

Today

March/April 2011

refresh, refocus, renew



**"The Power and Wisdom
of the Cross"**
Stanley Mast



"The Words of Christ"
Shawn Brix

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re FRAME MEDIA

this month

The Power and Wisdom of the Cross

Stanley Mast

Grand Rapids, Michigan

For the coming month, which ushers in Lent and springtime, our meditations will focus on the power and wisdom of God in the cross of Christ. These readings aim not only to help explain these mysterious ideas but also to apply the reality of God's power and wisdom to our daily lives. Renewal absolutely depends on what God did and what God teaches us in the cross of Christ. Even as the renewal of nature in spring depends on the tilt of the earth, so the renewal of our spiritual lives depends on the cross.

Beginning in 1971, Rev. Stanley Mast served churches in Missouri, Colorado, and Michigan. Since 1990, after teaching at Calvin Theological Seminary for a few years, he has served as minister of preaching at LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Stan is married to Sharon, with whom he shares the joys of two sons and five grandchildren.

THE POWER OF THE CROSS

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us . . . it is the power of God. —1 Corinthians 1:18

On March 30, 2010, an international team of scientists conducted a momentous experiment in a 17-mile tunnel beneath the Swiss-French border. Using the Large Hadron Collider, they sent two subatomic particles hurtling toward each other at unheard of speeds in conditions they claimed were similar to those just after the Big Bang. When those two protons collided, they produced an enormous explosion of energy. One ecstatic scientist, physicist Michio Kaku, declared, “This is a huge step toward unraveling Genesis 1:1—what happened at the beginning. This is a Genesis machine. It will help recreate the most glorious event in the history of the universe.”

When I read that, I immediately disagreed with Kaku, not just about science unraveling Genesis, but also about “the most glo-

rious event in history.” Though the creation of the universe was glorious, I don’t think it can be described as “the most glorious event.” I think the *redemption* of God’s creation was far more glorious, because the collision of God’s love and justice on the cross of Christ unleashed a power that can redeem the cosmos.

In this month that includes the beginning of Lent we will explore together what may sound like a grandiose claim about the power of the cross: “to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

O glorious God, open us now to the power of the cross. Stun us with the most momentous event in history—the death of your own Son. Amen.

CHRIST CRUCIFIED

We preach Christ crucified: . . . Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.
—1 Corinthians 1:23-24

By the end of this month we will be in the Lenten season. The word *Lent* derives from a Middle English word that means “springtime”—but this doesn’t mean Lent is a celebration of the annual renewal of nature caused by the tilt of the world’s axis. No, Lent is a celebration of the renewal of human life caused by the grace of God.

I use the word *celebration* guardedly here, because Lent is not a joyful dance around a Maypole. It is rather a season of solemn reflection and serious repentance that leads to spiritual renewal. It’s the time when we remember that such renewal depends on Christ crucified.

People outside of the Christian faith may wonder how we can celebrate a gruesome death that happened 2,000 years ago. It does sound ghoulish, unless Paul is right in 1 Corinthians 1,

where he says that Christ is “the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

As we focus this month on the power and wisdom of God in the cross of Christ, our goal should be not merely to explain those mysterious ideas but also to apply the reality of God’s power and wisdom to our daily lives.

Even as the renewal of nature in spring depends on the tilt of the earth, so the renewal of our spiritual lives depends on the cross.

O crucified Christ, help us to experience the joy and peace of renewal that flows from your cross for our sake. Amen.

BEING TRANSFORMED

We . . . are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory . . .
—2 Corinthians 3:18

Our renewal depends on the power and wisdom of God in the cross of Christ. But that brings up a deep question: How many of us actually want to be renewed? If social researcher George Barna is right, we probably don't. His surveys have discovered that 3 out of 5 Christians are not involved in an effort to grow spiritually.

Apparently many Christians ask, "Why should I change?" I'll give you the simple answer of our text—because God is continually involved in a change project that is centered in you. "We . . . are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

We should change—indeed, we should want to change, because the crucified and risen Lord is changing us. That changes our view toward change, doesn't

it? It should not be thought of as a grim duty, a tedious obligation, or a heavy burden we must pick up. No, change is a privilege, an opportunity, a joy. In a world that thinks we are all locked into an endless chain of cause and effect, this text gives us incredible good news. We are free to change in ways the world cannot begin to imagine.

The root word for "transformed" in our text is the Greek word *metamorpho*, also used to describe the change of a caterpillar to a butterfly. By the power of his crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus is transforming us into his beautiful likeness.

Lord Jesus, as you change us from within, fill us with a sincere desire to become like you. Amen.

TURN YOUR EYES UPON JESUS

When we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power . . . we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. —2 Peter 1:16

Decades after it happened, Peter wrote about the awesome moment when Jesus was transfigured (metamorphosed) on a mountain before their very eyes (see Luke 9:28-36). The disciples who witnessed that event saw his glory, and they never forgot it. It changed their lives forever.

That, says the apostle Paul, is the secret of our own metamorphosis: “We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Imagine looking in a mirror, especially during your teenage years: “Is that a new pimple? Do I need to shave? Is that hair out of place?” That’s the idea behind this text, except that Paul talks about gazing not at himself but at the glory of Christ. Change will come when, as an

old hymn says, we “turn [our] eyes upon Jesus, [and] look full in his wonderful face.”

In Greek mythology there’s a story about Medusa, a terrifying woman with snakes for hair. Anyone who looked directly at her would turn to stone. But that was a myth. Paul tells the good news that if you look directly at Jesus in faith, he will transform your stony heart into a heart that beats for God.

We need to turn our eyes to Christ, who was not only transfigured but was also crucified and raised from the dead to live and rule forever. And we will be transformed to new life.

Lord Jesus, in a world filled with flickering screens and dazzling images, help us to turn the eyes of our faith to you. Amen.

BY THE RENEWING OF YOUR MIND

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.
—Romans 12:2

There are many ways to change things in your life. You can change your behavior by sheer determination, your relationships by seeking good counseling, your weight by following a diet. But there is only one way to change your spiritual life, and that is to renew your mind.

We have talked about turning our eyes to Jesus. Of course, this refers not to our physical eyes but to our spiritual eyes, the eyes of faith, the eyes of our heart and mind. We turn our eyes upon Jesus by focusing our hearts on him. And that requires the renewing of our minds. If we truly desire spiritual renewal, we must be “transformed by the renewing of [our] mind.”

Now, Paul isn’t talking about positive thinking, or thought control, or all the current philosophical variations of “you are

what you think.” He is talking about Christ. Look at the turn of his discussion in Romans 12: “Therefore, I urge you . . . in view of God’s mercy . . .” Paul has just filled several pages explaining how God’s mercy has come to us in Jesus Christ. And now, in view of all that, he urges us to be transformed by fixing our minds on Christ.

In particular, fix your mind on Christ crucified and risen to victorious life. When your mind is filled with God’s power and wisdom in the cross of Christ, you will be changed into his likeness.

Holy Spirit, help us to clean out the attic of our minds and replace old musty ideas about ourselves with fresh new ideas about Jesus. Amen.

NONE UNDERSTOOD

None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. —1 Corinthians 2:8

Most people in this world do not understand the message of Christ crucified. Paul says that is why the rulers of this world crucified Jesus. They just could not comprehend that Jesus was the Lord of glory, because he didn't look or act the part.

The Jewish rulers expected the Lord of glory to use his power to rout the Romans and re-establish a geopolitical kingdom in the promised land of Israel. The idea that the Lord of glory would be crucified was a stumbling block to them. They stumbled over the concept of a murdered Messiah.

The Gentile rulers never expected a god to become human. The idea that Jupiter or Mars or Venus could actually become human and then literally die was total nonsense to them. So this Jesus, whoever he

was, was in their minds no Lord of glory.

Rulers today are no different. Whether they are academic elites writing scornful books about the Christian faith, powerful politicians convinced that policy change will usher in a new world, or media stars absorbed in their own lives, none understand that Christ crucified is the key to redemption.

So it is important to spend time in a Bible-believing church that is committed, like Paul, to preach only "Jesus Christ and him crucified." Then we can have true life.

Lord of glory, bless all who preach today. May they point only to you, the crucified Christ, as Savior, that all may be drawn to you. Amen.

GETTING THE CROSS

Sitting down, they kept watch over him there.

—Matthew 27:36

This week we're going to sit down at the foot of the cross to watch. We've already thought about the cross being the power of God. Now let's focus on what that means.

What immediately jumps off the page in our Bible reading for today is that the people who were at the cross just didn't get it. Jesus hung there for them, and they didn't get it. The criminals didn't get it. The crowds didn't get it. Even the devout religious people didn't get it.

Many people today don't get it either. Do you get it? This is extremely important, because your life depends on it—not just eternal life in the future but also your life day to day.

In 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul states that we are being transformed into God's image "with ever-increasing glory, which

comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." We can change important aspects of our lives because the Spirit of the Lord Jesus is working every moment to change us. He is doing that today because of what God did to change us 2,000 years ago through the cross of Christ. The present work of the Spirit is based on the finished work of Christ.

Do you get that? When you think you can't change or when you don't want to change, say to yourself, "I can change because Christ was crucified for me, and the Spirit is working in me."

Holy Spirit, help us to get the cross in our heads and our hearts so that we can live by your life-changing power. Amen.

CONFUSION AROUND THE CROSS

"I lay down my life. . . . No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."
—John 10:17-18

Jesus hung on the cross, but the people surrounding the cross didn't get it. We hear their confusion in the mockery of the crowd passing by and in the scorn of the religious leaders standing there. "Save yourself!" they said, adding comments like "He can't save himself! He made such big claims! Big man, big mouth, save yourself!" (See Matthew 27:39-44.)

Jesus did do big things. He healed people who were blind, people who had leprosy and other diseases, people who were disabled, and people who had demons. He even raised people from the dead.

"Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him," said the religious leaders. "Let God rescue him now if he wants him" (27:42-43). Well, of course, God wanted him. Jesus had spoken the truth when

he had said he was the Son of God. But God wanted him right there on the cross. And, of course, Jesus could have come down if he had wanted to.

He said, "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." Jesus didn't want to come down, because he was laying down his life for his sheep, including some of the people who mocked and insulted him.

He was also laying down his life for you and me!

Lord Jesus, we thank you for staying where you were, up on that cross, for us, when you could have saved yourself. We love you for that. Amen.

THE SUBSTITUTE

We all, like sheep, have gone astray . . . and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
—Isaiah 53:6

You can hear the confusion around the cross in the words of Gandhi: “I could accept Jesus as a martyr. . . . His death on the cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it, my heart could not accept.”

Often those who do not believe in Jesus are confused about the power of the cross, because they don’t accept the idea of substitution. The same is true of people who claim to believe but say the death of Jesus sounds like “divine child abuse.” But Isaiah had said substitution would be part of the ministry of this Servant. And on the cross the Lord laid on Jesus the iniquity of us all. Jesus was our substitute.

Why do we need a substitute? Imagine that your teenager uses your car and swerves off

your driveway, smashing into a tree. He’s fine, but there’s a lot of damage to the car. For reasons you cannot fathom, your insurance won’t cover the damage. What can you do? You can demand that your child pay the damages, or you can pay for them yourself. The fact is that the damage doesn’t somehow vanish into thin air. Someone has to pay.

On the cross God paid the damages caused in this world by our sin. We had swerved off the road, gone astray like sheep, and the Lord laid our debt on our Substitute by sending him to the place of ultimate damage. What amazing love!

Lord Jesus, “love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.” I offer it to you. Amen.

TRIPLY CONDEMNED

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us . . .
—Galatians 3:13

At the heart of the cross was the great reversal—the Holy One of God gave up his life for condemned criminals. In fact, Jesus died as a “triple condemned” criminal.

Jesus was condemned by both the Jews and the Romans. He claimed to be God, and that was the ultimate crime for the Jews. He claimed to be King, and that was the ultimate crime for the Romans.

But Jesus was also condemned by another—by God.

We see this in the way he died. Pilate, the Roman governor, asked the crowd, “What do you want me to do with Jesus?” (See Mark 15:1-15.) They had many options. They could cut off his head. Or poison him. Or throw him to the lions. Or stone him. But they said, “Crucify him. Hang him on a tree.”

Why? Because being hung on a tree, suspended between heaven and earth, rejected by both God and humanity, was a cursed death. Being crucified was the ultimate condemnation because it demonstrated that the criminal was cursed by God.

That’s what the cross was about—condemnation. Jesus was triply condemned.

When we understand that, we may say with the songwriter, “Ah, dearest Jesus, how have you offended . . . ?” And it’s true—he had caused no offense. But he died so that condemned criminals like us could be saved.

Dearest Jesus, give us the eyes to see our crimes clearly so that we may see the depths of your love for us. Amen.

NO CONDEMNATION

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

—Romans 8:1

When Jesus died on the cross, he took on himself all of our sins against God and against people. He was punished by the religious establishment, the state, and God, so “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

That’s why we can change. Jesus’ condemnation frees us to become like him. A person living on death row cannot live like a free person. He may become a better person in some ways, but as long as he lives behind bars awaiting death, he cannot live free. He cannot come and go as he pleases, doing the things people can do in free society. Condemnation robs him of freedom.

Many people live as condemned prisoners, even though they aren’t behind bars. They cannot change because of the prison of their past. They cannot move

ahead with their lives because of the chains of guilt and shame that hold them. As Dostoyevsky showed in his novel *Crime and Punishment*, they are paralyzed by the fear of being discovered and punished for their crimes.

As long as you live in the prison of guilt and fear, you will not be able to change your life and become like Jesus. That’s exactly why Jesus died. He would not save himself from condemnation because he wanted to save us from it and set us free to live a new life.

Are you living that life of freedom in Christ Jesus?

Holy Spirit, move in my heart so that I can trust Jesus and receive pardon and begin to change into his likeness. Amen.

LIKE SOLDIERS OR SIMON?

*"What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?"
Pilate asked.*

—Matthew 27:22

Pilate wanted to avoid responsibility for the fate of Jesus. He even said this explicitly at the end of Jesus' kangaroo trial, shouting at the religious leaders: "It is your responsibility!"

But it's not so easy to wash your hands of Jesus. Once you come into contact with him, once you know about the power of the cross, you have to do something with him. The question is, What will you do with Jesus Christ?

The gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) relate some very different responses to Christ and his cross. Matthew 27:32-36 shows us that the soldiers weren't very interested. They earned their pay by pounding some nails. They divided up Jesus' clothing as a little bonus. Then they sat and watched Jesus die. They didn't get emotionally involved as the

great reversal happened before their very eyes.

Simon got involved—against his will—but he still got involved. He carried Jesus' cross. As Jesus staggered to his death, Simon struggled to carry that instrument of condemnation. He may even have become a disciple of Jesus later (see Mark 15:21).

What will you be? A disinterested spectator? A struggling disciple? You can read about the cross and do nothing with Jesus. Or you can take up your cross of discipleship and follow him. As you do, Jesus' cross will carry you to a new life!

Lord, please redirect spectators who are disinterested in the cross. Make us all into disciples who struggle to change for your sake. Amen.

JEKYLL AND HYDE AND YOU

You were taught . . . to put off your old self . . . and to put on the new self, created to be like God . . . —Ephesians 4:22-24

Do you ever feel as if you are two different persons?

Back in the nineteenth century, Robert Louis Stevenson explored that idea in his short suspense novel *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

In an effort to become a better person, Dr. Jekyll, a mild-mannered man of science, develops a potion that can separate his good self from his bad self. What happens instead is that his bad side turns out to be much more evil than expected. At night he becomes Mr. Hyde, a mysterious and violent man who thinks only of his own desires. Once Dr. Jekyll realizes his own evil, he clamps down on his Mr. Hyde, resolving not to take the magic potion anymore. But Hyde has become too strong. In despair of ever changing himself for the good, Dr. Jekyll commits suicide.

The apostle Paul speaks of the same struggle in different terms—"old self" and "new self." One of the great issues of life is how we can change permanently and deeply so that we look more like Jesus all the time. Will it take moral effort, or meditation, or what?

In Ephesians 4 Paul says it requires "the truth that is in Jesus." There is much to learn about how the power of the cross creates that truth in us. But today let's give thanks that Christ can change our old self into a new self that honors him.

As we worship you today, Lord Jesus, fill us with hope that we can change. Teach us the truth about you, and may we give you thanks. Amen.

EX-CONVICTS, BUT NOT MODEL CITIZENS

I have been crucified with Christ The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God. —Galatians 2:20

Jesus has freed us from the condemnation that holds humanity captive, so everyone who is in Christ is now an ex-convict, out of jail and free from condemnation.

But of course there is more to salvation than that. An ex-con doesn't automatically become a model citizen. There's still the power and presence of sin in our lives day by day. There's still some of the old self in us that landed us in prison in the first place. It's a lot of old-prisoner thinking and talking and doing.

So how can we overcome the power of sin and rid our lives of its presence? Only by the power of the cross and the resurrection. There's much that can be said about this, but for now let's listen to the powerful testimony of the violent, murderous Pharisee who became the vibrant missionary Paul. (See the

dramatic story of his conversion in Acts 9; see also Acts 13:9.)

In his testimony in Galatians 2 Paul reveals the basis of his change from persecutor to preacher: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. . . . I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

That's how an ex-con becomes a saint. And that's how God changes every one of us.

Lord Jesus, we tremble in anticipation as we hear Paul's testimony. Help us to live in the faith that you can change us too. Amen.

A WICKED QUESTION

Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!

—Romans 6:1-2

Just before the verses we read from Romans 6 today, Paul has explained how we are set free from condemnation: “Where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 5:20-21).

Paul then anticipates that some readers will ask this wicked question: “What . . . then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?”

In my 40 years of ministry I’ve heard questions like that. The poet W. H. Auden puts similar words into the mouth of a criminal (King Herod): “I like committing crimes. God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged.”

So if there is no condemnation because of the power of the cross, can we just keep on sinning? Paul says, “By no means! We . . . have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?”

We must do away with sin in our lives because we have already begun a reality change: “we died with Christ.” Not only did Christ die for us, but we died with him. “Our old self was crucified with him . . . that we should no longer be slaves to sin.”

Paul is absolutely sure of that new reality. Are you?

Holy Spirit, we talk about real life. Give us the faith to believe in the new reality in which we live because we died with Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

BAPTIZED INTO HIS DEATH

Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?
—Romans 6:3

What in the world is Paul talking about when he says we have “died with Christ,” as we discussed yesterday? To begin with, Paul is referring to something that has happened in our own experience.

First, says Paul, you died to sin at some moment in your own experience. “Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death.”

That may confuse us if we were baptized as infants. In the early days of Christianity, most of the people to whom Paul was writing were adult converts who were baptized after personal repentance and faith. Their baptism was for them a visible expression of their death to sin and their resurrection to righteousness. But more than that,

their baptism pointed to the power of the cross and resurrection that brings new life in Christ.

But even if we haven’t had the experience of adult baptism because we were baptized as infants, the symbolism is just as real and powerful. Because I am a believer in Christ, there was a moment in my life when I died to sin. And now, whenever I see someone baptized or I reflect on the sacrament of baptism, I receive a powerful reminder of that moment, confirming my new life in Christ.

Holy Spirit, stir up the memory of our death to sin, presented in the powerful picture of baptism, so that we may celebrate our new life in Christ. Amen.

CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with. —Romans 6:6

The concept of dying with Christ is intricately tied in with the mystery of the cross. “We know that our old self was crucified with [Christ].” At a moment in history nearly 2,000 years ago, I was crucified with Christ.

How can that be? I wasn’t even born yet, not even a gleam in my parents’ eyes. Ah, but I was a gleam in God’s eyes. I was part of God’s plan long before I was born. I was there on the cross in Christ’s heart—and not just me but all the people for whom he died. I was there; you were there; we were all there.

Does that sound strange? It shouldn’t—not if we understand Romans 5:12-21, where Paul explains that even as we were all subject to death through Adam, so we can all receive the gift of new life through Christ. When Adam sinned and died,

so did we. When Christ died in our place, taking our sin on himself, so did we.

As a result, says Paul, our old self dominated by sin can be done away with. I don’t have to be a slave to sin anymore. Yes, there is sin still in me, but it is no longer my master. Jesus is.

We can change permanently and deeply—not by moral effort, or by meditation or any other ritual, but by the death and resurrection of Jesus. When he died and rose, so did we—and that reality changes everything.

Lord Jesus, we praise you for the miracle of your death and resurrection. Help us to believe in the transforming power of that miracle in our own lives. Amen.

COUNT YOURSELVES DEAD

Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

—Romans 6:11

When Paul says that we died to sin, he is talking about something that must happen in our own minds and hearts each day. The power of the cross will change us when we “count ourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

The word for “count” is from the same root word as our word for “logic.” Paul is saying that if we’re going to change, we must think logically and reasonably about ourselves.

How do you think of yourself most of the time: as a winner or a loser, a good person or a bad person, a Dr. Jekyll or a Mr. Hyde?

Well, says Paul, if you want to be changed by the power of the cross, you should think of yourself in connection with the deepest reality.

Whatever else I am, I am a person who died and rose with Christ so that I am dead to sin and alive to God.

When you face a decision, the first thing you should do is consider who you are because of the power of the cross. Then you are ready to make a choice to take action in a way that will honor God.

Let the crucified and risen Jesus be Lord of everything in your life, and you will be changed from one degree of glory to another until you become like Jesus.

As I live my life today, O God, help me to think reasonably about who I am and how I should live as a crucified and risen person. In Christ, Amen.

GOD DEMONSTRATES HIS LOVE

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
—Romans 5:8

The power of the cross affects each of us in very powerful and personal ways.

The most powerful motivator in the world is love—not force, not fear, not guilt, not money, but love. We will do almost anything for love. Indeed, if we know we are loved unconditionally, we will do anything for the one who loves us that way. Knowing that you are loved is the final step in the transformation of a sinner.

Remember that all who believe in Christ are ex-convicts, freed from condemnation by the power of the cross.

And recall that ex-cons don't become model citizens until the power of the cross sets them free from the power and presence of sin.

But the transformation isn't complete until sinners realize

that they are genuinely loved by God, until they believe that the Judge who pardoned them wants to be their Father.

How can sinners ever believe they are loved so much by a Holy God? They can believe by the power of the cross.

“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

That proof of God's love can transform a sinner into a son or daughter of God.

Have you experienced that powerful transformation in your life? Are you God's own child?

O God, focus our eyes on the cross so that we can see how much you love us. Amen.

ADOPTION

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves . . . rather, the Spirit . . . brought about your adoption —Romans 8:15

The movie *The Blind Side* gives a wonderful illustration about the power of love to change our lives. The movie focuses on Michael Oher, a big strong homeless young black teenager whose mother is a crack addict and prostitute. Through an unusual set of circumstances, he is admitted to an exclusive Christian school, where he doesn't fit at all. He is lost, until the wealthy white mother of two fellow students invites him home for dinner with her family, and then to spend the night.

In the morning he leaves before anyone is awake. But she pursues him, buying him clothes, helping him with homework, giving him his own room in their home, including him in the family. Eventually the family adopts him.

Michael's life is dramatically changed by this adoptive love.

He comes out of his shell, makes good grades, is accepted by the other kids, and becomes a star football player. Indeed, he is later drafted into the National Football League (U.S.) as a first-round pick in 2009.

Our slavery to sin is broken, says Paul in Romans 8, by the Spirit of God. And one of the things the Spirit does in liberating us is to convince us that we are the beloved children of God. The cross of Christ demonstrates that God loves us as our Father, and the Spirit of Christ completes the circle of love by assuring us that we are now the adopted children of God. Is God your Father?

Abba, Father, thank you for loving me into your family. Help me remember that I am your child, adopted by grace. Amen.

A SMILE AND OUTSTRETCHED HANDS

God . . . sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.
—1 John 4:9

John Calvin noted that we are moved to repentance not by the threat of God's law but by the promise of his grace. The threat of the law will only make us run from God, unless we know that he will receive us when we turn back to him in repentance.

I'll never forget a story told by Dr. Robert Schuller. He was invited on a mission trip to the wilds of the Amazon. A missionary had been working with a tribe that had a great fear of white people, having had little positive contact with them. Schuller and the missionary trekked further and further into the jungle with no sighting of this reclusive tribe. "Where are they?" Schuller asked. The missionary replied, "They're all around us, but they won't come out until they know it's safe."

Finally, the travelers arrived at a clearing. The missionary said,

"Here's what you have to do. Sit on the ground, stretch out your hands, and smile." So that's what Schuller did. For what seemed hours, he sat and smiled with outstretched hands. At last, a single native crept silently out of the jungle and shyly touched Schuller's hand.

On the cross, God, in effect, stretched out his hands and smiled, showing that he loves us. Only the cross has the power to draw sinners out of the darkness of sin into the light of life.

O Lord, thank you for the invitation, through Jesus, to come out of the darkness into the light of your love. Help me to believe that your love is utterly trustworthy. Amen.

IT TAKES A COMMUNITY

No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. —1 John 4:12

On the cross God showed us his love in a powerful way. But the fact is that we didn't see that demonstration of love with our own eyes. We have to rely on the eyewitness testimony of those who were there that day. It is through the centuries-old community of faith that we know about the power of the cross.

And in that community we come to believe in God's love, because it takes the love of fellow believers to give us a real-life experience of God's love. "No one has ever seen God," says John, except when God is present in the flesh. He did that in Christ, of course. And God also becomes present when he "lives in us," Christ's body, the church. God does this through his Spirit in us.

Indeed, "if we love one another, God lives in us." This means we

can experience God fully only in community. Of course, we can also have solitary moments of God-consciousness. But it is in community where we grow to know the fullness of God's love. "If we love one another . . . his love is made complete in us."

In the context of a loving church community we can change and become like Christ, because that is where the full power of the cross is experienced.

Are you part of a church community?

O Lord, we must confess that our churches are not always the communities of love they should be. Help us to love one another as you have loved us. Amen.

THE WISDOM OF GOD

"[If] a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies . . . it produces many seeds."
—John 12:24

As we've learned through our readings this month, the cross is central in the transformation of our lives. So far we have focused on the power of the cross, on what God actually did at the cross. But we also want to look at the wisdom of the cross, on what God teaches us through the cross. That wisdom changes us too.

In today's reading Jesus illustrates the first lesson of God's wisdom by pointing to his upcoming death. For Jesus, his last week on earth had begun. His crucifixion was just five days away. Now was the time to clarify what would happen so that his disciples would understand when it did.

So Jesus used a picture from agriculture that his listeners would understand: "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed.

But if it dies, it produces many seeds." Everyone knew that the death of seeds in that sense was necessary for a harvest. But Jesus was referring to his own death. He was saying, in effect, "Unless I die, there cannot be an abundant harvest of changed lives." His death was necessary for the salvation of many lives.

That sounded foolish to the Jews who heard this farmer's wisdom, because they thought their Messiah would never die (see v. 34).

But Jesus spoke the truth, and then he carried it out.

When our wisdom conflicts with yours, O God of truth, help us to live by the wisdom of the cross, so that our lives can be truly fruitful. Amen.

THE BIGGEST LOSER

"Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it."
—Matthew 10:39

The TV program "The Biggest Loser" focuses on obese people losing weight. But Jesus is talking about losing more than pounds. He urges us to lose our lives. The biggest obstacle to being transformed into Christ's likeness is precisely our fear of losing our life.

When Jesus talks about losing our lives for him, he's not just talking about our physical life. The context reveals that "life" is the complex web of people and position and possessions that make up our everyday existence. We try to find or control or save our lives by getting and keeping all the things that make up our life. The very attempt to find our life within this web will cost us real, full life. The wisdom of God teaches us that if we lose our lives for Christ's sake, we will find abundant, eternal life.

Focus on these three words for a moment: "for my sake."

Who does Jesus think he is, anyway? He comes crashing into the universe and then into our lives and takes over, pre-empting our most instinctive loyalties, presuming on our deepest affections, usurping our natural ties, and asking to be the most important person in our lives.

Who is he? He is God on a mission, the Lord of our lives who gave up his life for us. Isn't it wise to give up our life for his sake?

Lord Jesus, fix our eyes on the cross so that we may have the courageous wisdom to put you before anyone or anything else, and thus find life. Amen.

A CROSS IN YOUR FUTURE

"Whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."
—Luke 24:27

Putting Jesus first in our lives can cause real pain. Jesus calls that our cross—not just the pain that is common to humanity in a fallen world, but the unique pain that comes from following Jesus so closely that we lose something precious. Is there a cross in your future?

When you are tempted to shy away from your cross, remember Jesus. He was the “biggest loser” in history. He invested his life in preaching the kingdom, doing acts of love, teaching a radical way of living, training disciples to change the world, risking everything for the cause of God. And they killed him. What a loser!

No, says the gospel. It was precisely by losing that he won. By losing his life, he saved ours. And his resurrection proclaimed him the biggest winner in history, by proving that he

was who he said he was, that he did what he said he would, and that he can be trusted to keep his word.

Trust is what we need in order to overcome our fear of the cross in our future—trust in Jesus and his work and his word.

The world says that putting Jesus first is foolish. The cross says that putting Jesus first is the way of salvation. So what will you trust—the wisdom of the world or the wisdom of the cross? Will you trust yourself or Jesus?

Lord Jesus, as we journey on through life, keep your cross before our eyes so that if we see a cross looming in our future, we won't veer off the path. Amen.

LOVE

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart . . . ' And . . . 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"
—Matthew 22:37-39

This month we've been talking about being transformed into the likeness of Christ. We've heard that Christ crucified is the secret of such change, because in his cross we see both God's power and his wisdom. Today we turn to the last dimension of the wisdom of God demonstrated by the cross.

What is the central change God wants in our lives? So many of the changes we desire are important but not central to life: weight loss, better study habits, development of leadership skills, more peace of mind, even moral improvement. These are all good things, but they're not the main thing.

The legal expert who questioned Jesus understood the main thing, and he wanted to know if Jesus knew. "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus

answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind," and "love your neighbor as yourself." That's the central change God wants in our lives, and it will make us like Jesus.

To keep these priorities straight in a world filled with choices, we must, with the Spirit's help, keep our eyes on the cross, because at the center of the cross is the love of God. "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

O Love that will not let us go, we turn our longing eyes to you, as you suffered there on the cross in love for us. Amen.

DO YOU LOVE ME?

"Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

—John 21:15

Considering the central place of love in our lives, it is not surprising that Jesus would press Peter with this question. Peter had denied Jesus three times when he found himself under questioning in the courtyard of the high priest during Jesus' trial (John 18:15-27). Peter felt terrible after he had done that. Then Jesus died on the cross for our sins. That probably made Peter feel even worse.

Now Jesus was alive, raised from the dead by the power of God. And it was time for Peter to be restored as a disciple. So Jesus asked Peter three questions, paralleling his three denials. Each question centered on the same thing—the central thing in life, the central thing in the symbol of the cross.

"Simon son of John, do you love me . . . ?" By asking this question three times, Jesus was urg-

ing Peter to look deep into his heart, to see whether his love for Christ was real. Before Peter could be restored to his place in the company of the disciples, before he would be fit to follow Christ and lead the church, he had to be changed in his heart. He had to love most the one he had denied.

So it is with us. On this Sunday, as we gather with other believers to be renewed in our discipleship, Jesus wants one thing more than anything else. He wants our love. Do we love him more than anything and anyone else?

Holy Spirit, penetrate the layers of self-defense in our hearts so that we can learn the truth about how much we love Jesus. Then fill us with love for him. Amen.

WHAT KIND OF LOVE?

"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."
—John 15:13

It was the last night of Jesus' life. His farewell address in John 14-16 is filled with wonderful words, but none are more central than these. He had already told his disciples that love is the most important thing. It was love that moved him from the throne in heaven to the cross that he would face the next day. It was love that would move these disciples from their holy huddle in the upper room to spread his good news to the ends of the earth.

So he had to make sure they understood the kind of love that he had for them and that they needed to have for each other. There are many kinds of love—love for a pet, love of a car, love for a friend, love of beauty and truth. But there is only one kind of love that can change the world, and that is sacrificial love. "Greater love has no one

than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."

That's asking a lot. I will gladly give a friend my time (as long as I'm not too busy), my money (as long as it's not too much), my attention (if I'm not preoccupied). Our love has so many limits.

How can we possibly love sacrificially to the point of laying down our lives? Only if we keep Christ's sacrifice in view can we love as he loved us.

Jesus, we praise you today for laying down your life for us, even when we were your enemies. No one has greater love than that. Thank you. Amen.

WITH ACTIONS AND IN TRUTH

Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.
—1 John 3:18

In the final days before his death, Jesus talked a lot about sacrificial love. Those words seem very lofty and elevated—it's hard for many of us to imagine having to lay down our lives in love. But the words of 1 John today bring Jesus' words right down to the hard reality of a hurting world.

John repeats Jesus' words about laying down our lives for one another; then he guides us out into the mean streets of our cities, into the shabby homes of the poor, into the shoes of a discouraged church member who has lost his job. Here is the test of love. How do we respond to a real person in need?

If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother or sister in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? It's easy to turn away from the needy. We're

busy. We're already stretched. We're not sure how we can help. Besides, maybe the person brought it on himself. Still, true love gives birth to pity.

When God looks at us in our need, he could justifiably turn away. Heaven knows all the problems we have brought on ourselves.

But God felt pity, compassion, mercy—love for us in our need. And on the cross he loved us with actions and in truth. The wisdom of the cross shows us how love saves the needy.

How deep is our love? Does it show in actions and in truth?

Our Father, fill us with your love so that we can love the needy with true sacrificial love. Amen.

THE GOLDEN CHAIN

Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son . . .
—Romans 8:29

As we approach the end of our meditations on the cross, let's anchor our thoughts in the eternal plan of God, as revealed in today's stunning verses. One of the great Reformation confessions calls this "the golden chain of redemption."

Note how the various clauses are linked together like a chain: "For those God foreknew he also predestined . . . And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified." No break in the chain. God is the subject of each verb, the main actor in the drama of salvation. And the same people are the object of each verb. Each one of them is totally encircled by that golden chain and absolutely assured of complete salvation. The cross is anchored in that love, set up

and supported by that golden chain of our redemption.

Notice the ultimate purpose of God's love—that we might "be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the first-born among many brothers and sisters." The change we've been talking about all month is the goal of God's eternal plan and the purpose of the cross—not just to save us from our sin for heaven someday, but that we might "be conformed to the image of his Son." What a comfort! What a challenge!

Have you experienced the full breadth of God's love?

Eternal God, use this glimpse into your eternal plan to help us see the magnificent power of the cross and become like Jesus. Amen.

EAGER TO DO WHAT IS GOOD

Jesus . . . gave himself for us . . . to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. —Titus 2:13-14

We cannot save ourselves by being good. We are saved by “Christ crucified . . . the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:23-24). But we are saved so that we can do good.

Jesus gave himself “to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” He did that not just for his own sake, and surely not just for our sake. It was also for the world’s sake. Before the world will believe in Jesus, it needs an epiphany, a revealing of the reality of God.

God has already given the world one epiphany: “The grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.” That was the first coming of Jesus. And God will give the world another epiphany: “We wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God

and Savior, Jesus Christ.” That’s the second coming of Jesus.

Between those two epiphanies, there is an ongoing epiphany, the one for which Jesus gave up his life—to create a people who are eager to do good. The world will not believe in Jesus until it sees a people whose lives are changed by the power and wisdom of the cross. As we look forward to Good Friday and Easter next month and the coming of Jesus someday, let us be an epiphany, for Jesus’ sake, to the world!

Reveal yourself in us, O Lord, that the world may see our good works and glorify Christ crucified and risen. Amen.

this month

The Words of Christ

Shawn Brix

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I remember the final words my mother spoke as she lay dying on her hospital bed. "Jesus is calling me," she announced. "I have to go now, and I don't know why. But," she said with confidence, "I know I'm going to be with Jesus and that I will rise with him, and I'm so thankful."

The final words of a loved one stay with us, and they have the potential to shape and even change our lives in significant ways.

Perhaps that's why the gospel writers recorded Jesus' dying words on the cross. If the last words of our closest family and friends can leave an impression on us, how much more so the final words of Christ!

This month we'll reflect on the words Jesus spoke as he hung on the cross, offering his life for your sin and mine. Pray that his words will stay with you and powerfully work to transform you!

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UNDER THE SKIN

The word of God is alive and active. . . . It penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow. —Hebrews 4:12

The words of the Bible are unlike any other words. They are God's Word to us, and God's Word is alive—much more than simply ink on a page. God's Word is living because it has been God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16).

Our verse for today states that the Word of God is not only alive; it is also active. God's words have energy and power. They have the capacity to change and transform us. In Isaiah 55:11 God says, "My word . . . will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

God's words are also penetrating. They get under our skin and address the deepest issues of our heart.

For most of this month, we're going to ponder the words of God's Son from the cross. Jesus

spoke several times as he hung there offering his life for the world. Then in the final week of the month we'll consider some of the words Jesus spoke after his resurrection. These words are alive. They're powerful! They have the ability to cut through our defenses and speak to us at the center of who we are.

In fact, Jesus himself is God's Word, in human flesh (see John 1:1, 14). And he said, "The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life" (John 6:63).

Father, thank you for your Word. Thank you for the words of Jesus. Thank you for his words from the cross. As we study those words, shape us into the people you want us to be. Amen.

THEY DO NOT KNOW WHAT THEY ARE DOING

Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."
—Luke 23:34

"They do not know what they are doing."

Whom was Jesus referring to when he spoke these words from the cross? Was he talking about the soldiers who had just driven spikes through his hands and feet and were now rolling dice for his clothes? Surely they must not have known they were crucifying the Lord of heaven and earth!

Or could Jesus have been referring to people who were walking by, mocking and insulting him?

Or was it possible that he was speaking of his own disciples? They had abandoned him in his hour of deepest need!

Or maybe Jesus was thinking of the religious leaders, whose scheming had led to his sentencing. Or of Pilate, who gave in to the demands of the angry

crowd even though he knew Jesus was innocent.

Isn't it true that none of them really knew what they were doing?

Where do we stop when we think of whom Jesus had in mind when he said this?

The Bible teaches that Jesus' statement included even you and me. Jesus' plea of forgiveness on the cross didn't apply to any one person or group of people. Instead, it was about forgiveness "for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2).

O God, we often don't know what we are doing. We often don't see how our sin hurts you, others, and ourselves. Thank you that Jesus offered his life for us. Amen.

FATHER, FORGIVE THEM

The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.
—Psalm 103:8

When Jesus said on the cross, “They do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34), he was teaching us a lot about ourselves. We have an uncanny ability to remain blind to our sin and how deeply it cuts God’s fatherly heart.

But when Jesus said, “Father, forgive them,” he was also teaching us about God. “Father, forgive. . . .” These words go well together because the Bible affirms that, above all else, God is a God of mercy! “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.” As our heavenly Father, it is in God’s very character to forgive.

Again and again, when we come back from the strange ways of our ignorance and foolishness, we find God waiting for us with a welcoming heart. He is ready—even eager!—to forgive us when we return home.

God’s heart is not quick to condemn but, rather, to forgive. “God did not send his Son . . . to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:17).

In Jesus’ plea from the cross, then, we have both the brutal truth about ourselves and the glorious truth about God: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”

Thanks be to God that still today Jesus prays, “Father, forgive them,” on our behalf (see Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25).

Mighty God, thank you that through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, we can know forgiveness and new life in you! We are grateful that you are compassionate, merciful, and full of love. Amen.

AN OUTLANDISH REQUEST AND RESPONSE

"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

—Luke 23:43

What boldness!

Picture it: a convicted felon, admitting that he is being justly punished, asking in his dying moments to be remembered by God's Son! A violent robber, nailed to a cross, gasping for air, asking for some kind of reward!

Something about Jesus made an impact on this condemned man. We sometimes hear of "death-bed conversions," but this was a "cross conversion"! Maybe the man feared meeting God unprepared. After all, the question he put to the criminal on the other side of Jesus was "Don't you fear God?" Or maybe he was struck by Jesus' plea asking God to forgive.

Whatever brought the change within his heart, the former robber turned to Jesus and said, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom."

He didn't say, "You owe me." He didn't say, "I deserve" Instead he pleaded for mercy: "Remember me."

And Jesus responded with a mind-boggling promise: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

God's grace is free to save sinners who offer nothing but their need for mercy. That's all the criminal had to offer. But that's all he needed to offer.

That's all we need to offer as well.

Gracious God, remember me. In your mercy, grant me the gift of eternal life today, tomorrow, and forever, when Jesus returns to make all things new! Amen.

CAN YOU BE SURE?

He has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. —Hebrews 9:26

When a Christian dies, the believer's body goes into the ground, waiting to be resurrected when Christ returns to earth. But, upon death, a Christian's soul is brought into the presence of God! Jesus promised the criminal who was being crucified alongside him that on that very day the man's soul would be with him in paradise!

How can you know for sure that you too will be with Jesus after you die?

In the Old Testament, countless animals were sacrificed to assure people of God's forgiveness. But as our reading today says, Jesus did not need to "offer himself again and again." Instead, he "appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself." "Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many."

If being in paradise somehow depended on you and your life, you would have every reason to be uncertain about your eternal future. But if your destiny depends on what Christ has done for you, you can be sure that one day he will say to you also, "Today, you are with me in paradise!" (see Luke 23:43).

If you have confessed your sins to God and turned your life over to him, Christ's one sacrifice has completely cleansed you from sin! Nothing can prevent you from entering paradise for eternity!

Thank you, God that my destiny doesn't depend on my life, my devotion, my love, my giving, my serving, or my attitudes. Jesus died in my place so that I can know eternity with you! Amen.

A FINAL GOODBYE

*Jesus . . . said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother."
—John 19:26-27*

In these words from the cross, "Woman, here is your son," and, "Here is your mother," Jesus was saying his final goodbye to Mary, his mother.

Of course, it was not the first time Jesus had said goodbye to his family. Three years earlier, when John the Baptist was preaching in the desert, Jesus knew that it was time for him to leave Joseph's carpenter shop and begin his public ministry of teaching and healing.

Things were never quite the same after that. From that time on, Mary was only able to love her son from a distance: on the edge of a crowd, outside a packed house, at the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Maybe she was even there when Jesus taught, "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother

or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life" (Matthew 19:29).

But in his final hours, Jesus was deeply concerned for his mother's well-being. She was most likely a widow by this time (see Mark 3:20-21, 31), and Jesus was entrusting her to the care of one of his closest friends: John. From that time on, John cared for Mary as a member of his own household.

Thank you, God, for the special love and care Jesus had for Mary, his mother. Even in his darkest moments, he was obeying your word to honor one's parents. Amen.

A SWORD PIERCES MARY'S SOUL

"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many . . . And a sword will pierce your own soul too." —Luke 2:34-35

On the cross Jesus said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son," and to John, "Here is your mother" (John 19:26-27). What might Mary have been thinking as she heard those words?

A hundred things could have raced through her mind but, at least at some point, she must have recalled the prophecy that Simeon had spoken when Jesus was only eight days old.

Mary and Joseph had brought Jesus to the temple to present him to the Lord for circumcision, according to custom. That's when they met Simeon. He had approached them as they entered the temple, and he had scooped Jesus up in his arms. This was the child he had been waiting for! This was the child God himself had promised Simeon he would see before he died!

And Simeon said, "Sovereign Lord . . . you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation." But as Simeon handed Jesus back to his parents, he declared that one day this child would cause the rising and falling of many, depending on whether they would receive him as Messiah and Savior. "And a sword will pierce your own soul too," he said to Mary.

As she stood at the foot of the cross, watching her Son give up his life, Mary must have felt a stabbing pain in her soul, a sorrow too deep for words.

Father God, today Jesus still causes the rising and falling of many. Give me eyes of faith, that I may receive him as Savior and Lord of my life. Amen.

A NEW KIND OF FAMILY

In Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.
—Romans 12:5

With Jesus' words from the cross (John 19:26-27), John and Mary became part of the same household, the same family. They also became part of a much larger family as well.

In Acts 1:12-14 we find that both Mary and John were among the believers in the early Christian community. So they became family in more ways than one. They became mother and son, as Jesus said, and they joined with other believers to become brothers and sisters in Christ.

At the foot of the cross, a new kind of family was born. It was not based on blood ties. It was a family created by the common faith that Jesus is the Son of God. A shared commitment and loyalty to Jesus became the glue that held this new family together.

As he spoke to his mother from the cross, Jesus gave Mary a new family.

We are invited to become part of this family too! When we place our faith in Christ, we become part of a new body in which "each member belongs to all the others."

To belong to Christ is to belong to his body. Part of God's purpose in saving us is to make us into a functioning, living, breathing member of a new family!

Lord God, thank you for giving me a new family. As I place my faith in Jesus, I belong not only to you but also to a community of brothers and sisters in your name! Amen.

THE CRY OF FORSAKENNESS

Jesus cried out in a loud voice . . . "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
—Matthew 27:46

Jesus' words from the cross at "about three in the afternoon" were a cry of utter anguish and desolation.

For three years he had taught others to trust God. Again and again, he had encouraged crowds to place their faith in the loving Father.

But now here he was, suffering a horrible death. As he cried out this most awful of cries, it may have seemed he couldn't practice what he had preached.

Were his faith and trust in his Father broken?

These words of agony were spoken just after three hours of darkness had passed. This was not the darkness of a passing storm, or even an eclipse. It was the darkness brought on by human sin, the darkness of the torment of hell. The Father's abhorrence of all things evil was

revealed to Jesus in those three hours.

And as the land lay in darkness, Christ felt the full weight of humanity's sin upon his shoulders. His hands and feet were pierced, but they were pierced for our transgressions and wrongdoings. His body was crushed, and that was because of our iniquities and offenses. (See Isaiah 53:5.)

No wonder Christ felt so utterly deserted and abandoned by his Father. The sin of the world was upon him.

Father, we can't understand the depth of anguish Christ experienced for us as he hung on the cross. Thank you that, because of him, we never have to face that suffering. Amen.

THE SCAPEGOAT

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. —2 Corinthians 5:21

In the Old Testament there was a solemn Day of Atonement each year for the sin of all God's people. On that day, just once each year, the high priest of Israel was allowed to enter the Most Holy Place of the temple, where God's presence dwelled. Before he did that, the priest had to sacrifice a bull and a goat so that he could sprinkle their blood inside the Most Holy Place as a symbol of atonement for sin.

Then the high priest would come out and place his hands on the head of a live goat, and he would confess over this animal all the rebellion and sin of the people. This goat, called the scapegoat, would carry upon itself all the sins of the people. It would be led away to be released in the wilderness—banished to die in a remote place alone. (See Leviticus 16.)

As our Savior who took upon himself the burden of all our sins, Jesus became our scapegoat. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us." When this happened on the cross, God turned away from his Son, meaning that the full punishment for sin was upon him.

As Christ took on the full weight of this unimaginable burden, he cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). Jesus bore this burden, once for all of us, so that we would not have to face the horror of being forsaken by God. What a Savior!

Father, thank you that Jesus takes away all our sin. Thank you that he tasted hell for me, so that I will not have to. In his powerful name, Amen.

RESCUE!

He has not despised . . . the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help. —Psalm 22:24

When Christ cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46), he was quoting Psalm 22:1. This psalm, though it begins with an exclamation of pain, turns into an expression of faith and thanksgiving in the end. The first half of the psalm foreshadows much of what Jesus experienced on the cross: mocking, insults, thirst, the piercing of his hands and feet, even the casting of lots for his clothing. But further into the psalm, as our verse for today says, God “has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.”

While it seemed Christ had been forever abandoned, God wasn’t through with him. Jesus’ body would be placed in a grave, but he would be raised from the dead, the Lord of life!

He would be crowned with the name that is above every name (see Phil. 2:9-11).

Hebrews 5:7 says that while Jesus lived on earth, “he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.”

He was heard! It seemed for a time that he was not, but God did hear, and Jesus was assured that he could rest in his Father’s hands (see Luke 23:46). Then on the third day he rose from the grave!

Gracious God, you heard Jesus even in those darkest moments, and we can trust that you will never abandon us, for his sake. Thank you, Father! Amen.

HUMANITY IN THE MIDST OF DIVINITY

Knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." —John 19:28

In this statement Jesus expressed a need so human that anyone could have said it: "I am thirsty."

Of all the needs of the human body, water is one of the most basic. More than 60 percent of the human body is water! As we become dehydrated, our blood vessels and other cells literally begin to dry up.

By the time Jesus spoke these words from the cross, he had already been hanging there for more than six hours, and his body was becoming parched. Foreshadowing this moment, Psalm 22:15 says, "My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth."

A bruised, beaten man nailed to a cross and murmuring through cracked lips, "I am thirsty," is not what most of us picture when

we think of God. But these details remind us of a great truth. At the center of the Christian faith is not a remote and distant God who lives beyond human pain. At the core of our faith is a person who is not only fully divine but is also fully human—indeed, human enough to be thirsty.

"I am thirsty." These words remind us that "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14).

O God, when I think you don't understand my hardships and pain, remind me again that Jesus took on human flesh, became one of us, and suffered in our place. Thank you that he knows all about being human. Amen.

A MAN FAMILIAR WITH SUFFERING

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

“You can’t truly know people unless you walk a mile in their shoes,” we sometimes say. Jesus walked in our shoes and showed that he genuinely knew the full range of human experience.

The Bible often reminds us that Jesus was one of us. He experienced joy and sorrow, feasting and hunger, the fruits of hard work and the setbacks of poverty. He also knew the grief of losing a close friend, which led him to weep (John 11:32-35). In addition, Jesus was sometimes discouraged by the spiritual numbness of his disciples (Matthew 16:8-12), and weary from hot, dusty travel (John 4:6). He became angry when people mistreated God and others (Matthew 21:12-13), but he also took children in his arms and taught and blessed them (Matthew 19:13-14). In the account of his crucifixion,

as Isaiah foretold, Jesus even experienced total rejection and unimaginable suffering.

Our salvation wasn’t won in the beauty and safety of a royal palace. Jesus pioneered our salvation through the experience of human living in this world. He faced all the temptations and struggles we meet daily—and yet he never sinned (Hebrews 4:15). His words from the cross “I am thirsty” (John 19:28) assure us that he willingly and obediently dealt with all human experiences as he worked to defeat sin.

Thank you, Jesus, for being willing to enter the grit and grime of our humanity to save us. There has never been a greater sacrifice! Amen.

NO QUITTER

When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. —John 19:30

Were there times when Jesus simply wanted to quit? Is it possible there were moments when he was ready to simply say, "Thanks, but no thanks?"

Maybe you've never thought of Jesus wanting to throw in the towel. But isn't that what Jesus was expressing when he prayed in the garden on the night of his arrest? He said, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me" (Luke 22:42). Jesus was in anguish, praying so earnestly that "his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground" (22:44). He was looking into his Father's heart, asking if there was some other way. He was looking up to the heavens, searching for another way to replace the path of suffering that lay ahead.

Of course, we now know that he didn't give up. He followed through. In the end, he was able

to pray, "Yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

Jesus may have been on the verge of quitting, but he obediently pressed on so that his Father's will could be accomplished through him.

That's what makes his words from the cross "It is finished" so magnificent. Despite every obstacle, Jesus had stuck to his mission. He had resolutely finished what the Father had sent him to do. He was no quitter; he was a winner.

God, my Father, thank you that Jesus never gave up. He was determined to see your plan of salvation through to the end, for my sake and for your glory. Amen.

MAN ON A MISSION

"The Son . . . can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does." —John 5:19

"It is finished," Jesus cried from the cross (John 19:30).

But what was finished?

For one thing, his life would soon be finished. The powers of death and hell had done their worst, and he would soon breathe his last.

For another thing, Jesus' mission was also finished. The assignment he had been given to accomplish was now complete.

We can't read the Bible without getting the sense that Jesus was a "man on a mission." Even as a boy of twelve, he was deeply conscious that he ought to be tending to his Father's interests (Luke 2:41-49). Later in life, it remained clear that his Father's interests were the motive for every word he spoke and every deed he did. "The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father do-

ing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does." Nothing in life or death seemed to shake Jesus from that mission.

Do we live with a similar sense of mission and calling? Even before we were born, God prepared a mission for us (see Ephesians 2:10.)

Jesus never strayed from his calling. He came for a purpose, and with his words from the cross "It is finished" he declared that his purpose was fulfilled.

God in heaven, thank you that Jesus was resolute in his calling. Fill me too with a clear sense of your purposes for me, and help me to live out my calling to the very end. Amen.

PAID IN FULL

"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." —Matthew 20:28

Jesus' mission was a matter of "search and rescue." He came to seek and save those who were lost (Luke 19:10). He fulfilled that mission by giving his life "as a ransom for many."

As Jesus hung on the cross and spoke the words "It is finished" (John 19:30), he was announcing that his mission was now accomplished. Because he offered his perfect life as the sacrifice for sin, God was pleased to welcome home all his lost children!

The brief sentence "It is finished" translates from just a single word in the original Greek text. The same word was used by shopkeepers to announce that someone's bill was finally paid. When the final payment was made on a purchased item, the merchant would say "*Tetelestai*" ("It is finished"). In other words, the debt was paid in full.

When I made the last payment on the first car I ever bought, I remember how good it felt to see the bank teller stamp "Paid in Full" on my loan documents. Never again would another payment be required!

As Jesus said "It is finished" on the cross, he was assuring us that his mission was complete. He had paid in full all the costs required for our sin. And when we now place our trust in him, our debt for sin is forever wiped off the books!

O God, thank you that Jesus has bought salvation for me! He has done everything needed for me to know you, love you, and serve you now and forever! Amen.

SIMPLY TRUST

The blood of Christ . . . [cleanses] our consciences . . . so that we may serve the living God!
—Hebrews 9:14

There are times when almost all of us feel we need to add something to what Christ has done for us. Surely, we think, there must be some kind of additional payment we must make before we face God on Judgment Day!

But the truth is that all who are united to Christ by faith owe no more than what Christ has already paid on their behalf. He has paid our debt in full!

God doesn't embrace us as his children because we've been trying so hard. He doesn't welcome us into his family because we've been making great spiritual strides. He doesn't hold on to us and make us new because we've done something to make him proud. He welcomes us solely because his Son died for us. Under the old religious system, the blood sacrifices of goats and bulls symbolized the

one complete sacrifice needed to cleanse us forever from sin. And now that Christ has shed his blood for us, we are fully clean!

If you're wondering whether you'll ever be good enough, or if you struggle with always trying to do more and more to prove yourself to God, or if you fear meeting God—stop your wondering and struggling and fearing, and simply look to Christ with a trusting, believing heart. "It is finished," he said. Trust in him alone and find peace.

Forgive me, Father, for often trying to add somehow to the finished work of Jesus. The work of my hands could never add anything to the work of his! Amen.

A CHILDHOOD PRAYER

*Jesus called out . . . “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”
When he had said this, he breathed his last. —Luke 23:46*

The first bedtime prayer I was taught by my parents was “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.”

In Jesus’ day, little Jewish children were also taught a prayer. Every night, in houses all across the countryside, little children would pray the words of Psalm 31:5: “Into your hands I commit my spirit.” As parents tucked little ones in to bed, each child spoke those comforting words of trust in the Lord.

It’s likely that Jesus too was taught that prayer as a child. And some thirty years later it was the last thing he said before he took his last breath.

On the cross Jesus had reached the climax and the end of his entire mission. And as he took his dying breath, his final words were the words of that prayer he learned at his mother’s knee:

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

That’s the type of trust we’re all called to. Jesus had taught earlier that “anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:15). Jesus approached his Father both in life and in death with that simple childlike trust: “Into your hands I commit my spirit.”

Father in heaven, teach me to trust in you with childlike faith. In life and in death, I want to commit my body, mind, and spirit into your trustworthy hands. Amen.

A WILLING SACRIFICE

"I lay down my life . . . No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."
—John 10:17-18

"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). When Jesus offered that prayer from the cross, he willingly gave up his life. He wasn't fighting back, or resisting it. He was simply entrusting his spirit to the care and keeping of God.

Luke says that Jesus called those words out with a loud voice, but it wasn't a cry of desperation like we heard earlier, when he said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). Nor was it a shout of triumph like his words "It is finished"! No, these were simply words of trust, calmly spoken in a loud, confident voice.

Earlier, Jesus had told his disciples, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes

it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord."

Jesus wasn't forced to do anything for us. What he did for you and me, he did willingly.

He chose on his own to lay down his life as a sacrifice for his people everywhere. We see that willingness in his final words from the cross: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

What a Savior!

Lord God, thank you that Jesus gave his life for us without reservation, even while we were yet sinners! Thank you, Jesus, for choosing obedience so that we may have life! Amen.

THE MOST RADICAL TEACHING OF ALL

He was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.
—John 5:18

When Jesus quoted Psalm 31:5 in his final words on the cross, he added the word “Father.” As he prayed, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46), Jesus was clinging to the amazing truth that the God of the universe was his Father!

In our reading for today we find that this was Jesus’ most radical teaching because it meant he was “making himself equal with God.” This made the religious leaders so angry that they wanted to kill him, because they didn’t believe in him as the Son of God.

Jesus had done many things that the authorities thought were radical. For example, they didn’t like his habit of healing people on the Sabbath.

But Jesus truly was the Son of God, and their interpretations of God’s law were so legalistic

that they missed the intent of the law: to love God and to love others (Matthew 22:36-40).

Remarkably, Jesus invites us to call God our Father as well. He told his disciples, “This . . . is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name . . .’” (Matthew 6:9).

God isn’t a strict schoolmaster or a cosmic policeman looking to punish us. Neither is God a distant relative who’s not interested in us. No! Instead, he’s our faithful Father extending his care and love toward us. We can trust him, just as Jesus did in his final words from the cross: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”

Father, help me to trust you completely. Remind me that I can trust you with my entire life. Amen.

THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MARTYR

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."
—Acts 7:59

The first Christian martyr, Stephen, understood that God could be trusted as his heavenly Father. Stephen was given the opportunity to witness about Jesus before the Jewish religious council. He called the council members a stiff-necked people, resistant to the work of the Holy Spirit. He accused them and their ancestors of persecuting the prophets. And he charged them with murdering the Righteous One, Jesus Christ.

Eventually the council would listen no more. They rushed at Stephen and dragged him outside the city to stone him. And while they were pelting him with rocks, Stephen prayed. In his darkest moment on earth, he turned to God in trust: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." That sounds like the prayer Jesus himself offered from the cross:

"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

Stephen's prayer wasn't one of panic or fear. It was simply the prayer of one who understood that because God is our perfect Father, we can trust in his care even in the most extreme of life's circumstances.

In Jesus' final prayer from the cross, and in Stephen's prayer, we learn that even in the darkness, confusion, and mystery of our lives we can trust that we are always held safe in our Father's hand (John 10:29).

In my sorrows, in my fears for the future, in the face of my deepest problems, remind me, O God, that you are my perfect Father in whom I can place my full trust. Amen.

THE FINAL SACRIFICE

We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.
—Hebrews 10:10

The Bible tells us that Jesus drew his final breath at three o'clock in the afternoon (Luke 23:44-46). That was an important time in Jerusalem, for it was the time of the afternoon sacrifice, and because it was Passover week, the Passover lambs were being sacrificed at the Temple.

It was customary also for the priest to blow a horn at the time of the sacrifice—a ram's horn, called a *shofar*. So at the same time when Jesus breathed his last, the *shofar* could be heard. At the sound of the horn, people would stop what they were doing and fall silent for a few moments. And in that time of silence Jesus died.

As the Passover lambs were being sacrificed in the Temple, the Lamb of God was being sacrificed on the cross. In God's plan, never again would an afternoon sacrifice be needed. This

was just as John the Baptist had prophesied: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Through Jesus' one sacrifice, all who believe are forgiven and made holy forever.

To make sure Jesus was dead, a soldier jammed his spear into Jesus' side, "bringing a sudden flow of blood and water" (John 19:34). That blood was the blood of forgiveness for you and me—and for all who trust in Christ alone for their salvation.

O God, thank you for the sacrifice of your Son, the Lamb of God. Through his one sacrifice, I have been made clean and holy, fit for eternal life with you. Amen.

THE DAY OF SILENCE

I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley. . . . He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" —Ezekiel 37:2-3

On the one full day between his crucifixion and resurrection, there were no words from Jesus. He was dead and buried in a tomb. His voice was silent.

For his disciples, the silence was deafening. They had sacrificed everything to follow Jesus for the three years of his public ministry. And they had all grown to believe that he was the Christ—"the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16; see 14:33). Their expectations had peaked when Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem with the crowds shouting, cheering, and proclaiming him King (Matthew 21:6-11).

And now, less than a week later, it was all over. The disciples had seen Jesus arrested and hauled away by Roman soldiers. They had seen him sentenced to be crucified, and they had seen his grisly death. Then Mary his

mother and some others had seen his lifeless body placed in a tomb.

All their hopes and dreams now seemed no more than a valley of dry bones. Could hope ever rise again in the midst of their despair?

Jesus' friends would soon discover that God alone has the power to resurrect new life in the face of death.

But, for now, all was silent.

Father God, there are days where you seem silent and we feel that we will never know hope again. Show us that you have the power to bring new life where all we can see is despair. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FIRST WORDS OF THE RESURRECTION

Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"). —John 20:16

While John and Peter experienced the evidence of the empty tomb and the abandoned grave clothes, Mary had the privilege of a different kind of evidence. She had the amazing opportunity to be one of the first persons to actually meet the risen Lord and hear him speak (see Matthew 28:8-10).

Mary had been in tears, thinking that someone had stolen Jesus' body from the tomb. As Jesus approached her, he asked her gently why she was crying. But she thought he was the gardener and assumed he might know where Jesus' body was.

Then Jesus spoke her name: "Mary." And she knew.

All her distress immediately vanished. Instead of the dead body she had hoped to recover, she found herself face to face with the living Lord. It was all

the evidence she would ever need. For the second time that morning, Mary found herself running to the place where the disciples were staying, and she announced, "I have seen the Lord!"

Remarkably, God knows your name as well. "See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands," God says in Isaiah 49:16. If you listen, you will hear him calling your name deep within. It's the only evidence you will ever need to know that he is alive.

Loving God, open my heart to you so that I may hear you whisper my name. May I be filled with joy as I celebrate the remarkable gift that Jesus is alive! Amen.

WORDS OF PURPOSE

Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."
—John 20:21

The first words Jesus spoke to his frightened disciples after his resurrection were words of reassurance: "Peace be with you!" Then he quickly gave them a renewed sense of purpose: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

With those words, Jesus was passing his mission on to his followers. Perhaps you've seen a relay race in which one runner comes up behind the next and passes off the baton. That's what Jesus was doing here. He was passing off the baton to his followers and saying, "Go! Finish the race! Carry on the mission I began! I ran the first leg; now you run the next. Just as God the Father sent me into the world, now I am sending you into the world! Go!" (See John 17:18.)

Later, Jesus would remind his disciples again of that mission:

"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Jesus had been sent by his Father into the world "to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10). As his followers today, we also have that mission and purpose. Jesus has passed us the baton. Lost people matter to God, and they matter to us.

God in heaven, remind us often that Jesus has sent us into the world, just as you sent him into the world. May our lives and words be a light that shows others the way. Amen.

WORDS OF PROVISION

[Jesus] breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

—John 20:22

On the first Easter Sunday evening, Jesus gave his disciples not only words of purpose (John 20:21). He also gave them words indicating that he would provide for them. He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." To fulfill their purpose of carrying on his mission in the world, his followers would need the provision of the Holy Spirit.

On our own, we don't have what it takes to seek and save the lost. If we're going to pick up the baton of Jesus' mission, we're going to need the power of the Holy Spirit!

When Jesus invited his disciples to receive his Spirit on Easter evening, it was just a foretaste of what would happen a few weeks later. Jesus would tell the disciples to wait in Jerusalem till they received the special gift promised them by God. And

when that day arrived, they would be filled with the Holy Spirit.

After the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Day of Pentecost (fifty days after Passover), the disciples were never the same again (Acts 2:1-4). They taught and served with a new power that was irresistible. In fact, "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

That same provision of power is available to us as we trust in Christ and remain in his love (John 15:5, 9-10).

O God on High, fill me
with your Spirit so that
I might have power to
serve others in your name!
Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

"Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." —John 20:27

The disciple Thomas was not with the others when Jesus met with them on Easter Day. As a result, it was hard for him to believe that Jesus was really alive. He insisted that unless he could see the nail marks in Jesus' hands with his own eyes and touch the wound on Jesus' side, he simply couldn't believe.

A week after the resurrection, Thomas got his chance. It's remarkable how gently Jesus dealt with Thomas's doubts! Rather than scolding, Jesus entered with a warm greeting: "Peace be with you!" Then he assured Thomas that he was alive by inviting him to do exactly as Thomas said he would need to do in order to believe. "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

When Thomas finally did believe, the words that came out of his mouth formed one of the greatest confessions of faith in the entire Bible. He said to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!"

Just as Jesus understood Thomas's doubts, he understands our questions as well. But rather than admonishing us, he invites us to rediscover him in ways that reassure us. When we turn to him, he gives us exactly what we need in order to have our faith reconfirmed.

Jesus, thank you for not turning away from me when I find myself facing doubts, uncertainties, and fears. Please give me what I need today in order to fully believe! Amen.

WORDS THAT DISPEL DOUBT

Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"
—Mark 9:24

Everyone who has set their heart on following Jesus will face uncertainties from time to time. Sometimes our doubts grow over a period of time, but other times they seem to strike us instantly for no reason at all.

A believer from hundreds of years ago, St. John of the Cross, called that experience "the dark night of the soul."

It's not that we don't want to believe! It's simply that sometimes we find it hard to believe.

That was true of the man who came to Jesus, desperately longing for his son to be healed. He assured Jesus that he believed, but, in the same breath, he asked Jesus to help him overcome his unbelief. It was an example of doubt seeking faith, and, in response, Jesus honored the man's request.

God doesn't want us to be stuck in doubt. The apostle John said, "I write these things to you who believe . . . so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13).

God wants us to live with the joy and peace that come from being certain Jesus is alive, trusting that we will live with him forever! But when we're not sure, God understands—and he uses our questions and doubts to teach us to rely on him more fully.

Ask for his help, and he will restore your faith and deepen your trust.

O God, sometimes I'm not sure—I want to believe; "help me overcome my unbelief!" Assure me deep within so that I can live with the peace and joy you intend for me! Amen.

WORDS OF GRACE

"Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said . . . Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." —John 21:15

After his resurrection, Jesus spoke words of purpose and assurance, and he also spoke words of grace.

Peter, like the other disciples, had deserted Jesus on the night of his arrest (Matthew 26:56). Later that same night, Peter had denied three times that he even knew Jesus. When Peter realized that in his fear he had disowned his Lord, his heart was broken and he wept bitterly (Matthew 26:69-75).

Our world is not often a place where others will offer us a second chance. But Peter grew to learn that God's ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8). When Jesus met his disciples at the Sea of Galilee after his resurrection, he spoke words to Peter that assured him and all of us that with God there is always room for a new start.

Three times, Jesus asked Peter if he loved him. And each time, Peter responded positively. With each of Peter's responses, Jesus recommissioned him for service. "Feed my lambs," he said. "Take care of my sheep." And "Feed my sheep."

"A broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise" (Psalm 51:17). Despite Peter's failures and weaknesses, Jesus was assuring him and restoring him back to service in the kingdom of God. "Follow me!" he said.

Thank you, Father, for Peter's second chance, and for the second chance you are always ready to offer me. Help me to serve you faithfully in Jesus' name. Amen.

SWEETER THAN HONEY

How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!
—Psalm 119:103

Throughout this month, we've studied the words of Jesus from the cross, as well as some of the words he spoke after his resurrection and at other times. In many ways those words have given us insight and understanding. As the psalmist put it, those words have been "sweeter than honey." Psalm 19:10 states also, "[Your words] are more precious than gold."

One thing we always need to keep in mind when we consider Jesus is that he "came into the world to save sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). Because we are not able to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourself (Luke 10:27), we deserve no more than death (Romans 6:23). But, in love, God sent Jesus "to save the world through him" (John 3:17). Jesus' sacrifice on the

cross accomplished exactly that. As we trust in him, we receive God's forgiveness and the gift of eternal life with him!

God is now partnering with us to continue his work in the world, reconciling all things to himself. As we go forward in faith, we have the assurance that his Holy Spirit is with us, equipping and empowering us to fulfill our mission and calling.

Indeed, our Lord's words are sweet to our taste, and more precious to us than anything else we could ever have or know!

Lord Jesus, thank you for the words you spoke from the cross and throughout your ministry. They are life to us because they lead us to the heart of your Father! Amen.