of Jesus. Jesus was a relative of David. Jesus is the answer that Jeremiah was looking forward to.

Christians today do not like to lament or to cry out to God. After all, aren't we supposed to have faith? But the Bible gives a ton of examples of brutally honest prayers and accusations against God. Perhaps, in a strange way, lament shows more faith. It says to God, "We know things are not the way they should be. We know you can do something about it. And we know you are big enough to handle our complaints."

*Go ahead today and talk straight to God about how you are feeling or something that you are not happy God has or is doing. Ask God to help you be more honest in your prayers.*

## **Monday**

Ezekiel was a prophet who had strange visions while in exile. He interprets the exile as a result of Israel's faithlessness and not any weakness in God. For Ezekiel, God is holy and people are sinful and any interpretation of the exile that goes against either of those ideas simply cannot be true. He calls out oracles against Judah and against other nations. He also promises future restoration and has visions of the temple being rebuilt some day. In response, the individuals and the community of Israel must live holy lives. They cannot serve other gods. This would have been an important reminder for the people in exile who could not go to their temple to worship but could worship with their captors. Their only true hope must be found in God.

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they

wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

“Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.

“For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice. (Ezekiel 34:1-16 ESV)

God promises that He will come and personally deal with the situation- seek His sheep, bring them back, feed them, and give them peace. It is so incredible to think that God does not just sit back and watch these people who have rejected Him suffer. In love God pursues us. This is why the New Testament makes such a big deal out of Jesus not just being a messenger from God but being God Himself. Jesus is God working to fix the sin problem and bring His sheep into peace. For some clear references on Jesus actually being God, see John 1:1,14; 10:25-30; 14:6-7; Romans 9:5; Colossians 2:9; I John 5:20.

*Thank God that He did not sit back but did the work of making you right with Him.*

## **Tuesday**

Daniel was a member of the nobility of Israel who was taken into exile in Babylon. The first six chapters are narratives about the exile. Daniel interprets some of King Nebuchadnezzar's dream and becomes prominent in the Babylonian court. As he does this, he makes an enemy who gets him thrown into a lion's den for continuing to pray to God. God closes the mouth of the lions and he lives. He also sees a rule against worship see some other Hebrews get thrown into the fiery furnace, though they live. Daniel gives a good description of the trouble of exile. The second half of the book is about the visions of Daniel concerning explanations of the exile, the judgement upon the conquerors, and future restoration.

There are certain Jews whom you have appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These men, O king, pay no attention to you; they do not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

Then Nebuchadnezzar in furious rage commanded that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought. So they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar answered and said to them, “Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?”

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury, and the expression of his face was changed against Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He ordered the furnace heated seven times more than it was usually heated. And he ordered some of the mighty men of his army to bind Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. Then these men were bound in their cloaks, their tunics, their hats, and their other garments, and they were thrown into the burning fiery furnace. Because the king's order was urgent and the furnace overheated, the flame of the fire killed those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished and rose up in haste. He declared to his counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the fire?” They answered and said to the king, “True, O king.” He answered and said, “But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods.”

Then Nebuchadnezzar came near to the door of the burning fiery furnace; he declared, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out, and come here!” Then Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out from the fire. (Daniel 3:12-26 ESV)

What an amazing testimony of those who are willing to die for their faith. When others around them were bowing, these three would not bow. The big question of the text is this--what do you do with the 4th figure in the furnace? What that an angel? A representation of God being with them? Some scholars have even suggested that this is a Christophany, meaning it is Jesus appearing before He becomes flesh at the first Christmas. Have you ever thought about Jesus always existing? See John 1:1-14, Colossians 1:5-20, or I Peter 1:20-21 for this idea. The text in Daniel is not clear on what this 4th figure is, but it is surely a sign that God was with them.

*Pray that you would see God present with you in difficult times. Pray this for others you know who are going through difficult times as well.*

## Wednesday

We move today from the major prophets to the minor prophets. They are so-named because of length and not because of importance. They are sometimes referred to as *The Book of the Twelve* since there are 12 and they make for an interesting study as a group.

Hosea prophesied in the Northern Kingdom of Israel just before the exile and in Judah after Israel is taken into captivity. Israel was worshipping the Canaanite gods. Hosea not only speaks against out against Israel but also does symbolic action so that his very life is a prophetic vision for Israel.

And the LORD said to me, "Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins." So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley. And I said to her, "You must dwell as mine for many days. You shall not play the whore, or belong to another man; so will I also be to you." For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or household gods. Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the LORD their God, and David their king, and they shall come in fear to the LORD and to his goodness in the latter days. (Hosea 3 ESV)

Hosea takes a wife who is a prostitute. Though she is unfaithful, he remains faithful and shows that God will remain faithful to Israel even if Israel is unfaithful. We see the faithfulness of God in sending Jesus Christ. Though we are unfaithful to God, He remains steadfast in His love of us. As Paul says it in Romans 5:8, "While we were still sinners Christ died for us."

Joel is a short prophetic book against Judah which also looks forward to the Lord's pity and future blessings. It centers on an important prophetic theme of the coming day of judgment from God called *the day of the Lord*.

Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests;  
wail, O ministers of the altar.  
Go in, pass the night in sackcloth,  
O ministers of my God!  
Because grain offering and drink offering  
are withheld from the house of your God.  
Consecrate a fast;  
call a solemn assembly.  
Gather the elders  
and all the inhabitants of the land  
to the house of the LORD your God,  
and cry out to the LORD.  
Alas for the day!  
For the day of the LORD is near,  
and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.

Is not the food cut off  
before our eyes,  
joy and gladness  
from the house of our God? (Joel 1:13-16 ESV)

Day of the Lord is the day when God comes and makes things right. It sounds like a great thing, but for Israel who has been so faithless it needs to be approached with lament and caution. They stand with a lot to be judged about and need to get right with God before that. We often think what a great thing it is that Jesus came to us and that is true. But it is also a terrible thing. It means that all people are responsible and we all need Jesus. If we do not accept Jesus we stand condemned.

*Pray that God would help you solemnly consider your need for God and your unfaithfulness to Him, not so that you will remain depressed, but so that you can be more thankful for Jesus' saving work for you.*

## **Thursday**

Amos was a shepherd who prophesied to Israel before the fall of the Northern Kingdom. He calls out to Israel for two major issues that the prophets point out as a problem for Israel. First is the issue of syncretism. The people were mixing their worship with the worship of other Gods. Second, and most important to Amos was the issues of injustice going on. The poor were being abused and oppressed. The weak and vulnerable were not safe in Israel. Amos called for justice and also looked forward to the justice of God to come.

Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD!  
Why would you have the day of the LORD?  
It is darkness, and not light,  
as if a man fled from a lion,  
and a bear met him,  
or went into the house and leaned his hand against the wall,  
and a serpent bit him.  
Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light,  
and gloom with no brightness in it?  
“I hate, I despise your feasts,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,  
I will not look upon them.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:18-24 ESV)

Again we see the darkness of the day of the Lord. A healthy respect and fears of God is surely in order. The reality is that going through the motions will not cut it. God does not desire our empty worship and ritual. We must live differently and we must especially care for the lost and broken. This is all over the teachings of Jesus, though the church often needs reminded of this. Martin Luther King Jr. used the last line of Amos in his famous "I Have a Dream" speech.

We do not know anything about Obadiah other than his name. It is a short book of one chapter and only 21 verses. It is a book of judgement on Israel's enemy Edom. So many neighboring countries were abusing and manipulating Israel. It also includes a promise of the restoration of Israel.

Those of the Negeb shall possess Mount Esau,  
and those of the Shephelah shall possess the land of the Philistines;  
they shall possess the land of Ephraim and the land of Samaria,  
and Benjamin shall possess Gilead.  
The exiles of this host of the people of Israel  
shall possess the land of the Canaanites as far as Zarephath,  
and the exiles of Jerusalem who are in Sepharad  
shall possess the cities of the Negeb.  
Saviors shall go up to Mount Zion  
to rule Mount Esau,  
and the kingdom shall be the LORD's. (Obadiah 1:19-21 ESV)

How do you build trust with someone? You have experience with them and if they act trustworthy then you extend to them more trust. The great thing about the Bible is that we have a record of God fulfilling promises. What was written to give Israel hope in troubled times can also bring us hope. God did restore Israel. God dealt with Edom. And we know that Jesus did come as God's ultimate salvation. Jesus promises to be with us. Jesus promises that He will return and make all things right. We can trust Him.

*Pray that God would help you to trust Him more and would show you where you can work for His justice and righteousness.*

## **Friday**

Jonah is a familiar story to many of us. He is the reluctant prophet who ran the other way and only did what God asked after he spent a few days in the belly of a fish. Jonah has very little prophecy in it, but instead is a story of prophecy or even a commentary on prophecy. The key to understand the book is to ask the glaring question of the text--why does Jonah run? Most people assume he is afraid to go to Nineveh but that is not what the text says.

Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." But Jonah

rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD. (Jonah 1:1-3 ESV)

And the LORD appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights. (Jonah 1:17 ESV)

The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish."

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. (Jonah 3:6-10 ESV)

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, "O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." And the LORD said, "Do you do well to be angry?" (Jonah 4:1-4 ESV)

So why does Jonah get angry? Jonah gets angry because God was gracious. Jonah did not want God to save the Ninevites. He wanted them to be destroyed. Jonah is a book about God's grace versus our judgement. Jesus faces the same thing as He spends all this time with sinners and tax collectors. The religious people are stunned. Then, after Jesus is ascended into heaven, the Gospel starts spreading among the Gentiles (non-Jews) and the church does not know what to do with it. Even today, we would like God's grace to have a little higher acceptance standards, but here is the fact: Jesus dies for the world. Grace cannot be controlled or limited to certain people.

*Pray that you would follow God's call no matter what and would extend grace to whoever God puts in your path.*

## **Saturday**

Micah was a prophet from the town of Moreshet. He gives his purpose in Micah 3:8. "But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin." He is concerned with both the justice and might of God and so he complains against Israel's injustice to others and their unfaithfulness to God. These complaints in the prophetic books are often called *oracles* meaning indictments or instructions.

Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops;

siege is laid against us;  
 with a rod they strike the judge of Israel  
 on the cheek.  
 But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
 who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,  
 from you shall come forth for me  
 one who is to be ruler in Israel,  
 whose coming forth is from of old,  
 from ancient days.  
 Therefore he shall give them up until the time  
 when she who is in labor has given birth;  
 then the rest of his brothers shall return  
 to the people of Israel.  
 And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD,  
 in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.  
 And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great  
 to the ends of the earth.  
 And he shall be their peace.  
 When the Assyrian comes into our land  
 and treads in our palaces,  
 then we will raise against him seven shepherds  
 and eight princes of men; (Micah 5:1-5 ESV)

This is probably Micah's best known prophecy--that the coming Savior would be born in Bethlehem. Matthew refers to this in the New Testament. Micah also prophecies here that the savior coming from old which see as Jesus existing before and "becoming flesh" in the New Testament.

Nahum prophecies against Nineveh--the capital of Assyria. Apparently the reforms after the prophecies of Jonah did not last. It was not until a century later that Assyria did finally fall. For Nahum, God is gracious and slow to anger but God is also concerned with dealing with His enemies.

An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh.  
 The LORD is a jealous and avenging God;  
 the LORD is avenging and wrathful;  
 the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries  
 and keeps wrath for his enemies.  
 The LORD is slow to anger and great in power,  
 and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty.  
 His way is in whirlwind and storm,  
 and the clouds are the dust of his feet.  
 He rebukes the sea and makes it dry;  
 he dries up all the rivers;  
 Bashan and Carmel wither;  
 the bloom of Lebanon withers.  
 The mountains quake before him;

the hills melt;  
the earth heaves before him,  
the world and all who dwell in it.  
Who can stand before his indignation?  
Who can endure the heat of his anger?  
His wrath is poured out like fire,  
and the rocks are broken into pieces by him.  
The LORD is good,  
a stronghold in the day of trouble;  
he knows those who take refuge in him.  
But with an overflowing flood  
he will make a complete end of the adversaries,  
and will pursue his enemies into darkness. (Nahum 1:1-8 ESV)

We are not used to this language about God. We do not often speak of God as jealous or taking vengeance. But for God to be righteous he has to be upset about sin. If you have ever been wronged and longed for vengeance you understand how this can sometimes be justifiable. But Nahum says that God is also good and a stronghold. In Jesus we see both God's jealousy and God's goodness. God cannot allow sin to go unpunished but at the same time Jesus comes to sacrifice Himself for the problem.

*Pray today and simply thank Jesus for taking your punishment and being your stronghold in difficult times.*

## **Fourth Sunday of Lent**

Habakkuk was a prophet around 630 B.C. He questions how God can tolerate injustice of other nations against and even in Israel. But the answer lies in the disloyalty of Israel itself. Habakkuk predicts that even though the Assyrians are the powers of the day that the Babylonians would actually cause the fall of Judah.

A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth.  
O LORD, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear. In the midst of the years revive it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.  
God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. His splendor covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. Selah  
His brightness was like the light; rays flashed from his hand; and there he veiled his power.  
Before him went pestilence, and plague followed at his heels.  
He stood and measured the earth; he looked and shook the nations; then the eternal mountains were scattered; the everlasting hills sank low. His were the everlasting ways.  
I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction; the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble.  
(Habakkuk 3:1-7 ESV)

Habakkuk has heard the story of God's power from Israel's past and wants to see it again in his own lifetime. How much can we identify with that? If only we could see Jesus walking among us... If only we could feel and see the power of the early church... If only our pews and parking lots were full again... The claim of Easter is that Jesus is alive and well. He is active in the world in the Holy Spirit. We need to hope and pray for the great works of God in our own midst in our lifetime.

Zephaniah prophesies to Judah and calls them back to the covenant that God made with Israel. God's relationship with Israel included both promises but also punishments if the people were unfaithful. Zephaniah, like the other prophets, warns Israel of God's coming judgment. They have bad things coming because of their unfaithfulness but he also reminds them that the promises of God's favor remain and will be there in the long run.

Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;  
shout, O Israel!  
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,  
O daughter of Jerusalem!  
The LORD has taken away the judgments against you;  
he has cleared away your enemies.  
The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;  
you shall never again fear evil.  
On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:  
“Fear not, O Zion;  
let not your hands grow weak.  
The LORD your God is in your midst,  
a mighty one who will save;  
he will rejoice over you with gladness;  
he will quiet you by his love;  
he will exult over you with loud singing.  
I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival,  
so that you will no longer suffer reproach.  
Behold, at that time I will deal  
with all your oppressors.  
And I will save the lame  
and gather the outcast,  
and I will change their shame into praise  
and renown in all the earth.  
At that time I will bring you in,  
at the time when I gather you together;  
for I will make you renowned and praised  
among all the peoples of the earth,  
when I restore your fortunes  
before your eyes,” says the LORD. (Zephaniah 3:14-20 ESV)

One of the challenges of reading prophecy is the limits of our knowledge about the prophets. How much did the prophets know they were saying? They were talking about the exile and returning to the land, but we are reading into the prophecies the saving work of Jesus. They may not have understood the what they were prophesying entirely, but we are in good company to read them this way. The early church and even the New Testament writers went back and saw the ultimate salvation like Zephaniah talked about to be completed in Jesus. In Luke 24:27 it says that Jesus went back and explained in Moses and all the Prophets all that was said about himself. Return from exile is not enough because God's people will be unfaithful again. Jesus fulfills the whole plan of God.

*Pray that Jesus would be your answer to everything in life and that you would see the Holy Spirit more powerfully work in your life and your church.*

## **Monday**

After the empires of Assyria and Babylon falter Israel begins to return from Exile. But they are threatened by the growing Persian empire. Imagine the people's frustrations as they return home only to still be dominated by another nation. They have been rebuilding their own lives and homes but not the House of the Lord otherwise known as the temple. They are rebuilding their lives without God being of prominence. It is in this context that Haggai and Zechariah prophecy. Haggai gives 4 sermons calling the people to support their leaders and rebuild the temple. Zechariah goes even further and reminds the people that the temple is not enough. They need to once again be faithful to the covenant. The second half of Zechariah also gives a large collection of promises and promises about the restoration and the Messiah.

Then the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now, therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes.

"Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the LORD. You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the LORD of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors." (Haggai 1:3-11 ESV)

Israel has trouble with priorities. They came back and began building their own homes but not the Lord's temple. But the point is not the temple. The point is that the Lord is not of primary importance to them. This is what got them in trouble in the first place. You would think that after all God had done for them they would be less self-focused. Yet it is not hard to understand the people of

Israel because so often we do the same thing. After all Jesus has done for us Jesus becomes an afterthought. Our houses become more important than His house--the church. The New Testament even goes so far as to call our own bodies the temple because the Holy Spirit dwells within us. Perhaps we need to take Haggai's instruction and "consider our ways."

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
Behold, your king is coming to you;  
righteous and having salvation is he,  
humble and mounted on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.  
I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim  
and the war horse from Jerusalem;  
and the battle bow shall be cut off,  
and he shall speak peace to the nations;  
his rule shall be from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of the earth.  
As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you,  
I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.  
Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;  
today I declare that I will restore to you double.  
For I have bent Judah as my bow;  
I have made Ephraim its arrow.  
I will stir up your sons, O Zion,  
against your sons, O Greece,  
and wield you like a warrior's sword.  
Then the LORD will appear over them,  
and his arrow will go forth like lightning;  
the Lord GOD will sound the trumpet  
and will march forth in the whirlwinds of the south.  
The LORD of hosts will protect them,  
and they shall devour, and tread down the sling stones,  
and they shall drink and roar as if drunk with wine,  
and be full like a bowl,  
drenched like the corners of the altar.  
On that day the LORD their God will save them,  
as the flock of his people;  
for like the jewels of a crown  
they shall shine on his land.  
For how great is his goodness, and how great his beauty!  
Grain shall make the young men flourish,  
and new wine the young women. (Zechariah 9:9-17 ESV)

Zechariah looks to a future coming savior that will save the people. Look at the connections to Jesus. He will ride a donkey as Jesus did on Palm Sunday. The covenant will be one of blood as in the

cross and represented in communion. The idea of a trumpet blowing sounds a lot like the promises of Jesus' second coming.

*Pray that God will show you where you need to "consider your ways" and the areas of your life where you need to trust in Jesus as your Savior and King.*

## **Tuesday**

Malachi is the last book of the Minor Prophets and the Old Testament. He is addressing Israel after the temple has been rebuilt. He calls Israel to serve God as they covenant called them to. God deserves their worship but does not need it. God demands our lives and our commitment. It seems that the conduct of Israel at the time was still not good. Many were holding back in giving to the temple. They were going through the motions of religion too much without truly honoring God.

“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

“Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.

“For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’ Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts. Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 3:1-12 ESV)

The *messenger* spoken of here is said to be like Elijah and is shown in the New Testament to be John the Baptist. Because God is holy, there is a coming judgement, but also because God does not change God will be faithful to the covenant. God calls the people: "Return to me and I will return to you." But he demands the full tithe. There can be no holding back. Because the plan has been since Abraham was first called that Israel would be a blessing to all nations. Jesus is that blessing.

It is especially important to note the emphasis of the Elijah the messenger. John the Baptist is the bridge between the Old and New Testament. For several hundred years there are not prophetic writings. There are some other books that are written but these are not in our protestant Bibles. But John the Baptist is key because he marks the transition. He is the last of the prophets and the messenger or fore-runner to Jesus.

*Pray that you would return to Jesus in any part of your life that you have been holding back.*

## **Wednesday**

We now enter the New Testament with the 4 gospels--Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The word *gospel* means "good news." We have 4 different perspectives and witnesses to the life and work of Jesus. The first three are called the synoptics because they share a lot of structure, stories, and even particular wording. John stands apart as being more focused on the theological rather than the biographical information about Jesus.

Matthew's gospel is particularly Jewish and pays particular attention to Old Testament prophecies that are fulfilled in Jesus. He pays attention to Jesus' relationship to Israel. Matthew also seeks to explain the rejection of Jesus by Israel. Matthew, does not stop with Israel, however, and emphasizes several stories of Gentiles with whom Jesus interacts. He writes his gospel around 5 major speeches (called discourses) of Jesus.

*Note: Rather than give you a specific taste of the gospels and since this is a Lenten devotion, we will take these days to journey through the events of Easter.*

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here, while I go over there and pray." And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."

While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; seize him." And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" And he kissed him. Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what

you came to do.” Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?” At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples left him and fled. (Matthew 26:36-56 ESV)

The importance of this story is specific--Jesus knows what is going to happen and willingly goes to the cross. This is not an accident or a master plot that Jesus falls into. Jesus goes to a place where He can get caught. He stays so that he can be grabbed. He prays that God would take the cup away but also submits to the Father's will. He knows what Judas is doing as He had already prophesied that it would happen. He predicted His death. He lets Judas kiss Him. He does not let His disciples fight back. Jesus absolutely and resolutely goes to the cross for our sins.

*Pray that God would show you in an even deeper way why Jesus so intentionally went to the cross.*

## **Thursday**

If each of the gospels were made into movies, Mark would be the action movie. Mark tells stories in rapid succession without going too deeply into details. One of Mark's favorite words is *immediately* and he uses it to keep the stories moving. Mark writes for people of his day who are suffering for the gospel of Jesus Christ. He tries to show that Jesus was the Messiah and that He was faithful to God no matter the costs. This would be an encouragement. He emphasizes a theme of the gospels called the *kingdom of God* or the *reign of God*. The idea is that God has always ruled the universe but now a new and more intimate reign is coming. Mark also uses the theme sometimes called "the messianic secret" where Jesus' true identity is withheld until Peter's confession in chapter 8 that Jesus is Lord.

And they led Jesus to the high priest. And all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together. And Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire. Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’” Yet even about this their testimony did not agree. And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?” But he remained silent and made no answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” And Jesus said, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” And the high priest

tore his garments and said, “What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?” And they all condemned him as deserving death. And some began to spit on him and to cover his face and to strike him, saying to him, “Prophecy!” And the guards received him with blows.

And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came, and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, “You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus.” But he denied it, saying, “I neither know nor understand what you mean.” And he went out into the gateway and the rooster crowed. And the servant girl saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, “This man is one of them.” But again he denied it. And after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, “Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.” But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know this man of whom you speak.” And immediately the rooster crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, “Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.” And he broke down and wept. (Mark 14:53-72 ESV)

Here we witness the trial of Jesus and the denial of Peter. What is it that Jesus says that gets them so mad? In His answer Jesus quotes from Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13-14 and actually claims to be God. First, He answer affirmatively to being the Messiah and the Son of the Blessed. Second, He does so by saying "I Am" and alluding the name God revealed for Himself to Moses. Finally, Jesus claims to be seated at the right hand of Power meaning that He is equal to God. No wonder they wanted to kill Him.

The greatness and boldness of the claims of Jesus are contrasted with the fear and failure of Peter who denies Jesus not just once but three times. In the moment Peter does not even remember that Jesus predicted this.

*Pray and ask for forgiveness for all of the times you have denied or doubted that Jesus truly was God.*

## **Friday**

Luke was a physician and missionary companion of Paul. He was probably a Gentile--making him likely the only Gentile author in the New Testament. Luke also wrote the book of Acts and the two books can be looked at together as a two-volume work. The book of Luke is the story of Jesus and Acts is a story of the Holy Spirit. Luke ends and Acts begins with the ascension of Jesus.

Luke uses a number of stories about Gentiles and women to show the universal impact of Jesus. Like the gospel of Mark, Luke builds up the narrative up to the confession of Peter that Jesus is Lord. After that Luke takes 10 chapters to show Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and to the cross. Here we see some of Jesus' best known parables and miracles.

Two others, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what

they do.” And they cast lots to divide his garments. And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, “He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!” The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last. Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, “Certainly this man was innocent!” And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. And all his acquaintances and the women who had followed him from Galilee stood at a distance watching these things.

Now there was a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their decision and action; and he was looking for the kingdom of God. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb cut in stone, where no one had ever yet been laid. It was the day of Preparation, and the Sabbath was beginning. The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments.

On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment. (Luke 23:32-56 ESV)

There are several things to reflect on here. We see again the attitude of Jesus in asking God to forgive them. He is not being wronged, but is choosing to go to the cross. There is the beautiful story of the thief saved on the cross because of his belief in Jesus. The Centurions believe in Jesus as well. A thief believes, a Gentile soldier believes, and some women follow Jesus. This shows that Jesus' grace is for anyone. They laid Him in a tomb and left him there on the Sabbath (Saturday) to come and finish taking care of the body on Sunday. We will see that when they return on Sunday Jesus will not be there.

*Pray that you would have the saving faith of the man on the cross and believe in who Jesus is.*

## **Saturday**

John is different from the other gospels. John is more of a theological gospel. John has his own material and writes in his own structured way. Rather than giving a birth narrative, John gives a theological birth narrative of sorts. Jesus is the *word* or ultimate truth that was with God forever but

who came and became flesh. The gospel of John is based on the number 7. There are seven times where Jesus says "I am..." and then fills in a descriptor for Himself. Each of these involve something from everyday life such as light, water, bread, a vine, and a shepherd. Perhaps the most memorable of these is Jesus' claim to be "the way, the truth, and the life" and that no one comes to God except through Him. There are 7 major signs or miracles in the book. John organizes his material so that the reader must think about who Jesus is and not simply what Jesus did.

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her.

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." (John 20:1-23 ESV)

The disciples and the women, after being devastated by the death of Jesus, do not remember His promise of resurrection. That seems outside of the realm of possibility and does not even enter their minds. They assume that the body has been taken. But Jesus appears to Mary and then later to the rest of the disciples. Surely Jesus had to begin by saying "Peace be with you." They were probably freaking out. But He did rise. His body while of a more spiritual substance still had the visible wounds in His hands and His sides. It really was Jesus--alive and well!

*Pray for the faith to see Jesus alive and well today.*

## **Fifth Sunday of Lent**

Acts is the second in a two volume work that began with the Gospel of Luke. It begins where Luke ends--with the ascension of Jesus. Acts is the story of how this little band of scared followers spread out and began a worldwide movement that continues to this day. The big ideas are first that Jesus is the Messiah even though He was crucified. This message comes up in the many sermons and speeches given throughout the book. Second, the Holy Spirit is the power behind this growing movement. We see this when it is Pentecost is the Third, Acts defends the inclusion of the Gentiles into the saving work of Jesus by showing the missionary work of Paul and its acceptance by the early Christian leaders. The book centers on the work of the Spirit in Jerusalem and in Israel and then follows Paul as he goes on many missionary journeys.

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” (Acts 1:6-11 ESV)

This is the story of Jesus' ascension into heaven. It is important for a number of reasons. We see the disciples still seeing the work of Jesus as the restoration of the kingdom of Israel. But in response Jesus shows that His work is much more global. After the Holy Spirit, comes, the mission of these men will go to the end of the earth. This description actually comes to fruition throughout the book of Acts. We also get the promise of Jesus' return, but the instruction that we should not just hang out waiting for Jesus to return but should do the work the Holy Spirit leads us to do.

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. (Acts 2:37-41 ESV)

Pentecost is the amazing experience of the Holy Spirit coming to the disciples. This text is the reaction that people have to the words of Peter's sermon at Pentecost. He calls them to repent and be baptized and three thousand are added to their numbers that day. That same Holy Spirit that empowered and spoke through Peter is the same Holy Spirit in you and in your church.

*Pray for the work of the Holy Spirit in a new and powerful way.*

## **Monday**

Many of the books in the New Testament are attributed to the apostle Paul. Paul was a Jewish leader who persecuted Christians until God temporarily blinded him and called him to follow Jesus. In the book of Acts, Paul becomes the leader of the missionary work to the Gentiles. He travels around and establishes churches. The books we have by him are letters of correspondence he has with churches or church leaders.

Of Paul's work, Romans is his most significant. He writes the Roman church in hopes of visiting them while passing through on the way to Spain. Since Paul is not addressing specific issues for the community, he gives a beautiful and detailed theology and lays out the good news in great detail. His major argument is that God is righteous and that all people, Jew or Gentile, stand in need of the saving work of Jesus. He is also concerned with what to do with the Old Testament law. We do not just throw it off, but we are also not defined by it. We are defined by Christ.

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law. (Romans 3:19-31 ESV)

For Paul, Jesus changes the game. The Old Testament law had rules and sacrifices that we would to get right with God. But in Jesus the law is changed. Rather than something that we do, God takes the initiative. Now we get right with God by faith in what Jesus has done for us. We still follow God's rules but we are not justified or made righteous by them. The loaded term of this text is the word *propitiation*. It means to appease. In this sense, it means that Jesus appeases the requirements of God in His act on the cross. He pays the debt. He is the sacrifice that makes us right with God.

*Pray and thank God for the saving work of Jesus. Pray that you would follow God's commandments not to earn His love but instead to do them in gratitude for His love.*

## **Tuesday**

Corinth was a city in which Paul started church. We have two letters from Paul to Corinth, though the letters themselves refer to other correspondence. Corinth was a community in trouble. They struggled to figure out what it means to be Christian in the middle of their pagan culture. Paul addresses a number of topics with them. They are easily divided into groups and often in conflict. They are not in agreement on how to handle ethical problems. They have disruptive and disorderly worship as well as questions of theology. The second book to the Corinthians deals with further challenges to Paul's authority and Paul's attempt, despite hurt feelings, to strengthen the Corinthian church. The books to the Corinthians are great examples of the application of the gospel to real world situations.

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:12-28 ESV)

The church of Corinth had some questions about what happens after a person dies and what will happen in the resurrection. Some are claiming that death is just the end and that the dead are no more. For Paul this solution is impossible because if there is no resurrection then Jesus cannot have been resurrected. But why is so important that Christ was really resurrected in bodily form? Doesn't His death pay the price of sin? Why can't that be enough? Why can't He simply rise in Spirit? For Paul and for the rest of the Bible Jesus has to completely defeat sin and death. He cannot half-win. He has to put sin and death in subjection. Since sin impacts our bodies, Jesus has to beat sin in a way that corrects the impact of sin on the body. It is not enough to be resurrected in Spirit. The body must be made new as well. In this way, my body and your body will also be raised some day. Jesus is the *firstfruits* of something that will happen to us all. You are not just a spirit in a shell called a body. You

are a body and a spirit together. Since both are broken by sin both will be restored and made perfect when the Lord chooses to return.

*Pray that God would help you believe in the resurrection of Jesus and in your own resurrection.*

## **Wednesday**

When Paul writes to the Galatians he is not happy. This short letter has none of the flowery introduction or concluding material of his letter. He gets right to the point. People have come to Galatia call "Judaizers" who demand that Christians follow the law and be circumcised in order to be saved. This is in direct contradiction to the gospel of grace that Paul preached. But the Galatians are falling for it. Paul has strong words for this community and calls them back to grace. He does some theological work along the way to show how salvation by works cannot be effective and how salvation must be by grace alone.

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”?

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might

come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. (Galatians 2:15-3:14 ESV)

The key to Paul's theology is the centrality of Jesus Christ. How does this become ours? Paul is clear in everything he writes that it is not by works but faith in Jesus Christ. In faith we are connected to the life, death and resurrection of Christ. But this has huge implications for our lives. As Paul puts it, it "is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me." You are not your own. What then is purpose of the law? It shows to us our need for Jesus because we cannot follow the law. It also guides us of how to live. But the law cannot save. We are redeemed in Jesus. This means that the Gentiles can participate even though they do not follow the law. The Galatians have been foolish to follow the logic of the Judaizers. Paul even uses Abraham as an example to show that even in the Old Testament faith is still of central importance.

*Pray that your life would no longer be about you but about Christ.*

## **Thursday**

Ephesus was an important port city in its day. Paul had stayed there about three years in order to establish the church there. Later, Paul writes the Ephesians a very positive and encouraging letter which we call the book of Ephesians. Paul especially emphasize right doctrine among the Ephesians. For a short book Paul packs a lot of succinct and important theology. He emphasizes the importance of God's action in our salvation over and above our free choice. He talks about the importance of our standing in Christ and explores how to live in light of this. Ephesians also includes the popular "Armor of God" passage.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in

ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Ephesians 2 ESV)

Here Paul has a powerful of talking about what Jesus has done for us. We were dead. Dead people cannot do anything to save themselves. But we are saved by grace through faith. This is brought to us by the actions of Jesus. This means that we cannot boast about anything in ourselves but can only boat in Jesus. God saves us and God prepares work for us to do. How do we know that we have been saved? How can we have peace and assurance? Not by circumcision or any other law practice. Jesus Himself is our peace. In Jesus we now have full access to the Father. We are now citizens of heaven. We have a new identity to live out of.

*Pray that your boasting would never be about yourself but would that you would share with others Christ's work in your life.*

## **Friday**

Paul had started the church at Philippi on one of his missionary journeys after he and his missionary companion Silas had been thrown in prison. During the night God caused an earthquake and their prison chains fell off. The jailer and his family were saved and began the church of Philippi. You can read the story in Acts 16:11-40. This letter, written around 10 or so years later, is a news update from Paul and an encouragement to the church. Paul writes to thank them for their support of his work and to challenge them to live in humility, joy, and contentment. The church had helped Paul out financially (4:16) and in prayer and emotional support. Paul sends them a man named Epaphroditus and wants to send Timothy. Paul also hopes to visit them in the future. The content of the letter emphasizes living as a citizen of heaven and especially living in humility. While some are emphasizing legalism or rules based salvation in Philippi, Paul's goal is the resurrection through faith. Paul instructs the church to be more united and not be too anxious.

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed

on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me. (Philippians 2:1-18 ESV)

This passage has in it what is often called "The Philippian Christ Hymn." It is believed that the phrasing in that first paragraph starting at "though he was in the form of God" actually comes from an early church hymn. This is a powerful description about the work of Jesus who humbles Himself to become flesh and then further humbles himself to go to the cross. Paul also encourages the Philippians to work out their salvation. This does not mean that they need to earn it or to figure it. The image is literally that God does something inside of you through Jesus Christ and you have a responsibility to work it out of you and into action. There is a way of doing things if you have been saved by Christ.

*Pray that God would humble you in the model of Christ's humility and help you to work your salvation out into action.*

## **Saturday**

Colosse was a city in the middle of what it now Turkey. Paul never visited it but it was probably started as an extension of his work in the area. Paul writes the letter we call Colossians because he has heard about false teaching that is spreading there. The false teaching appears to be related to the ideas growing at that time called *gnosticism*. This idea said that the material world is evil and that salvation came from higher special knowledge called *gnosis*. This belief system tends to emphasize things like secret interpretations of scripture, visions, and angels. The net result of this heresy was that it picked apart the life and work of Jesus. Some works that Jesus did would be human or material works and they were devalued. Other quote "spiritual" things that Jesus did was lifted up. Paul writes the Colossians and challenges their false teachers. He lifts Jesus up as the ideal and as the thing that saves us. We are not saved by special knowledge but by our participation in the life, death, resurrection, and lordship of Jesus Christ. Therefore what we do on earth and in our bodies *is* important and we should live focusing on what it means to follow Christ.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him

all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. (Colossians 1:15-23 ESV)

Jesus is the ultimate expression of God. He is not created but all was created through Him. This means that Jesus' existence was not started at the Christmas story. He has always existed, just not in the flesh. All the physical world is subject to Him because all was made through Him. Now, as flesh, Jesus reconciles all of us to God. We are aliens to God no more.

Gnosticism is still around today. There is a perpetual understanding even among Christians that our spirit is the real us and that our body is simply a shell to hold our body. This tints our view of Jesus as well. He can only be half human or is resurrected in spirit only. But, as we saw in 1 Corinthians, the body is important. The effects of sin have to be totally defeated and Jesus has to fix the sin problem from the human side of the relationship. The Christian faith makes no sense if Jesus was not totally human or was only a human. It also makes no sense if Jesus was not resurrected in the body as well as the spirit.

*Pray that God would help you to better understand the life and work of Jesus.*

## **Palm Sunday**

We have two letters that Paul writes to the Thessalonians sometime after he first established the church there. It was a port city that had a number of Jewish people and also had Gentiles who worshipped the God of the Jews (as opposed to their gods) even before Jesus had come. In the first letter, Paul encourages the church in their faithfulness. They are apparently suffering persecution from the Jews who did not believe in Christ, as even Paul had during his missionary work there (see Acts 17). Paul encourages them to live in love and purity even more and to grow in their godly living. He also calls them to look toward the future hope of Jesus' return to earth. Paul writes them a second time of theological confusion going on in the church regarding how Jesus was going to return. It was distracting them from their mission as a church. Some people are doing nothing and just waiting for Jesus to return. Paul encourages them to mature.

Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know. For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.

But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you—for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. (1 Thessalonians 3 ESV)

Paul, in the middle of his own persecution, is concerned for the church in Thessalonica. He writes them to check on how they are doing. Timothy brought him good news of their faith and love. He says that he and his companions now live if they are standing fast in the Lord. What an amazing testimony to the heart of a Christian leader. We see here the passion with which Paul does the ministry that God has set before him to do. He wraps up his very life in the communities that he is ministering to. I think that this is definitely a model for pastors and leaders in the church, but it is also a great model of our Christians. What has God put before you to do that would give Jesus glory and that would consume your life?

*Pray that God would show you the work He has for you and that you would have the strength to pour your life into it.*

## **Monday**

Paul wrote two letters to Timothy--a young pastor that Paul mentored and taken with him for missionary work. Timothy had learned the scriptures from his mother and grandmother and, though young, had a strong faith. Paul writes to encourage him to boldness against false teachers and false doctrine. He gives him instruction on worship, relationships in the church, and the need for Christians to be content with their possessions and not be greedy. Paul's second letter is written just before he dies a martyr's death and is probably the last letter he wrote before being beheaded. It is a last letter to a friend and to someone who will continue Paul's work. Ultimately, both letters provide great instructions for Christian leadership and for boldly defending the faith.

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time. For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.<sup>1</sup> (1 Timothy 2:1-7 ESV)

Paul is not a very pluralistic guy. For Paul there is one God and one mediator between God and people. Jesus is the only way to get to God. He gave his life to pay the ransom for all people. This is the center of Paul's life and work. This is why he was called to go to the Gentiles. The same needs to be true of Timothy in his ministry. The same needs to be true of us today.

Titus was a Gentile who probably became a Christian on one of Paul's missionary journeys. He is a man of maturity who was accepted by the Jewish Christian leadership. He was also sent by Paul to Corinth to help them in their troubles. Paul writes this letter as Titus is working on the island of Crete. It is close in content to I Timothy as it is encouragement to a leader dealing with heresy, training leaders, and relating to people in the church. Crete was not an easy place to work because the people there were pretty immoral. To this day we can use the word *cretan* to refer to someone who does bad things. Titus and I Timothy also have criteria for choosing good leaders in the church that are still used by many churches today.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you.  
(Titus 2:11-15 ESV)

The grace of God that appears is Jesus Christ. He brings salvation but also trains us up to live differently. We look forward to his appearing at the end of time when all things are made right. Titus is challenged to lead others to be zealous for good works. He needs to do this boldly and not be pushed aside or ignored. The message is too important.

*Pray that Jesus' work would be the center of your life and that God would train you up in the areas where you are not fully serving Him.*

## **Tuesday**

Philemon is a little book that Paul wrote to a particular Christian of that name. One of Philemon's slaves named Onesimus had run away and stolen some money from his master. While in Rome, he met Paul and became a Christian. He even helped Paul in his work. Onesimus then decided that the right thing to do was to return to Philemon and make things right. Paul writes this letter to encourage Philemon to accept Onesimus back not as a slave but as a brother. While Paul does not demand Onesimus' release, he does seem to subtly suggest that Philemon release Onesimus that he might return to Paul and continue to be a help to him.

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have. (Philippians 1:12-30 ESV)

Philippians has been used by Christians to justify slavery in the past. If you read carefully you will see that Paul is subtly suggesting that Onesimus be released by appealing to the goodness of Philemon. Does Paul do enough? Does the bible accept or encourage slavery? First, you must understand that slavery back then was not like it is today. It was not ethnically or racially based. Though it was certainly abused at times, slavery was not the same as antebellum slavery in the New World. Slaves could have families, own property, and buy their freedom. They were not considered property the way American slavery was. For many slavery was the only way to survive. In reality, slavery in Paul's day probably looked more like employment today than antebellum slavery. That does not mean it was ok, but we must always be careful of the things we project from our own experiences and understandings into scripture.

I think Paul's subtle way of relating to Philemon is a powerful example of the implications of the Gospel. Christianity has always been tempted to gain access to power in order to further the mission of Christ. The problem is that this method is actually contrary to the message. In other words, a gospel of grace can never be forced on anyone. In this letter, we see Paul take on a social issue of his day in a way that fits with the Gospel. That is not to say that Christians should not fight injustice. Civil rights, for example, needed Christians to boldly stand up and say "enough is enough." But the method must also be taken into account. I call Paul's work in Philemon a "gospel assault."

*Pray that God would give you a heart for the issues in this world that you should pour yourself into and that the Holy Spirit would guide you in your methods for changing the world.*

## Wednesday

The author of the book of Hebrews is not identified in the text. Whoever it is wrote with great style and prose to a group of Jewish Christians. The writer encourage them to stay in the Christian faith and not return to their previously held Jewish faith. The letter or sermon is written to defend Jesus Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of the Jewish faith including the temple, the law, the priests, and the sacrifices. Jesus is better than these things. He is the next step and far superior to the past. This new faith and covenant supersedes the old one. As the author builds this case, they interject encouragement and warnings to Christians. The end result is that the Christian's life must be based on faith and in that life we must have endurance over the long haul.

Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain." But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. (Hebrews 8:1-7 ESV)

We see here an example of the comparisons that Hebrews make between Jesus and Jewish history. The priest was the go-between for humanity and God. They would tend to the temple—the presence of God on this world—and also tend to the people by teaching the Word. But Christ is described here as much more excellent and better. Jesus is the sacrifice and He also has full access to the Father in heaven. The flaws of the old covenant are covered in Jesus.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2 ESV)

Here Jesus is called the author and perfecter of our faith. Jesus creates our faith but also takes responsibility for bringing it to completion. We tend to want to take responsibility for both our salvation and our living out of that salvation. We want to save ourselves by our decisions or works. We want to control our spiritual growth. But these are both Jesus' job. We do have some responsibility. We need to put aside sin. We especially need endurance to continue with Christ for the long haul. Luckily we have the encouragement and examples of the Christians who have gone on before.

*Pray that God would reveal Jesus to you are more and more excellent than anything else and that Jesus would continue to perfect your faith.*

## Maundy Thursday

James is probably the half-brother of Jesus who becomes a leader in the early church after Jesus is ascended into heaven. He is called a half-brother because Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and not by Joseph. He writes a very practical book to encourage Jewish Christians to live out their faith. It is sometimes called the "Proverbs of the New Testament" because of how practical it is. It has not always been appreciated in the church. Martin Luther did not like its emphasis on works and called it an "epistle of straw." (epistle is another word for letter) The emphasis is not, however, that your works save you. Rather, your works prove that you have saving faith. If you say that you have faith but your life does not look any different then there is room to doubt that saving faith. James emphasizes works that come from faith in how the Christians handles trials, controls their tongue, refrains from showing partiality, and relates to riches and poverty. The Word of God is something that cannot simply be heard. It is something that must be done--it must be turned into action.

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. (James 2:14-26 ESV)

This reading is for Maundy Thursday. This is the night that Jesus betrayed, but also tonight Jesus serves communion and washes the disciples feet. Clearly Jesus thought that works were important. He spend His ministry caring for people. James does not mean and Jesus does not think that works save you. Grace through faith saves us. But *faith* is completed by works. It is perhaps helpful to define terms. When most people think of *faith* what they really mean is *belief* but faith is more than belief. Faith is belief in action. It is doing something based on that belief. You might believe in Jesus—that He actually existed and did what Christians say that He did. But that is not enough because if it was the Demons would also be saved. Faith requires action based on belief. If there are not works than there is no faith. There is only belief and the faith is dead.

*Pray that God would help you when your faith is not active so that your faith is not useless but is alive and active.*

## Good Friday

The Apostle Peter is a man who went through a great change. As a disciple, he is known for being brash and walking on water, though he is probably best known for denying Jesus 3 times. But when the Holy Spirit comes upon Peter, he is a new man. His first sermon at Pentecost saves thousands. Peter leads the church to accept the salvation of the Gentiles. He also writes 2 letters to be circulated through the churches in what is today the country of Turkey. Peter's writes to churches that are being persecuted to encourage them and to remind them of the hope they have in Christ Jesus. Peter's first letter flips back and forth between theology and application. He makes amazing claims about Jesus but also shows how Jesus relates to our hurt and suffering as well as how we should relate to others in suffering. Peter's second letter is written at the end of his life and he sees a growing number of false teachers and alternative interpretations of the life of Jesus. He combats the by challenging the churches to return to the solid teachings of the Bible and the Apostles. He also clarifies some questions about the Lord's return to this world.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. (1 Peter 1:3-21 ESV)

This is Good Friday. It is the day that Christ died on the cross. The prophets had spoken of this event. The history of Israel had prepared the world for this moment. On this day Jesus died as the

perfect sacrifice—a lamb without a blemish or spot. This is the center of our hope. When you see a cross or think about the sacrifice of Jesus, try to remind yourself that it should have been you on that cross. This is kind of a depressing thought, but only if the story had stopped on Good Friday. Easter is coming, when we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. It is to that hope that Peter points these early Christians in their persecution. May that be our hope today.

*Pray that on the Good Friday God would help you to consider the saving action of Jesus Christ on the cross. Pray to that God would take away all the other areas where you mistakenly place your hope.*

## **Holy Saturday**

The Apostle John authored the gospel of John, three short letters, and the book of Revelation. He was a disciple of Jesus who, with his brother James, left their jobs working with their father as fishermen. He was one of the disciples that was closest to Jesus. He was an early leader in the church and then became a missionary around the city of Ephesus.

In these 3 small letters, we see once again instruction on false teaching. Why was false teaching such a big deal? Because the gospel of Jesus was (and is) something different than other religions and philosophies. The idea of God working on our behalf by grace through faith was totally original in its day. If Christians water that message down in any way then it becomes something it was not meant to be. John's message in these letters is that true fellowship with God comes only through Jesus. In Jesus, we can be assured of our salvation and not have doubts that would lead us to a works based righteousness. Anyone who would threaten that message of grace should be severely dealt with.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. (1 John 1:5-2:6 ESV)

We do not like to admit it but John puts it right in front of us. We all have sin. When we say we do not we deceive ourselves. We all are in need of God's cleansing in the blood of Jesus. We all need to walk in the light because often the darkness feels more natural to us. When we do sin, we need

to remember that Jesus Christ died for our sins past, present, and future. We keep working and maturing and walking in God's ways. But we do not beat ourselves up when we fall into sin. We simply continue to turn to Christ.

Jude is a very short book written to battle false teachers. Jude identifies himself as a brother of James. It is likely he is referring to the Apostle James. This would make Jude a half-brother of Jesus as well. Jude encourages Christians to be discerning of the truth and to live a life of holiness.

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen. (Jude 1:24-25 ESV)

This benediction ends the book of Jude. It emphasizes again for us the work of Jesus as our salvation but also as the one who perfects our faith. It also emphasizes the ultimate expression of worship in this world. God deserves all the glory and majesty. God deserves to rule over everything. Someday God will get all that God deserves.

*Pray that God would help you to receive His forgiveness and to forgive yourself so that God may receive all the glory in your life.*

## **Easter Sunday**

Revelation is a book written in a genre called apocalyptic literature. It is written by the Apostle John and uses big images filled with vivid and sweeping details to capture the imagination. While some people try to read Revelation as a step by step guide to the end of the world, it might be better to think about this book like a political cartoon. No one looks at a political cartoon and asks the meaning behind Richard Nixon's large nose. The exaggeration serves to engage the reader of the cartoon so that the main point is achieved. This is how one might speak of Revelation. There is a lot of meaning in the imagery and movement of the book but it does not need to be read as step by step instructions. That does not mean it is any less true. It just changes how we read it. The point of Revelation is simple--JESUS WINS! The meaning of the imagery, some of which we have lost over time, fails in comparison to the central message. This is the conclusion to all of time. It is the conclusion to the Bible. What you saw beginning in creation came through Noah and Abraham. It was carried through Moses. God brought it forward through the kings and the prophets. It was ultimately won and paid for in Christ. The Apostles looked forward to it. Revelation is how sin is defeated at the redemptive work of God in Jesus Christ is completed.

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following

him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, "Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great." And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh. (Revelation 19:11-21 ESV)

This entire lent, as we have been building up to Easter. We have also been building up to this moment in the Bible throughout the devotional. Jesus takes His place as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The saved are called to the great banquet. The sin and evil are forever thrown out of this world. As we celebrate that Easter sunrise and Jesus coming out of the tomb, we also look forward to Jesus' return and the completion of all that He has done.

*Pray that you would never again see Easter merely as a past tense event but as a future hope as well.*

## Afterward

I hope that this devotional was as fun and helpful to read as it was to write. It really challenged me to pay attention to the grand themes of the Bible and to study my scripture in even more depth. I hope that it does the same for you. The Bible is not a document from which you should take simple sayings and maxims. It is God's Word and needs to be digested and wrestled with. I would challenge you to commit to a lifetime of daily Bible reading. Try to read from different parts and passages. Here are some ideas that may help you.

- **The Daily Lectionary**- This is a two year cycle of daily scriptures that does not cover the entire Bible but covers many of the important passages and themes. It includes a Psalm, an Old Testament reading, a Gospel reading, and a New Testament reading. You can find these reading plans if you search on the internet for "daily lectionary" or talk to your pastor.
- **One Year Bible**- You can order a Bible online or at most major bookstores that gives you passages every day so that you read the entire Bible in a year. They are most often broken down into sections like the Daily Lectionary but you can also get ones that are put together chronologically based on when the story or text occurs.
- **Bible in 90 Days**- This is a specific program that is an intense immersion into the Bible. The goal is to read the Bible from cover to cover in 3 months. It comes out to about 12 pages a day and takes people between 45 minutes and an hour every day. The value is that you make a solid commitment and push through. It is a great way to see the major themes of the Bible because you see things unfold in a compact period of time. There is also curriculum available so you can learn more in weekly meetings and can share your learning with others.

If you want to get more out of your Bible reading I suggest that you get a good study Bible. I prefer the ESV Study Bible but you can find one that works for you. Joining a Bible study or Sunday school class can also help you.

My biggest suggestion is that you find a way to balance a macro-view of the Bible with a micro-view of the Bible. In other words, you need to read sometimes just for fun or devotionally so that you get the big picture of the Bible. You also sometimes need to dive into texts deeper through reading or studying.

THANKS FOR TAKING THIS JOURNEY.  
MAY GOD CONTINUE TO SPEAK TO YOU THROUGH HIS  
WORD WORD AND HIS HOLY SPIRIT AND MAY HE  
CONTINUALLY POINT YOU TO THE GREAT THINGS THAT  
JESUS CHRIST HAS DONE.