



UPSIDE-DOWN KINGDOM

Lenten Devotional 2024

A 40 DAY DEVOTIONAL FOR LENT 2024

Dear Church family,

The devotional booklet you hold in your hands is a tool to help us draw near to Jesus Christ as we prepare ourselves for the joys of Easter. Traditionally, this journey is called Lent, beginning on Ash Wednesday and carrying forward to Easter Sunday. Lent is a forty-day journey, echoing the forty-year journey of Israel to the Promised Land and Jesus' forty days of temptation in the wilderness.

Lent aims to lead us into deeper engagement with God through prayerful reflection and reading of Scripture. In particular Lent focuses on Jesus' path to Jerusalem and the crucifixion, a time when things became real for Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

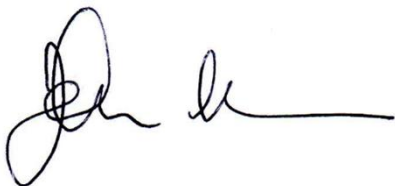
This year, our sermon series on the Sermon on the Mount will last throughout the Lenten season. Beginning in Lent, with its emphasis on Jesus' steady walk toward the Cross, we will carry forward into Easter season, with its emphasis on Jesus' resurrection from death. This echoes two basic points of our discipleship to Jesus: dying to self and rising to new life in Christ.

What does it look like to live the upside-down life with God? There may be numerous answers to that question, but perhaps no portion of the Bible provides a clearer picture of what it means to live upside-down with God than Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7). During our 40 days of reflection, we are invited to focus on different verses in Jesus' sermon alongside other readings that help us focus on the principles taught through Jesus' words.

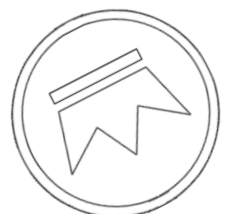
I can think of no more meaningful portion of Scripture to serve as the anchor of our forty-day journey during the season of Lent than Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps now more than ever we understand that living as disciples means living with Christ and in His Kingdom in the face of many other options. Perhaps now more than ever we feel the challenge of our calling to truly live in Jesus' way in the face of many temptations and challenges. May God grow us through this journey together so that we might truly be people of the upside-down Kingdom of Christ.

As we journey together my prayer is that in our choice to encounter Christ each day we won't only read familiar scriptures and move on, but we will take time to stop, reflect, respond and receive fresh revelation from Jesus and the empowerment to be a Kingdom people, living by a different set of values that to the world are upside-down but to living disciples are transformational.

Blessings,



Major John Mclean, MA.
Corps Officer
Bedford Congress Hall
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HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL

By using the '3 Rs' we hope you will be able to use this devotional to dig deeper into God's Word, to apply it to your daily discipleship journey and consider what applications you need to make in your spiritual formation and prayer life.

READ

Sometimes when we don't have a clue what to say to God, it helps to have a Scripture to prompt our words and thoughts. Each day we have provided some Scripture readings to help you focus your thinking with a specific verse to use throughout the day.

REFLECT

To start you off on your thinking process we have added a short devotional thought, which we hope will allow you to begin your daily time with God considering the significance of the reading and space for personal reflection and application.

RESPOND

After reading God's Word, and processing the significance of the reading through reflection, we have given you some guidance for a daily 'action' or starting prayer for the day.

Day One:

Dying to Become

READ

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Matthew 16:24)

REFLECT

As a teenager I had a friend who had a tumour removed from his leg. The growth wasn't cancerous but was interfering with his development of muscles and tendons, especially around his knee joint, and could cause long-term difficulties. I remember him saying that the doctor had said if he wanted to avoid trouble in the future, it would need to be removed through surgery and a long recovery afterwards. As a teen trying to understand the pain my friend was dealing with, I'm happy to say, according to Facebook, that he can easily run and walk without hindrance now even in his forties!

Sometimes things have to come apart before they can be put back together. Sometimes life has to go down before it can go up.

Jesus knows that in a world touched by sin and evil everything is upside-down. What we think is life is often deadly or lifeless. What we think is abundance is often empty. Who has not had the realisation at some point in their life that a pursuit, a relationship, an activity is more of a dead-end than it is a living way forward?

Jesus knows that an upside-down world, with upside-down lives, needs to be put to rights. It is because of that need that Jesus, the one and only Son, came as Messiah from the Father. It is because of this that He will walk steadily toward Jerusalem and the suffering that waits for Him there. It is because of this that Jesus will be crucified and die. It is for this that Jesus will rise victoriously by the Father's will and power.

It is because of this that Jesus invites all who hear Him to become real, fully human, by dying to self in order to live in Him. This calling to take up the cross is not rooted in some perverse love of suffering, but rather in a clear-eyed understanding of the radical change He knows is necessary. Like a surgeon diagnosing the problem and naming the resolution, Jesus calls us to die in order to become real in Him.

We begin our Lenten journey with our eyes also clear through the vision that Jesus gives. May we take up our cross this Lent that we might become even more real because of His transforming truth and grace at work within us.

RESPOND

Father, as I commence this Lenten journey, I pray that you will bring people into my life who will hold me accountable and challenge me when I do not show meekness in my relationships.

Day Two:

Look to the Cross

READ

'Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.' (Matt 10:38-39 – Read Matt 10:32-39)

REFLECT

I remember a gentleman who, when I was youngster, made time every encounter to encourage me. He was especially energetic in his encouraging and would often remind me that God had a plan and purpose for my life and that I just needed to seek out His will and step into it.

Fast forward 4 years and, no longer a school teen, I encountered the gentleman again who clearly recognised me but certainly didn't greet me warmly! Thankfully, the ward sister had warned me that the doctor didn't warm to men working in hospitals and therefore not to take it personally; it comes with the job.

Next time I bumped into the doctor at a Churches Together event, I got the cold shoulder. I resisted the impulse to say to him, 'What is your problem!' because I didn't and still don't know his issues that caused the response and, in any case, I wasn't planning on staying in the hospital job, and not likely to see him again at his day job.

Conflict is a problem, and it is not something we can escape by moving to a new job or town. Life is contentious, and peace at any cost, including at the cost of our integrity, is not the way of the Cross. Jesus wants us to know how much more this will be true when contending for the Faith. Sometimes people are simply not going to like us, or like what we have to say, because of what we believe as Christians.

Certainly, we see this in politics and education, but perhaps all the more among the people we long to be closest to—our families. While some may love to fight, Jesus is not asking us to be obnoxious; He is letting us know that being double-minded and belonging to Him don't go together. We are called to acknowledge Him even when doing so is alienating for us while in this world. No, we should not expect this to be easy. Will we fail? Ask the Apostle Peter.

At this start of Lent, a season in which we give particular attention to examining our hearts and loyalties, let's look to the Cross as our hope and salvation.

RESPOND

In your personal quiet space take time to ask the Holy Spirit to show you areas where you need to become bolder in standing up for the faith that you have. Also spend time confessing for the times it has been 'peace at any cost' when you should have declared Christ.

Day Three:

Necessary Food

READ

'I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you cannot have eternal life within you... For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.' (John 6:53,55 – Read John 6:52-69)

REFLECT

For many of us, John 6 is well known for the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, Jesus' walking on the Sea of Galilee and His familiar declaration, 'I am the bread of life.' Today's Scripture reading, however, brings into focus a passage we perhaps skip over or completely avoid because, well, it's hard to swallow.

The claims Jesus makes in the previous verses (V.35-59) are startling, even offensive to His followers, to the extent that some of them turn away in shocked rejection while others draw near with awe and renewed faith.

Feast on me, Jesus invites His followers. To eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood is to be united with Jesus Christ, as intimately as the food and drink we consume and digest. He is our real food, our real drink, our lasting nourishment. To convey how life-giving and necessary this union is, Jesus compares it to His own relationship with His Father: I live because of the Father.

Likewise, eternal, and abundant life for us can only be found in Jesus. It is a union made possible through the Holy Spirit and granted by the Father. How will we respond? Will we turn away and reject Jesus and His words? We may be quick to say, 'That's an interesting perspective, Jesus, but I know where to find food and drink elsewhere.'

How prone we are to consider Jesus as our Sunday meal, pursuing our weekday satisfaction in other places, in other people, in ourselves. Jesus turns to face His small group of followers and asks; do you want to go away as well?

We can trust that Jesus will never water down or retract what He says. His words cut to the heart of the matter, and they are true. With confidence and childlike trust, Peter responds, "to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

In Jesus, he has found his master, his friend, his Lord and Saviour...his life. May Jesus receive our 'yes' as well, for truly He is the living bread that came down from heaven.

RESPOND

Jesus, so often we look to the world to find our significance and purpose. We focus our attention to other's opinions and 'drink and eat' the unhealthy fast-food responses rather than receiving the necessary food from you. Show me this day who I am in you.

Day Four:

The way down is the way up!

READ

'Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'" (Matt 5:10)

REFLECT

Over the past few years life for most has been challenging. Alongside navigating the pandemic, we have had to face change at a speed we wouldn't have expected. I read recently that university students have had one of the biggest challenges as they are the generation that missed formal exams and now need to learn how to engage in the exam room. Reading these familiar words from Jesus that begin the Sermon on the Mount are like a balm for my soul.

Rather than blessing great deeds and kind words, Jesus proclaims eight blessings over kingdom people that seem to be a sort of progression downward. To start, these kingdom people are 'poor in spirit', but in the next verse they are actually 'mourning'. Their mourning results in 'meekness', which leads them to 'hunger and thirst for righteousness'. After hungering and thirsting for righteousness, they are filled with 'mercy' (makes sense!), which makes them 'pure in heart'. Eventually their journey takes them from a change of mindset and heart into action: they take up the hard work of 'peace-making'. But the tenderised, transformed, humbled peacemaker isn't the end goal of being a kingdom person. Jesus goes on to bless those who are actually 'persecuted because of righteousness', those who are insulted and slandered for their faith. Jesus is laying out a new ethic here that is one in which the way down is the way up; the blessings flow as we allow the Holy Spirit to tenderise our lives through pain, hardship, and persecution.

I think what this means for us today is that the painful seasons of growth, silence, death, mourning, and challenge are actually an opportunity to walk the path of sanctification; to take the next step. As we allow life circumstances and the work of the Holy Spirit to humble us, we are walking the path of Christ and becoming kingdom people. Humility is the pathway to glory in Jesus' kingdom; hardship like we have experienced in recent years can tenderise and prune us into more sensitive people who are blessed: the way down is the way up.

RESPOND

Jesus, show me where you have been at work in my life in the hard times. Remind me of your goodness and faithfulness, even when I have struggled to see it.

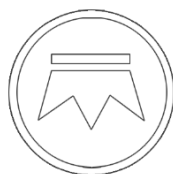
Weekend 1:

Jesus calls us to **RADICAL** Change

Over the course of the last few days, we have been reading challenging words from Jesus: *'take up your cross, deny yourself, follow me, I did not come to bring peace but a sword, eat my flesh and drink my blood.'*

These last three days have reminded us that Jesus calls us to radical change. Take a moment to look at the cover of this devotional booklet. You will see a very small pilgrim mirrored above, climbing a hill, journeying upwards. But the peaks and valleys depicted here reflect that the journey of faith is not linear. We are reminded that as followers of Jesus we are invited to live by upside-down Kingdom values unfamiliar to the world.

What does this bring to mind from your own life of faith? Where are you in your journey with Jesus right now? What is He calling you to do in response to this week's readings?



Day Five:

Rediscovering Real

READ

'You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.'

(Phil 2:5 – Read Phil 2:5-11)

REFLECT

I wonder if you wore a WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) band in the 1990s. It served to remind Christians that they are called to live like Jesus in everyday life. Did you know that this same phrase was used in the late 1800's? Yes! It was used by Charles Sheldon who wrote, *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* The novel depicts an encounter with a homeless man who hears people singing inside a church, 'All for Jesus...all my thoughts, all my doings, all my days and all my hours.' He imagines how different the troubled world would be if the people singing were motivated to live out the song lyrics.

Back in 55 AD, Paul pointed to what (or who) is our motivation for real life! It's Jesus! He is our divine example, our moral compass, the One who inspires every believer to surrender all that we are, all that we have, for God's divine purposes.

If the song of salvation is truly in our hearts, our worship will be real worship that extends beyond the brick and mortar of a church. So, is my real identity in the name of Jesus, or am I lost in trying to make a name for myself? Have I been set free by the truth that is in Jesus or am I still imprisoned by lies? (Self-absorption, self-preservation and self-interest...)

In other words, if Christianity was a crime would there be enough evidence in my life to convict me? Has knowing Jesus transformed the way that I live in my daily life? Are my daily choices portraying the humility of Christ or a self-absorbed person? Is my life displaying the wardrobe of Christ, adorned by compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience or am I modelling self-righteousness? Have I surrendered all that I am, all that I have to God, for His purposes, or does pride, privilege or politics still have a hold on me?

Rediscovering life calls me to put off the old self which is corrupted and to put on the new self that is mine in Christ! Rediscovering life frees me to live as God's servant, just like Jesus, the Son of God. Rediscovering life empowers me to not only sing on Sundays but to actually live out the worship song lyrics, so that my lives exalt the Name of Jesus and bring glory to God.

RESPOND

Ask God to show you the areas of your life that do not display the character of Jesus in your daily walk. Take time to reflect on the life you are invited to live in Christ.

Day Six:

Responding to the 'Required'

READ

'And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.' (Micah 6:8)

REFLECT

Over the years God has given me opportunity to engage with different people in different contexts. Serving others has opened my heart to God's love for those who have messed up, His love for the last, the least and the lost and He has allowed me to preach, lead Bible studies, and do one-on-one support with people others would shy away from. It has enriched my life and Christian experience.

As part of serving others, whether it has been in schools or institutions I have had to meet the requirements before being allowed access. I have had to fill in volunteer applications, submit a DBS, have a discussion with the chaplain or school headteacher before being allowed to engage with the people group. Requirements must be met.

In our reading today, the Old Testament prophet, Micah, asks questions about the requirements to be met by the people of Israel in order to live lives which are God-honouring. His question is birthed out of his deep concern for the poor, marginalised, and often forgotten ones in Israel 700+ years before the life of Jesus. Justice, mercy, and humility are the requirements, not burnt offerings, not offering one's firstborn, not perfunctory activities performed to fulfil the law's requirements. The LORD looks for actions that flow from the heart.

Centuries later, Jesus underscores this in the Beatitudes as He reminds His audience that blessing flows out of an individual's compassionate consideration for those in need of God's kindness and goodness. 'Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy' (Matt 5:7). Daily acts of extending mercy (Greek: *eleos* - mercy) to others is a requirement for us as Christ-followers in order for us to fully taste God's daily mercy in our lives.

This is normal Christian life stuff—not simply required of those who serve the poor in far-off lands or destitute areas in our own nation. So, what does God require, ask of us? Mercy.

'If grace contemplates humans as sinful, guilty and condemned, mercy sees them as miserable and needy.' (Millard Erickson)

RESPOND

Jesus, help me see others as you see them... Break my heart and understanding with what breaks your heart...

Day Seven:

Be Blessed

READ

'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.' (Matt 5:8)

REFLECT

One of my friends ends our conversations and emails with the words 'Be Blessed!' After each engagement I am always challenged as my friend has faced much pain, sadness and challenge in his life, yet he is the one who celebrates the blessing of God on his life.

We are blessed. It has always been the plan of God to bless all the peoples of the world. Even when Adam and Eve sinned, and life and death was introduced into the world, God was committed to find a way to bring us back to Himself, the Source of true life. He would do this through Jesus Christ, the Seed of Abraham (Gen 12:1-3). Psalm 24 complements the beatitudes in Matt 5 because it shows us how we can be blessed with true life in Jesus.

In Psalm 24:4 we read, *'The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god. They will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from God their Saviour.'* This is very similar to Matt 5:8.

As King David mentions in Psalm 24, and King Jesus expounds on in Matt 5, we receive the blessing of God when we have a pure heart. However, the fact is that no one has a pure heart, but for the saving work of the Holy Spirit. That is exactly the point. To be blessed and enjoy real life with God in His kingdom where Jesus is King, we must be poor in spirit (Matt 5:4), acknowledging that we have nothing without God. That is where Jesus takes over. He cleanses us with His precious blood (1 John 1:7), adopts us into His family (John 1:12), and ushers us into God's kingdom that is boundless, limitless, unending in its spiritual blessings in Jesus Christ (Eph 1:3).

It is fitting therefore that having received God's blessings; we lift up the gates of our heart that the King of Glory may come in. *Who is this King? Who is He, this King of glory? The LORD Almighty—He is the King of glory.* (Psalm 24:9-10). Yes, Jesus is the King of glory. He blesses us with true life and the ability to have a pure heart. Praise be His holy name forever and BE BLESSED!

RESPOND

Take some time today to give thanks to God for the true life you find in Christ Jesus.

Day Eight: *Devoted in Love, Faithful in Prayer*

READ

'Love each other with genuine affection... Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble and keep on praying.' (Rom 12:10,12 – Read Rom 12:9-21)

REFLECT

I recently read the story by a pastor who was reflecting after a thirteen-year estrangement with his father. Five months later his father was diagnosed with advanced cancer, and passed away during the Covid pandemic whilst he was with him. Within the space of those two sentences lies a story of one of the most miraculous gifts of the Christian life, an experience that shows us what it means to 'love each other with genuine affection' (Rom12:10) The pastor goes on to share his experience,

*'It was a time when every task and effort was in service not just to my dad's care, but to the clarity that God provided for me the day he was diagnosed. The message was clear and unequivocal: Show up. Say yes. Keep your eyes on God. I started traveling to Oklahoma to be with my dad nearly every month after that, where I spent my time doing whatever needed to be done. Helping my dad hang pictures and driving him to chemo appointments shifted to managing meetings with hospice nurses, which then gave way to the task of keeping him as comfortable as possible. Some days that was about dabbing his forehead with a tissue when he became feverish. One night it was about driving to the local shop for help his craving for a cold lemon slush puppy. It didn't much matter to me where and how I was called to be of service; what mattered was knowing that everywhere I went—I was not alone. Even as I slept in my dad's guest bedroom, I knew God was with me.'*¹

The pastor's testimony of one of the most difficult times in his life invites us to focus our prayers and thinking in how we love and pray. I wonder if we started each morning and ended each day on our knees with the Lord's Prayer, knowing that by being faithful in prayer (Romans 12:12) our focus would stay on Christ's love for us and by focussing on Christ's love for us we would be able to extend that love to those we are invited to serve and care for.

In the upside-down Kingdom we are invited to let go of past hurts and focus on what could be. In Christ Jesus our experienced love empowers us to express His love to those with whom we have struggled. May we choose this day to devote our lives in love and be faithful in prayer.

RESPOND

Jesus help me to love and let go and to faithfully pray through the difficult relationships I find myself in.

1. Christine Davanzo – Finding Forgiveness and Hope

Day Nine:

Unity in His Community

READ

'Search me O God and know my heart; try me and know my thoughts. See if there be any wicked way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.'

(Ps 139:23-24 – Read Ephesians 4:1-7)

REFLECT

Lent is a time of soul searching. As I walk with Jesus through the final weeks of His life on earth, I ask myself, 'Is my life what He desires it to be?' Jesus knew the Cross was the key plan to restore life on earth. He lived in constant communication with His Father. His love for me and the salvation of mankind propelled Him forward. He laid down His life so I could live with Him. How do I respond to such a sacrificial love?

Paul writes, *'Live a life worthy of the calling you have received.'* Love Him the way He loves you. Let Him use the life He has given His all for. Love is a commitment: I am yours and you are mine. It calls for a lifestyle of submission: I want what you want. *'Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.'* There is nothing more important in my life than Him. He's given us His Word, constant open access to Him, and His Spirit to live in us and empower us. Am I utilising these treasures? *'Be completely humble.'* I can't do anything for Him in my strength, I must come to Him to receive the power to do anything. *'Be gentle, patient, bearing with each other in love.'*

These qualities build a secure community. Everyone is equally important and valuable; we need each other. There is no room for pride or competition. We need the Holy Spirit to make us humble, gentle, patient and loving. It is counter-cultural.

We have learned to look out for ourselves; we value independence, strength, competence, and winners. God has to put those values to death and remake our minds to see our need for unity, the strong with the weak, the rich with the poor, the old with the young. We need each other, like the organs in our body, we need to work together.

'Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.' How am I growing here? All other important issues of our day must fall away for the sake of unity in the Spirit. Unity is the goal of God for His church: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father—over all, through all, and in all. That's a lot of oneness.

His grace has been given to us to accomplish this. By His grace I want to live a life worthy of His calling.

RESPOND

Ask God to show you how to live a life worthy of the calling within His community.

Day Ten:

Flavour & Flash

READ

'You are the salt of the earth. But what good is salt if it has lost its flavour? Can you make it salty again? It will be thrown out and trampled underfoot as worthless.' (Matt 5:13)

REFLECT

Bland food and dimmed lighting are never tasteful or helpful. We have all experienced food that had no flavour and struggled to walk up a path because of the lack of light and direction.

Jesus called His disciples to their identity in God. They experienced God's power and love in Jesus' teaching, ministry, and fellowship. God's covenant with His people was being fulfilled in Jesus, and His kingdom was breaking in! The contrast between God's blessed kingdom and the sinful, wounded world was great. God's righteousness was offensive to the ways of the world and would bring them persecution. Yet this high calling was reason to rejoice! Jesus called His disciples salt and light. Salt was for preserving and flavouring and in Jesus they had new life. His light was to shine in the world through them. They were to carry the work of Jesus to a world in need of deliverance from the spiritual darkness of sin and death.

The high calling of Jesus continues for all members of the Body of Christ to be salt and light. We believe in Jesus and His sacrificial death and resurrection, and God's kingdom has come into our hearts. In our new and eternal life in Jesus, the Holy Spirit works in our confession and repentance of sin, forgiveness, and restoration. Jesus is with us as we meditate on God's Word, pray, trust, and obey God's will, gather, and serve together, and grow in His love and goodness. Rejoicing in God's presence, we are present in the world to bear good fruit in all we do. In humility we influence others with the mercy, grace, truth, and love of Jesus and are His life preserving and illuminating presence in the world.

Jesus warns His followers of 'salt that loses its saltiness.' If we live in sinful ways, we will be ineffective and trampled on. We are not to be proud, false, hypocritical, or self-centred. Instead, when we humbly acknowledge our weakness to God, He transforms and gifts us to bear His image and share His Good News with joy and hope. God brings us to greater glory as we worship Him with renewed hearts and minds. When people see Jesus in our lives as we follow Him, they are drawn to our Heavenly Father and praise Him!

RESPOND

Take time to ask our Father to show you where you need to be more flavoured in your faith and witness.

Weekend 2:

Jesus' **BLESSING**

Is accessible to you

This week, we have been studying the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, as well as other Old and New Testament passages that support these passages. The beatitudes reveal that being blessed with the good life with God is accessible to us through Jesus Christ.

What stood out to you as you read, studied, and prayed this week? Was it the blessings of Matthew 5? The call to real life from Philippians 2? The challenge of humility and mercy from Micah 6? The promise of blessing from Psalm 24? The call to devotion, love, and prayer from Romans 12? The appeal for oneness from Ephesians 4? Take a little more time to consider what God is speaking to you this week.



Day Eleven:

Becoming

READ

'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' (2 Cor 5:21 – Read 2 Cor 5:16-21)

REFLECT

I remember at a minister's breakfast in a previous appointment having the discussion regarding translations of the Bible. I think I caused shock with the firm evangelicals when I said that in my preparation, I always love looking at different translations of God's Word. I often search out words or phrases, letting the Word teach me the Word. I'm not one to read too many commentaries, rich as they are. I prefer to search out gems as the Holy Spirit guides me. So in reading 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, I ventured into personalising it as though God were speaking right to me...

'So now, I don't regard anyone from a worldly point of view, although I used to! I also thought of Jesus Christ that way, distant, for 'others' and not me because of my sinful lifestyle. BUT GOD opened my eyes, redirected my path, reached down, and pulled me out of my wayward and blind life! I no longer viewed Jesus Christ the old way—I was made new, becoming a new creation! My heart, eyes, whole being were gone, and I became an eye-opened, heart pumping new person. I was so aware of God's cleansing of my old self, becoming a new creation, that I couldn't help but share it with everyone.

I know that all of this is from God, who showed me the lengths He went to save me...that in sending Jesus He was reconciling me to Him—the whole world even! And He didn't count my sins against me. So now, He's made me an ambassador of reconciliation. It is my privilege and OBLIGATION to tell others about this great mystery of which I now know and believe...'

In officership ministry we often get the honour of meeting Christians from all over the world. Some 'salty' in the sense that their lives are making a difference in the flavour of their culture. Others are beacons of light. Their examples spur me on. My prayer is that my life too would bring flavour and light to the little corner of the world I serve.

RESPOND

Jesus, I thank you that I read your Word not as a historical document but as the Living Word that can transform me in character and invites me to be an agent of transformation in my world.

Day Twelve:

No more Excuses

READ

'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' (2 Cor 5:21 – Read Luke 12:8-12)

REFLECT

Before entering ministry, I remember asking God to give me opportunities to share my testimony with friends and every opportunity He gave I chose to change the conversation to something more superficial.

I used to read Exodus 3 & 4 and get so mad at Moses. I mean, here he is in conversation with God via the burning bush and God is giving him clear instructions on a job He has for him. But all Moses does is try to get out of it: 'Who am I that I should go?' 'What can I say to them?' 'What if they don't believe me?' And my favourite, 'But I don't talk good!' Excuse after excuse after excuse.

I mean, if I had been God, I probably would have made the fire shoot out and give Moses a little burn just to get him to stop!

I then think about myself. I know I am called to be an 'ambassador' for Christ, a witness if you will. But how often do I hesitate and make excuses? *'I need to build a better relationship with them first, I don't want to scare them away. I don't know where they're coming from, I should probably know more about them so that I can be more intentional with what I say. I don't have the right Bible verses memorised for this situation.'* Excuse after excuse after excuse. Sound familiar?

Our verses today tell us that we should expect to have opportunities to be witnesses for Christ that we're not 'prepared' for, but that what we're expected to do is be faithful and honest. To be true to who we are and to be willing to simply say, 'I am a follower of Christ.'

And like God said to Moses in Ex 4:12, 'Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.' In Luke 12:12, Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit will help us know what to say when we need words of Truth to share.

RESPOND

Spend time praying for those in your life and influence who are not-yet-Christians. Pray for confidence to share your story of transformation with friends and family.

Day Thirteen:

...Wait?

READ

'Jesus commanded them, "Do not leave Jerusalem until the Father sends you the gift he promised, as I told you before..."' (Acts 1:4 – Read Acts 1:4-8)

REFLECT

Christ gives them the command to wait. We need to be obedient to His perfect timing and plan regarding the 'when, the where, and the how' of fulfilling His good work: not our natural understanding.

How did the Apostles feel about this? Remember that after His crucifixion they were dispirited, they went into hiding and didn't know what to do.

Then imagine them as they got to spend 40 amazing days with the Risen Christ. They were ready to GO! ...and He says to wait!

Do we think that they knew what they were waiting for? Did they understand? Even then they were still thinking in terms of an earthly, political kingdom. Christ gently rebukes them and implies that much more is coming.

Matthew 5:12-16 shows us how God esteems us when we are obedient to His commands: 'salt and light', 'my witnesses' (to everywhere). The disciples were able to be effective in doing the LORD's work only after the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

It's clear that they would have caused harm if they had charged ahead on their own. It's clear that only after we can see ourselves as the LORD does that we see ourselves as we really are. Only then, led by The Holy Spirit, can we encourage and witness however, wherever and whenever He leads.

We all are magnificently blessed to be a part of working out His plan for the salvation of the world. It's in understanding that while His plans will be accomplished, our part begins when we accept His vision for our lives: we choose to become His. He is truth; therefore, any understanding of the reality of His plan that is based on our own understanding is false and just won't work.

The disciples' obedience by waiting in Jerusalem enabled them to 'become real...witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth.'

At various stages in our work as followers of Jesus, we prayed for the LORD to show us His plan, to give us His heart for His plan and then to make us obedient. The LORD has never failed to delight us as His better plans have unfolded during our walk: wherever, whenever and with whomever He wished.

RESPOND

Pray for a fresh infilling of the Holy Spirit in this Lenten season.

Day Fourteen:

Commissioned

READ

'Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations..."'

(Acts 28:18-19)

REFLECT

We will all remember where we were last year (2023) when the King was crowned at his coronation. Having made scones and bought 'posh' jam we sat watching the rich and famous enter the abbey. It isn't like the election of a new Prime Minister or government but it was a deeply emotional experience for most as we watched and witnessed an event that we might only see once in our lifetimes. There was something so awe-inspiring about seeing someone take on such a deep commitment to so many people from so many backgrounds. I was amazed that anyone could or would want such a job.

Matthew 28:16-20 is an extremely important passage of Scripture, because we receive our commission from the King of kings and Lord of lords. Jesus has risen and has met the disciples. The moment is awe-inspiring because what few could comprehend had indeed happened as Jesus told them. The disciples were given the commission to go and tell everyone about the precious gift of a relationship with Jesus; to offer them the free gift of salvation that was given to us by the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. They were to go to all nations because this was not a race or culturally exclusive gift. This gift was and is for anyone willing to receive it.

One thing that we hear from every Prime Minister and government that has been elected is their desire to do what they feel is best for our nation. This is a huge burden and undertaking, because as human beings, we are limited in our ability to do what is best for all. However, Jesus is able! Let us remember the great commission that was given by the Almighty. Let us proclaim the goodness and the gift of Jesus Christ that was freely given. This gift is a unifier and the only thing that draws us together as a people. The Word of God can and will break down the walls that have been built up in the hearts and minds of people. I am thankful that no matter where God places me I am able to walk in the commission that He has proclaimed. We are blessed that God has given His Holy Spirit to help us accomplish this great task.

God has already laid out the blueprint for what our country and world needs, let us refocus our attention to doing the job He commissioned us to do.

RESPOND

Prayer pondering points:

- Which part of the great commission is most intimidating to you? How does His promise to be with you reassure you of this call?

Day Fifteen:

For the Master

READ

'You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden.'
(Matt 5:14 – Read Col 4:1-6)

REFLECT

Whether we are employers or not, all believers also have a Master in heaven. The word 'Master' can be substituted with the word 'Lord' and refers to someone supreme in authority.

As followers of Jesus and ones who are resolved to learn at His feet, we must remember that He submitted Himself to His Father. He did not do His own will but the will of the One who sent Him (John 6:38). As Christians, we know Jesus is watching and we are accountable to Him.

Be prayerful. Be watchful. Be thankful. Be wise. Make the most of opportunities. Speak with grace and salt... All qualities which should characterise our lives as disciples. After all, a disciple should be like his lord and a slave like his master. If we consistently did the will of the Master, we would be like a shining city set on a hill. Our light would be visible for all to see. (Matt 5:14)

Was Jesus prayerful? Watchful? Thankful? Wise? Did He make the most of opportunities? Speak with grace and salt? $\sqrt{-\sqrt{-\sqrt{-}}}$ He was and yes, He did all this and more.

There is a watching and waiting world out there. For those who have no idea who the God of the Bible is or who grew up with a skewed view of Him, we may be the first or only true representative of Jesus they encounter. Will they be able to see Christ in us, or are we so full of ourselves or so much like the world that there is no room for Christ to shine through?

Lent is a time for sober reflection—for abstaining from the usual routine to free up room for spiritual contemplation and growth. It can be a time of pruning and recalibration if we are willing. As we ponder Christ's journey to the Cross in submission to His Master and Father's will, we can once again pledge ourselves to be faithful disciples of Jesus.

What is inside of a vessel is what shines through and what spills out when full. You do not find oranges growing on pepper plants or get milk from a chicken (compare with Matt 7:16-18). People see who you really are from your words and your actions. Let us resolve to be faithful disciples of Christ who bring glory to our Master in word and deed.

RESPOND

As you pray today, light a tealight and use it as a focus as you consider your witness in the workplace and playground.

Day Sixteen:

Greater Grace

READ

'Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose...' (Matt 5:17-20 – Read Eph 2:4-10)

REFLECT

At first glance there seems to be two responses to this passage: 1. Strive toward the impossible goal of perfection in our own broken humanness or 2. Throw up our hands in total despair at the impossibility of ever perfectly following the Law in our own strength. Neither option seems an option. In searching our own hearts and memories, each of us knows the many times we have failed, have come up short, have ended up right back where we had resolved we would never go again.

Fortunately, the Lord in His wisdom, love, mercy, and grace knew that left on our own, we were utterly hopeless.

'But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages He might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.' (Eph 2:4-10)

Praise God—for this is our hope! The impossible task of fulfilling the Law to completion was never meant to be shouldered by us. We cannot and will not ever rescue ourselves from our sin. No one can ever BE good enough or DO good enough. It is only through our faith in Christ that we are saved, and even our very faith is a freely given gift from a merciful and kind God. May we live in the freedom from perfection and performance, knowing that Christ has done it all out of his great love for us and offer Him our days out of gratitude and gratefulness.

RESPOND

Take some time in prayer to rest from striving for perfection and instead move back in confidence of God's grace.

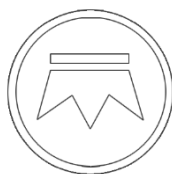
Weekend 3:

Jesus followers

are to be

SALT & LIGHT

What challenged you this week? Did anything encourage you? Is there any action that you are called to do as a result of what you have learned and read?



Day Seventeen:

Go and Be Reconciled

READ

'...Go and be reconciled to that person...' (Matt 5:24b – Read Matt 5:21-26)

REFLECT

Every culture has strengths and weaknesses that reveal themselves over time. Even within a Christian community this is the case. One shock I found happened a few years ago when my life got very messy. I remember the phone call from a fellow church leader who appeared to gloat that my life was a mess. The words, 'well I hoped things would fall apart because your ministry was very fruitful.' It was at that point I realised that we all can gather and hold grudges and issues with others.

In Matt 5:21-26, Jesus talks about fulfilling the law by examining the heart behind behaviour. The Mosaic law said do not murder; Jesus tells us that holding anger, insulting, and cursing are all on the same spectrum as murder, and all are worthy of judgment. Real righteousness requires us not merely to restrain our violent behaviour, but also to resolve our lingering anger and grudges against other Christians.

So, what steps can we take when we are offended by another, and we find ourselves nursing a grudge in our hearts? Or when we understand that another is offended by something we have done? Jesus tells us to take rapid initiative to seek reconciliation and peace with the other. Do not delay. Seek them out. Apologise; that is, admit fault and express remorse. This takes priority over routine religious practices. Do your best to settle the matter in the relationship, before going to authorities. Because if authorities become involved, the penalty is more serious.

My experience is that none of these steps come naturally. Our hearts are deeply self-centred, easily offended, and desperate to avoid pain and shame. The unnatural work of remaking our hearts requires the supernatural work of God's Spirit.

RESPOND

Today, what relationship do you need to mend? What grudges are you still nursing? What self-concern keeps you from seeking the best for others? Act today to seek reconciliation.

Day Eighteen:

Life Fruit

READ

'Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.' (Matt 10:38-39 – Read Matt 10:32-39)

REFLECT

Take a moment to slowly read the passage today. What feelings or thoughts come to you as you read it? Do you find yourself skimming through it? Or, does it stir a sense of obligation or even guilt?

It is quite the heavy teaching. For me, this passage has been poorly used by myself and others to instill a sense of religious ambition and legalism. We can get laser-focused on Jesus's example of cutting off a hand or poking an eye out. We focus on how corrupt our hearts are, and how much we must conquer this corruption through making rules and restrictions.

Let's take a step back from that for a moment and pause to journey back to the Garden. Remember the image we're given in the Garden? Two trees, two choices: the choice to eat of the tree of Life or eat of the tree of Death.

As we read Matthew 5, we need to remember who is speaking: Jesus Himself. We need to keep the Garden in our mind here. We need to remember that Jesus never left the Garden. He has enjoyed complete fellowship with God since before time began. He only knows the fruit of the tree of Life, and the wholeness that comes with being in complete relationship with God. To Him, that wholeness is so fulfilling, so wonderful, that it far outweighs any temptation to wander off. If we're fortunate, we get to experience a glimpse of this in our own lives, friendships, families, and marriages.

I think of the deepest relationships in my life. The ones that have been with me through all the twists and turns of life. Our relationships have grown so deep through the years, the thought of ever hurting them or betraying them doesn't even come to mind. It isn't even a fleeting thought. Because I am bound to them in love. What if we chose to pursue the fruit of the tree of Life, and let go of the religious burdens we can lay on ourselves and others?

Let's also think of our friends struggling with lust or hurting from a divorce. This passage can be a particularly heavy burden for them to carry. If either of those are true of you, I'd encourage you to return to the start of Matthew 5 and reflect on the Beatitudes. Does Jesus say, 'Blessed are the fervent religious ones?' No. His message is far different. Let us rest on that truth, seek the fruit of the tree of Life, and the deep healing only found in Christ.

RESPOND

Re-read Matt 5 focusing on the fact that in Christ to be broken is to be healed.



Day Nineteen:

Real Righteousness

READ

'Just say a simple, 'Yes, I will,' or 'No, I won't.' Anything beyond this is from the evil one.' (Matt 5:37 – Read Matt 5:33-37)

REFLECT

As I read the verses in Matthew, I am reminded of the games we would play with the truth when we were kids. You probably know what I'm talking about. When we were children, we learned that if we would embellish our promises ('cross my heart and hope to die...' or 'I pinkie promise...') then we were far more likely to get people to trust us. I mean, obviously we really meant it if we were willing to pinkie promise! Unless we had our fingers crossed. Or legs crossed. Or eyes crossed. Then of course any promises made were void.

Good thing all that stops when we're kids, right?

In our verses today, Jesus is pointing to the issue of our character, our integrity. Are we people of our word, that is, will we do what we've said we'll do? Would people in our life trust us with their needs, their secret, with their burden?

The man or woman who strives to be that kind of person, who feels confident that most people do think of them in those terms, that person has no need to say anything but 'yes' or 'no'... 'their sober words should be as sacred as their solemn oaths'. The people around should be able to say, 'If he/she said yes, then they do it', or 'if they said no, then I believe them. It wasn't their fault.'

As Christians, we should have a reputation for being honest and dependable. Jesus says we should keep things simple. Yes or no. And then follow through. Tell the truth. Keep our promises. Do what we say we are going to do. Don't use our promises to manipulate others. Live with integrity. Real righteousness doesn't have to convince someone with flowery words, it is words backed up by consistent actions.

RESPOND

Prayer points to ponder:

What situations do you face where you are most tempted to not follow through on a promise or expectation? How can you lessen these opportunities and increase your ability to let your yes be yes and your no be no?

Day Twenty:

Grow Up

READ

'You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also.'

(Matt 5:38-39 – Read Matt 5:38-48)

REFLECT

Read today's passage in The Message paraphrase to hear Jesus' words afresh:

'Here's another old saying that deserves a second look: 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.' Is that going to get us anywhere? Here's what I propose: 'Don't hit back at all.' If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, gift-wrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.

You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the supple moves of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.

In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.' (Matt 5:38-48, The Message)

Russian author Leo Tolstoy was deeply impacted by the words of Christ in this passage. In his book, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, which was largely influenced by the Sermon on the Mount, Tolstoy wrote: 'Accept the teaching of Christ as it is, clear and simple; then you will see that we live among the big lies.' Tolstoy's writing was deeply influential even with non-Christians, leading Mahatma Gandhi to read the Sermon on the Mount. Gandhi later wrote: 'It is a first-class human tragedy that people of the earth who claim to believe in the message of Jesus, whom they describe as the Prince of Peace, show little of that belief in actual practice.'

RESPOND

Using the news pray for the difficulties in the world, asking God to bring His peace to our world.

Day Twenty-One:

Perfect Law Abiding

READ

'God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law, as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago. We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are.' (Ro 3:21-22 – Read Ro 3:19-31)

REFLECT

Any business, organisation, club, or society must have rules set in place to properly govern its members. And all good policies, procedures, laws, standards, or rules of conduct must have a reference point in order to have validity and reason for compliance.

For those who consider themselves part of the family of God, we are told in verses 19 and 20 that our reference point is the Law of God. It holds us accountable to Him AND gives us no credit for our attempts to fulfil the law. All our attempts to do what the law requires only reveal our weakness to accomplish it. We have zero power within us to comply fully with the standards set by the Holy God. His law is the ultimate truth teller.

Yet, separate from the law, the righteousness of God has been given to us by faith. In a way, the law and my God-declared righteousness both require a faith. Either a faith in myself to fulfil the law, which I cannot, or a faith in the giver of the law. A dichotomy that can only be understood and reconciled from the reference point of God Himself since He is 'the author and perfecter of our faith'.

Where the law brings justification of punishment because we cannot do what it requires, it also brings justification of restoration because what we cannot do is fulfilled in Jesus. He is the One determined from before the creation of the world to be our Saviour. The One who knows the depths to which our obedience must go.

Jesus' life requires us to understand that His ability to 'surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees' is more than a checklist of rules. To realise that though the hidden parts of our life contain hate, lust, deceit, greed, prejudice, pride, laziness, worry, a lukewarm heart; 'filthy rags,' it has all been covered by the power of the cross.

There really is power in the name of Jesus!

RESPOND

Take time to thank God for his grace and forgiveness and His provision through the cross of Christ.

Day Twenty-Two:

A Humble Heart

READ

'Watch out! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired by others, for you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven...' (Matt 6:1 – Read Matt 5:1-4)

REFLECT

On first glance, my response to this passage is 'Done. Got it. I do not boast about how I help people; I never bring a trumpet or ask for applause when I give so I am accomplishing what Jesus is saying here.' Joking aside, this sentiment is missing the point. Jesus is not interested in ensuring I appear to have good behaviour; He is interested in my heart. He says in Matt 6:1, *'Do not practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them.'* (NIV)

'To be admired by others' is key here: it touches on heart motivations. Whether serving in secret or in front of others with a trumpet and applause, if my heart desires to perform, gain recognition, or get something from my service, I lack humility and that is going to be empty generosity.

Think about it this way for a moment: serving and giving with a humble heart posture sounds like asking, 'What does God have to show me in this situation or about this person/experience/etc.?' Do you sense the quiet peace and humility that comes with such a posture? It is getting out of the way to make room for God. It is submitting to how God intends to work. I picture it as the release of my tightly clasped hands.

Now, compare it to entering into a serving situation with a mindset of 'I am here to serve, I will make a difference.' There is nothing outright wrong with this sentiment, but the focus is on my actions, my works, my service, and leads toward trumpet wielding and applause seeking motivations. Again, it's all about the heart posture. Make room for God to enter into your serving and giving and allow Him to lead. He promises us it will be worth it.

The God of the universe who constructed this magnificent earth and every unique human on it loves and cares for you with the utmost humility. I pray we can be like Christ in this way.

RESPOND

Ask God to join you in mining the depths of your heart today. When giving and serving, what are you holding on to in the name of earthly recognition or achievement? What can you do this week to practice serving with a humble heart posture?

Weekend 4:

Jesus calls us to
RIGHTEOUS
Living

What stood out to you as you read, studied, and prayed this week?
What challenged you? What encouraged you?



Day Twenty-Three:

Simple Heart Words

READ

'But when you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.' (Matt 6:6 – Read Matt 6:6-8)

REFLECT

As a teenager I remember thinking that I wasn't as eloquent nor fancy when I prayed out loud and wanted to pray using theological words rather than how I perceived my prayers to be. I wasn't used to praying scripted prayers and so wrestled with feeling not good enough to pray and on reflection I guess I wasn't sure how to pray. Listening to some of the other people praying intimidated me, 'Why can't I pray like that?'

Jesus says to pray simply and honestly. He says to find a quiet secluded place. My day often starts out with prayer before my feet even touch the ground in the morning. I thank our Lord for another day of life. I ask Him to help me honour Him and give me opportunities to tell others about Him. Throughout the day I often stop to tell Him how much I love Him and how thankful I am for His presence and protection in my life. My prayers are many times short and simple, but they are always from my heart.

God is not impressed with our words. No matter where or when you pray, whether by yourself, with a friend or in a group, God should be the only one we're talking to. The good news is, He hears the simple words of our heart and loves us all the more.

RESPOND

Teach me how to love thee, teach me how to pray, teach me how to serve thee better every day; teach me how to serve thee better every day.

Day Twenty-Four:

Teach me how to Pray...

READ

'When you pray, don't babble on and on as the Gentiles do...' (Matt 6:9-15)

REFLECT

How do you pray? In this passage, Jesus teaches us how:

'Our Father, in heaven, hallowed be your name,' (v.9)

Jesus begins by inviting us to reverently approach the Father with Him. As we come to Him, we must acknowledge to whom we are praying. He is both personal (our Father) as well as Holy (seated on the throne).

'...your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' (v.10)

We are taught to pray with a kingdom mindset. This calls us to die to ourselves. Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, 'Abba, Father...everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will. (Mark 14:36) How challenging! When we come before the Father, it is only natural that we share our desires with Him. However, ultimately, we need to surrender fully to His will, acknowledging it is perfect. We must put off our earthly mindsets and be kingdom focused.

'Give us today our daily bread.' (v.11)

Living in North London last year, this passage often came to mind. At almost every corner, little bagel bakeries abound where locals go to buy fresh bread to accompany their morning coffee. In John 6:35, Jesus says, 'I am the bread of life...' Seeking Jesus as our daily bread isn't something we binge on some days and starve ourselves the next. It is a daily practice. Just as the Hendon Jewish community recognise their desire for bread and that it is best when fresh (not stale or day-old), so we too should nourish ourselves each day from the one who not only gives life but is life.

Vs12-15 compel us to pray against our sinful nature. Although we are taught to pray that we would not be led into temptation, Jesus doesn't promise that temptation won't come. However, when we are faced with it, He holds the power to 'deliver us from the evil one.' (v.13)

Interestingly, the end of this passage is often left unspoken, even in communal prayer, but it is worth examining! Here, we are reminded that if we truly desire God's forgiveness, we must extend that same forgiveness to those that have wronged us. If Jesus could take on the sin of the world as the Spotless Lamb to give us salvation, then we must follow His example and forgive others.

RESPOND

Using your preferred version of the Lord's prayer, take time to pray it allowing God to draw near.

Day Twenty-Five:

Secret Devotion

READ

'So that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret: and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.'

(Matt 6:18 – Read Matt 6:16-18)

REFLECT

'Secrecy: Consciously refraining from having our good deeds and qualities generally known, which, in turn, rightly disciplines our longing for recognition.'

(The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible)

The practice of secrecy cuts against the grain of our world's image-driven culture. Jesus is calling us to a radical un-knowingness—an upside down, completely different alternative to our self-promoting culture. I do not need to be seen. I do not need to be understood by others. I do not need others to know the good things I am doing. I simply need to seek my Father's face first.

Love for my Father must motivate my actions, instead of my actions being motivated by the opinions of others. I must make it my ultimate priority to seek the love of my Father. My Father's love for me is shown in allowing his Son to die a horrific death on a tree. My Father says it is by His Son's piercing that I am brought healing and peace. My ultimate goal in secrecy is to seek My Father's face not only for myself, but for others.

My self-denial is out of love for this Father, who has shown the ultimate self-denial for me. I let go of food to let my Father know how I long for unity in His Bride, the Church. I let go of needing to be seen, in order to surrender to my Father's ways before mine. I seek my Father's face with my time in order to wait for a heart to hear His voice above the drone of media and opinions of others.

My Father of love sees me. His word sustains me. He asks me to rely on His lovingkindness. He graciously allows me to trust in His faithfulness. He allows me to see His ability to sustain the universe with one Word. He is in control; I am not. He loves His bride and will keep her. His ways are higher than my ways. In secret, He comforts me in the brilliance of His love.

RESPOND

Ask God to reveal to you the areas of your life that you always seek recognition. Spend time asking God to continue His work of transformation.

Day Twenty-Six: *Undivided Generous Heart*

READ

'Don't store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in heaven...' (Matt 6:19-20a – Read 2 Cor 9:6-15)

REFLECT

How much should I give? This question has come up countless times in my adult life. The myriad of requests that come in the mailbox or email inbox—some financial, while others may be requesting my time dedicated to service or time spent in prayer. How much should I give?

In our passage in Corinthians, Paul lays out wide parameters in V.6; to give sparingly or to give generously. Could the key to giving be in V.7 where he lays out the follow up to these parameters?

We have been instructed to give according to what we have decided in our heart to give. Not a percent, or to a certain level of sacrifice.

So, the million-dollar (pun intended!) question then becomes...how is my HEART?

One of my favourite passages as a heart guide is Psalm 86: 11-12: *'Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart that I may fear your name. I will praise you, O Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever.'*

Our heart should be undivided. It should be bent on praise to God. Additional heart guides in our passage, specific to giving, point to a heart that is cheerful and not reluctant. And finally, a heart that mirrors the Father with His indescribable gift—of Jesus!

Did you notice the promises that come from heart-focused giving? How about... generous reaping, (V.6), abundant blessings (V.8), enrichment to be further generous (V.11), and expressions of thanks (V.12) and praise (V.13) from others toward God?

Exciting stuff! We all have tangible opportunities to give. We have a decision to make with each opportunity that involves integrating many factors to form our response. As we respond, let us be people with an undivided, kingdom-focused heart!

RESPOND

Lord, help me to have an undivided heart when it comes to my generosity.

Day Twenty-Seven:

Armour Ready

READ

'And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith?' (Matt 6:30 – Read Eph 6:10-20)

REFLECT

Most people who know me are always surprised that I like action movies. My favourite parts are dramatic scenes where the hero reveals his or her extraordinary abilities and courage against seemingly invincible enemies. As fun as they are, I'm afraid these movies have influenced my imagination too much about this passage. I've expected spiritual battles to mirror action movies—victory in my own strength, glory for me as I save the day, and an unseen cool outfit. Reality is much more humbling. Paul wasn't writing about how to be a Christian action hero. He was describing the spiritual protection available to believers, God's own strength and armour. Paul begins this passage urging the Ephesians to *'be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power'*, and as he lists the pieces of the armour, he seems to be recalling God's own armour described in the book of Isaiah. God has shared them with us, but He is the deliverer.

Realising this, there is a helpful element from action movies—the training montage. Let me share a scene: it's night, a kitchen sink piled with dinner dishes. A pendant light shines on the dishes and a tired lady standing in comfy pyjamas and a pink fluffy bathrobe. As she washes, thoughts of the day bubble up in her heart. Some are like flaming darts. 'Why did I get so mad about toys in the living room? I shouldn't have yelled. I'm not doing a good job loving my mum right now. I'm a failure.' Some are like lead. 'I don't know what to do. This world is full of evil and wrong.' Some are sparkling daydreams, magic mirrors where she is always right and the hero of every story. All are used by the enemy to trip and wound.

Unseen is her Teacher. He's provided her armour and weapons against the flaming darts, the lead balls and the false mirrors, and He's training her to use them. Like a soldier in training learns the right moves; she learns to remember, trust, pray. Remember, hope, pray. Remember, repent, pray. Remember, worship, pray. Verses and sermons, podcasts and hymns bring His truth to her memory.

Night after night (dishes never seem to end), this fluffy pink robed soldier comes back to her Teacher. Over time, the lessons spill out into the rest of the day. Prayer comes more quickly; words of hope and peace spill out to others. She's grown in trust of God, and she is able to stand.

RESPOND

Prayer point to ponder:

- What are the flaming darts, lead balls and magic mirrors that are often shot at you? What are the verses and truths from Scripture that you turn to for protection from those attacks?

Day Twenty-Eight:

Treasure Redefined

READ

'Your eye is like a lamp that provides light for your body. When your eye is healthy, your whole body is filled with light.'

(Matt 6:22 – Read Matt 6:19-24)

REFLECT

It had been an interesting week. The holiday club had been busy and most of the team were tired but knew only one more day to go, but today was the day we made crowns and the group leaders had put little boxes of Poundland jewels and gemstones aside for each child. The children were new to church, they were full of excitement and enthusiasm, but we were very much aware that their family needs were evident in behaviour and responses to treats. At the end of the session one little girl brought her little box of the left-over jewels and without saying anything I knew she was taking them home, no matter my opinion.

As humans we are naturally drawn to the colourful, the sparkly, the new and the different. We are created to appreciate beauty because it points us to the Creator of all beauty. But at the same time, we are called to see with spiritual eyes, 'the lamp of the body.' We are called to look beyond the colourful, the sparkly, the new and the different and instead, to catch a glimpse of what is real and what is lasting.

Thirteen years later I still smile at the challenging children's ministry of that holiday club and the memories are the shiny, sparkly lives that although had challenging behaviour discovered that they were precious to the creator.

Spiritual sight does that to you. As you walk with Christ, it loosens your grip on the treasures of this world and redefines what is beautiful. You gladly trade in the fake gemstones of the world for the true beauty of His kingdom.

RESPOND

Father, open my eyes to see the 'treasures' around me.

Weekend 5:

Jesus knows you

And knows your

HEART

What stood out to you as you read, studied, and prayed this week? What challenged you? What encouraged you?



Day Twenty-Nine:

Authentic Treasure

READ

'Jesus told him, "If you want to be perfect, go and sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."' (Matt 19:21 – Read Matt 19:16-26, Matt 6:24)

REFLECT

I wonder what is the one thing in your life that you treasure most? For me, along with my children, the truth is that the greatest treasure and blessing is my wife, Lydia. Besides being a treasure in my life, my wife has helped me to understand these verses in a multitude of ways.

While we are not the richest in the financial sense, I know I have been blessed abundantly, and God in His grace has given Lydia as a gift. Alongside being the Mclean social diary coordinator, she has taught me that to treasure is to love unconditionally, to value the 'just being together times' in daily life and to choose to enjoy the mundane alongside the special.

As the rich young ruler is faced with the challenge of giving up everything to follow Jesus, we can see his heart struggle and ultimately make the choice to keep his earthly treasure and reject the gift Jesus was offering. The point of all of this is that we all have treasure we can tend to hold onto tightly. But when we lay it before Jesus, when we open our hands and say, 'I want you more than anything!' He is faithful to replace those treasures with the true treasure of knowing His joy and peace above all else.

RESPOND

Jesus, I thank you for the treasures you have given me in my life. Help me to daily give them back to you knowing that you will fill me with the true treasure of your joy and peace.

Day Thirty:

Confession is good for the Soul

READ

'That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing?' (Matt 6:25 – Read Luke 12:13-21)

REFLECT

If we were all honest, we would admit that we worry about money and about our stuff. Let's just confess this right away. Now you know that this parable makes me uncomfortable, deeply so.

Society and that paranoid inner voice tells us to hoard our possessions, our gifts, our time, and everything else. 'Do what's best for you', they yell. 'No one else will take care of you', is their refrain. And you know what, we often believe them. So, we squirrel away our time and our talents, we sit on the knowledge that our inaction for others enriches ourselves. And we wait, watching our stores burst at the seams, only to plot ways to gain more.

At what cost? At what destruction? The rich man's sin is not his wealth, though his wealth is certainly not a force for good. The rich man's sin is not the abundant harvest, nor the means to secure a storage solution. Rather the rich man's, and indeed our own, sin is the never ending need to fill up, hoard, and secure for himself. He already has barns, multiple barns, for his own needs. He doesn't need more.

God grants him an abundant harvest and instead of looking around the community to see who else may need this excess he hoards it for himself. The rich man's sin is greed and gluttony.

Often, we really miss the point of excess granted by God. We treasure this excess and build shrines to it, bigger houses, bigger 'barns', bigger bank accounts. This treasure becomes our only interest, we work to maintain it and enjoy it.

At what cost? At what destruction? The parable of the rich man gives us a glimpse into the economy of Jesus. In which, Jesus flips the norms upside down. I like to look at parables backwards. What if the rich man didn't hoard? What if he gave all he had to the poor, as Jesus calls another rich young ruler to do? How would this parable have played out? Would the rich man have lived? I don't have the space here to answer these questions, but I would ask that you take the time to answer them for yourself. There isn't necessarily a right answer, but I do think your answers will offer you a glimpse of what Jesus is wanting you to learn through this parable.

RESPOND

Jesus, when I spend more time protecting your blessings rather than sharing them teach me to be generous as you were with your life.

Day Thirty-One:

Waiting Room

READ

'You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!' (James 5:1-9)

REFLECT

My nana even in her late eighties enjoys gardening and she is especially good at it. Of course, when she tries to have conversations with me on her gardening, I learn much but have very little, if anything, to contribute to the conversation. During those conversations I have come to understand our total reliance on the Lord when it comes to gardening. From the gift of life, with sprouting seeds, to favourable weather and a productive harvest despite all the things that can damage a crop. My nana gives me a perspective that all we have is a result of the blessing and gifting of God.

In this passage, James points out the harsh judgment coming for those who have hoarded wealth and misused it: storing up treasures, at the cost of others only to realise the treasures of this world will not last. This judgment is a warning to those with wealth who use it for the wrong purposes. As we look at the injustice recorded in this passage, and as we look at the injustice in our world today, do we understand the responsibilities and opportunity required of wealthy Christians? Do we seek out those opportunities to be fair in our financial transactions? Do we give GOD the glory for the source of that financial wealth and look for opportunities to help in our communities?

As Christians, the injustice of this world at times makes us cry out for the Lord to take action. But in the last two verses, James asks Christians to be patient. We are to wait on the Lord's timing. We wait, not just with patience, but with assured patience, knowing that judgment will come. As sure as we are of the sun rising the morning, of the spring rains and, for the gardeners in Drummole, Scotland, the last frost in May. We live in the assuredness that the Just Judgment is coming!

RESPOND

Lord, help us to fight injustice individually and as a local church in the right way, may we always look to you as the solution.

Day Thirty-Two:

Eternal Investment

READ

'...They should be rich in good works and generous to those in need...'

(Read 1 Tim 6:18 – Read 1 Tim 6:17-19)

REFLECT

I remember as a child being made to watch Antiques Roadshow every Sunday and not knowing much about what was going on. As is tradition and being Scottish I was interested to see in 2019 that a single bottle of 1926 Macallan single malt whisky sold at auction for £1.2 million making it up to that point in time the most expensive bottle of whisky ever sold. It was one of many bottles sold that day from one man's whisky collection that in total sold for close to £10 million. Obviously, the seller and the buyers were people of means and whisky was one of their common treasures. (They clearly were not good Salvationists!)

Treasure can take many forms. Some treasures are universal like silver and gold, valued by most everyone, while others, like that high end whisky are only treasured by a select few. If you have enough money, you can buy almost any treasure that you set your heart on. There is one treasure however that money cannot buy. One that you can't store up for later use or buy more of from somebody else. We all have it, yet there never seems to be enough of it. That treasure is time.

In this world we have all been given a limited amount of time by our Creator along with the freedom to use it any way we want. True, in the long run some may have more time than others, but tomorrow is promised to none of us. Anyone's time can be up at any moment. As valuable as our time is we often squander much of it. Just as we are to be good stewards of the financial and material resources the Lord has blessed us with, we need to be good stewards of the time God has given us as well.

We can choose to spend our time pursuing material things and experiences that benefit only us. In moderation, there is nothing wrong with that. God intends for us to enjoy abundant life, yet if we're to be 'rich in good deeds', we need to also make the choice of dying to ourselves and investing time in God's Kingdom. Pleasing Him by generously loving and serving others—this is how we convert our time here to eternal treasure.

RESPOND

Jesus, so often I fill my time with things that are unhelpful or lack spiritual value. Show me what I should invest my time in that has eternal value.

Day Thirty-Three:

The Best Construction

READ

'Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged.'
(Matt 7:1-2 – Read Matt 7:1-6)

REFLECT

Concluding His teaching on the spiritual life, Jesus transitions His teaching to talk about human relationships. How should we relate to our neighbours?

He begins by saying 'Do not judge'. Judging people is His job, not ours. When the woman caught in adultery was brought to Him, we recall how He silenced those who judged her leaving Him alone as the Judge. This is how it should be.

In the parallel version of this teaching found in Luke, Jesus further challenges us not to condemn but to forgive and to give generously to our neighbour. He promises that if we obey His instructions, we will not be judged or condemned but forgiven and not only given back but will be given back the container filled to the full and heaped above its lip. In both Gospel accounts, Jesus then quotes a common Jewish proverb of the time; the measure you use will be used for you.

When is it proper to reprimand our neighbour? The illustration of a small speck of wood, dust or grass that gets in our eye is helpful because you may need someone to take it out for you. Likewise, we may need help from others in identifying and helping us to give up or eliminate the small wrongs we seem to fall into. But why do we think we can point out the small wrongs of others without first removing our obvious faults? Jesus instructs us to deal with these faults first. And then, to give us some real perspective, Jesus contrasts the small irritating speck with a large construction beam. A beam would not just obstruct our view but would actually blind us. Once removed, we can then see the other's speck with clarity.

Jesus also counsels us to not correct those who live a worldly life. Like a wild animal, they just go scavenging about, seeking satisfaction of their hunger. Or like a pig, they get angry and ignore you. You may find words of rebuke precious, but the people in the world find them both irritating and useless.

Luther comments on this Commandment by saying, *'out of our fear and love of God, that we should not deceitfully belie, betray, slander nor defame our neighbour, but defend him, speak well of him, and put the best construction on everything.'*

I'm sure Jesus the carpenter agrees!

RESPOND

Spend time asking God to remove your judgemental thinking.

Day Thirty-Four:

Borrowing Trouble

READ

'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?' (Matt 6:25 – Read Matt 6:25-34)

REFLECT

Jesus tells His disciples in verse 23 that they shouldn't worry about tomorrow because tomorrow will 'worry about itself.' Sometimes Jesus is funny!

How can tomorrow worry? In a humorous way, Jesus is trying to get His disciples to realise that if they live their lives in worry, they are stressing out for no benefit. And what's more, they're not pleasing God, who wants us to live our lives in faith, not fear. Jesus is not saying life is easy. Look at the end of verse 34, 'Each day has enough trouble of its own.' Jesus wants his disciples to live in the present by real faith, making plans for the future, certainly, but holding those plans lightly. We are not in control of the future; God is.

On Palm Sunday we focus on the triumphant entry into the city. We remember the story well; the young colt being borrowed and the crowds cheering for the King arriving in town. In gathered worship we focus on the praises of the people and for a moment we forget that by the end of the week the very disciples who had given up much to follow the Messiah find themselves worrying about tomorrow. The very crowds that are celebrating and appearing to worship within days are shouting crucify him and focused on a better offer.

As people of faith, we often find ourselves at two extremes. Either we focus only on the celebration and welcoming the King without recognising the pain that lay ahead or we linger at the cross focusing on the pain, worrying about tomorrow, overwhelmed by our problems, rather than recognising that our Messiah has brought freedom through his death and resurrection.

The upside-down Kingdom teaches us that we need to celebrate and concentrate on the fact that in our brokenness and worry we can celebrate, because the Messiah appears to approach the cross defeated but proves that He is victorious. Choose not to worry but trust the God who is in control.

RESPOND

Lord, help me to celebrate and concentrate that in this week of meditation of your final days on earth I do not need to worry but to trust in a God who holds the future in the palm of His hand.

Weekend 6:

Jesus Defines **TREASURE** *Differently*

What does it mean to treasure something and how does it impact our life? How does this relate to the power of money in our life?

What stood out to you as you read, studied, and prayed this week?
What challenged you? What encouraged you?



Day Thirty-Five:

Standing Strong

READ

'This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.'

(Jos 1:9 – Read Jos 1:6-9)

REFLECT

It's one thing to say we believe God is at work on our behalf and will make a way in our seemingly impossible situations. It's another thing completely to live out this belief when the road is strewn with stones that trip us and we come to a fork in the road and can't quite remember where the next turn leads.

At these crossroads, we are to stand firm and unmoving in the movement of God. Many people think standing strong and courageous means we have to do the work and it's up to us to be brave. But true strength stands on the unchanging Word of God. When we dig our heels into Scripture, we build a firm foundation that offers us confidence as we are reminded of God's character and stand on His promises.

God assured Joshua that His presence will be with him and gives the command to take heart. Multiple times, God mentions this, even adding very courageous as emphasis. Leading the Israelites is no small task as they geared up to cross the Jordan River and take the land God promised, without the help of a proper road map. Of course, knees would be knocking, and anxious thoughts would swirl. But in this moment of embarking into the unknown, God encouraged Joshua that He would be with him, and that was to be his strength. God then gave Joshua a game plan to combat the fear: meditate on His Word and keep it close. The Bible keeps us grounded and guides us in His truth for the tasks ahead.

Trust is hard when we're wrapped in worry, but God, as our Creator, knows our humanity and emotions. He doesn't say we are exempt from fear, but He promises us His presence and Word so we may step forward in faith despite our worry.

Authentic faith stands firm on what we can't see and moves us forward with eyes fixed on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of that faith. We don't have to wonder if we're making the right choice or where our lives will lead, because we can rest assured that God is with us no matter where we are. Like Joshua, we can live a daily faith through communion with God, Scripture, and bold moves that build our belief brick by brick to establish our own Promised Land in Him.

RESPOND

Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace.

Day Thirty-Six:

Anxiety Antidote

READ

'Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.' (Phil 4:6-7 – Read Phi 4:4-9)

REFLECT

As a young Christian, Phil 4:6-7 was one of the first verses that I learned. I loved the fact, and still do, that I could present my anxious thoughts and difficult situations to God and He would take them and in return He would give me His peace. This allowed me to take my focus off myself and place it on God. Paul states in every situation by prayer and petition present your requests to God. The word petition suggests an intensity of prayer such that we fully transfer our requests into God's hands, trusting in His faithfulness to handle them.

On further study, I saw that the verse stated, 'with thanksgiving'. Now this was more difficult to do. The verse does not mean that we are to thank God for everything but 'within everything', recognising that He hears us and will work on our behalf trusting that He is a wise and loving Father. The practice of thankfulness is well known to be one of the best antidotes to worry. Doctors have even been known to prescribe this practice to anxious patients.

If we entrust God with our concerns with thanksgiving and do not take them back, the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Paul's use of the word guard here may reflect the fact that while writing this letter, he was being guarded in a Roman prison. The peace that God promises transcends or goes beyond our understanding and beyond our circumstances.

Paul then moves on from our hearts to our minds where anxiety often starts—what if...? Instead, Paul exhorts us to focus on whatever is true, noble etc. We are to fill our minds with those things that help us to worship God and serve others. As we all know, this is easier said than done. First, we need to be careful what we let into our minds through reading, social media or what we view. Second, in order to develop a focus on God, it is helpful to meditate on God's word, pray, worship and fellowship with other believers.

Finally, Paul asks the Philippians to practice what they have seen him do and Paul promises that if they do likewise then the peace of God will be with them. They will experience not only the peace of God but also the actual presence of God.

RESPOND

As you ponder the events of holy week and consider the emotions that the first disciples experienced bring your concerns to the Father asking for His peace to reign.

Day Thirty-Seven:

Head Lifter

READ

'But you, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head.'
(Psalm 3:3 – Read John 4:1-4, 25-27)

REFLECT

The account of the woman at the well has always held a special place in Scripture for me, as it is filled with many lessons to be learned. This woman's divine appointment with the Saviour gives us the picture of Jesus going out of His way to speak love and compassion into the heart of a woman lost in the messiness of a life of bad choices. She lived a life filled with worry and anxiety. Her lifestyle made her an outcast. Her worry of what others would say sent her to fetch water in the hottest time of the day.

Corrie ten Boom says:

'...worrying is carrying tomorrow's burden with today's strength. Worried people are like tightrope walkers, trying to walk over a rope from the past to the future, balancing between hope and fear. In one hand they hold a bag with the disordered past, in the other a bag, the feared future. Worrying does not take away tomorrow's grief, it takes away today's strength.'

This thinking sets the scene for this woman's encounter with the One who knew her best. He knew what she needed and was there to open her heart and her eyes to the reality of her need for a Saviour. What a moment it must have been when Jesus said to her, *'I, the one speaking to you—I am he.'* Briscoe has said that sometimes God gives a 'peek around the corner of Scripture.' As Jesus speaks these words to the woman, the peek I see is Jesus lifting her head so she would see Him face to face. They would be eye to eye when He spoke those words to her. Jesus had her full attention, and His words touched her heart and soul with its truth. And only as Jesus can do, her worry and despair were replaced with joy and hope! We know this because, she gave testimony to everyone she met. If we read a little further in John 4:39 we read, *'Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony...'*

Peter faced with his failure and denial was completely wrecked by failing Jesus. Often we do the same, we live in shame but we must allow Jesus to lift our head that we might look into His eyes. Allow Him to free you from the burden that binds you. Hear His words, 'I am He!'

RESPOND

Listen to the song, "O Come to the Altar" by Elevation Worship. Allow the truth of these words to lift your heart and head.

Day Thirty-Eight:

Stinky Feet

READ

'Simon Peter said, "You're the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God."'
(Matt 16:16, The Message – Read Matt 26:17-30)

REFLECT

When leading the corps at Leamington Spa one of the partnerships our homeless project had was with a national podiatrist chain. Each month they could come and run a clinic for those struggling with homeless, addiction and mental health and work with them to help them bring their feet to health. The clinic was next to my office and as I would chat, I often noticed how much the service user's feet showed the difficulties of life lived outside in the cold winter. Their feet were soaked and dried, pared corns and calluses, carefully removed macerated skin from between their toes, and clipped long toenails. They powdered their feet and rolled on new, absorbent socks. Each month as I would watch this service to our community, I was often reminded of how Jesus had washed His disciple's feet.

On Maundy Thursday, we remember Jesus' last supper and foot-washing. How He rose from the table and washed the disciples' dirty feet. How He reclined at the table with them and predicted His betrayal. Today is our time to call to mind our Lord's terrible and lonely journey to the Cross. He knew what was coming. He willingly walked into betrayal and made Himself so vulnerable, so surrendered. He loved to the end those who didn't understand Him, who couldn't stay awake to pray for Him, who denied knowing Him, who betrayed Him with a kiss, and who fled as He was crucified.

Today, let's take time to carefully remember Jesus' experiences of betrayal and the extraordinary love that propelled Him forward. The men who received foot care expressed amazement and gratitude that they received care that they considered disgusting and shameful. How much more profound should our response be to Jesus' personal care for us. May we cry out anew from our hearts, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!'

RESPOND

Take time to reflect and give thanks for Jesus' care of you. Pray for those who need to know the love and forgiveness of our Father in heaven.

Day Thirty-Nine:

Agony in the Garden

READ

'O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not my will, but your will be done.' (Matt 26:39)

REFLECT

The account of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane before being taken away to be crucified is one of the most personal glimpses into the relationship between Jesus and his Father, God. It shows us the close relationship and trust Jesus had with his Father. Jesus went to the Father with his deepest troubles and honestly cried out to Him. Not only did Jesus trust God with his fears, sadness, and requests, he also trusted the perfect plan God had for his future. Even when it would cost him his life, Jesus trusted the will of his Father and even prayed for it.

Jesus lived on Earth as a man for 33 years. In the Gospels, we have a record of the three years he spent in ministry. As he travelled preaching the gospel, healing the sick, and training up disciples, all the while Jesus knew what was coming and how his life would end. He knew that his purpose on earth was to become the perfect lamb to be sacrificed for the sins of the world. He understood that to become that perfect sacrifice he would suffer greatly, be put to death, and have the relationship between Him, and the Father broken for a time.

Throughout every story in Matthew, we see Jesus behave calmly, trusting the Father at every turn. Jesus relied on the Father to guide him, strengthen him and work through him. He trusted that the Father's will for him (and all of us) is perfect and right. Jesus taught the disciples to live their lives the same way, even as he warned them that very soon, he will be arrested and ultimately be put to death for the sake of the world.

If you read through Matt 26, you'll see the situation reaches a new level of intensity. The hour is at hand, and the circumstances are falling into place to put God's plan into motion.

In other words, it's becoming real, the upside-down Kingdom is being established.

RESPOND

As you reread Matt 26:36-46 ask Jesus to take you into his reality and to speak to you as you ponder God's plan and purposes in your life.

Day Forty:

The Astonishing Story

READ

'Once again Jesus shouted, and then he died.' (Matt 27:50 – Read Matt 27:45-56)

REFLECT

Although as a child I attended the corps where Good Friday was reverently observed each year, I'd never wept over Jesus' crucifixion. Then, when I was about in my teens, I read C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Through the eyes of the children in the story, I watched in disbelief as the good lion Aslan, ruler of Narnia, allowed evil creatures to bind and muzzle him—though he could easily have knocked them aside with a mighty paw. I was appalled as they sheared off his mane, then mocked, kicked, spit—and finally killed him. He gave his life willingly to save someone else! I cried for Aslan, but I also knew I was crying for Jesus.

If we let the Good Friday story past our guard, it triggers many emotions. Some are all too familiar in our fallen world. Anger at injustice—as sinless Jesus is accused in a sham trial, convicted for political gain, sentenced to a shameful death. Dismay at brutality—as a company of soldiers beats a lone prisoner and attires him in 'royal' garb for their amusement. Outrage over cruelty—as a dying man is taunted by spectators calling him an impostor, daring him to save himself.

Then there is an emotion that's less familiar—astonishment at great self-sacrifice. For Jesus was no helpless victim. He was the Son of God! If the scene were in a superhero movie, we'd be leaning forward in our seats, waiting eagerly for Jesus to come down from the cross, reveal His power, and punish His tormentors. When He did not, we'd be stunned. Devastated. We might even cry.

Jesus chose not to defend His body from pain, His name from slander, or even His soul from being forsaken by the Father. Instead, He trusted God's plan and *'humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a Cross.'* (Phil 2:8) This obedience was so momentous that darkness fell and the earth shook. His incomprehensible sacrifice was made for selfish beings who did not deserve it at all. For us.

How can we allow these truths to truly touch us? For some of us we might watch a movie about the crucifixion, for someone else it might be to listen to special music. Everyone is different. But we all need to allow our hearts open to Jesus, because he *'gave himself up for us.'* (Eph 5:2)

RESPOND

Spend time allowing the crucifixion to impact your heart today. Watch, read, or listen to versions of the crucifixion and reflect on all Jesus experienced.

Resurrection Sunday

READ

'Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.' (Matt 28:5-6)

REFLECT

When I read the gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection, I often imagine and wonder about what that experience was like. Imagine it with me.

What did the tremors of that angelic earthquake feel like? How was it that the angel rolled back the stone of Jesus' tomb? What did the brilliance of the angel's appearance feel like to the human eye? What did the angelic voice that the women heard announcing Jesus' resurrection sound like? How did the mixture of fear and joy feel as it tingled up their spine and surged through their souls as they turned to go? And what about when they saw Jesus, clasped His feet and worshipped Him?

Have you ever woken up from sleep without knowing clearly whether you are awake or asleep? When could you discern what was real? How do you know what is real life?

I wonder if these women felt the same way. Did they wonder if they were dreaming? When was the moment that they knew this angelic visitor and message, as well as the final encounter with Jesus, was real?

Regardless, there He was standing right in front of them: Jesus in real life. The best of their hopes and dreams now stands in resurrection reality before them. Then, Jesus urges them to tell the other disciples. And so, the first ones ever sent by Christ with the fullness of the gospel bring His message to others.

In my imagination I stand there with them. Many times, with a pang in my heart, I wish I could have been there too. I'm sometimes jealous of these first believers who saw, heard, and touched our risen Saviour. Then I think of Jesus' words to Thomas:

'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.' (John 20:29).

Blessed as they are, there is blessing for us, too. We, too, can know the power of His resurrection and enter into authentic abundant life. We too can know the joy of sharing His message with others.

RESPOND

On this resurrection day, enter into the gospel story with your imagination set on fire by the Holy Spirit. Take time to thank Jesus for the new life you have found in Him. Take some time to consider the blessings He has given you through Jesus, the Messiah, who has risen with abundant life for all of us.