

A person is walking through a vast desert landscape with rolling sand dunes under a bright sky. The person is small in the distance, leaving a trail of footprints in the sand. The sky is a mix of blue and orange, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The overall mood is one of solitude and journey.

Today

July/Aug 2020

refresh, refocus, renew

**WITH US IN THE
WILDERNESS**

ALSO: JESUS IN JOHN: WHO GOD IS

Dear Friends:

Where I live in Michigan, we occasionally have summer dry spells. For the most part, though, we have plenty of water. So maybe, like me, you have a hard time truly imagining the harshness of the desert, let alone living there.



In July, focusing on the book of Numbers, Pastor Tom Groelsema helps us picture the desert and Israel's life there for forty years. Israel's time in the desert had some harsh realities and grim moments, but it was also a time of intimacy with God. The Lord was with them every moment and provided for all their needs. Their experience in the wilderness with God can help us when we face "wilderness" times in our lives, especially when we recognize God's presence with us through his Son, Jesus.

In August, Pastor A.J. Gretz picks up the theme of Jesus' teachings and ministry in the book of John. As fully God and fully human, Jesus was able to show us who God is, and the good news is that he was able to reconcile us with God. Through Jesus we are freely forgiven and given new life. Now that really is good news!

As you reflect on Israel's time in the desert and on Jesus' life and ministry for us, may you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

—Kurt Selles

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**"With Us in the
Wilderness"**
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**"Jesus in John:
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A.J. Gretz

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ReFrame
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With Us in the Wilderness

Tom Groelsema

july

Life is wonderful, and it can be filled with excitement and new possibilities. But, as many of us know, life can also have setbacks and struggles. Sometimes it can even feel more like a desert than a place of abundant living.

The book of Numbers can help us with that. Did you know that the original Hebrew name for this book is “In the Desert”? Numbers tells the story of Israel’s time in the desert wilderness, as they wandered for forty years before entering the land God had promised them. That period in their lives was often difficult, but it supplied many lessons for building up their faith. And the biggest lesson was that God was with them all along the way.

Tom Groelsema and his wife, Sheri, have served churches in Minnesota, Michigan, and North Carolina. They have four children and three granddaughters.

Jesus in John: Who God Is

A.J. Gretz

august

In the book of John we learn a lot about Jesus and why he came. Jesus is more than a teacher and more than a prophet. In fact, Jesus is God himself, and he came to show us what God is like.

Many of the stories about Jesus in John help us better understand who God is and how he feels about us. The main thing is that full life with God is not about something we do to try to earn God’s favor or make up for our sin. It is about *receiving* the gifts of forgiveness and new life, made possible in Jesus.

Anthony Joseph (A.J.) Gretz is a pastor in Grandville, Michigan. He has also served churches in Ohio and in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He and his wife, Anna, have three children.

A LIGHT IN THE DARK

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.
—John 1:5

The book of John uses the image of light to help explain who Jesus is.

Jesus Christ, the Word of God, created the world with God in the beginning. He also came into the world to save it, because it was broken by the curse of sin and death. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God in Eden, they brought this curse on all of God's creation (Genesis 3). The world that God once called "good" has been afflicted with conflict, isolation, sickness, and grief ever since. And sin has estranged us from the God who created us. Even worse, no matter how hard we try, we cannot make things right. Our sin continually forms a barrier between us and our Creator.

Maybe you are reading these devotions because you are feeling sin's effects in your life. Perhaps something has hap-

pened that has left you feeling lost or confused. Maybe you feel as if you are groping in the dark, looking for a light to guide your way.

The Bible promises that the darkness you face—whatever it might be—will never overcome the light of Christ. Like a lighthouse on a rocky shore, Jesus offers us hope and a clear path to God.

There is no sin or enemy of God that is big enough to snuff out the light of Christ. He will always be victorious, and if we place our faith in him, he invites us to share in his victory.

Lord, help me to have eyes to see the light of Christ shining in the dark places around me, and fill me with hope in the promise of his victory. Amen.

GOD WITH US

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

—John 1:14

John is writing this book to clarify who Jesus is. In the years soon after Jesus' ministry, some people doubted that Jesus was actually *God*. They argued that he was merely a prophet, or a teacher, or perhaps even a person who was out of his mind.

So here John spells out some important things. Jesus, the one and only Son of God, is fully God, and he came to live among us and with us.

In the church we call this the *incarnation*: God came to live among us in human flesh. The God of the universe came to be born as a helpless human baby, and he was raised by relatively unknown, ordinary people in a small town in first-century Galilee (Luke 2). This child, Jesus, came to suffer, die, and rise to life again for our sake.

If the Christian story is a new story to you, you might won-

der why the almighty, all-powerful God would do this. Why leave heaven and go to so much trouble for us? We might have expected God just to create the world and then step back, leaving people to figure things out for themselves.

Instead, God became one of us because he loves us and wants to be in relationship with us.

Because he is God, Jesus could take our sins upon himself. And because he became human, Jesus could redeem every aspect of our humanity. By his sacrifice for us, Jesus cleansed us and made a relationship with God possible for us again.

God, thank you for sending Jesus to become one of us so that you can be in relationship with us. Amen.

GRACE AND TRUTH

*The one and only Son [Jesus Christ] . . . came from the Father,
full of grace and truth.*
—John 1:14

Some of us are what we might call “truth people.” We tend to draw firm lines between right and wrong, and we feel that we have a responsibility to speak up when something doesn’t sound right.

Sometimes this is a gift because God can use us to identify sin and injustice, urging people to bring about change. But sometimes it hurts our relationships because we can focus on the negative and be judgmental, pushing people away.

Meanwhile, some of us are “grace people.” We gravitate toward the idea of God’s love and forgiveness, and we don’t like making a scene or creating conflict. Instead, we try to forgive others and move on.

This too can be a gift because God can use us to bring harmony into tough situations. But we need to be careful not

to ignore serious hurts and problems that should be addressed.

In the Bible we learn what God is like in the life and teaching of Jesus. And we see how Jesus brings the practices of grace and truth together. Jesus is infinitely compassionate—willing to forgive all who place their faith in him. At the same time, he is not afraid to speak a hard word of truth to bring someone deeper into faith.

At this time in your life, what do you need from God? Grace? Encouragement? Forgiveness? A word of truth to set you in the right direction?

Lord, thank you for being the God of both grace and truth. Speak whatever words I need to hear in my life in order to grow nearer to you. Amen.

WATER INTO WINE

What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.
—John 2:11

In this story Jesus changes more than 120 gallons of water into wine for the guests at a wedding feast. And John tells us this was the first “sign” or miracle through which Jesus revealed his glory. But as readers today, we might find ourselves wondering why Jesus provided *wine* to drink.

After all, the Bible includes many warnings against drunkenness. And today we know very well the dangers of consuming too much alcohol. So why does Jesus seem to encourage drinking here? And what do gallons of wine have to do with being the Savior of God’s people?

The answer comes from the Old Testament picture of wine as a symbol of God’s blessing (Isaiah 25:6; Amos 9:13-15; Proverbs 3:9-10). Wine is often

used to represent God’s abundant provisions for his people.

In this scene, Jesus has chosen to demonstrate the blessings of his coming kingdom by blessing a wedding celebration with this sign. The wine serves as a symbol of God’s provision in Jesus and of the generous love he will put on display.

Signs like this are meant to build up his followers’ faith and help them to trust in Jesus.

How is God demonstrating his abundant love for *you*, in your life today? How has God been providing for you, as a sign that you belong to him?

Father, help me to trust and believe that I am loved by you, and to see the ways you have been providing for me in my life. Amen.

MAKING WRONGS RIGHT

So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.
—John 2:15

In this story about Jesus clearing the temple courts, we have a picture in which Jesus is upset and seems to be angry. Does this fit with the way you normally think of him?

Vendors are defiling the temple area during the Passover festival, and that is a problem for a couple of reasons. For one thing, they are selling animals in a space where people are supposed to be able to pray.

Another concern is price gouging. Animal sacrifices are required for the festival, and it can be difficult for travelers to bring animals a long distance. So the merchants are maximizing profits by charging the travelers high prices for their animals.

All of this makes Jesus rightly upset. But this is not without purpose, and it does not mean he is out of control. Instead,

Jesus is purifying a holy space and protecting people from exploitation. He is taking on something wrong and setting it right.

As we seek to be followers of Jesus, we are called to put God first in our lives and to seek our neighbors' well-being (see Matthew 22:37-40). But we continue to struggle against sin. We still need to be corrected and even rebuked at times. In those moments Jesus may need to get our attention, or even speak a hard word to us, to shake us out of focusing on ourselves. He's making us more like him.

Lord, show me where I have sinned, and give me the courage to honor you and do what's right. Amen.

BORN AGAIN

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."
—John 3:3

One of the key images Jesus teaches is that all who believe in him have *new life*. Faith in Jesus is not an add-on to our lives or an accessory we can just pay attention to once in a while. Our faith in Jesus is meant to transform our entire being so that we are changed and become newly born, newly created.

Nicodemus came to Jesus with questions. And Jesus used the image of being "born again" to help Nicodemus understand how radically we must change to become his followers. Jesus said that the only ones who can experience the kingdom and understand his teaching are those who are born again. To explain further, he said we need to be "born of water and the Spirit." This is likely a reference to baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit, which people

receive when they become believers in Christ.

Today we might associate the idea of being "born again" with a dramatic conversion story. But rebirth in Christ is not a one-time event; discipleship involves a *continuous* dying and rising with Christ. As we grow in faith, Jesus cleanses us from sin and reshapes us in his own image. Again and again, we must allow him to reshape our priorities, change our attitudes, and empower us for service.

In what ways has the Lord reshaped you lately?

Lord, continue to show me how I must be born again. Show me the parts of myself that need to be cleansed and changed, and make me new in your perfect image. Amen.

GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD

"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

The story of salvation starts with God's people making a huge error. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God and brought sin into the world (Genesis 3).

If you and I were in God's position, would we have felt like restoring Adam and Eve? We might have wanted to start over with someone else. Maybe we'd even make an entirely different world and fill it with something other than human beings.

But God chose not to abandon his creation. Even though we humans don't deserve it, God stays in relationship with us. He clothes us. He guides us. And he promises that Satan will be defeated.

Throughout the Old Testament we find that God's people fell into sin and dysfunction again and again. But God remained

faithful. He stayed with his people and promised that one day a Savior would come, break the cycle, and free people from the curse of sin.

The book of John was written to help people understand that Jesus is that Savior (Messiah). God loved us so much that he sent Jesus from heaven to become one of us in order to pay for our sin and restore our relationship with God.

In Christ we see that God's love for us truly is unconditional. It does not depend on our doing enough to please him; instead, salvation is freely given as an undeserved gift.

Father, in spite of my sin and wrongdoing, help me to believe that you love me and that through Jesus you give me eternal life. Amen.

LIVING WATER

"If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."
—John 4:10

A friend of mine likes to talk about our temptation to follow "Churchianity." He describes this as a version of faith that centers on the church as a social organization, rather than on our relationship with God.

As a pastor, I am always grateful for people who want to support our ministries and programs. But I know it can be tempting for people to equate their church involvement with faith itself. When I ask about their spiritual lives, they might focus on music, programs, or committees in the church without ever describing their actual relationship with God.

When that happens, I am challenged to remind people of the greater gift that Jesus offers. Jesus did not come just to make us busy volunteers or to get us to donate to the church's

ministries. Jesus came to invite us into God's presence.

Through Jesus, we are brought into a loving relationship with God. And it is in this relationship that we find forgiveness, healing, and purpose.

Belonging to a church is an important part of being a disciple. But in this passage, we are reminded that the purpose of the church isn't merely to make ourselves busy or to create a comfortable worship service. It's to facilitate the presence of God—to give you and me the chance to drink the "water welling up to eternal life."

Father, help me to move beyond church attendance or religious activity to develop a life-giving relationship with you. Amen.

HEALING ON THE SABBATH

In his defense Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working." —John 5:17

In this episode Jesus finds himself in trouble with the religious authorities for healing on the Sabbath. They saw it as "working" on the Sabbath, the day on which people were commanded to rest from all kinds of work. The Sabbath was meant to be a good gift to God's people. But unfortunately that sense was lost under a mountain of rules against activities that counted as "work." For example, the man who is healed in this story gets in trouble just for carrying his mat.

When Jesus heals on the Sabbath, the religious leaders get angry because their rules have become more important to them than love for their neighbor. But here Jesus reminds us that mercy is more important to God than rigid legalism. Jesus has an opportunity to heal, and he takes it because the Father is always

working to build his kingdom, regardless of what day of the week it is.

This challenges us today to consider any "rules" we follow that may limit our ability to serve God. Are there places we are unwilling to go, people we are unwilling to help, or times when we make ourselves unavailable to others? If so, are we putting something in the way of showing God's love and care?

Father, give us the grace to know the difference between your good commands and our human rules that can get in the way of your will being done. Amen.

THE BREAD OF LIFE

Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."
—John 6:35

Here Jesus was challenging people who wanted him to lead a revolution. Their nation was occupied by the Roman Empire, and many people were hoping that their promised Messiah, a leader specially appointed by God, would restore them as a political power. Jesus was indeed the Messiah, but he was not a political leader.

We can understand why the people would want things to change in their country. But Jesus wanted them to understand that he had come for an even bigger purpose. As we have seen earlier, Jesus has come to give people eternal life and bring them into the presence of God. If people would trust in him as the bread of life who would provide them full life with God, their deepest and greatest need would always be met.

In our busy world, we can easily get caught up in pursuing "food that spoils." We want to take care of our family. We want to do well in our job. We may want to be involved in leading our community and our nation. These are all good things. But sometimes these good things can get in the way of the *best* thing.

Are we spending too much time chasing goals that will not last? Are we so concerned with the here and now in our lives that Jesus is getting crowded out? Or are we walking with him daily so that we can live life to the full?

Lord, help me to make my relationship with you more important than anything else, and nourish me with the bread of life you offer. Amen.

THE BEST WAY

Jesus answered, "My teaching is not my own. It comes from the one who sent me."
—John 7:16

Several years ago I experimented with something called the Paleo diet. The idea is that you eat the way cavepeople supposedly ate before agriculture was developed, focusing on meat and plants while avoiding carbs as much as possible.

This diet (and others like it) is endorsed by a number of celebrities, bloggers, and social media influencers who have found success losing weight or improving their athletic performance. But when *I* tried the diet, I mainly felt crabby and sluggish. What worked for others didn't really work for me, and I quickly abandoned it. It was an interesting experiment, but I found that it wasn't the right fit for my lifestyle.

Sometimes we are tempted to treat Jesus' voice like just another voice in the world giving advice about options for our diet, finances, or productivity.

But in this passage in John 7, we are reminded that Jesus actually speaks for God because his teaching is from God.

Jesus' instructions are not something we can pick and choose from. Every instruction he gave is in line with the way you and I were created to live. If we want to experience life as it was meant to be lived, we will find it by listening to Jesus and doing what he asks us to do.

Father, help me to trust Jesus as he speaks the truth that comes from you. Give me the courage to trust and obey, wherever he leads. Amen.

THE FIRST STONE

"Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."
—John 8:7

Jesus challenges a crowd that is ready to stone a sinful woman to death. He says that only those who are without sin have the right to throw a stone—and, one by one, the accusers walk away, forced to admit that they too are sinners.

Jesus is reminding us that we are often blind to our own sin. We can be quick to criticize a spouse for a thoughtless comment, quick to judge a fallen celebrity, or quick to look down on a neighbor for breaking a law. But we quickly forget that we too have sinned—perhaps even in the same ways. In this story we see that we all stand equally in need of forgiveness and that only Jesus has the right to judge.

Why are we so quick to criticize and condemn? Probably because it is much easier than looking inside ourselves. We live in a world that provides

limitless ways to avoid the pain of self-reflection. But if we are honest, we must admit that we are just as guilty of violating God's law as anyone else.

And yet Jesus has a word for us. When we repent and believe, we experience the gift of forgiveness. Then he encourages us to leave our life of sin and be born again, becoming a new creation in the image of Christ.

Father, forgive me for my tendency to judge people. Help me to be slower to speak about the sins of others and to see my own need for your forgiveness. Amen.

A MAN BORN BLIND

"This happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."
—John 9:3

The disciples see a man who was born blind, and they assume that his blindness is someone's fault. This was a common way of thinking about suffering in those days. Sickness and disability were often believed to be a result of sin somewhere in the family line.

If we think about it, we can see how people could fall into that kind of thinking. It has happened in many cultures. If a person has a disability or a terrible disease, or if they are down and out in some kind of hardship, it can be convenient to blame them or their family or even their friends or community. It calms our fears if we can state a reason or a cause for something we don't understand—or don't want to.

In this story Jesus complicates things even more by implying that God allowed the man to be blind so that his healing by

Jesus could help people see the works of God being done. This is hard to understand—there is no getting around that. Human suffering is a lot more complicated than we would like to believe. Sin has broken this world in ways that go beyond our understanding.

But at the same time, this story offers comfort because we see that God can and will work to bring good out of challenges and suffering. God works for our good in all things (Romans 8:28)—and he has redeemed us in Christ. When the works of God shine through adversity, he shows in a unique way that he is good and loves us.

Father, in difficult times, help us to see you working for good, wanting to free us completely from the curse of sin. Amen.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

"I am the good shepherd."

—John 10:11

If you have ever owned a pet, you know the bond that can form between an animal and its caretaker. For example, if you have a dog, you provide it with food and shelter, discipline, and belly rubs. And, in return, the dog forms a strong bond with you because you are giving it a sense of belonging and safety.

In John 10, Jesus identifies himself as the good shepherd—someone who takes care of a flock of sheep. You and I might not love the idea of being compared to sheep, because they are not very bright animals. But there's a lot of power in this picture of Jesus as our shepherd.

A shepherd in those days was both a leader and a caretaker. Sometimes the shepherd provided comfort to the animals when they were scared or injured, going as far as carrying

them back to the flock when they had wandered off. Other times the shepherd had to correct and guide the sheep to get them where they needed to go. A good shepherd acted with the sheep's best interest in mind.

What a great way to think about Jesus and what he does for us! He is much more than a teacher. He is our Master and Lord. His voice leads us on the path of life. His hand provides for our needs. His discipline keeps us out of harm's way. His love and care give us the best life possible.

Lord Jesus, you are my good shepherd. Help me to know I belong to you, and help me to trust your voice wherever you lead me. Amen.

RAISING LAZARUS

Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.
—John 11:43-44

Scholars describe the raising of Lazarus as the seventh and final "sign" or miracle in the book of John, and—as we can see—Jesus has saved the best for last.

Even though Lazarus has been dead for several days, Jesus pulls him back from death's grasp and restores him to life. All it takes is Jesus' command. The voice that spoke creation into existence now calls him out of the darkness of death and into the light of life again.

In our skeptical, postmodern age, this may seem like a story that's been embellished by John to help "sell" people on the idea of following Jesus. But this miraculous story is *real*. Like the other signs in the book of John, it is meant to point to a deeper truth about Jesus and his ministry.

Lazarus' resurrection points us to the hope of resurrection and new life that we have in Christ. What Jesus did for Lazarus is also a promise for all who believe: in Jesus there is no enemy of God—not even death itself—that can defeat us. If we are in Christ, we will have eternal life and victory over death, no matter what we face today.

When we have times in which we are struggling, anxious, or afraid, we can look to Jesus and remember his promises of life forever with him. Nothing is too big, and no problem is too difficult for Jesus to overcome. Not even death itself.

Father, when things are difficult and I feel discouraged, give me hope. Help me to trust in your power to bring me into life forever with you. Amen.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF KING

"Blessed is the king of Israel!"

—John 12:13

Many first-century Jews had hopes that their promised Messiah would be a political leader, someone who could lead Israel in a revolution against the Roman Empire. Their hope was that Jesus could lead the nation to independence again.

So in our reading from John 12 for today, Jesus is hailed as a hero on his way into Jerusalem: "Blessed is the king of Israel!" In fact, the crowd is so large and excited that the religious leaders despair that "the whole world has gone after him."

We can understand why the Jewish people would want to return to their country's glory days. But Jesus came to be a very different kind of king. He came not so much to wear a crown but to bear a cross. He came to break the curse of sin for our sake, laying down his own life in our place. And

that's how he would welcome all who believe in him to enter God's kingdom in this broken world. Because he is God, Jesus is and always has been the King of kings and Lord of lords!

Jesus' coming teaches us that God is not interested in a political agenda, or just one nation, or just one people group. God loves the entire world, and his kingdom purposes are bigger than any of us. As followers of Christ, our citizenship is in the kingdom of heaven, first and foremost, and all of our other goals and desires must fall into place with respect to that.

Father, help me to see that your work is bigger than my city, state, or country, and help me to share your love for the whole world. Amen.

JESUS PREDICTS HIS DEATH

"Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!"

—John 12:27-28

It's easy for us to know that Jesus is God because of all his miracles. But this episode reminds us of Jesus' humanity. Here, in John 12, Jesus tells the disciples that his soul is "troubled." He knows the pain that he must endure by dying on a cross—both physically and spiritually—as he bears the weight of all human sin on himself. Thinking about that leaves him feeling troubled.

How does this feel to us as readers? What does it say to us that Jesus experienced a moment of weakness like this?

As one who is fully God, Jesus absorbed all the sin we have done and will ever do, in order to cleanse us completely. He is the one, final sacrifice for the payment of sin—and that is only possible because he is fully God.

But because he is also fully human, Jesus experienced

emotion, a troubled soul, and even deep questions. At this moment, and in others like it, we see the depth of God's love for us revealed in a new way.

Notice that in spite of these feelings, Jesus remained obedient. He did not stoically bear the cross without feeling. It hurt—far more than we can imagine.

And yet in spite of the pain, Jesus remained faithful, committed to God's mission of redeeming us and restoring the world (John 3:16). How great is his love for us!

Father, in my moments of weakness, help me to remember the great love you have shown through Jesus and his willingness to suffer for my sake. Amen.

WASHING FEET

"Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet."
—John 13:14

Even when we consider all of the surprising things that Jesus did in his teaching and healing ministry, this scene was likely one of the most shocking so far to the people around him.

At that time, it was common for a servant to wash people's feet as they entered a home. And as we might imagine, this was an important practice of hospitality. Most people wore sandals as they walked roads covered in dust, dirt, and animal dung. So we can easily imagine how unpleasant it would be to wash someone's feet—and that's why it was typically done by the lowest ranking slave or servant in a household.

But here Jesus gives us a beautiful picture of the gospel—the good news of the kingdom of God. Washing his disciples' feet shows God's love for sinners in a way that mere words

cannot express. This act of service gave the disciples a preview of the cross, when Jesus laid down his very life to wash our sins away.

But Jesus didn't stop there. He also told his disciples to go and do the same for others.

We are called to communicate the gospel through a servant lifestyle, giving of ourselves so that others may experience life.

How is God calling you to do this? How can you humbly serve others, in order to point them to Jesus, who gave himself on their behalf?

Father, fill my heart with a willingness to serve others and to give generously so that people may see your love at work in my life. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."
—John 13:34

I have often thought I should learn to speak Spanish. I took classes in college, but my knowledge since then has faded. From time to time I've picked up vocabulary cards or done Spanish-speaking exercises, but I have never really kept up the effort.

Up to this point, I can say that I *want* to learn the language, but that doesn't mean much. If I really believed it was important, I would make more of an effort and follow through so that I really do learn Spanish.

In this passage, Jesus tells his disciples to love one another because by doing so people will know they are his disciples. Jesus knows that our actions reveal our true beliefs and motivations, and he encourages his followers to live out their faith by loving one another well.

Jesus understands that it doesn't do any good to preach a gospel of grace but to have a critical spirit toward the people around us. Further, it doesn't help people to *tell* them that God loves them but to ignore their various needs. We are called to truly show the love of Jesus to the people around us, and by that they will know we really believe in God's love and his good news for the world.

If we want to serve as effective disciples and point others to faith in Christ, our witness actually begins with the way we treat people.

Father, help me to see that showing your love is essential in my witness to others. Show me how to share your love with the people you bring into my life. Amen.

THE WAY, THE TRUTH, THE LIFE

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

Jesus makes a bold claim in this passage, saying he is the way, the truth, and the life. He's the only one who can lead people to God the Father.

Many people today disagree with this. They argue that it's wrong to make such an exclusive claim because spiritual truth is ultimately unknowable for us.

In this passage, Jesus makes it hard to stand in the "mushy middle" when it comes to Christianity. Each person who reads John 14 must make a decision to accept or reject Jesus' claim. Following Christ is either the one true way to know God, or it's not.

For some of us, this either-or choice may seem extreme. But as we consider Jesus' words, it's helpful to remember that he makes this statement while he is preparing to go to the cross.

He knows he will be arrested this very night and be crucified the next day. Jesus is comforting his disciples in the face of his impending death by reminding them of the truth.

As he gets ready to die, Jesus wants his friends to have the assurance that he and they are doing the right thing. He will give up his life on the cross in order to open the way for us to have full life with God forever. No matter what happens over the coming days, he wants them to know that if they believe in him, they can trust that they will be with him forever.

Father, help me to find confidence in this claim of Jesus. Give me the courage to follow his teachings, trusting that he is leading the way to you. Amen.

THE HOLY SPIRIT

"The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."
—John 14:26

Have you ever thought, "I wish Jesus was physically here right now"? Each Sunday we gather to worship a God we are "in relationship" with even though we can't see him or touch him. And, to be honest, that's not always an easy thing to get our minds around.

We pray to God for guidance and direction, or to provide for our needs, and sometimes it can feel like we are talking to empty space. Sometimes we might think faith was easier for the disciples because they could walk and talk and eat with Jesus in person.

On the night before he died, Jesus told his disciples that they were going to receive the Holy Spirit. Depending on what version of the Bible you are reading, the Spirit is called the Advocate, Helper, Counselor, or Comforter. And each title

helps to explain who the Spirit is and what the Spirit does.

The Spirit is more than just an abstract concept. He is a person, as fully God as the Father and the Son. The Spirit of God comes to dwell within believers, representing a new level of intimacy between God and his people.

So, in our times of doubt, we can take comfort knowing that no matter what it feels like, God is in fact present with us. In fact, through the Spirit, God has come closer to us than ever before.

Father, make your Spirit known to me. Help me to sense your presence and to hear your voice in my life. Amen.

THE VINE

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."
—John 15:5

Several passages in the Bible refer to God's people Israel as a vine planted by God. The idea is that, before Jesus came, God took this group of chosen people and made a home for them where they could grow healthy and prosperous in a relationship with him.

But despite all that God did for his people, they failed to thrive. Time after time, they wandered away from God in their sin. They worshiped the gods of other nations. They strayed from the path that God had placed them on.

Now Jesus is switching up the imagery about the vine. He says that, ultimately, he has come as the true vine to give people the opportunity to grow in a relationship with God, the way God always intended.

Practically speaking, the church has understood that this happens through spiritual disciplines, such as reading and studying Scripture and spending time in prayer, worship, confession, and fellowship with community. And these things aren't about scoring points with God or trying to make up for our sin. Instead, they are about staying connected to the vine so that we can thrive.

When we draw near to Jesus, we are supported, nourished, and able to bear fruit in our relationship with him.

Lord Jesus, help me to remain in you. Help me to give you time and attention each day so that I can be firmly connected in relationship with you. Amen.

A HATED PEOPLE

"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first."

—John 15:18

This may be one of Jesus' hardest teachings—especially if you tend to be a people pleaser. Jesus wants us to understand that his followers will sometimes be at odds with the values of the world. As a result, there will be times when we pay a relational price for following him.

But will we be hated?

Disliked? Probably. Misunderstood? Sure. But *hated*? That sounds pretty extreme.

Yet Jesus chooses strong language here for a reason. Putting God first will create friction—it's a threat to people and systems that have a vested interest in their own ambitions and ways of doing things.

Jesus invited people into the kingdom of God, and this resulted in his death on a cross. Why? Because his teachings represented a threat to the

religious leadership. Following Jesus meant having less power, status, and attention, so their response was to get rid of the competition and protect their own interests (see John 11:48).

Since that is how Jesus was treated, should we be surprised to encounter hardship in our own lives because of our faith in him? No.

Yet, in spite of resistance in this world, God remains faithful to his people. Through the Spirit, we can be empowered and refreshed to continue the work God calls us to do. And in community we can find the support to keep following Jesus, no matter what it costs us.

Lord, give me the courage to stay faithful even when others criticize or condemn me for my faith in you. Amen.

VICTORY

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

One of the things Jesus wants his followers to understand is that the way forward for them will not be easy. As we saw yesterday, we should be prepared to experience resistance and even hostility because of our faith. But beyond that, we will have to deal with many other problems in our fallen world. Conflict. Anxiety. Depression. Poverty. Divorce. Cancer. Tragedy. Disaster. The list goes on and on.

Jesus wants us to understand that there will be days and even seasons of life that are incredibly difficult. Scripture never promises that faith in Jesus will make our problems go away—in fact, sometimes the opposite is true.

But whatever comes our way, we do not face our struggles without hope. We have put our trust in the Savior who

died but then rose again. He made our salvation and new life possible by defeating sin and death. Bible teachers call this theme in Scripture *Christus Victor*—the idea that Jesus will triumph over every enemy of God and that we will share in that victory because of our faith.

In Christ, we have hope for the possibility of redemption in this life. Bodies can be healed, hearts can be softened, and lives can be changed. But even if we don't experience some of the changes we hope for during our lives, we have the assurance that one day we *will* share in Christ's victory.

Father, grant me your peace in difficult seasons, knowing that I will share in your victory. Amen.

SENT PEOPLE

"As you sent me into the world [Father], I have sent them into the world."
—John 17:18

The Bible describes Jesus' followers in a number of ways. We are called forgiven sinners, adopted sons and daughters, and beloved members of the body of Christ. All of these are key aspects of who we are in Christ.

But one of the most important identities we have is as "sent people." Just as Jesus was sent into the world to show God's love, so he now sends *us* to do the same.

After Jesus' resurrection, his followers received the Holy Spirit to empower them for mission. As Jesus' followers today, we are called to share the good news of Jesus in our words and actions, inviting people to place their faith in Jesus just as we have done.

Too often, local churches become wrapped up in their own concerns. Christians spend so

much time running programs and dealing with internal conflicts that they have little energy to build relationships with people outside the church. It's not surprising that many of our churches are shrinking and that a lot of church "growth" is just a result of Christians transferring from one congregation to another.

Jesus' teaching makes clear, however, that his followers are partners in God's mission of saving people who are lost in sin. It's not enough to simply *talk about* sharing our faith—it's part of our identity in being the people God calls us to be.

Father, use my words and actions to help others understand the gospel and see their need for you. Amen.

KINGDOM POWER

"My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."
—John 18:36

This scene between Jesus and Pilate is all about the power struggle between them. Pilate thinks he is putting Jesus on trial, but it turns out that Jesus is more interested in challenging Pilate than defending himself.

This is the case because Jesus has an entirely different view of power. Pilate is focused on maintaining his position of authority over the Jews. He does not really believe that Jesus is guilty. But in the end, Pilate will choose the politically smart thing and hand Jesus over to be crucified in order to keep his power.

By contrast, Jesus' power doesn't come from amassing control or preserving his own interests. If it did, then Jesus and his followers would have fought for his release, he said.

Instead, real power—kingdom power—is about giving of our-

selves for the sake of others. Real power is in the ability to give of oneself so that another may find life. Jesus knows his death will be painful and difficult, but he follows through with a display of power that has never been seen before—all for the sake of this sinful world.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to pursue this kind of power rather than the power that the world offers. Are we giving of ourselves in service to others so that they can have life?

Lord, help me to display kingdom power in my service to others rather than accumulating power for myself. Amen.

THE SIDE OF TRUTH

"Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

—John 18:37

Jesus' statement here about truth is in line with everything he has taught. Jesus stands before Pilate "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). He is the bread of life; the living water; the way, the truth, and the life; the only way to know God the Father (John 6:35; 7:38; 14:6).

As he stands before this Roman governor, Jesus offers Pilate the chance to experience the truth and enter into a relationship with him—like one of his disciples.

But doing that would be very costly for Pilate. If Pilate were to accept what Jesus has to say, he would have to make the truth more important than Rome. Or political power. Or wealth. If Pilate accepted Jesus' claims and set Jesus free, he would be throwing away his credibility with the Jews, if not his entire career.

In this book John has been helping us to understand that all we possess on this earth—all our power, influence, and wealth—pales in comparison to the truth of Jesus. The offer Jesus extends is the chance to experience life with God the way we are created to live it. *Nothing* is more important than that.

Sadly, Pilate rejects Jesus' offer.

What about you?

What might you need to let go of in order to embrace the truth of Jesus?

Lord, help me to live on the side of truth, knowing that life with you is the most important thing for me today and every day. Amen.

THIRSTY

Jesus said, "I am thirsty."

—John 19:28

When was the last time you became really thirsty? Perhaps it was a hot day, or maybe you were doing a tough workout. Or maybe you were on the highway in a car for too long without a stop. We all know what it feels like to get really thirsty; and although it may seem a small thing, it can make us feel miserable.

John tells us that one of the last things Jesus said from the cross was "I am thirsty." And we might wonder why John bothers to include this detail.

There's power in this image of Jesus, who described himself as the "living water," saying "I am thirsty." It's a physical proof of his suffering for our sake. Jesus thirsts in order to quench our thirst. He is dehydrated on the cross so that we may have living water.

In our world today, in which the main goal for most people is to seek an easier, more comfortable life, we must remember what Jesus was willing to go through. We don't like to be thirsty. Or hungry. Or to experience pain of any kind. But following the way of the cross means giving sacrificially of ourselves. This means giving till it hurts—and more. It doesn't mean ignoring our need for boundaries, but it may well mean giving of ourselves until we too become "thirsty," as Jesus did.

Father, show me how to give of myself—even when it's uncomfortable—so that others may have life in you. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

“IT IS FINISHED”

Jesus said, “It is finished.”

—John 19:30

As Jesus prepares to give up his spirit, he utters one final phrase from the cross: “It is finished.” Through Jesus’ death and resurrection, God has made redemption possible for every person who believes in his power to save. Jesus has taken all of the world’s sin on himself, the one final sacrifice for all people, for all time.

At times, you and I will be tempted to believe the lie that we are not worthy enough for God to save us. We may look at our past and think we are too flawed to ever belong to God fully. Or we might get discouraged about a sin that we continue to struggle with, in spite of our best efforts. Or we might compare ourselves to others and think that we are not doing enough for God in comparison to them. It is easy to believe that we must do

more or be more in order to deserve God’s love.

But on the cross, Jesus declared, “It is finished.” No matter who you are, what you have done, or what you have failed to do, Jesus’ death is payment *enough* to cover all of your sin. Though we can never do enough good to outweigh our sin or to earn God’s favor, Jesus has done it for us. It is finished.

The good news is that Jesus is enough. No matter your story, he is enough to make you right with God and to assure your place at his side. Because of Jesus, you can have full life forever with him.

Lord, help me to rest in the knowledge that your sacrifice on the cross is enough to save me. Amen.

MOMENT OF DOUBT

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

As we go forward in our life of faith, we all experience moments of doubt. We may wonder, Does God really love me? Does God see what I'm going through? Is all of this teaching in the Bible real, or am I just wasting my time? These questions and others are a natural part of believing in an invisible, intangible God.

Sometimes we may fear that our doubts are inappropriate or even sinful. We may wonder if God is angry with us for doubting his faithfulness or wondering if the Bible can be trusted.

But here in John 20, we see God's patience for doubters like us. Thomas had a hard time believing that Jesus had truly risen from the dead. But rather than scolding Thomas or dismissing him, Jesus invited him to find the proof that he

needed: "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side."

In our own times of doubt, God may similarly provide for us. He may show up through the guidance of a friend, a comforting passage of Scripture, or a well-timed sermon or devotional reading. He may even give us a sign to point us in the right direction.

There's no reason we should be afraid of our doubts or of bringing them before God. If we are honest and open, he is faithful to provide what we need to continue following him.

Lord, be near me in times of doubt. Provide the guidance and assurance I need to continue serving you. Amen.

A FLAWED LEADER

Peter . . . said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep."
—John 21:17

Imagine living in the first or second century and hearing about Christianity. You learn about Jesus in the book of John, and about his followers and the early church (book of Acts). You even learn about Peter's betrayal of Jesus (see John 19:15-27). And then you realize that Peter became a leader of the apostles and helped to start many churches.

How would that strike you? Would it fill you with confidence, knowing that this movement was led by an openly flawed guy who had turned his back on Jesus when things got difficult?

For some people, that might have been a deal-breaker. They might not have felt confident to be part of a movement led by this person with a past. People have a tendency to want to idealize leaders and expect them to be perfect. But

John's gospel makes it impossible to see Peter that way.

That's exactly the point. John chose to include this story even though it makes a key figure in the early church look bad. In fact, John actually closes the book with this restoration story to highlight Jesus' gracious attitude toward sinners.

As readers, we are meant to see ourselves in Peter. His story is *our* story. And here we are left with a final reminder that our faith is not about us and what we do for God. Instead, it's all about what Jesus has done for us, to show us who God is.

Father, help me, going forward, to live out the gospel of grace, showing the same undeserved love to others that you have shown to me. In Jesus, Amen.

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