

WESTERN

THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Devotions for Lent

by students of Western Theological Seminary



Current WTS students wrote all these devotionals. The one exception is the first devotional, written by Rev. Adam Navis, a 2006 WTS graduate who taught *Writing Outside the Sermon* in the fall of 2012. One of the class projects was to produce this booklet. Students also wrote the entire 2013 third quarter of devotionals for *Words of Hope*. We hope you will enjoy reading these as much as the students enjoyed writing them.

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101 East 13th Street, Holland MI 49423-3622
ph 616.392.8555 fax 616.392.7717 westernsem.edu
advancement@westernsem.edu

Ashes and Dust

You are dust, and to dust you shall return. (v. 19)

Today, on Ash Wednesday, we face the truth. We have seen the fire of sin pass through our lives and leave its telltale residue. We have watched our best efforts fall far short of the mark. We cannot deny that our flesh is weak, and that sin and death cloud our existence. As we lower our foreheads to be smeared with ashes, we visibly express our mortality, frailty, and failings.

Yet as we move through Lent, we never fully forget the Resurrection. We confess our sin but know we are already forgiven. We fast from food or drink or entertainment yet know these acts will not and cannot save us. For forty days we dwell in the shadow of the cross, but we celebrate Easter on each and every Sunday. We know we are bound for death, but we never forget that in Christ, death is not the end.

The students who wrote these devotionals knew these things. They struggled over synonyms, wrestled with comma placement, and edited until their eyes were blurry. And still, perfection was beyond their reach. This is the Lenten experience: recognizing that even our best efforts are ashes and dust. They know what the psalmist tells us, that it is God alone who draws us up out of the miry pit (Psalm 40:2).

By sharing their thoughts, these students are embracing the Easter moments that break through the forty days* of Lent. They chose to trust God to take their handful of ashes and make something of them. May their example inspire you this Lenten season to find your own Easter moments. —*Adam Navis*

Prayer: Use the ashes and dust of our lives for your sake, O Lord.

* We have chosen to include Sundays, so this booklet contains 47 days of devotionals.

Lowest Common Denominator

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion (v. 1 NIV)

My eighth-grade math teacher preached a gospel of lowest common denominators. I never became a math-convert but eventually caught on to the concept: find the smallest number that a group of larger numbers is divisible by. This was the one fundamental number that connected the others.

This technique is helpful for reducing fractions, and the same principle applies to Christian unity. Paul's exhorts the Philippians in verse one to find the common denominators between them. The repetition of "if you have any...if any...if any...if any" underscores this point. Paul tells the Philippians, as well as us, to look for encouragement, comfort, shared life, tenderness, or faithful compassion and when we've found it, to hold it up and focus our attention on it. It *will* create unity.

During this Lenten season, we focus on basic truths that connect us: Jesus suffered for each of us; he conquered sin and death; he left the tomb empty. By focusing on these "common denominators" just like the early church did, we become like a fraction that's been reduced and can no longer be divided.

Look for a way to share the encouragement and comfort you've received from God. Practice the same tenderness and compassion God has shown you. —*Amy Blackledge*

Prayer: Remind me daily of the common faith I share with fellow travelers on this journey. Help me to be a source of encouragement rather than division.

Like-Mindedness

*Make my joy complete by being like-minded,
having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose (v. 2 NIV)*

Sometimes I think my kids disagree just to cause me anxiety. I need to stop asking them open-ended questions like, "What would you like to do tonight?" because they will inevitably express opposing views and I'll be left holding the can of worms I opened. Any parent can relate to such tension-filled moments and to the corresponding longing for a like-minded family.

Like any family, churches can be ripe environments for disagreement. But also like any other family, there must be a spirit of like-mindedness for the church to function smoothly. Paul says it would make his joy complete for the Philippians to be like-minded. Jesus, as he faces his final hours on earth, prays for his followers, "I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one" (John 17:20-21 NIV).

The Church is a large family with a diversity of gifts and plenty of big personalities. As we journey through Lent, remember that Jesus faced the cross with us on his mind, not only as individuals, but as a united body of believers; the Body of Christ. Can we make *his* joy complete this season by creating unity in his Body? —Amy Blackledge

Prayer: Help me to bring you joy as I use my gifts while accepting the gifts you have given others.

“Unselfifying”

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. (v. 3 NIV)

“Unselfifying” should be the word for the act of removing ourselves from the center of the universe and allowing God to guide our lives. Ironically, doing this doesn’t diminish our importance in God’s plan; in fact, today’s verse paints a picture of a Body of Christ where each one of us is an essential part of caring for other people. I can’t just watch out for myself, because people need me to be in relationship with them.

On the other hand, “selfish ambition or vain conceit” quickly ruins relationships. When life becomes about taking care of ourselves, we often act out of fear or suspicion. My love for others and my love for self can be mutually exclusive, especially in a “me first” culture that emphasizes someone else’s gain as my loss. It’s challenging to follow Christ in this aspect, but as one of my pastors was fond of saying, “The Christian life isn’t easy...it’s impossible!”

The good news is that you and I don’t have to do it by ourselves. Jesus loved us enough to trade the riches of heaven for a lonely walk to Golgotha. He removed himself from the center of the universe (literally) and somehow both remained God and became a man. As we walk with him this Lenten season, may our love for him grow. May our love for others deepen and may we become more the people we are intended to be. —Amy Blackledge

Prayer: Dear Father, break me of selfish ambition and vain conceit. Give me a vision of a world where I value others as deeply as you do, and the courage to live it out.

Praising the Lord in Darkness

*From the rising of the sun to its setting,
the name of the Lord is to be praised. (v. 3)*

In the morning, as the clouds split open with sunlight, I go running. I often find myself reciting Psalm 19, which says that the heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky proclaims his handiwork. I can't help praising God when the sun breaks the horizon and sprays the sky with golden light.

Unlike my morning run, the season of Lent is not bright. It holds the promise of the most-glorious morning—Easter—but requires that we wait out the darkness first. Lent urges us to acknowledge our mortality, reminding us of both our beginning and end: “you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19). The season of Lent can feel like anything *but* a sunny morning. We spend these weeks considering our sin and reflecting on the death of Jesus Christ on Good Friday and the silence of Holy Saturday. In this time we find ourselves more often in the dark of night than in the light of the morning.

And yet, our God entered into our mortality, our suffering, and our darkness, which allows us to praise him even from the depths of darkness. The psalmist praises God from sunrise into the night because God entered the darkness and then triumphed over it. Knowing this, we can join the psalmist in praising God day and night. —*Grace Claus*

Prayer: God of light, we praise you for entering the darkness, for submitting yourself to death, and then for overcoming it so that we can be sure of the coming morning.

The Mindset of Jesus

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.... (v. 5-6, NIV)

It is encouraging to hear that, with unlimited power at his disposal, Jesus chose to lay down his heavenly advantage for a life in the dust. In today's passage, Paul asks the Philippians to follow Christ's example by having a similar mindset of humility.

Jesus' humility flowed out of knowing that he was one with the Father. Because he had nothing to prove, he was able to keep his mind and heart free of distractions. He could hear each word that God spoke to him: each nuance, each instruction and each request for obedience that drew him closer to the cross. I think the same is true for us. When we accept and see ourselves bearing the priceless value God placed on us as sons and daughters, we are in a position to love and listen well to others. We are ready to have the mindset of Christ.

Allow this Lenten journey to draw you closer to knowing how deeply you are loved by God. Learn to listen for his voice in light of his great love, undistracted by needing to prove anything. May both joy and humility flow from practicing the mindset of Jesus. —Amy Blackledge

Prayer: Dear Father, draw my heart to the humility of the cross and Jesus, who considered your will there above all else.

Humble Obedience

...rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (v. 7, NIV)

People don't like limitations. We like to constantly improve. Since the Garden of Eden, when we come up against an obstacle, we crush it, move it, integrate it, protest it, or ignore it. The last option almost always would be to submit to it and serve it.

What a sharp contrast to the way of Jesus, who willingly took on the nature of a servant. Because of his unique relationship with the Father, he had the power to call down angels (Matthew 26:53) but didn't use his power like a trump card when life got hard. Instead, every time someone wanted to elevate him, he lowered himself. He sought out the lonely, talked to the outcast, healed the untouchable, disciplined unlikely followers, washed dirty feet, and called religious bigotry what it was. Eventually, he endured the cross "for the joy set before him" (Hebrews 12:2).

Humans buck up against limitations and often seek more power, control, beauty and wealth in efforts to validate our lives. In the world's eyes, people with these things must be doing something right. But following Christ means embracing our limitations and the Lenten realities that we are sinful, rebellious and lacking in self-control.

Jesus shows us the way to the top is found in humble obedience and service. —*Amy Blackledge*

Prayer: You made yourself nothing to rescue us. Help us follow you into this great mystery.

The Journey Through

*And being found in human form, he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross! (v. 7,8)*

If you've faced a difficulty like joblessness, divorce, financial loss, severe illness, the death of a loved one, or parenting a prodigal, you know the taste of hardship. It tastes like concrete—rock hard and weighty enough to sink the best heart. Somewhere in my own recovery from childhood abuse, I realized that the only way out was to "journey through." When I tried to avoid the pain in various ways, things only got more difficult.

We often look for an easy way to get around the hardships of life. Yet when Jesus found himself in difficult situations, he didn't seek the easy route—he sought his Father's voice. What the Father said, he did. Even when he asked for a different way (Luke 22:42) and the answer was "no," he still obeyed. The only way out was to journey through: through the contempt of his fellow Jews; through the torture of the Roman guards; through the incalculable weight of carrying all the sin of the world on his sinless shoulders; through the nails and wood and death to glory.

Scripture says that even Jesus learned obedience through the things that he suffered (Hebrews 5:8). Rather than avoid hardship, during this Lenten season we are invited to enter into the darkness while keeping our ears tuned ever more closely for our Father's voice. —*Amy Blackledge*

Prayer: When life threatens to undo me, speak to me louder than my terror. Amen.

Therefore

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name (v. 9)

I'm always in a hurry when I'm learning something. Whether I am studying English or piano or systematic theology, I am impatient to get through the fundamentals. I want to be sailing in the deeper water. In the same way, in today's scripture I am tempted to rush over the "therefore" and jump to the "God exalted him." But there is such an important story behind the "therefore."

Unlike me, Jesus was in no hurry. His work involved listening, fasting, and prayer to the point of sweating blood. He walked down dusty roads, took time to sit down and talk, *really* talk, and care for people along the way (John 4:7-26, Luke 19:1-10). He was patient in developing life-changing relationships with uneducated fisherman. He took time to withdraw, rest, and spend hours with his Father, receiving instructions about what to do, who to heal, what to say, and where to go next. That whole life is included in the simple word "therefore" in verse 9.

During Lent, we can be in a hurry to get to Easter, but we too must model the patience, obedience, and posture of Christ. It is only by patiently following Christ through Lent that we may fully follow Christ into the experience of Easter. —Amy Blackledge

Prayer: Dear Lord, next time I am tempted to skip the "therefore," help me pause and remember that learning to listen for your every word is my best work.

Calling Out in Lament

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? (v. 1)

When things are good it is easy to come to God with praise and thanksgiving. Unfortunately, life is not always filled with occasions for praise. Sometimes life is difficult. Sometimes our situations are more than we can handle. It is in these times we turn to God in lament.

A lament is a prayer that begins by crying out to God from a deep sense that something is wrong with the world. Out of pain and despair we call on God as the psalmists do so often. Our cries do not come from a lack of faith, but are, in fact, a *sign* of faith. We turn to God because God is the only one who can help us. Jesus turned to God in prayers of lament both in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross when he spoke the opening words of Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

During our times of struggle we do not need to hide our feelings and pretend that everything is all right. In the face of the pain and trouble in our world, we have the gift of lament available to us. God calls us to bring our needs before him and promises that our prayers will be heard. Lament is part of an honest, trusting relationship with God. Whatever may be happening in your life right now, know that you can offer it to God in prayer. —*Jeremy Kreuze*

Prayer: O Lord, help us as we turn to you.

Bringing our Complaints to God

Consider and answer me, O Lord my God. (v. 3)

When things aren't perfect, we can be quick to complain. We complain about our jobs, our co-workers, the weather, and anything else that gets in the way of an idyllic existence. We bring these complaints to our spouses, friends or anyone willing to offer a listening ear. Ironically, when we come to God in prayer, we are all too quick to hide our complaints and frustrations.

Prayers of lament seek to bring our whole selves, complaints and all, before God. The Psalms recount the prayers of people who feel neglected, abused, and alone. They don't put on a fake smile; they lift their complaints to God, saying things such as, "Hear me!" "Deliver me!" or, "Remember me!" They approach God with complaints that the world is not as it should be. This brought Job in Job 7:11 to state, "I will complain in the bitterness of my soul." God cares and wants us to come to him in all seasons of life.

The praying of our complaints can be an act filled with anger, guilt, and frustration, as these are all feelings common to experiences of pain and suffering. Perhaps you've been holding back a part of yourself from God—an emotion or notion you believe that as a good Christian you shouldn't feel or think. God can take it. God loves all parts of you. Take a moment today to pray to God openly and honestly. —*Jeremy Kreuze*

Prayer: O Lord, hear us and deliver us from the pain and despair in our lives.

God's Powerful Deliverance

*Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord,
at the presence of the God of Jacob. (v. 7)*

Try to recall the wildest weather you've experienced. I remember a summer storm in the Midwest, the black sky streaming a torrent of rain, the ground resonating with the growling thunder, and six months' worth of lightning bolts bursting into a single evening's sky—a display simultaneously majestic and terrifying.

But even the strongest hurricane and the most explosive volcano are no match for the power of God. Today's psalm records the earth's response to God's mighty act of deliverance. Fed up with Egyptian bondage, the Lord sets Israel free. Knowing better than to stand in God's way, the sea splits in two, and the mountains leap like animals. God takes deliverance seriously. When he desires to deliver his people from sin and evil, all of creation had better tremble and make way.

God uses his power not to destroy but to redeem. During Lent, we look toward Good Friday and Easter Sunday, two days marked by dramatic events in nature. When Jesus Christ is crucified, the sun hides and the earth shakes so deeply that graves break open. When he rises from the dead, another earthquake accompanies the coming of the angel of the Lord to open the tomb. The earth dares not impede the salvation of the Lord. No power on earth exceeds the power of God. —*Grace Claus*

Prayer: Almighty God, we tremble at your strength and thank you that you wield it for our salvation.

Trusting God in Lament

But I have trusted in your steadfast love. (v. 5)

After addressing God and offering their complaints, the psalms of lament often turn to statements of trust. How can that be? Isn't the psalmist contradicting himself by asking, "How long?" on the one hand and then saying, "I trust God" on the other?

Addressing God in prayer and bringing forth complaints actually implies that we believe God can do something about our situations and will help. By opening ourselves to be vulnerable before God, we can see our situation differently. We are reminded that we are not alone. God is with us, even in our times of pain and trouble.

Also, as we reflect on our trust in God, we are reminded of the ways God has brought us through difficulties in our past. Reflecting on the way God has been faithful in the past is a way of helping us trust that God will continue to be faithful in the future.

Praying out of lament both implies trust and requires humility. When we pray out of lament we understand that we cannot remedy our situation alone. The trouble in our lives is more than we can bear. We are totally and utterly dependent on God. It is at this stage in the prayer of lament that we trust God and rely fully on him. As you pray today, voice your trust to God as you remember the ways he has been faithful in your past. —*Jeremy Kreuze*

Prayer: Oh Lord, in the midst of the difficulties in life, I trust you.

Bringing our Requests to God

*Do not cast me off in the time of old age,
do not forsake me when my strength is spent. (v. 9)*

As we lament, we bring our complaints to God. We open ourselves and hopefully realize we can trust God as we reflect on the ways God has been faithful in our past. From this place of trust we move to bring our requests before God.

We bring our requests to God as we ask God to enter into our circumstances. In some cases, our requests may be the result of our statements of trust in God. As we reflect on the ways God has been faithful in our past, we ask God to continue to be faithful in the future. In other cases, our requests may involve asking God to right a wrong we are experiencing. Our prayers may flow out of our beliefs about God. As we trust that God is love, we can pray that God's love be made known in the midst of trouble.

Jesus invites us to ask God for the things we need in life (Matthew 7:7-11). Our requests do not indicate a desperate lack of faith or trust in God, but a clear desire for God to intervene. We recognize that in our fallen world, things are not as they should be, and so we ask God to help. We ask God to come into our lives and deliver us. —*Jeremy Kreuze*

Prayer: Oh Lord, continue to be faithful as you so often have been before.

God Hears our Prayers

Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he will hear my voice. (v. 16)

Prayer is more than just a way to get what we want, and calling out in prayer to God is more than just a way to send him a message. To pray is to be in relationship with God; the one to whom we are praying. Through prayer we are able to come before God honestly and directly. The Bible assures us that God listens to our prayers and cares for us more than we will ever understand.

The awareness that God listens to us is a comforting thought. Listening seems almost a lost art in our world where busy people have a hard time slowing down enough to pay attention to what others are saying. We are too often distracted and think about what we are going to make for dinner, the email we need to respond to, or what time we need to go someplace to pick up the kids. We are so focused on our internal dialogue that we fail to really listen to one another.

As we lament to God, we are assured that God pays attention. David repeats often in the Psalms that when he cries out, God hears his voice. Having addressed God in prayer and having voiced our petitions, we can be confident that God listens to us. Today, pray knowing that you are conversing with God who loves and hears you. —*Jeremy Kreuze*

Prayer: Oh Lord, thank you for being a God who cares enough to truly listen.

Praising God

*I will sing to the Lord, because
he has dealt bountifully with me. (v. 6)*

Often, at the end of a psalm of lament, there is a moment of praise. Praise may seem out of place in a prayer of lament. After all, a lament is a cry to God for help in times of need. But it is precisely here that the psalmists find reason to praise. As we bring our troubles before God, we know that God both hears us and cares for us, and this is reason to praise.

God not only hears us but promises more: to be with us. In Matthew 28:20, Jesus states, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." Whatever difficulties you may be facing in life, you are not going through them alone. God does not exist distanced from the daily events of our lives. Instead, as we proclaim so often at Christmas, we worship Immanuel: God with us. This truly is a reason to praise. We are not alone in our pain. God promises to never leave us nor forsake us. As you pray today, praise God for the very fact that God loves you enough to be with you always.

Saying "The Lord has dealt bountifully with me" does not mean we get everything we want. It means that what we have is enough. Immanuel, God with us, is enough. As we pray, we do so knowing that God is truly with us and will never leave us.

—Jeremy Kreuze

Asking

Will he delay long in helping them? (v. 7)

Christmas and birthday wish lists have a curious effect on me. Before I write a wish list, I don't really want anything. But as soon as I add something to my list, I find that I cannot go on without it. Are you like me? After I put together a list like that, I truly hope to get what I have asked for.

The widow in this parable is an asker, too. She seeks justice, not something trivial like new clothes or a new gadget. She has only one way to get what she needs. She's not posting a few hints on her refrigerator door. Her pleas are a ceaseless, even embarrassing display of distressed need, and the judge can only take so much. "Because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming" (v. 5).

Jesus tells this story to teach us that God answers prayer much more quickly and more fairly than the judge in this parable. The judge gives in to get rid of a nuisance. How much more will a loving God do? God hears our Lenten prayers, our laments of distress, of waiting, and of injustice. "Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice" (v. 7-8).

I write wish lists expectantly; I pray even more so.

—Cody Raak

Prayer: God-Who-Provides, listen to our prayers this Lent, and answer speedily.

Who Will You Invite?

Come; for everything is ready.” (v. 17)

My favorite parts of family gatherings are the meals. Thanksgiving feasts with all the fixings, Christmas buffets of sweets and snacks, three-course Sunday dinners: delicious! I was raised in a home where hospitality always involved food. Having company, whether friends or family, meant making a big “to-do” of it, and this is still how I play host.

Because I love hosting, I find the Parable of the Great Dinner compelling. The parable asks, who should you invite to your table? “But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you” (v. 13-14). If I will get something back for my efforts, then this isn’t really a kingdom feast; only when I invite those who can’t repay me do I “proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:19).

Lent, however, is rarely a feast. If anything, Lent is a season of fasting, of giving up something. But this parable reminds us that the kingdom is like a man throwing a banquet, even during Lent. Hear today the Master’s invitation: “Come; for everything is ready” (v.17), and accept his invitation to experience Lent as a table shared with “the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind,” and in this sharing, dare to discover yourself as one of them, truly in need of the Lord’s gracious hospitality and entirely unable to repay him. —Cody Raak

Prayer: Gracious Lord, host us at your table this Lent, and let us see your other guests clearly.

Impotent Idols

*Those who make them are like them;
so are all who trust in them. (v. 8)*

We've heard it before: even though we don't keep figurines enshrined in the corners of our houses, we still worship idols. We trust in investments, pensions, and the belief that, with elbow grease and a savvy broker, anyone can be a millionaire. We worship idols of health, nutrition, and beauty. Or we believe that our salvation comes in the technology that enables us to know right now what's happening all around the world and to text our family and friends all day long.

But the psalmist argues that all of our idols are impotent; they are powerless to give life. The machines that assemble our stuff have "hands," but can they feel? Siri, the iPhone's intelligent personal assistant, has a "mouth," but does she speak deep truth? A reporter's pocket recorder has "ears," but can it detect echoes of the gospel? More significantly, if we trust in idols of consumption and information, we also lose our powers of real speech, sight, hearing, movement, and touch. We fall under the power of sin.

The good news is that the God of Israel, who does whatever he pleases, was pleased to send his Son to free us from our captivity to idols. By Christ's death and resurrection, we are new creations, with eyes for what's real, ears for truth, mouths to proclaim the gospel, and hands to join in God's work. When we trust in the Lord, *he* is our salvation. —*Grace Claus*

Prayer: Savior, we trust you, not our idols, for salvation.

Why Lament?

My groans are many and my heart is faint. (v. 22)

My grandmother suffers from chronic back pain, and when she is having problems I tend to respond by saying something upbeat like, "It'll get better soon" or "But the pain is less than it was" or "Your medicine is helping, isn't it?" I want the pain to go away, and I shy away from fully entering into her suffering. In the same way, I have a hard time reading Lamentations, because Jeremiah invites me to sit in the dust and ashes with him and keep him company.

Jeremiah does not attempt to cover up Israel's agony; instead, he uses his words to participate deeply in her pain. He opens his senses and soul to his people's deep aches, and his lament is a passionate report of this shared pain to God. Lament is not the opposite of joy. Lament is the counterpart to celebration. When we celebrate, we gratefully lift what is good in our lives to God. When we lament, we lift the pain and sorrow in our lives to God.

As we contemplate Christ's suffering on the cross during Lent, we are also asked to look around and see the pain of our neighbors, our family, and ourselves. During this season our worship and devotion should include lament and the lifting of pain and sorrow to God.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus! —*Cody Raak*

Prayer: Lord, let us enter this season and lament. Hear us as we cry out to you.

Center-less and Structure-less

He has destroyed his tabernacle. (Lamentations 2:6)

As a student, I find structure and identity in the weekly rhythms of reading, writing, and studying. I like having a syllabus to order my schedule and a constant flow of assignments to work on. During breaks this can fall apart, and it takes a lot of energy to return to the set rhythms of school.

In a similar way, the temple of God provided structure for Israel's life. It was seen as the throne of God and the place where the people of God were reconciled to him and to each other. When the temple was destroyed, the center of life crumbled and Jeremiah felt as if the world had lost its gravity. At the same time, the walls of the city were also destroyed (Lamentations 2:8). Without walls, Jerusalem was defenseless. The city had no protection from external threats and no structure for internal order. Imagine how difficult it was for Jeremiah to find hope amid his ruined city.

At the cross, we feel Jeremiah's same de-centered, de-structured agony. The crucifixion of Jesus was a crisis: once again God's dwelling place was taken violently. Living on this side of Easter, it is easy for us to jump over the anguish and desperation the crucifixion must have caused. Part of our Lenten journey is getting in touch with the center-less and structure-less feelings between the crucifixion and resurrection. —Cody Raak

Prayer: Lord, help us find our center at the cross, and our identity in the suffering of your Son.

Writing from the Tomb

*He has made me sit in darkness like the dead of long ago.
(Lamentations 3:6)*

I wish I kept a regular journal. Writing is a way to let a hurricane swirl of thoughts and emotions out and begin to understand what one is experiencing. My sporadic journaling always comes after some personal crisis or deep hurt and is a way of freeing myself from an emotional tomb being built around me.

Similarly, Jeremiah experiences despair as a tomb: “He has walled me about so that I cannot escape” (Lamentations 3:7) and “He has blocked my ways with hewn stones” (Lamentations 3:9). Jeremiah’s way of dealing with this emotional tomb was to write about it.

The calling to be God’s prophet was a terrible burden. Throughout Jeremiah’s career, God warns him, “Do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you” (Jeremiah 7:16). “My anger and my wrath shall be poured out on this place” (Jeremiah 7:20), and all of Israel’s suffering and lament were subsequently expressed by Jeremiah.

There is liberation in lament when we acknowledge our pain and express it. Lent is an opportunity for us to voice our deep disappointments and frustrations to God and ask him for comfort and rescue. As Lent continues, consider the example of Jeremiah. Try journaling and writing down your prayers and laments. —Cody Raak

Prayer: Lord, hear us as we pray from the tombs of our hurts, and answer us quickly.

Hope Renewed

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. (v. 22)

I was a competitive swimmer growing up. While water was like a second home to me, I still needed to breathe. There were many races where I was sure that I would never get enough air in my lungs again. The fiery pressure in my chest would build and each quick snatch at air was only enough to keep going until I would finally finish the race, breathless and gasping. I felt I would faint for lack of air, until my heart gradually slowed, my gasps turned into deep inhalations, and my chest filled again with sweet, abundant oxygen.

Even though I knew I would breathe again, it certainly didn't feel like it halfway through the race. Likewise, Jeremiah is in the middle of the pool of prophecy with a long swim ahead. He's wondering if he'll ever get another breath: "I have forgotten what happiness is" (v.17). But Jeremiah knows that just above the surface, there is sweet, sweet air. He is able to say, "My teeth grind on gravel" (v.16), and in the next breath say, "I have hope" (v.21).

We see in Jeremiah how despair and hope may stand side by side: "My soul...is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind...The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases" (v.20-22).

The promises of the Lord endure. —Cody Raak

Prayer: Father, do not abandon us in hopelessness, but open our eyes to your ever-new mercies.

A Better Alliance

*We were watching eagerly for a nation which could not save.
(Lamentations 4:17)*

The word “alliance” makes me think of the television series *Survivor*, where average people are deserted in a dangerous, remote location and must compete to be the last “survivor.” Inevitably, contestants make alliances with those whom they perceive to be stronger players. Also, inevitably, they are betrayed by those they trusted and are “voted off the island.”

Israel fared no better when she looked to Egypt for rescue (Jeremiah 37:6-10). Israel ignored the wisdom of the psalmist: “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help” (Psalm 146:3). Israel looked to political alliances with human kingdoms for rescue rather than relying on God, who had shown himself to be faithful again and again.

Israel’s history proved that God was always quick to rescue, and his love endured long after each crisis. We also often look to our own resources and alliances and struggle to fully depend on God. In financial loss, family crisis, or moral failure, we discover that our resources run dry and those we depend on are as human as we are. We are better served to put our faith and trust in God who “keeps faith forever” (Psalm 146:6). He delivers on his promises to sustain and protect us, and even more, to bless us. —*Cody Raak*

Prayer: Lord, thank you for your steadfast love; teach us to rely more fully on you.

Thy Kingdom Come

But you, O Lord, reign forever. (v.19)

In spite of our careful planning, circumstances sweep through our lives that are painful and traumatic. The cancer returns, more aggressive this time; a new regime closes its country's borders to foreign adoptions; gas prices reach record highs, making that long-anticipated vacation out of reach. In these moments, the winds of adversity whip our gold-painted paper crowns from our heads, and we discover with disorienting clarity that we are anything but in control.

Jeremiah, writing from his pile of ashes in the middle of the desolation of Jerusalem, concludes his Lamentations with this bitter reality: "The crown has fallen from our head" (v.16). Houses are burnt, the temple has been ransacked, the people are exiled and all of the king's and priests' attempts to rule have failed abysmally. From the depths of his mourning over Jerusalem, Jeremiah lifts up Israel's confession: "Woe to us, for we have sinned" (v.16). Despite military displays, political alliances and political pronouncements, God still wears the true crown.

In whose kingdom will you live today? Your kingdom or the kingdom of God? Are you making your plans or listening to God to get in step with him? Let us act with Jeremiah and relinquish our crowns and our efforts to control our lives and the lives of people around us. Let us humbly acknowledge that God wears the true crown: "But you, O Lord, reign forever" (v.19). When God wears the crown, we can rest sure in his kingdom. —*Cody Raak*

Prayer: Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as in heaven.

Walking in the Light

I walk before the Lord in the land of the living (v. 9)

During the season of Lent, Sundays don't count as part of the 40 days preceding Easter. Sundays are different. Each one is a mini-Easter, offering a respite from the solemnity of Lent. Sunday gives us a chance to celebrate the resurrection life of our risen Lord.

Psalm 116 invites us into this celebration. Composed after the psalmist has recovered from an illness, it praises the Lord for his graciousness, mercy, and protection. The psalmist recognizes that without the Lord, he would have been overcome by "the snares of death" (v. 3). He was in a place of despair, not unlike the distress that our sin-sick state causes us. Lent reminds us that we have been brought lower than low, and that without the deliverance of the Lord, we have no hope.

The Sundays in Lent also reinforce God's goodness. He has "dealt bountifully" with us, delivering us not only from death, but also from tears and from stumbling. We no longer stagger around in the dark world of death, because Christ's light shines in the darkness. Now we walk before the Lord in the land of the living. Having assumed a posture of humble repentance all week, we can now stand, lift up the cup of salvation, and praise the Lord with all his people.

—Grace Claus

Prayer: Gracious Lord, you have dealt bountifully with us, and we offer our thanksgiving to you.

The Suffering Servant

Who has believed what we have heard?

And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? (v. 1)

The God of Israel gave the prophet Isaiah a vision of a servant who would bring salvation to the world. Isaiah declared that God would delight in this servant and anoint him with his Spirit. This servant would bring justice to the nations and teach the long awaited way of righteousness. He would be a light to the world, giving sight to the blind and freedom to prisoners who sit in darkness.

Isaiah's vision has an unexpected twist. This servant would bring justice and deliverance for all, but only through great suffering. The servant would prosper and be lifted up, and many nations and kings would fall silent and bow before him. Still, this revolution would not come by way of the servant's political or military triumph, but by enduring an agonizing death.

God called the nation of Israel to be his holy and perfect servant, but they were unable. Yet at the right time, out of this nation came Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord's anointed who fulfilled Isaiah's vision of the suffering servant. God gives himself to us in Jesus, and though this Savior comes in a different way than we had imagined, he is nonetheless everything that we need.

—Garret Szantner

Prayer: Gracious God, we admit we resist the message of your gospel. Give us a humble heart and open mind to receive the Good News of your Son, Jesus Christ.

The Un-noble Nobleman

*He had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. (v. 2)*

Superman is considered the first superhero, different than other heroes because he possessed unearthly powers and fought, in the familiar phrase, for “truth, justice, and the American way.” Those lines were written for the 1950s *Superman* television show at the height of the Cold War, and the writers tapped into the desire for someone “faster than a speeding bullet” and “more powerful than a locomotive” who could not only “leap tall buildings in a single bound” but, more significantly, would right the world’s wrongs.

Scripture proclaims Jesus Christ as Savior, one a far cry from Superman. His noble birth was not in a grand cradle draped with silk, but in a trough used to feed livestock. His form and appearance were ordinary; certainly he wore no shirt emblazoned with a large “S.” During his triumphal entry into Jerusalem he did not sit upon a handsome steed, but on a donkey. The crown placed upon his head was not of pure gold and fine jewels, but of thorns, which pierced his skin and caused blood to drip onto his scarlet robe.

Humankind is inclined to hope in heroes they create rather than Jesus Christ, the creator. Are our hopes set upon our own desires or upon Jesus? —*Garret Szantner*

Prayer: We confess, O Lord, that we have placed our hearts’ desires and hopes in things of this world. Set our eyes upon Jesus Christ.

Our Hope in Suffering

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. (v. 4)

Suffering is an isolating reality. I came to understand this as I held my sister's hand while she suffered through a night of wondering whether her boyfriend would survive a horrific accident. Any hopeful words I offered did little to comfort her, and I was aware I could not fully understand all she was experiencing. Though we sat side by side, it felt like we were miles apart.

After many tears had fallen and night gave way to morning, God provided me with these simple words: "Even now Jesus Christ is present with your boyfriend at the hospital and holding his hand, just as Jesus is present with us." Jesus is our hope in suffering. God is ever present with us, for he walked among us in Jesus Christ.

Though we cannot see him, Jesus is present with us in our suffering. More than that, Jesus is not only present, he is also able to understand our suffering because he bore our infirmities and carried our diseases. "Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested" (Hebrews 2:18). Jesus is God's promise that we are never alone in our suffering. —*Garret Szantner*

Prayer: Jesus, our Immanuel, make your presence and grace known to us in our affliction.

The Shepherd and Sheep

Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent. (v. 7)

Jesus is portrayed often in scripture as both a sheep and a shepherd. That shouldn't surprise us, given the agricultural realities of Israel during biblical times, but I got a little confused as a child when my Sunday school teachers taught me Jesus was both the "lamb of God" and the "good shepherd." I learned that Jesus was gentle and peaceful like a lamb but he was also caring and watchful like a shepherd, and I wondered which was he, sheep or shepherd?

The answer, of course, is "both of the above." Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). Jesus tends to the flock of God. He calls us by name, prays for us, feeds us, and lays down his life for us.

Still, our shepherd is one of the sheep. That also shouldn't surprise us, since in the Incarnation Jesus became one of us. Jesus is the lamb that is led to the slaughter, the "lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), and, as the RCA communion liturgy puts it, "the perfect sacrifice offered once on the cross for the sin of the world."

The lamb of God is also the good shepherd who presents us as righteous and blameless before the throne of the Father.

—Garret Szantner

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help our minds comprehend the magnitude of your life and work.

The Righteous Servant

The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous. (v. 11)

“Am I a good person?” A high school friend asks me this question at least once a year. I wonder what my face looks like after she asks, because answering makes me so uncomfortable. I squirm in my seat and fidget as I think of what to say. What exactly is she looking for? Does she want to be justified, to know that the sum of her actions makes her a “righteous” person before God? And does she believe I am fit to provide an answer because I’m a seminary student?

A man asked Jesus, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” Jesus replied, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good” (Matthew 19:16,17). If Jesus wasn’t willing to comment on who and what is “good,” why should we?

Nothing we do or can do makes us “righteous” before God. And as for being good, well, the world is full of “good” people who do bad things and “bad” people who do good things. “Goodness” is irrelevant. The Father embraces us as righteous, not by our works, but because of the righteousness of the suffering servant, Jesus Christ.

The next time my high school friend asks, I hope I have the courage to say this to her. —*Garret Szantner*

Prayer: Lord God, we give thanks to you that we are not judged according to our effort, but by the plentiful righteousness of Jesus.

Communing with Christ and Each Other

He poured out himself to death (v. 12)

I believe the most beautiful scene I regularly lay my eyes on is the people of God gathered around a communion table.

The sacrament has meant many things during my life. When I was young I believed the bread and wine were a magical means of salvation; during high school they were only cooked dough and fermented grapes. However, as I have matured I have come to understand that the loaf and cup are the gifts of God for the people of God.

The liturgy says the Lord's Supper is a feast of remembrance, communion and hope. As we eat and drink we remember the sacrifice of suffering made by Jesus on the cross for the sin of the whole world. But we also are communing in the present tense with God through the elements that nourish our faith and become a visible display of the unity we have with one another in Jesus Christ. And we look forward—we experience a foretaste of the togetherness, peace, and blessing we will enjoy when Jesus comes again and we see him face to face.

We cannot see God, but we know he lives and reigns by his Spirit. Likewise, we are drawn to the communion table by the same Spirit. We grow closer to God and to each other as we share the elements of bread and wine. —*Garret Szantner*

Prayer: Lord Jesus, give us eyes to see and hearts to receive you every time we gather around your table.

All Nations and All Peoples

Praise the Lord, all you nations! (v. 1)

During Lent, it can be easy for me to turn inward and contemplate my own sin and my need for a savior. This posture is appropriate; I ought to bow before the Lord in humility and awe, confessing my unfaithfulness to God. And yet I shouldn't remain kneeling in isolation. At some point, recognizing God's steadfast love and faithfulness means that I have to stand up and join others in praising God. We can't forget Easter.

This standing up is what Psalm 117 calls us to do: "Praise the Lord, all you nations! Extol him, all you peoples!" The good news of Jesus' death and resurrection isn't addressed only to the individual; it's meant for whole nations, entire people groups. Moreover, when we experience the steadfast love of God, we should respond by joining with others and praising the Lord.

Worshipping God in that way gives us a taste of worship in the age to come. In Revelation, John sees an enormous gathering, made up of people "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...They cried out in a loud voice saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" (Rev. 7:9-10). What a marvelous picture of life in the kingdom.

So enter into Easter joy and praise him, all you nations!

—Grace Claus

Prayer: Faithful God, with people from every nation and language, we praise your glorious name!

Corrective Lenses

For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind. (v. 9)

Poor eyesight is common. In fact, three out of four people in America need vision correction. Whether we use glasses or contacts, corrective lenses function by putting a lens between our eyes and the world. However, there is a new type of contact that corrects vision itself. Worn at night, the contact forms and reshapes the eye to see clearly so that no glasses or contacts are needed during the day. If you stop wearing them, poor vision returns.

Lenten practices like prayer, Bible reading and fasting help shape our lives to focus on Jesus and “his precious and very great promises” (v. 4). These spiritual disciplines are like that new type of contact lenses: they shape our vision. Spiritual disciplines are not easy nor do they provide instant results, but when practiced in faith and with devotion to God, over time we will see Jesus Christ more clearly.

Neglecting these practices, like refusing to wear those eye-shaping contacts, leads to a deterioration of our vision. We become nearsighted and blind, forgetting even that Jesus Christ has forgiven us. By living with our eyes on Jesus, our vision is shifted and corrected. Our “nearsightedness” gives way to the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ. Our faith becomes supplemented with virtue, self-control, godliness, and love. We begin to see Jesus more clearly. —*Stephen Shaffer*

Prayer: O Lord, correct my vision that I may see you more clearly.

Bearing Witness

We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. (v. 18)

I was once called to be a witness in a legal proceeding. My friend was accused of a crime, and when the authorities learned I had seen the incident they called me in, sat me down, and questioned me. I was called upon because I knew what had happened.

Peter and the rest of the apostles had witnessed tremendous events. They heard God the Father give Jesus honor and glory both at his baptism and on the mount of Transfiguration. Peter was there when Jesus healed the lame, cast out demons, and calmed the sea. The disciples heard Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of God and saw his life, death, and resurrection as the fulfillment of what God had promised long ago. After Jesus' ascension, Peter was compelled to testify to what he had seen. He witnessed Jesus Christ and then was called upon to be a witness for Jesus Christ because he knew all that had happened.

Like Peter, we are called upon to bear witness. Peter's testimony to the risen Christ is like a "lamp shining in a dark place" to which we "will do well to be attentive" (v. 19). We remember Christ's journey to the cross. It is not myth or false witness, but the truth of the gospel. Christ has died, Christ is risen and Christ will come again. —*Stephen Shaffer*

Prayer: Lord, embolden me to bear witness to Jesus Christ.

He Knows our Trials

The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial. (v. 9)

The Christian life sometimes leads to friction. Walking in step with God can mean walking out of step with the world. This friction can lead to an opportunity to witness, but it may also lead to conflict, scorn and pressure to conform.

Peter's church was facing intense pressure and trials, but the situation was not beyond God's control. The ungodliness, false teaching, and wickedness around the church were no threat to God. He had upheld faithful Lot when he was surrounded by Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:1-29). He rescued righteous Noah in the ark in a time when "every intention of the thoughts of [the human] heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). God restrains evil, corrects falsehood, and keeps his people from falling into ruin. Even in dark situations, God maintains control and works to bring his people out of darkness and into light. Peter knew what his church would soon face and was convinced that God would continue to rescue his people—as he had always done.

The Lord also knows our trials. The difficulties we face in our life are no threat to God. Not only does he know our struggles, but he also knows how to lead us out of them. God, who rescued us from sin through Jesus Christ, continues to come and rescue his people. —*Stephen Shaffer*

Prayer: Lord, thank you for coming to rescue us through your son, Jesus Christ.

Free to Follow

They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. (v. 19)

In college, I attended several dance shows. The freedom the dancers expressed came from countless hours of practice. What popularly is called “dancing”—stepping out and flailing one’s body—is not true dance. Dance requires restraint and structure. The beauty of the dance is not from spontaneous actions but through the ease of movement that is a result of hours of diligent work. Through purposefully training their bodies, true freedom is able to emerge.

Peter is writing to a church surrounded by a culture that adored freedom from restraint. The world had grown “bold and willful” (v.10) in pursuing their desires. Their motto seemed to be: if it could be done, it should be done. This lack of restraint, like a flailing body on the dance floor, led more to injury and pain than liberation. They had become enslaved to their own desires (v. 19). Sound familiar? Peter could have been writing just as easily about our world today.

Instead of unrestrained freedom, Christ grants freedom to follow him. Our Lenten journey is an exercise of just such freedom. This freedom is exercised in restraint—refusing some practices, beginning others. It involves placing ourselves on the path of Christ that we might, by the work of the Spirit, walk in his freedom. —*Stephen Shaffer*

Prayer: Lord, thank you for the true freedom of life in Christ.

Not So Fast

The Lord is not slow about his promise. (v. 9)

Punctuality is a Western virtue. Have you heard the mantra of time management gurus? “If you are not five minutes early, you are late.” We set deadlines and due dates and often manage our calendars down to the last minute hoping to squeeze every moment of productivity out of the day. Time is a commodity to be spent well, and wasting it is a sin. Punctuality is prized, and patience is often in short supply.

God exists outside of time and does not operate on our schedule. The early church in Peter’s day was eagerly awaiting the imminent return of Christ. When Christ had ascended, he promised to return and the church lived in anticipation of that event. Yet, Jesus was taking his time. Days and years went by and Christ had not returned. People became impatient—grumbling and scoffing and saying, “Where is the promise of his coming?” (v. 4).

While God’s timing may appear slow to us, he is not slow “as some count slowness” (v. 9), but is patiently working out his plan of salvation. God’s delay in returning is not tardiness but patience because he “does not want any to perish” (v. 9). Thank God for that!

Just as Jesus Christ came in the “fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4), God works in his perfect timing. He calls us to trust him to bring all that he desires to pass. —*Stephen Shaffer*

Prayer: Lord, give me a measure of your patience and the wisdom to trust in your timing.

Active and Diligent Waiting

Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace. (v. 14)

Waiting is a passive verb. Growing up, being told to “wait patiently” meant that I should stop fidgeting or fussing and sit quietly. How boring! Time slows down in situations like that and it is hard work to wait, especially for kids.

By contrast, waiting on the Lord is an active verb. Like a host waiting for guests to arrive, there is much to be done to get ready. The church in Peter’s day was eagerly anticipating the return of Christ. After years of waiting, Jesus had not yet returned. Some people gave up. They followed false teachers who said that Jesus would never come back, and they fell into sin. Others waited patiently but passively, withdrawing from society and expecting Jesus to come and take them out of this world. In the face of these two options, Peter called the church to active waiting—to live preparing for Christ’s return. Peter asks, “What sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness?” (v. 11)

Lent is a season of waiting and anticipation. We wait for Easter and the resurrection, but we ultimately long for Christ’s return. During Lent we walk diligently down the road of discipleship. We love and worship God, care for our neighbor, and humbly serve in the world God has made. How will you actively wait for Christ today? —*Stephen Shaffer*

Prayer: Lord, help me to be diligent in waiting for you.

Prepare the Way

*Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar. (Psalm 118:27)*

Our lives are cluttered, but it's not fitting to leave our souls a mess for God. His presence calls us to prepare a place suitable for him. Chaotic schedules hinder God's movement in our lives. If he is always bumping up against piano lessons and late nights at the office and back-to-back social events, we haven't given him the space he deserves. We need to prepare a place fit for him.

Today, on Palm Sunday, we prepare the way for the Lord. We do not make the way—only God makes the way—but we prepare it. We clear our lives of the debris that has collected, do a thorough cleaning, and make the way fit for a king. We give God space to move and to act in our lives. Like the psalmist, we make these preparations in gratitude for the things God has done, especially for his faithfulness to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus, which we rehearse during the coming week.

Our preparations include not only recounting God's steadfast love and making space for God's work, but also offering ourselves to him. We take the meager things we have—cloaks and branches—and make them part of our sacrifice to the Lord by spreading them before him. With those things no longer cluttering our lives, we are freer to follow him. —*Grace Claus*

Prayer: Blessed Lord, we're preparing the way. Come in, come in.

The Good Shepherd

Woman, here is your son. (19:26)

The story of the death of Jesus is not peaceful or calm. He went from Pilate to Herod and back again. He was tortured and then mocked as he was led to the place of his crucifixion and death. Yet, even in the chaos and suffering Jesus remembered his mother. As his world crumbled, he provided for his mother a second son, a further support, in the disciple John.

In this Holy Week, we remember the death of Jesus and the events leading up to it. This is a week of strong emotions. We may feel moved by stories of Christ's righteous anger in the temple or Peter's denial. Worship services are often somber, because we focus on the suffering that Jesus endured on our behalf.

However, as he did for Mary, Jesus also speaks words of comfort and assurance to us. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). His words are a comfort to us. Jesus, our Lord and Savior, is our shepherd and he will provide for us. He guides us through the darkest valleys, protecting and comforting us, restoring our soul.

In this week of remembrance, may Jesus, the good shepherd, be our comfort and guide as we navigate the valley of the shadow of death. May we know that our Lord walks with us every step of the way. —*Jonathon VanderWall*

Prayer: Lord, may we know your comfort and provision as you guide us through all the days of our lives.

Love and Forgiveness

Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing. (v. 34)

Like all children, I knocked my head, tripped and fell, and crashed my bike more than a few times. I remember the pain of those times. But real physical torture is not something that I can honestly relate to. It is difficult to entirely understand the suffering and physical anguish Jesus endured in the last 24 hours of his life on earth. He was beaten, spat on, flogged and crucified.

Yet even in this torturous punishment Jesus cried out to God, not in anger or resentment, but on behalf of his persecutors. "Forgive them," he asked, "for they do not know what they are doing." Jesus had at his disposal the power of God and legions of angels to swoop to his aid (Matthew 26:53). However, instead of taking revenge on his killers, Jesus prayed for them.

The previous night Jesus had spoken to his disciples of this kind of love, saying, "Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34). On the cross he demonstrated the full extent of his love.

Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of those who tortured him. How difficult is it for us to forgive those who have wronged us? May we follow his example more completely.

—Jonathon VanderWall

Mockery or Mercy

Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise. (v. 43)

There are two possible reactions to Jesus, and these reactions are personified in the two criminals crucified alongside of him. One mocked him, saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (v. 39) The other criminal simply asked for mercy.

I am aware that I have embodied both responses to Jesus in my life. One of the subtle ways I mock Jesus is to live my life on my own terms, trying to be the best student, Christian, son, and brother I can be. I try to impress God with my efforts. Yet I am painfully aware of how often I fall short of God's glory. My only recourse is to stop trying to justify myself and ask Jesus to save me.

Neither criminal maintained his innocence in the face of death, and like them we are all sinners that deserve punishment. The scriptures are clear and our experience testifies that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). The great news of the gospel is that "the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

So which do you choose? Mockery or mercy?

Jesus suffered and was crucified on our behalf. He offers paradise to those who ask. —*Jonathon VanderWall*

Prayer: Thank you Lord for sending your Son. Help me to live every day in your salvation.

The Bread and the Cup

I am thirsty. (19:28)

On the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you." He did the same with a cup, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:19-20). With these words he instituted the Lord's Supper, which is traditionally commemorated around the world tonight. We eat the bread and remember that Jesus' body was broken for us. We drink from the cup and remember Jesus' blood was shed for us.

All of these actions give definition to what he had earlier said in John 6. In that passage there is much arguing among the Jews and among the disciples—Jesus' words about never being hungry or thirsty again must have sounded unusual. Yet we know he is the living water of which we can drink and never be thirsty and that he is the bread of life of which we eat and are satisfied.

A day after instituting this supper, as he hung on the cross, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." As John tells us, this was to fulfill the scriptures. Jesus thirsted so we no longer would.

As we come to the table and remember Jesus' death, we know that in him and through him we will never thirst or hunger again. —*Jonathon VanderWall*

Prayer: Jesus, you suffered so that we don't have to; you died that we may live. Thank you for your sacrifice.

The Light of the World

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (v. 34)

Darkness covered the entire land. An earthquake shook the ground, and Jesus cried out in a loud voice the first words of Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This was the darkest moment of Jesus’ sojourn on earth, and he gave an utter cry from empty blackness. Scholars debate what exactly happened at this moment. Did the Father actually turn away from Jesus, or did it just *feel* like the Father had turned away? Was all hope lost?

There are times in our lives when it seems like all hope is lost. Though we will never understand the feeling of the weight of the world’s sin on us, we do experience times of emptiness, darkness, even hopelessness. In these times we often echo the words of Jesus, “My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Today we remember the death of our Lord and Savior, but we never fully forget that we do not worship a God who was defeated by death. “I am the light of the world,” Jesus said. “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). We worship the living God, the light of the world, who has conquered death and darkness and who walks beside us always. —*Jonathon VanderWall*

Prayer: Jesus, help us to remember that you are always with us, no matter how dark life may seem.

The True Vine

Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. (v. 46)

During this last week we have remembered and reflected on the words of Christ in his last hours on earth. After all he had been through, his final words were words of trust: “Into your hands I commend my spirit.” Yesterday we noted he quoted Psalm 22 on the cross, today we see he also quotes Psalm 31:5. In contrast to the anguish of Psalm 22, these final words are words of hope, trust and faith, and it is to that hope, trust and faith that we also are called.

We’ve seen him in a number of different ways this week. He is the good shepherd, the bread of life, living water and the light of the world. He forgives those who torture and kill him and he offers mercy to a criminal crucified next to him. Salvation is found in him—he is the source of life.

“I am the vine,” he says, “you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

As this week draws to a close, take a moment to reflect on all the things Jesus is to you and thank him. Let us renew our commitment to him and also say, “Into your hands I commend my spirit,” for it is very true that apart from him we can do nothing. —*Jonathon VanderWall*

Prayer: Help us to abide in you each and every day. We do commit ourselves afresh to you.

The Resurrection and the Life

It is finished. (19:30)

He is risen! Christ the Lord is risen today! This is the pinnacle of the Christian faith, the crux on which all things turn. Our God is not dead; he does not lie in a tomb. He is alive now and forever. In his resurrection he broke the chains of death that we may live forever more.

As Jesus breathed his last on Good Friday, he spoke the words "It is finished," and indeed his work is finished. Jesus' sacrifice was once and for all, and the forgiveness of sins is sealed in his blood. He truly is the resurrection and the life; in him we have the promise of everlasting life.

Although Jesus' earthly work is finished, God's work here is not done. "It is finished" foreshadows the "It is done!" found in Revelation 21. We believe not only in the resurrection of Christ but also of the return of Christ. We wait eagerly for the day of Christ's return, the day when God sets all things right and our salvation will be fully realized. We will stand at the throne of God with believers from every tribe, tongue, and nation proclaiming together, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:10) —*Jonathon VanderWall*

Prayer: Risen Lord, we rejoice in you today. Help us to live in the resurrection and seek to share your good news with all people.

The writers



Rev. Adam Navis is a 2006 graduate of Western Theological Seminary, the Associate Editor for Words of Hope, and an adjunct instructor at Western.

"Working with students to craft devotionals was a blessing and a gift. Churches should prepare themselves for a batch of leaders who are very skilled writers."

Amy Blackledge

Hometown: Kalamazoo, MI

Church: Centerpoint (RCA), Kalamazoo, MI

BA Journalism, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX

Worship director for Heritage CRC in Kalamazoo, MI



Amy is passionate about music of the church, both old and new, and enjoys writing songs and liturgy.

"Also, as God has brought me alongside people deeply affected by childhood abuse, I have developed a passion for pastoral care ministries, counseling, family dynamics, and helping others heal from trauma."

Grace Claus

Hometown: Crystal Lake, IL

Church: Third Reformed Church, Holland, MI

BA English, Hope College, Holland, MI



Grace and her husband, Dan, intend to co-pastor a congregation in any town with a local coffee shop and a farmer's market. Grace is especially interested in redeeming language and expanding our vocabularies of faith.

"There's too much weak, deceitful, cliché, sound-bitey language in the world, and it's part of the redemption of the world to restore language, too! As Christians, it's our work to use it to its fullness."



Jeremy Kreuze

Hometown: Holland, MI

Church: Westend Christian Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, MI

BS Biblical Studies and Youth Ministry, Kuyper College, Grand Rapids, MI

Jeremy feels called to work in a pastoral role within a church.



Cody Raak

Hometown: Sioux Center, IA

Church: First Reformed Church, Sioux Center, IA

BA Religion, Northwestern College, Orange City, IA

Cody is pursuing ordination in the Reformed Church in America with special interest in spiritual formation and liturgical renewal.

"As a growing writer, I am excited to see how my gifts and voice can help nurture a congregation's spiritual health."

Stephen Shaffer

Hometown: Grand Rapids, MI

Church: North Holland Reformed Church, Holland, MI

BA Religion and Philosophy, Hope College, Holland, MI

"I desire to be the preaching pastor of a local church and serve by proclaiming God's Word, reaching out to the community, and helping people grow deeper in their faith by seeing God at work in their daily lives."



R. Garret Szantner

Hometown: Rochester Hills, MI

Church: Trinity Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, MI

BA History and Political Science, Hope College, Holland, MI

"I believe it is a blessing to know God has called me to be a pastor somewhere in North America; still, I am unsure where or in what role. I look forward to discerning God's will for my life at Western Theological Seminary over the next year."



Jonathon VanderWall

Hometown: Grandville, MI

Church: Overisel Reformed Church, Overisel, MI

BS Worship & Music Studies and BS Bible & Theological Studies, Kuyper College, Grand Rapids, MI

Jon feels called to serve Christ's church in the area of worship.

"I love worship and leading it in church settings. Whether I continue this or not after seminary is still a mystery to me, but I look forward to how God will reveal His will for me in His perfect timing."



Western Theological Seminary is deeply committed to the task of preparing men and women called by God to preach, teach, counsel, care, pursue justice, and tell the good news of Jesus to everyone, everywhere.

—President Timothy L. Brown

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101 East 13th Street, Holland MI 49423-3622
ph 616.392.8555 fax 616.392.7717 westernsem.edu