

Mar/Apr 2018

Today

refresh, refocus, renew



ن هو ههنا لانه قام
كما قال

He is not here;
he has risen,
just as he said.

Mt 28:6

**LIVING
AS EASTER
PEOPLE**



ALSO: WHERE ARE YOU?

Friends:

On family vacations, as I pulled out my video camera, I'd often prompt my kids with the question "Where are you?" I wanted them to describe on-camera where they were, what they were doing, and what was happening that made this an important moment.

I hoped to preserve on video and for posterity their own narrations of excitement, trepidation, or even tedium as we visited seashores, mountaintops, or yet another graduation ceremony or other family event.



God asked that same question in Eden after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, and God wasn't confused. "Where are you?" is an invitation to reflect on where we are in the midst of God's creation and what we are doing with God's gifts.

As we journey into Lent this March, Professor Arie Leder begins to explore our need for a Savior by reflecting on that very question from the early chapters of Genesis. *Where are we, and what are we doing?*

Then, in April, Pastor Laurie Zuverink invites us to take a step further and reflect on this question: *In light of Easter, how are we living into the reality of being resurrection people?*

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

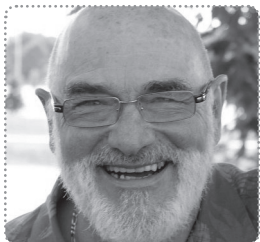
A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Steven Koster". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Steven" and last name "Koster" clearly legible.

—Steven Koster

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"Where Are You?"
Arie Leder



"Living as Easter People"
Laurie Zuverink

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Where Are You?

Arie C. Leder

This month we'll reflect on the question God asked the first human beings in the garden after they disobeyed and fell into sin: "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9). Since we are now in the period of Lent, leading up to Easter, we will consider this question in light of God's amazing love shown to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

At this time of year many Christians practice fasting—from food, behaviors, or attitudes—so we will also think about self-denial in the desert. The wilderness is where Israel spent forty years and where Jesus was tested for forty days. In addition, we will meditate on the seven deadly sins and the virtues that strengthen us against them. Finally, we will examine Jesus' determination to go to Jerusalem and be crucified, as described in the gospel of Luke.

May this journey from the desert to the cross—and your reflections about God's question "Where are you?"—bless you this month.

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WHERE ARE YOU?

The LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

—Genesis 3:9

The first question God asks in the Bible may seem a bit strange. We might think God would ask, "What have you done?" since Adam had disobeyed God's instruction not to eat from the tree in the middle of the garden. But the question God asks is "Where are you?"—and, of course, God knows exactly where Adam and Eve are.

God's question makes clear to us that we cannot hide from him (Psalm 139:7-12), that we belong in his presence, that he made us to walk with him. But the guilt of our sin pushes us to try to hide. We try to cover up or run away, not wanting to face up to what we've done.

The time of Lent, the forty days before Easter, gives us an excellent opportunity to focus on the "where" of God's question: our walk with God. The Bible uses the word "way" for

the first time in Genesis 3:24, saying that the "way" back to the garden was blocked by an angel with a sword. But God loved the world so much that he provided the way back to him, and to full life again, through Jesus Christ, who said: "I am the way and the truth and the life."

Walking with the Lord means constantly answering the question "Where are you?" and emerging from our hiding places—that we may see ourselves in the light of God's grace. It's a good question to ask at the beginning of each day this month.

Have your own way with me, Lord, and keep my feet on the path that leads to eternal life. In Jesus' name, Amen.

NEIGHBORS ON THE WAY

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

Neighbors can get in the way of our love for God, but not because of what they do. It wasn't Abel's fault that God preferred his sacrifice, and it wasn't the prodigal son's fault that his father wanted to throw a lavish party when he returned. The older brothers refused to love their neighbors—that is, their younger brothers—because they disagreed with God's love for them.

To walk with God, we need neighbors—whether they are family members or other believers in Christ—even if the only way to connect with them is by phone or Internet. Some neighbors may also be unknown to us, like a good Samaritan who helps a man attacked by robbers.

There are also some neighbors who can be a constant thorn in your side: maybe there's a fellow believer who cannot be

quiet about how good he is to the poor; or maybe there's a friend who keeps reminding you of your sin against him, even though he accepted your apology.

Walking with God can be difficult because we sometimes don't like his goodness to others, or we don't like our neighbor's behavior.

The good news is that we don't have to like our neighbors. All we have to do is love them, as God loved us for no good reason. Give your neighbor a good reason to love you.

I confess, Lord, that it's difficult to love some of my neighbors—and it must be difficult for some of my neighbors to love me. Pour out your love on us, in Jesus' name. Amen.

THE FOOD OF FASTING

Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.
—Deuteronomy 8:3

Israel had spent forty years of fasting on manna and water in the desert, but Moses still had to teach them what that long fast was all about. In their wanderings they needed to know that every moment of their lives depended on God and his Word for them.

Israel had plenty to eat when they left Egypt, for they had taken their flocks and herds with them (Exodus 12:38). But the food that really kept them alive was the daily manna God spoke into existence, and the drink that really quenched their thirst was the water that God sweetened and the water that flowed from rocks split by his mighty Word (see Exodus 15:22-17:7).

When Israel left behind the food of Egypt and limited themselves to their own herds, that was not fasting. In the desert God's people received a

new menu: "every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." In a nutshell it comes down to this: Love God with everything you have, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Fasting enables Christ's disciples to eat from the new menu, the Word of God. Real fasting imitates the example of Christ, who did not give in to temptations to make his own food during his forty-day fast, who lived only by every word that comes from the mouth of God, and who repeatedly said: "It is written."

Are you following Christ's example today?

We thank you, Lord, for our daily bread. Help us to live by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Amen.

I SURRENDER ALL

"Go . . . to the land I will show you. . . ." So Abram went.

—Genesis 12:1, 4

"Come, follow me." . . . At once they left. —Matthew 4:19-20

Fasting is a healthy spiritual exercise. It can make us aware of the life-changing power of walking with God.

After a period of fasting, we may well see that there are behaviors and attitudes we can do without, and new practices that can help bring light to our path. As a sign of devotion to the Lord, we may want to give up old habits and develop a new spiritual discipline, realizing it will also take some hard work. For example, it's not easy to give up an unruly tongue, a wandering eye, or unchecked eating or drinking. Nor is it easy to become more thoughtful in prayer and reflection with God, to intentionally take time for a neighbor, or to concentrate more on honoring God in our worship.

Few of us leave everything behind immediately, as Abram

and the disciples of Jesus did. Most of us make step-by-step changes. The Bible also shows that Abraham and the disciples struggled along on their way with God. They didn't make progress on their own; they did it *with God* and *in his strength*.

Whether we are fasting or not during this season of Lent does not matter in itself. But wherever we are on our way with the Lord, we have opportunities to listen to his voice, to examine the burdens that constrain us, and to let something go so that we can serve God more freely and faithfully.

Lord, give us the wisdom to recognize the burdens that slow our walk with you, and the strength to give them up and grow closer to you. Amen.

TESTED

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds. . . .
—James 1:2

Anyone who has tried to give up a bad habit knows how hard it can be to resist its enticements. Just a few days after “quitting,” you’re ready to take up the old habit again. The feeble attempt of trying to quit was little more than a miserable exercise doomed to failure.

There is nothing more difficult than denying our “self.” As James puts it, “Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.” This is because our sinful nature still clings to our “self” and we are powerless to fight it in our own strength. We need God’s help always.

Things and habits we struggle to deny reveal desires that harm the body and stifle the soul. Wherever we are, such desires inevitably surface to foil our best attempts at maturing in the faith.

Testing, writes James, develops perseverance, a dedication to grow and mature in Christian patience and wisdom. And perseverance includes the disappointments of our miserable failures. And when our disappointments reveal a hidden temptation, we can be thankful to God, who “gives [wisdom] generously to all without finding fault.” God is our help and strength—always.

There is great joy in God’s gift of wisdom to discern an unhealthy desire and to work at disciplining yourself, to conform to the mind of Christ.

Have you asked God for wisdom to withstand temptations?

Under the shadow of your wings, Lord, give me the wisdom and strength to persevere in my walk with you. Amen.

WISHING FOR A DESERT?

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

—Exodus 16:3

Have you ever wished to "get away from it all"—to escape daily pressures and difficult people and relationships, to move far away and try to get your life back together again? Be careful what you wish for.

The monk Alessandro Pronzato counsels, "If you . . . go to the desert to be rid of all the dreadful people and all the awful problems in your life, you will be wasting your time. You should go to the desert for a total confrontation with yourself." It appears that "others" are not the problem.

Safe from Pharaoh's orders in the desert, the people of Israel discover their own rebellious voice. They'd rather die in Egypt, eating the meat of slavery, than live in the desert by the Word of the Lord. Satan is more than ready to fill their minds with ideas that conflict with God's will. It will take

more than forty years in the wilderness for them to silence their own voice in favor of listening to God's commands.

Voicing the desires that are put into our minds by the devil is as natural as not liking our neighbor. Substituting God's Word for our own voice is the painful goal of our way with God.

Jesus showed us how it is done. When tempted by the ancient oppressor, he quoted the Word of God each time, saying, "It is written" (Matthew 4:1-11). Jesus silenced his own voice so that his Father's Word might be heard.

Heavenly Father, help me to know your Word, that I may speak it whenever I am tempted by the ancient oppressor. In Jesus' name, Amen.

OVERCOMING OUR SIN

Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.
—Romans 12:1

Many Christian parents have taught their children the song “Oh, be careful little eyes what you see.” That’s because little eyes don’t just see another child’s toy; they can lead one to envy what another has. To remind adults about this, Jesus uses the example of a man looking at a woman lustfully.

The Christian tradition has often thought about how we offend God in the ways we use our eyes, hands, feet, and other body parts. The seven deadly sins, for example, are listed as envy, gluttony, greed, lust, pride, sloth, and anger. All of these—and more—play a part in our disobedience to God.

The Christian tradition has also thought about what we can do with our bodies to please God. The seven virtues, in contrast to the deadly sins, are listed as kindness, temperance,

charity, chastity, humility, diligence, and patience. And all of these—along with other good things—play an important role in our walk with God.

Anyone who thinks they can practice such virtues in place of their sins will find that they can’t do it on their own. But because Jesus paid the price of all our sin, the Spirit of God comes into our lives to work in us, making us new. The Spirit gives us the strength to resist sin and to serve God faithfully.

Do you believe this? Ask God’s Spirit to help you today!

I want to live faithfully for you, Lord, but I need the power of your Spirit to focus my eyes, direct my feet, and place my hands where you would have them be. Help me, Lord. In Jesus, Amen.

OBSESSED WITH ENVY

He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat.

—1 Kings 21:4

King Ahab wanted his neighbor's land in order to cultivate vegetables, but Naboth the owner refused the offer. He would not trade or sell his inheritance, the garden God had assigned to his ancestors in the promised land. King Ahab moped, refused food, and retreated to bed.

Envy is a sin of the eyes: another's house, spouse, or salary can become an obsession. Some people have killed in order to get the things they wanted. Ahab's envy sowed a seed that grew into Jezebel's twisted plan, and he went along with it. Envy aims to destroy, and it harms everyone involved.

Seneca, an ancient Roman philosopher said, "No one can have all he wants, but a man can refrain from wanting what he has not, and cheerfully make the best of a bird in the hand."

In Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, the envious eye of the older brother could not bear to look on the joy of his father at welcoming back a wandering son who had returned (Luke 15:28-32). Envy gets in the way of the joy our heavenly Father provides and wants everyone to enjoy.

Jesus' recommendation to pluck out the envious eye may seem severe, but it is not worse than the sickness. It should be the goal of every believer, as we walk with the Lord, that we lose our own vision so that we might see through the eyes of God's grace.

Is that your goal?

Open my eyes, Lord, that I may learn to see with joy the gifts you bestow on my neighbor. Amen.

DOING KINDNESS

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

In Jesus' parable, the good Samaritan showed kindness by placing the needs of another person ahead of his own. It may be better to say he "did a kindness" because kindness is more than an attitude or a feeling. The Samaritan used his hands to soothe wounds, lift the beaten man's body onto his donkey, and pay out hard cash for recuperation at the inn.

Keeping a promise to be kind can be costly, and failing to keep such a promise can be hurtful. A fellow prisoner forgot Joseph's request to be kind to him. We aren't told why he forgot, but the cupbearer's failure to do a kindness left Joseph in prison for two more years.

A Hebrew proverb—"kindness is the beginning and the end of the law"—echoes Psalm 119:149: "Hear my voice in accordance with your love;

preserve my life, LORD, according to your laws." In some versions of the Bible, the word "love" here is translated as "lovingkindness." That's beautiful. Because the Lord is kind, his law gives shape to the way of kindness. Did you notice that the Samaritan's kindness was an example of loving God first and loving his neighbor as himself? That is the heart of God's law.

Doing kindness also plucks out the envious eye, for it sees the neighbor with the eyes of our Lord, who is slow to anger and full of kindness and love.

You have been kind to me, Lord; help me to act in kindness to others. Give me your eyes to see, that my sight may become whole. In Jesus, Amen.

WHAT'S EATING YOU?

"Give us today our daily bread."

—Matthew 6:11

Jesus teaches us to ask God for our daily food—not more, not less. In our culture today, though, we are often tempted to think more about food “whenever I want it” than the food we need to live one day at a time in our service for God.

Gluttony is the sin of inordinate desire, the insatiable desire to please our appetites. Banquets in ancient Rome put gluttony on display: after consuming all kinds of delicacies, guests would induce vomiting so they could eat more. But the rhythm of gorging and purging is unhealthy. A French proverb says, “A glutton digs his own grave with his teeth.”

The inordinate desire for food and drink, writes the novelist Peter De Vries, “is an emotional escape, a sign that something is eating us.” The ordinary desire for daily food is fed by a trust in God’s provisions, not

by dependence on our own remedies. That’s easier said than done, but it’s the point of fasting.

There is a good reason for fasting: our problems began with the desire for forbidden fruit in Eden, fruit that was both pleasing as food and represented power and knowledge. With our teeth we’ve been digging our own graves.

Stewardship of our daily bread is an intimate expression of our resurrection life with the Lord Jesus. Enjoy God’s daily gift of food, but don’t let it eat you.

“For health and strength and daily food, we praise your name, O Lord.” Help us to appreciate your daily provisions and not continually want more. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

HASTE MAKES WASTE

The Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.
—2 Timothy 1:7

Who doesn't feel something for Lamech's unrestrained desire for justice? In the heat of the moment, the desire to avenge a wrong seems right. But experience argues that it will usually be wiser to "Cool it!" and give yourself time to reflect on how you should react.

Self-control, or temperance, bridles our desires and channels them for our own good and the good of our neighbor. The spirit of self-control is a gift of God that brings health to mind and body and rest to the soul. Self-control saves us from being enslaved to our impulsive emotions.

Self-control is not for cowards, Paul tells Timothy, for it takes superhuman strength to deny ourselves. Such strength is available by surrendering to the Spirit of power and to the love God bestows on his disciples through Jesus Christ. God's

power and love begin a life-long fast to our self-centered, out-of-control desires, to temper our souls with the fire of the Holy Spirit.

For all his bravado, Lamech was a weakling because he yielded to his passion for violence: he would avenge himself 77 times, he said, for a neighbor's wrong. Jesus calls us, however, to forgive a person again and again, so often that we couldn't really keep track (see Matthew 18:21-22). And surrendering to his gift of self-control will give us his strength to do that.

Lord, thank you for the strength to surrender my wants to your will. But I know I don't always show self-control. Help me to be strong, in your name. Amen.

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

Godliness with contentment is great gain.

—1 Timothy 6:6

In Jesus' parable, a man receives far more than he needs for his health and well-being. But instead of sharing his abundance with people who don't have enough, he hoards the surplus and plans to take life easy for himself. He thinks only of himself and his own desires.

Greed always wants to gather more than is needed—and it refuses to share.

The greedy one's eyes are bigger than its stomach. Greed, says a Chinese proverb, is like a snake that wants to swallow an elephant. Greed's motto is concise: "Never enough!" Bigger barns and garages and walk-in closets are just the beginning.

Death will stop greed in its path and expose its folly: more is not better. After all, you can't take it with you. Everything we have acquired on earth is useless to us after we're gone. It

is better, says Jesus, to store up treasures that last, that death cannot swallow, that show wisdom toward God.

Greed is a problem of the "self," of what "I" need for the good life. Dying to our "selves" through Jesus is the beginning of wisdom that knows the meaning of "enough." Self-denial in Christ's name leads to the truly good life. Daily surrender to the Lord and his Spirit builds up riches that last. These are riches that lead us to love God above all and our neighbors as ourselves.

Dear Lord, "give me neither poverty nor riches." Help me not to be greedy but to rely on you for what I need, and to share willingly. In Jesus, Amen.

COMPELLED TO LOVE

Christ's love compels us. . . . He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. —2 Corinthians 5:14-15

The use of the word “compel” in connection with loving God and our neighbor may sound strange. How can you compel real love and kindness? Shouldn't it flow naturally?

The Bible often shows that hatred flows naturally from the human heart, and hatred can be as relentless and destructive as a powerful river that flows wherever it wants. The same is true of greed and other selfish desires. Only an outside force—a system of levees or dams—can compel a swollen river to change course to prevent flooding and destruction. But if a levee or a dam breaks, watch out!

Only a supernatural outside force can derail our natural passions. That's why Paul points to the compelling, unconditional love of God in Christ.

God's love doesn't just redirect our natural passions and impulses, it transforms their source: the heart. Just as the widow's empty jar flowed with enough oil to meet all her needs, so Christ's love fills the hearts and lives of those who love and serve him.

When the love of God fills our hearts, it compels us to love as we are loved. And because it leaves no room for hatred or greed, the love of Christ frees us from our selfish desires.

Have you experienced Christ's love? If so, is that love flowing from you to those around you?

Most loving God, author of all love, may we love as you love us. May your love flow through us to a world that desperately needs your love. Amen.

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Do not lust in your heart after her beauty. . . .

—Proverbs 6:25

Not only beauty but also lust is in the eye of the beholder. Wanting to take intimacy from another person can begin with a glance, move on to a conversation, and be followed with a touch. But soon a person can lose control of their senses, and the result is disaster and unhappiness.

Fulfilling sexual desire any way we see fit is destructive for everyone. If your eye wanders, it would be better, says Jesus, to go through life without that offensive eye than to lose your entire life in destruction. This seemingly harsh advice underscores the power of human sexuality, a God-given gift. It gives life but can also destroy it.

Life is God's gift, and human sexuality is the means to bring forth fruit that God desires: intimate marriages and descendants who "call on the name of the Lord" (Genesis 4:26).

But gratifying sexual desire lustfully gets in the way of the coming kingdom of God because it does not seek the righteousness of God. It seeks only to use others in the satisfaction of selfishness, which is soon gone like a mist, leaving us longing for more.

In light of all who have struggled to keep the faith, the author of Hebrews exhorts us who are Christ's disciples and who have not yet finished the race to keep our eyes on Jesus, following the course he marked out for us (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Dear Lord, direct my eyes to look at you, and keep my eyes from lust, that I may love my neighbor as you love me. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

KEEPING IT CLEAN

Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit.
—2 Corinthians 7:1

When we sin, we might try to cover it up, but God knows all about it, so there's no use trying to hide. Cover-up makes for an unhealthy life. Confession is good for the soul.

Anyone who admits to the addictive power of sin also hungers for the cleansing of forgiveness, for the innocence that was, for wholeness of body and soul. And for that we must return home, come back into God's cleansing presence by the grace of Jesus Christ. He was tempted like us, but did not sin. Chastity, like charity, begins at home.

In God's presence we learn that our bodies are temples of the purifying Holy Spirit, who brings the groans of our pressing uncleanness before God's throne. And God says, "You are clean, for Jesus' sake."

Centered in God's forgiving love, we continue to walk with him. We're not innocent of our passions and desires, but we are purified by grace and dazed by amazing forgiveness. We've been cleansed by the work of Jesus, who paid with his life to save us, body and soul.

But work remains, for Lady Folly never stops inviting us to enjoy stolen sweets. She hopes we'll forget that her doors lead to death (Proverbs 9:13-18). She's persistent, but no match for God's cleansing Spirit. Because we are the temple of the Holy Spirit, we can turn away from temptation and continue to be cleansed from every defilement of body and soul.

Create in me, O God,
a clean heart, and may
my spirit and body be at
home with you. Amen.

WHAT COMES BEFORE A FALL?

The Pharisee . . . prayed: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people. . . . I fast twice a week." —Luke 18:11-12

Pride takes many forms—often, sadly, among people who try to serve God, and even if they begin humbly. The road of fasting, for example, is paved with good intentions and littered with broken vows. With a sigh, some promise themselves to try to do better next time. Others, if they have kept their vows, can easily be tempted to feel proud of their success.

Fasting and prayer are resources that help us focus on our need for God's love and mercy; they are not instruments for self-enhancement. Pride in self-denial is self-defeating. In false humility we can become puffed up with pride and even boastful. The Pharisee in Jesus' parable boasted that he was not like "robbers, evil-doers, adulterers—or even like [the] tax collector" nearby. He judged himself as much better than all of these others, and he

was sure that God would reward him.

If we want to boast about anything, says Paul, we should boast in "Jesus Christ, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30). Paul knew about spiritual pride. For a long time he was convinced that he was better than Christ's followers, and he sought to exterminate them (Acts 8:3; 9:1). Spiritual pride so shrinks the soul that it has no room for God's love—or for neighbors.

Dear Lord, free us from our selfish pride, knowing we are lost in sin and powerless to do any good without you. May we boast only in you and in your love and grace for us. Amen.

HUMILITY

He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." —Luke 18:13

Our world is hostile to humility; it sees the humble person as a doormat—someone who stands by quietly while others step all over them. The world would rather have us think more of ourselves.

But we are naturally so selfish that increasing our love of self will leave little room for God, not to mention our neighbor. A life built on self-esteem is lonely. What's more, because humility is often confused with weakness, the lover of self tends not to forgive others.

True humility places all the power of "self" in the service of God and neighbor. Thus God takes hold of Moses' weak tongue and strengthens him to speak boldly and plainly to Pharaoh. And the humble tax collector throws himself on God's grace when he says, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Most important,

the eternal Son of God takes on the form of a humble servant and dies in our place (see Philippians 2:5-11).

Directed by God's love, people who are humble in spirit invest themselves in what the world thinks is weakness. Christ's power strengthens us to love God above all and our neighbors as ourselves. Sharing the good news of God's love and helping others in need, we have "the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:15-16).

The world scorns humility. But Jesus Christ's humility has overcome the world, to the glory of God the Father.

Lord Jesus, may your mind live in us daily so that your love and power will guide us in all we do and say. Amen.

A “WHATEVER” ATTITUDE

“Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance.”
—Matthew 25:29

Today many Christian believers will attend church and hear the good news of the gospel. We acknowledge that even though we don't deserve it, God in his grace has poured out the gift of salvation on us. In response, Christians offer sacrifices of praise. They also ask God to sustain them in their daily walk so that they will not be careless with God's gifts.

Through Joshua God gave Israel the land he had promised to Abraham centuries earlier. And the servant in Jesus' parable had received a gift from his master. These gifts did not come without responsibilities, however. The gift is like a seed that must be cultivated to grow and provide abundance. Joshua and Israel were careless with the Gibeonites' deception. Failing to consult God, they were slothful, like the

servant in Jesus' parable who buried his master's gift.

Careless cultivation of God's gifts prevents the blossoming of the good news of the gospel; spiritual laziness, a “whatever” attitude, makes it difficult to praise God, from whom all blessings flow.

Spending time in worship with God's people is a good opportunity to be surprised again by the good news of the gospel, and to exchange a “whatever” attitude for the deep joy of praise for forgiveness.

Are you praising God today?

Father, forgive us for the carelessness with which we have handled your gifts. Help us to respond in gratitude and praise. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

THE ZEAL OF THE ANT

Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.
—Romans 12:11

You can't stop ants from doing their work. No matter how many times you sweep away the sand they've muscled through the cracks in your driveway, you can do it again tomorrow, and the next day, and the next.

Ants are vocationally fulfilled; like the birds of the air, they do not have a care in the world. God cares for them; all they care about is doing what God made them to do. But God cares for us even more than the ants and the birds. And he equips us, like them, to give our all to do diligently what he has created us to do—to love him above all and our neighbor as ourselves.

With God's help, we can love sincerely, as Paul instructs. We can "hate what is evil; cling to what is good." We can "be devoted to one another in love" and "honor one another"

above ourselves. "Never be lacking in zeal," says Paul, "but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord." Hospitality, patience, sharing with others, living in harmony, and other positive traits are listed as important to a Christian who is trying to serve the Lord. We are also called to live at peace with everyone.

This is a challenging task. It is fulltime work. But God's gifts will simply overwhelm spiritual carelessness because, like the ant, we'll have enough to do from morning till night. And we can do it again the next day, and the next.

Thank you, Lord for equipping us to do your good will all day long, and every day, in Christ's name. Amen.

SIN AT THE DOOR

"In your anger do not sin."

—Ephesians 4:26

Anger is the first recorded deadly sin after Adam and Eve's exile from the Garden of Eden. Because God accepted Abel's sacrifice, Cain became angry and killed his brother. Anger and murder have been sinister cousins ever since. When Cain became angry, God warned him: "Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it." But Cain let his anger rule him, and that led to murder.

Though anger doesn't always lead to murder, it is nonetheless a powerful emotion. Few of us have escaped anger's destructive effects on our self-discipline. Anger shows that hatred of God and neighbor are tightly interwoven.

"In your anger, do not sin." That's easier said than done, even though it's possible to be angry and not sin. When we do become angry, we need to

ask God's help in dealing with it and letting it go. Cain refused God's instruction, opened the door to sin, and killed his brother.

A lifetime of Christian self-discipline knows the truth about the primal sin of anger. But we also know that along with our other sins, our anger was crucified through Christ's death on the cross. And we know that with Christ's help, we can curb and control our anger and seek the higher good of others. Following the Lord's example, we can even forgive.

Lord, forgive me the sin of letting anger affect my actions. Guard me from giving the devil a foothold. May your love fill my life, keeping anger and hatred out. Amen.

HOW LONG, LORD?

You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about.
—James 5:11

Job was tested severely, losing all his children and flocks and herds, and then eventually his health. And yet he did not lose his faith and did not sin against God (see Job 1-2; 42).

If we look at Job's life, we might think he had every right to be angry. Throughout his defense we see some notes of righteous anger against his friends, who spoke unfairly to him. But in all his suffering and complaints, Job did not sin. And yet how long did Job have to wait for God's declaration of righteousness?

In the heat of the moment, anger often wins over patience. Let anger go and you can avoid its terrible consequences. Letting go of anger means releasing your right to be vindicated. God sees all and knows the truth. Not unlike a wild horse that needs training to accept a bridle, the emotional power of unrestrained

anger can be redirected and refocused into God's hands. But how long will God take to make things right?

It's all in the Lord's timing. We will struggle with sin until Christ returns, but in the meantime we will have access to the patience to resist anger and the other deadly sins scratching at our door and seeking a place in our hearts.

Christ has nailed the power of sinful anger to the cross. Persevere in the Lord's steadfast love today, and, in his strength, keep waiting patiently for the Lord.

Lord, "I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation." You are so good to me. Help me to be patient and wait for the good that you have promised. Amen.

TURNING TO JERUSALEM

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.
—Luke 9:51

After three years of teaching and healing to announce the good news of the kingdom of God, Jesus knew that it was time for him to go to Jerusalem. There he would enter the city as the promised Messiah, cleanse the temple, teach the truth about his Father (Luke 19:28-48), be arrested and beaten, die on a cross, and be “taken up to heaven.”

Jesus’ determination to endure all this so focused his journey that not even the inhospitality of a Samaritan village distracted him. When his disciples wanted to make them pay for their insolence, he instead rebuked the disciples and moved along to another village. As he put it, “the Son of Man [had] no place to lay his head.” Jesus knew he had nowhere else to go but to Jerusalem and the cross, and nothing would hinder him.

Because the goal of the Christian life is to crucify our passions with Christ, we need to, with great determination, keep our focus directly on Jesus and seek to follow him.

So let us keep our eyes on him who endured “opposition from sinners,” including the humiliation of refused hospitality. For our sake he even “endured the cross.” Keeping focused on all he has done for us, we will not “grow weary and lose heart.” And, as he has promised, our crucified and risen Lord will be with us every step of the way.

Lord, keep my eyes on Jesus, so that nothing may distract me from following him. Jesus, thank you for paying the price for all my sins on the cross. In your name, Amen.

FIT TO FOLLOW JESUS

"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."
—Luke 9:62

For Jesus, not only the journey required a diligent focus; so did the ultimate goal—a horrible death by crucifixion on a cross. Jesus removed any doubt about the difficulties of the journey by telling someone who wanted to follow him that this meant no rest and no bed. He told someone else that following him meant sacrificing time with his grieving family. Would you follow Jesus under those conditions?

If you're planning a long trip—say, to Prague or Machu Picchu, you're likely to do a lot of advance planning. But if you're willing to pay the price, you go. Grumbling about the cost once you're in the air is pointless. Similarly, it's only natural for Jesus to tell his disciples at the beginning of this journey to Jerusalem what it will cost them.

Of course, it's a high and demanding price—and Jesus makes all the decisions. You don't get to choose accommodations or to take time off for family obligations. You must simply follow Jesus, on his terms.

The cost of following Jesus means dying to our own desires and placing him ahead of everything else: comfort, family, friends, career, ideals—even our life on this earth. Only when we have unburdened ourselves of all earthly concerns will we be fit to follow and serve Jesus.

Thank you, Lord, for detailing the cost of the journey, and for paying the price for us with your own life. Help us to willingly serve you. Amen.

JERUSALEM, KILLER OF PROPHETS

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you . . ."
—Luke 13:34

Jerusalem was supposed to be a place where God gathered the outcasts and healed the brokenhearted, not the center for killing his prophets. It had happened before, and it was happening again (see 2 Chronicles 24:20-21; Jeremiah 26:20-23; Luke 9:9). Ruled by ruthless Herod and governed by the Romans, the city of peace was again an opponent of God's purposes. If it killed the messengers of God, what would it do with the Son of God?

Jerusalem's opposition did not deter Jesus from continuing his journey. He didn't shrink from his calling. He was determined to appear in Jerusalem as the Lord's Messiah. He knew that at the time God had appointed, and not before, he too would be sentenced there to die.

Through his work of salvation and restoration, Jesus will

also return one day with a new Jerusalem that truly gathers God's people, healing the brokenhearted and binding up their wounds. Then there will be no more mourning or crying or pain (Revelation 21:1-4).

Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" (Luke 5:31)—physically, mentally, spiritually. This includes us: we need the healing and saving love of Jesus just as much as all who rejected him in Jerusalem.

He went to Jerusalem, determined to fulfill his mission for the sake of all who would believe. Jesus died for you and me. Do you believe it?

Renew my heart, Lord.
Help me acknowledge my sin, seek forgiveness, and live in the light of your redeeming love. Amen.

JESUS HEARS OUR CRIES

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

—Luke 18:38

When the blind man heard that Jesus of Nazareth was coming, he knew just who this teacher was. In contrast to the people of Jerusalem who had rejected God's prophets, this outcast from Jericho called out to Jesus as the Son of David, the promised Messiah of God's people. Attempts to silence him only increased his resolve. And, having heard his cries, Jesus commanded that the man be brought to him.

Giving sight to the blind is not carpenter's work. Only the Creator who made heaven and earth and rules from Jerusalem can give sight to the blind. By having the blind man brought to him over the objections of many and granting the man's request, Jesus lets everyone know that he *is* the Son of David—that is, the Messiah, the Son of God.

After the man receives his sight, he follows Jesus. He also does what any believer does when heaven comes to earth to heal them: he glorifies and praises God. And no one can stop him. When all the people see what has happened, they praise God too.

Today many who have received new life in Christ will gather together in worship to praise the Son of David, who has heard their cries. Come and join in with heart and voice in praise to the ruling King! Hear the good news proclaimed. Call on Jesus for mercy, that you may be made whole.

Thank you, Lord, for hearing my cry in the midst of opposing voices. In your mercy make me whole and grant me full life with you. Amen.

BLINDNESS IN JERUSALEM

"If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes."

—Luke 19:42

The disciples could not withhold their praise of Jesus as he entered Jerusalem, for they had seen his mighty works. They had heard his amazing teaching and had seen many miracles, from Jesus' walking on water and quieting a storm to his many healings and even raising people from the dead. And as Psalm 122 says, just going to Jerusalem and to seek its peace at the house of the Lord was a reason for praise and joy.

But not everyone saw things the same way. The religious leaders complained about the disciples' raucous praise of Jesus. You'd think these teachers of God's Word would respond to Jesus' work with enthusiasm, as did his disciples and so many others. But they had been looking for a political messiah, so they rejected him—and now the truth that would bring peace was hid-

den from their eyes. Unlike the blind man who received sight, Jerusalem had lost its ability to see.

Blind Jerusalem was looking for the wrong solution to their problems. They weren't looking for someone who would save them from their sins. They wanted someone who would save them from the tyranny of the Romans who ruled over them.

The peace of Jerusalem—and true peace for each of us—can come only from Jesus, the King over all things, who laid down his life so that all who would believe in him could live. Do you believe in him?

I've heard the good news, Lord. Help me to see you clearly each day and believe in you as Savior, Lord, and King. Amen.

A NEW COVENANT

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people. . . ." —Jeremiah 31:31

Jesus instructs his disciples to check with a man in the city about a guest room that can be used for celebrating the Passover. They find things "just as Jesus had told them," and make the Passover preparations there. This is quite a different result from having "no guest room available" on the night Jesus was born (Luke 2:7).

In the large upper room where they have gathered to eat the Passover meal, Jesus tells his disciples that this will be his last supper with them until the kingdom of God comes fully. He then reveals that he will sacrifice his body and pour out his blood. He even invites them to eat with him from a loaf of bread and to share wine from his cup, saying that these represent his body and blood.

Echoing God's promise through the prophet Jeremiah, Jesus declares that his sacrifice will seal

a new covenant, and he asks the disciples to eat and drink in remembrance of him. This new covenant will replace the animal sacrifices that were necessary in the Old Testament, and his death is a sacrifice so strong that anyone who believes that Jesus has given his body and blood for them can depend on him for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Today, whenever we celebrate this supper in memory of Jesus, we are reminded that God has written his law of love on our hearts and "will remember [our] sins no more." In remembrance of him, shall we make room in our hearts for Jesus?

Lord Jesus, help me to remember your sacrifice, today and every day, till you come again. Amen.

SEATED AT JESUS' TABLE

"You may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom. . . ."

—Luke 22:30

Judas sat at the same table as his fellow disciples, ate the same bread, and drank the same wine. He may even have participated in the dispute about who was greatest. We don't know. What we do know is that Judas would leave to betray Jesus and that the other disciples would sit on thrones of judgment.

In his betrayal of Jesus, Judas became great in the eyes of the chief priests and other leaders in Jerusalem (Luke 22:3-6). But the rule of Jerusalem was on the way out.

A new kingdom was emerging, strangely, through Jesus' trials and betrayals. And as the Father had prepared a road of suffering for Jesus, now Jesus gave his followers a similar role in this emerging kingdom.

Like Jesus, the disciples would suffer trials and betrayals. And

this troublesome road of suffering and self-denial, to which Jesus added the assignment to serve others, would end only when the kingdom will come in its fullness. Then all of Jesus' followers will eat and drink at his table in his kingdom. Suffering and denying and fleeing will be no more.

Nor will there be any more betrayal, no more participating in heated discussions and judgments about right and wrong. Rather, God's people will be ruled from a heavenly table over which presides the risen Lord and all whom he has saved to sit with him at that table. What a day that will be!

You are holy, Lord, enthroned on the praises of your people. In you we trust. Amen.

THE BETRAYAL KISS

Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has turned against me.
—Psalm 41:9

Jesus and his disciples left the security of the upper room and walked outside the city to the Mount of Olives. And there, away from the crowds, he was betrayed. A kiss from Judas, one of his own chosen disciples, one who had learned from Jesus for the past few years, betrayed him to the officials who were seeking to destroy him. Jesus confronted Judas with his treason: *Are you going to use the kiss of friendship to hand me over to the powers of darkness?*

A kiss is not a sign of friendship when the one who delivers it is your enemy. Psalm 41 reminds us that false friendship is an ancient problem, especially among brothers: Cain killed Abel, Jacob deceived Esau, and Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery.

The disciples' reaction is understandable: put the opposition

to the sword. But Jesus heals the cut-off ear, salving the wound made by a zealous disciple. In receiving Judas's treasonous kiss, Jesus took on himself all the false friendships that embittered his people. The disloyalty of one who shared his table took him to the cross.

In dark Gethsemane, we see a king we don't expect to see. Instead of a pompous ruler on a throne, we see our suffering Lord, who faces the humiliation of a bitter betrayal.

And we must remember that he suffered all this for you and me so that we might live.

Lord, thank you for enduring all this suffering and death for me. I am eternally grateful. Please help me be faithful, Lord. I pray in your name. Amen.

TRUTH IN JERUSALEM

"Rule in the midst of your enemies!"

—Psalm 110:2

Speaking truth to power is dangerous. You may lose your job, be publicly humiliated, and have your family disgraced. You may even lose your life. That's the way of the world, and, sadly, it is sometimes also the way of God's people. Jesus suffered humiliation and death at the hands of religious leaders who had closed their minds to the truth of God.

The problem was that Jesus had agreed with them. Jesus had said, "The Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God." And they asked, "Are you then the Son of God?" And he said, "You say that I am."

These self-righteous authorities had wanted Jesus himself to say: "Yes, I am the Son of God." But Jesus used his enemies' words against them. In effect, he had them declare in the highest religious court that

he was the Son of God. They'd fallen into the pit they had tried to dig for Jesus. But they still had political power and could try to spin things their own way. So the officials twisted Jesus' words to fit their purposes, and they condemned him to death.

But a word once spoken cannot be recovered. The truth was out. Jesus' opponents are forever remembered as declaring that he had the authority he claimed. And with that authority he proceeded to the cross—to pay for sin once for all.

On this Good Friday, Lord, thank you that not even the most powerful authorities could stamp out the truth of the gospel: that you are Lord. Thank you for dying for me. Amen.

RIGHTEOUSNESS OUTSIDE JERUSALEM

"Surely this was a righteous man."

—Luke 23:47

When Jesus turned his face to Jerusalem in order "to be taken up to heaven" (Luke 9:51), he in effect declared that his death was the planned end of his mission. The rulers in Jerusalem believed that they had gotten rid of a blasphemer and someone who was disrupting the people, but a Roman officer declared what he witnessed: the crucifixion of a righteous man.

Someone who is righteous has the love of God in their heart and shows it by doing what's right. That person's purpose in life is to do the will of the heavenly Father. Jesus accomplished all of that with determination and without sin.

The righteous Christ died on a cross outside Jerusalem to pay for human sin and to give new life to all who believe in him. And all who are made right with God in Christ will

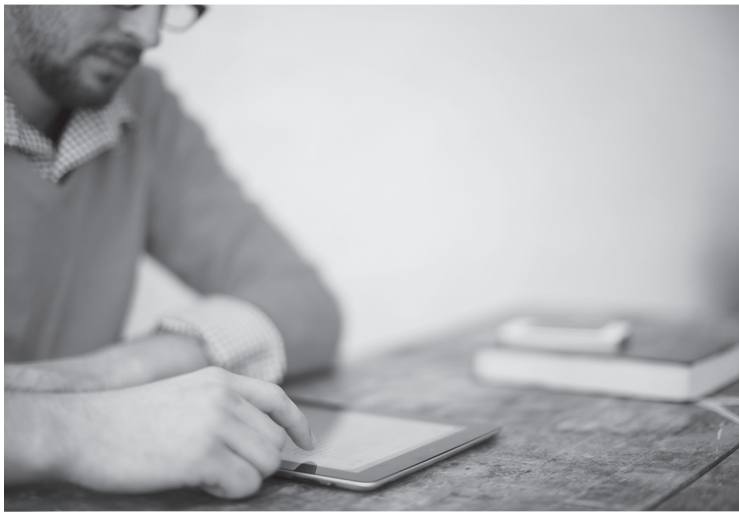
live with him in the presence of God forever, in the new heaven and new earth.

Those who condemned Jesus to be crucified had given false testimony against him. But the officer who had witnessed Jesus' crucifixion praised God when he declared Jesus a righteous man.

Where are you today? If God were to ask you—as he asked Adam in the Garden of Eden—"Where are you?" what would you say?

Are you a follower of Jesus, who was crucified for your sins?

Lord Jesus, thank you for laying down your life for our sake, and thank you for rising from the dead with the promise of new life for us all. May we forever follow you. Amen.



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