


BEYOND  ME

Lenten Devotional

A 40 DAY DEVOTIONAL

Dear Family,

Welcome to the first day of our Lenten journey! If you are reading this Lenten Devotional, it is because you desire to be closer to Christ. You recognise areas in your life where you need to improve, and you are willing to do the work to be better.

We are all familiar with the picture painted in Matthew 26:36-46 when Jesus takes some of his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. It is in this imagery we begin our journey towards Easter this year.

Jesus, our Saviour and Redeemer finds himself in the middle of an emotional tug-of-war. In this deeply painful prayer he prays,

“My Father, if there is no other way than this, drinking this cup to the dregs, I’m ready. Do it your way.” (Matthew 26:42 – The Message)

Jesus, faced with the brutal reality of his death on the cross surrenders to the will of the father. He realised that although in real terms the few days ahead would be filled with unbearable cruelty and pain that he had to look beyond himself and see God’s Redemption Plan for the world.

Over the next 40 days we want to firstly, deepen our appreciation for all that Christ did on the cross. Secondly, we want to understand what it means to live a life through the lens of the cross, to respond to the invitation of Christ to look BEYOND ME and realise that we are not only partakers in God’s redemption plan, but we are called to participate in his mission to redeem our families, communities and world.

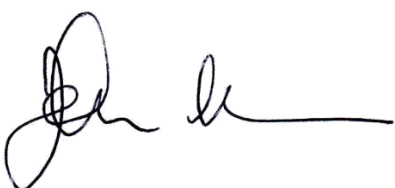
For hundreds of years, Christians have been participating in Lent. Lent has traditionally been a time to prepare our hearts for Easter by fasting, praying, and repenting of sin as we get ready to celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus.

You’ve probably heard of Lent before—you may have even participated in it before. But it’s not just an empty tradition or a meaningless ritual. Christians all over the world observe Lent as a way of removing clutter from our lives so that we can see Jesus more clearly during Easter.

So, traditionally, people who practice Lent give something up in order to spend more time in prayer. What you fast from could be just about anything—chocolate, TV, social media, or even choosing to drink only water or forfeit hairdressers!

Our aim is to express, embrace and embody what it means to be redeemed by God. Grab your Bible, a journal or notepad alongside your coffee and spend time with Father by looking BEYOND ME for a fresh encounter.

Blessings,



Major John Mclean, MA.



BEYOND ME

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 to help you focus and read through 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 that we hope will allow you to start 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' and prayer for the day.

TAKING UP OUR CROSSES

READ

'Then, calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?" (Mk 8:34-36)

REFLECT

The Christian life is a life of dying to self. Dying to self is an active choice. It is not something passive. When Jesus took up his cross, it was an active choice that he made. He came to bring the kingdom of God to the world, and in doing so, took up his cross.

When we use the phrase, "_____ is my cross to bear," we are describing something that has happened to us. This is not the call that Jesus is making. Jesus is calling people to make an active choice. A choice, as verse 35 says, "for my sake."

Christ calls us to take up our crosses out of faithfulness to him.

Our faithfulness and loyalty to Jesus require us to give of ourselves.

The season of lent is a season in which we can actively give of ourselves out of faithfulness to Christ.

I've known people that gave up things like television, sugar, coffee, or certain foods for lent. Others have given up time. A friend of mine gave up an hour each day that he normally spent sitting in front of the television and went for a jog during that time.

Some of these things appear to be large sacrifices, while others may appear less sacrificial. In each circumstance, however, it took a considerable amount of prayer and effort to abstain from these habits during the weeks leading up to Easter.

As we give up a normal part of our daily lives during the season of Lent, let us remember that in a small way, we are dying to ourselves. We are making an active choice for Jesus' sake. The Christian life is a life of dying to self. It is a life of taking up our crosses. As we feel the loss of what we've given up for lent, as we rise to the challenge of moving BEYOND ME let us remember that it is for the sake of Jesus that we've done so.

RESPOND

God, help us to remember that the Christian life is a life of losing. It is a life dedicated to giving of ourselves for Your sake.



VULNERABLE, MESSY AND AUTHENTIC

READ

'After Jesus had taken the wine he said, "It is fulfilled"; and bowing his head he gave up his spirit... One of the soldiers pierced his side with a lance; and immediately there came out blood and water. This is the evidence of one who saw it- true evidence, and he knows that what he says is true- and he gives it so that you may believe as well. Because all this happened to fulfil the words of the scripture: ... They will look to the one whom they have pierced.'" (John 19:30, 34-37)

REFLECT

As a teen I remember getting up early to walk to school in the winter and looking out into the garden and seeing the beauty of the morning frost. It was a beautiful image and yet in reality under the frost our lawn was our dog's toilet.

Often on Sunday mornings I obediently go to the army ready to lead the congregation in worship. My cheeks are still flushed from the heated discussion getting teens ready. My uniform looks smart though.

Many of us are really good at faking it - showing up on Sunday morning and putting on our 'best selves.' We know how to be polite, we know how to look, what to sing, what to say and where to turn in our Bibles. We have our priorities wrong. Focusing on what we are saying and how we are looking - while ignoring the mess underneath. Many of us have been doing this for a while. But this isn't our authentic selves, and it is not sustainable. Our closest friends, confidants, and families don't only see us at our best or when we choose to be presentable. They see all of us - the messy us. The same is true of our relationship with God.

The work Jesus did for us on the cross was not dressed up fancy. It was not pretty or composed. It was not polite or palatable. It was messy. It was suffering. It is in the suffering of Jesus on the cross that we saw the fullness of God's love. His love was made known to us in the darkest way possible- through the death of His son.

RESPOND

Lord, forgive me the times when I show up to pray pretending to be stronger than I am. Forgive me when I show up to sing and listened only to my voice- forgetting to listen for yours. Lord help me be open to you.

DENY YOURSELF

READ

'Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.'" (Luke 9:23)

REFLECT

A friend challenged me recently to think about what my crosses are. Some of them are very challenging. Others are just petty annoyances that I would prefer not to have to deal with. If I think about it, I can make a long list!

Jesus said that I have to deny myself. What does that mean? What do I deny? Wanting my own way? Wanting things to be easy, comfortable, etc? Do I have to be miserable all the time, never getting things the way, I want? I'm not sure that's worth it! Especially when I feel like my personal space and time are invaded, I rebel! I would almost rather endure a hard thing than a petty annoyance!

I am reading a book called Qualities of a Spiritual Warrior by Graham Cooke. He presents another point of view that I find striking. He suggests the challenges we experience in life are opportunities to see God acting in us in ways we would not otherwise experience. We have a chance to grow in our ability to trust Him and to build our joy as we focus on His victory in faith rather than seeing the struggles on the way there. We don't embrace the cross for the sake of the cross. We take up the cross as a way to the resurrection.

I can encounter a crisis and be defeated. Or I can encounter a crisis and deliberately praise God for how He is both working in the situation and how He is working in me. What is He teaching me? How can I grow in love, trust, and deep faith in Him? How does he want to purify my heart so I can see BEYOND ME and be united in His love? If I do that, the crisis is a chance to experience great joy as I wonder at the great work that He is doing in both me and in my circumstances. What a gift!

RESPOND

Father, increase my trust in you. Help me to see even the slight annoyances I experience as opportunities to see you working in me.

FASTING, FEASTING & FAVOUR

READ

'So go ahead. Eat your food with joy, and drink your wine with a happy heart, for God approves of this! Wear fine clothes, with a splash of cologne! Live happily with the woman you love through all the meaningless days of life that God has given you under the sun. The wife God gives you is your reward for all your earthly toil. Whatever you do, do well. For when you go to the grave, there will be no work or planning or knowledge or wisdom.' (Eccl 7:9-10)

REFLECT

It probably seems mismatched to read passages about eating and drinking merrily in a season of fasting, but by verse 10 you can feel echoes of Ash Wednesday: 'to dust you will return.' Lenten fasts help us savour the goodness of God's gifts to us as we enjoy them the rest of the year. Likewise, we look forward to resurrection with more fervour because we give time for sober acknowledgement that our days are numbered. God loves mystery and the Bible is full of paradox – tensions that keep us coming back with better and deeper questions. The realities of death, fasting, sin, and sacrifice seem like they should make us nothing-else-matters nihilists. But all of these live in the shadow of fuller, better realities on the horizon. Resurrection, feasting, holiness, and flourishing will take over, and in the meantime, we live in the mysterious contentment of striving. We apply wisdom and sweat to the things that God places in front of us, knowing that his approval and his promises allow us to enjoy life now in the shadow cast by the light of the life to come.

RESPOND

O Lord, you give many gifts, and every gift from you is deeply, truly good. Your grace in the mundane, and your presence in eternity; both are ours through the faithful life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Let our fasting enrich our feasting. Let our relationships swell with the love of the Spirit. Put to death apathy and greed in us and resurrect faithfulness in our work and contentment in our rest.

SSSSHHHH – PRAY!

READ

'Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord.'

(James 5:13-14)

REFLECT

Have you ever wanted someone to pray for you before you pray for yourself? I have. We need be able to run to God first before anyone else. When we are in trouble we should run to God. When we are happy, we should sing songs of praise to God. And when we feel like we made it we should ask someone to pray for us like when we are sick. We should ask people to pray for us but first we should pray ourselves. I challenge all of us to seek God first this lent.

RESPOND

Jesus, so often I ask people to pray for me or seek counsel from others without coming to you first. Please forgive me for seeking attention rather than seeking you as my Saviour and Redeemer and help me to be a person who uses this season as an opportunity to no longer just talk about my concerns and hardships but who also seeks the presence of the King.

HERE AND NOW

READ

'Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy.

May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.'

(Matt 6:9-10)

REFLECT

I was recently asked the question, "How do you get to heaven?" Of course, there is the proper theological answer of only through Christ, through his grace, confessing our sin, and asking him into your life, but I have since pondered this question with much thought. It is of course easy for us to think of Heaven as a far-off place we go after we die. We all have our own interpretations and understandings of exactly what it will look like and the steps to take in order for us to move there. However, I think we all can agree that God wants to build his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

The season of Lent is a time for me to reflect on the culmination of God's incarnation through Christ. It is through the person of Jesus Christ that God brought heaven to earth. In pastoral care I am constantly challenged with the task of making Christ known, bringing God's kingdom to earth, through my relationship with him and my relationship with those around me. I am continually reminded that it is not about me and my ideas, but rather it is about obedience and discernment. I often find myself being a bridge between this world and God's world. His desire is to build his kingdom on earth, and he wants to use me.

May we be attentive to his spirit and his leading as we avail ourselves to this kingdom, one that is much bigger than us and our finite understanding and submit ourselves to full obedience to God and his desire to set up his kingdom in our midst.

RESPOND

Father, so often our focus on what is to come in the eternal rather than responding to your invitation to establish your Kingdom of the earth today. As we seek your Kingdom help us to also establish your Kingdom by living for you.

UNITY IN HIS COMMUNITY

READ

'I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.' (John 17:20-25)

REFLECT

I was recently reading and meditating on this scripture. Here Jesus prays for the generations of believers that will come after hearing the disciple's testimony about him.

The Lord revealed something about this scripture that I had never really pondered. I normally take the 'let us all be unified' as to mean in church, ecclesial bodies, etc. Yes, it does mean that, but the Lord was saying to me that he wanted us to be unified completely with him and to the father. To not know where I end and where he begins. To be completely and utterly complete in the father through the reconciliation that Jesus offers.

He says in verse 21 *'that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me, and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.'*

Jesus set the standard and made it possible for us to be reconciled with the Father. Using Jesus' example, how often do we seek to be completely unified with the Father? How often do we walk in that reconciliation?

The very next chapter Jesus illustrates this reality by saying he is the vine, and we are the branches. That apart from unity with him we can bear no fruit. Attached to the vine we are our truest self.

Too often I get distracted from all the 'noise' of the world and have to reorient myself to this reality. All the demands on my life can get me off course from operating daily knowing that I am in Jesus and Jesus is in me just as Jesus and the father are one. It's a win-win!

RESPOND

Jesus, we pray for unity among all believers and reconciliation of all mankind. We also pray for greater unity with you and with the father. Thank you for making it possible to walk in a new identity. May we increase in greater awareness of our unity with the Father through what you've done and continue to do. Amen

LOOKING LOCAL

READ

'So, I arrived in Jerusalem. Three days later, I slipped out during the night, taking only a few others with me. I had not told anyone about the plans God had put in my heart for Jerusalem. We took no pack animals with us except the donkey I was riding.' (Nehemiah 2:11-12)

REFLECT

The story of Nehemiah has always been one of my favourites from scripture. I am not sure what draws me to it so much. It might be because Nehemiah was a man of action, or because it really is an underdog story. It also has great leadership attributes that catch my attention. I love how he breaks down the task, which seems to overwhelm the people, into smaller pieces that they can handle. Basically, "Hey you, worry about the part of the wall next to your house." And, when everybody comes together the wall is accomplished. There is also this part where the people have to overcome significant negativity from those around them. I'd encourage you to read through Nehemiah again, at least through the first four chapters.

But at one point they are almost shut down completely from words, and threats. Without a single stone or stick lifted against them, fear cripples them. We have and are living in a time of fear in our country based on Covid, Brexit and the cost of living right now. Fear on both sides of issues. Media makes it loud. Maybe you have heard the term fearmongering? Fearmongering means "the action of deliberately arousing public fear or alarm about a particular issue." FEAR... and lack of resources is the number one reason that the walls around Jerusalem laid in ruins for so long. Fear seems to be polarising our communities and especially our country.

But what can we do? If we were to survey our town like Nehemiah did in Chapter one, what would we see? What report would we get? Nehemiah deliberately surveyed the city without his "advisors." He wanted to look with God's eyes. For us, I think it means exploring our communities without the direction of media, or to not be reactionary to someone's post. Take time to explore/ survey/ investigate (talk with your neighbours) with God's eyes and see just what He has in store.

RESPOND

Lord in troubling times, in confusing times, let us rally to support one another. Let us press into you. Give us eyes to see as you do. Let us return to the foundational prayer, 'your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'

READY TO REPENT

READ

'When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven. Then I said, "O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of unfailing love with those who love him and obey his commands, listen to my prayer! Look down and see me praying night and day for your people Israel. I confess that we have sinned against you. Yes, even my own family and I have sinned! We have sinned terribly by not obeying the commands, decrees, and regulations that you gave us through your servant Moses.' (Nehemiah 1:4-7)

REFLECT

In yesterday's devotion I encouraged everyone to read through the book of Nehemiah, or at least the first four chapters. I want to look at another piece that has stood out and challenged me for some time. This is more about the heart of this man Nehemiah.

Pre-Nehemiah the nation of Israel is overrun, conquered. Most of the people are taken into exile, into forced service for the conquering nation, slaves. This group included nobility, the extremely talented in crafts and trade, as well as general labourers. This was long before Nehemiah's birth. Nehemiah was actually born in captivity, in exile. Which means, that none of the actions taken against Israel, the captivity, the slavery, the exile is his fault. He wasn't even born yet, there is no way, fully impossible for any responsibility to be placed at his feet for what had happened to his nation. Guilt free, and now he had worked his way up in service in the royal court. He appears to have a cordial relationship with the King. Maybe even pulled himself up by his own bootstraps.

We see a broken and repentant man. Not blaming things on others, not justifying himself. He even takes personal responsibility, 'We have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house...' Repentance is such a beautiful thing. The fruit of repentance is reconciliation and redemption. Why then are we so afraid to repent? Why are we so resistant to taking any of the responsibility? I hear excuses like shaming. But isn't it pride that keeps our hearts from being broken like Nehemiah's? Is it not pride that keeps us from repentance?

RESPOND

Take time to repent and give thanks for God's grace.

TAKING THE TIME TO SAY THANK YOU!

READ

'We always thank God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ when we pray for you because we have heard of your faith in Jesus Christ and of the love you have for all the saints the faith and love that springs from the whole that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of Truth the Gospel that has come to you.'

(Colossians 1:3-6)

REFLECT

Has someone ever come up to you and said because of what your 'influence and example has been my life was changed and now I feel God has called me to do something.' When this happens, we get so excited about it that we want to tell everyone. We want to write them a letter of encouragement and celebration when we hear what they are doing. This is exactly what Paul is writing here to the Colossians.

So often we take for granted the influence people have had in our lives. We forget to say thank you, we forget to celebrate other's ministry, and we so very often focus on ourselves rather than those who have given of themselves. The opposite is also true, we can become offended when others do not recognise what we have given.

Moving BEYOND ME allows me the privilege of giving thanks to God for those who have shown me the way but also allows me to take the opportunity to simply say thank you!

Why not write a letter of Celebration to someone?

RESPOND

Give thanks to God for those He has used to draw you closer to himself.

LET US IN

READ

'When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the Lord your God.' (Leviticus 23.22)

REFLECT

Fasting is the central practice of Lent. In various shapes and measures, our fast through the 40 days of Lent is an imitation of the 40 days Jesus spent alone and hungry in the desert. Jesus's fast, in turn, was in imitation of the fast his favourite prophet, Isaiah called:

'Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to lose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?'

Fasting is more than skipping meals or doing without ice cream. Above all, fasting is about repenting of injustice and setting about untying the yokes of oppression. Perhaps then, as we imitate Jesus's Isaiah fast, we should listen to the even older command of Leviticus: *do not reap the edges of your field.*

But we are not farmers, most of us. Nor are we even grocers with the ability to donate day-old food to a food bank. We are asked to restrain ourselves, in order to make room for others. Perhaps God is asking us today: *do not reap the edges of your lives.*

Instead of maximising our own material security, God asks us to make space for the poor and the foreigners living among us. God asks us to share. God asks us to *do without in order to do for.* To move from a self-centred attitude to a BEYOND ME life.

May our fasting and our praying, then, be the beginning of a refusal to reap the edges of our lives, opening our lives to the presence of the poor and the foreigner residing among us. For we were once strangers and foreigners, and God chose to let us in.

ASK, SEEK, & KNOCK

READ

'Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you.' (Matthew 7:7)

REFLECT

Prayer connects our weakness to the endless strength of our heavenly Father. That's prayer in a nutshell. We don't ask, seek, and knock because He's reluctant. We pursue God's kingdom on our knees and knuckles because God is hiding something for us. He's not hiding something from us.

Jesus was the 'first fruits' of Heaven on Earth. Men and women whose knees and knuckles are marked by kneeling and knocking have also been the very ones whom God used to bring the kingdom of heaven to Earth. This is prayer's purpose: Heaven on Earth.

If we desire to be marked by prayer, we must take Jesus' words from Matt 18:18 to heart: *'I tell you, whatever you bind on Earth will be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'* He also said in the Sermon on the Mount: *'Ask, and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.'* Jesus wanted us to grasp the privilege and responsibility we have of standing with Him in bringing Heaven to Earth.

How do we accomplish this more practically? Scripture makes it clear: 1) Ask 2) Seek 3) Knock.

If we look at prayer as "rubbing a magical lamp" we miss the context of much of what Jesus taught on the Kingdom. His teaching often reflected a process.

Instantaneous answers only exist in myths and movies. God's not a genie. He's a gardener. He works within the process of seed, time and harvest. Therefore, let's use these three distinct but interconnected seasons of prayer.

RESPOND

Lord, help me to pray without ceasing, asking, seeking, and knocking in accordance with your teaching on prayer.

PRAYING FULLY

READ

'Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...' (Mt. 6:9)

REFLECT

Jesus goes up onto a mountain and teaches his disciples. In the middle of this long teaching, Jesus teaches the disciples about prayer. He begins, 'hallowed be your name' (6:9). The first quality of Jesus' prayer is AWE. Jesus teaches the disciples to acknowledge God's holiness; to be in awe of the God to whom they are speaking.

The next quality of Jesus' prayer is SUBMISSION to God's authority. Jesus teaches the disciples to pray 'Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' (6:10). He teaches that prayers are to include an element that says, 'Not my will, not what I wish for, but Your will be done.'

Next Jesus teaches that prayer should include ASKING. The next part of the prayer is 'Give us this day our daily bread' (6:11). In addition, the prayer closes with 'And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one' (6:13). Much of the time, our prayer lives focus on asking God for things. This makes sense—we have needs, and often we have hurts. However, this is only a portion of the prayer that Christ teaches his disciples. We must remember that asking God for things should only be a part of our overall prayer life.

Then Jesus teaches the importance of REPENTANCE in our prayer lives. He teaches his disciples to pray 'Forgive us our debts' (6:12a). We are a broken people, and we have this pattern of sin in our lives. Part of our prayer life should involve asking God to forgive us when we sin against him.

The final theme in Jesus' prayer is FORGIVENESS. Immediately after Jesus says this he says, 'as we also have forgiven our debtors' (6:12b). He then closes the prayer by saying 'For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses' (6:14-15). Jesus is tough when talking about forgiveness. We cannot expect to be forgiven when we sin against God if we do not forgive others when they sin against us. We need to understand that we are sinful in the same way that those who wrong us are sinful. Choose to spend time forgiving those who have harmed and hurt you.

IT'S HIS NOT YOURS

READ

'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it. The world and all its people belong to him. For he laid the earth's foundation on the seas and built it on the ocean depths.' (Read Psalm 24)

REFLECT

When we know it and when we forget, the earth – in its entirety – belongs to the Lord. Abraham Kuyper personalised it for humanity this way:

'There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!'

That is true, whether we recognise it or not...but workloads pile up, kids run late, deadlines for work ambush us, social calendars tangle, little meddling screws need tightening around the house, and we forget. Suddenly the world only feels like mostly, or maybe even partially, Christ's.

Self-centred living, self-serving priorities, and self-oriented loves work to carve out slivers of the world where I can be sovereign. Truth be told, I'm terrible at it, but I find it difficult to admit – much less give it back. Lent is that spring cleaning for the soul, the season to look BEYOND ME, where we look at the suffering and sacrifice of Jesus and join him. His sacrifice won him the world back from brokenness. So, as an aside – it's his twice: once in creation, and again in redemption. Our sacrifices and reflection during Lent don't buy us a portion of his world. Instead, it's a chance to let him remind us, how very much it really is his, and how very good he is at caring for us in it.

RESPOND

Lord Jesus, in this quiet moment, I am reminded that I am small, but belonging to you, I am not helpless. You are the King of all creation, Ruler of history, global and my own. Would you use this season of Lent to remind me of your good and gracious care. Remind me of the simplicity and rest that come from entrusting myself and everything in my life – things for which I am responsible, and the things I am not – to you. Let us spend more time quietly seeking you, shunning the temptations and sins that have piled up with inattention over time.

A FAITH THAT WILL NOT LET GO!

READ

'Oh, that my words could be recorded. Oh, that they could be inscribed on a monument, carved with an iron chisel, and filled with lead, engraved forever in the rock. But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and he will stand upon the earth at last. And after my body has decayed, yet in my body I will see God! I will see him for myself. Yes, I will see him with my own eyes.

I am overwhelmed at the thought!' (Job 19:23-27)

REFLECT

Lent is a season in the church calendar that offers a great opportunity to stop, reflect and pray as we seek the heart of God for our own lives and for the lives of those that God has placed around us.

I like to go back from time to time and read through the story of Job and reflect on the incredible faith he displays. Job was a man of prayer with an incredible faith in God. He prayed for his family daily. As a priest for his family, he also sacrificed burnt offerings on behalf of his family. His entire life was saturated with an incredible faith throughout. Words that were used to describe Job were blameless, upright, feared God and shunned evil. God Himself said of Job, *'There is no one on earth like him.'* As a test of Job's unwavering faith, the attacks on his physical body, the loss of his family, the loss of his possessions and the scathing remarks from his 'friends.'

In the end God instructs Job's 'friends' in finding deliverance for all of the accusatory things they had spoken to Job. Job performs as their 'priest' as they find forgiveness.

RESPOND

God, grant me the grace like that of Job as he wrestled with adversity but kept on pressing in to know You.

FOR THEY

READ

'A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over... who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all. Looking at his disciples, he said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."' (Luke 6:19-21)

REFLECT

Someone has said beatitudes are a stethoscope set on the beating heart of God. The poor, the humble, the peacemakers, they are near to God's heart, and they will not ultimately be abandoned to those who take advantage of them and grind their lives into the earth. God promises them the future: the kingdom. You can think of the two sides of each beatitude as the flow of blood in and out of the heart, and that little repeated phrase —'**for they**'—as the beat.

In the beatitudes, Jesus draws the lives of the poor into the life of God. A promise that the prayer of the abandoned will not go unanswered: *'Lord when you come into your kingdom, remember me.'* That where anyone is being taken advantage of because they are weak, God is there with them and as the weak one. That where a refugee is scapegoated by the wealthy, warm, and well-fed, and cast out with nowhere to go, God is there with them and as the one being cast out.

Because Jesus was fully God, the poor can be confident that the Kingdom belongs to them not just because God likes them, but also because they are like God. God is humble. God is meek. Though rich, God became poor for our sakes. God is a peacemaker. God fled a homeland in fear of violence. God was persecuted for righteousness' sake on the cross.

The transformational heartbeat of the love of God: this is the mystery of our faith. This heartbeat gives life to Scripture's written declarations of the gracious kindness of God. This heartbeat frees the poor to struggle for justice and calls us to join them, for we do not serve an idol who depends on the power we can gather by trampling others.

RESPOND

Lord, your Son gave his life trusting the promise that the kingdom belongs to the poor. May you cause that same Spirit to dwell in us.



PUT IT DOWN

READ

'Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.'
(Hebrews 12:1)

REFLECT

'Gonna lay down my burdens down by the river side...' has been sung since the American Civil War days. Regardless of the singer's setting or situation, the reference is about setting down what weighs us down. Burdens are a distraction, a nuisance, a diversion, anything that gets in the way of us truly connecting with God. The passage from Hebrews places us right in the middle of the cross country race called life. Spectators who have already finished the race are cheering us on, calling attention to their journey of faith, giving us hope and encouragement.

We're standing there dressed in the trendiest running gear and shoes ready to dash. The starter pistol fires, and we head like a herd in one direction. But we struggle to gain momentum and hit a decent pace. Each hand holds a suitcase full of habits and hobbies. Our backpack bulks out from the creature comforts we feel we cannot live without. Although equipped with the latest wireless technology, the plethora of chargers become entangled with our confused feet.

We have an endurance race to run! God has called us! And equipped us with what we need to complete the race. But for goodness sake, we call into question God's choice of outfit and decide we must accessorise. Distractions. Doubt. Start singing. 'Gonna lay down my burdens...'

Want something more contemporary? Feel you are being judged by the crowd instead of encouraged? David Crowder invites us to lay down our burdens and lay down our shame... come as you are.

RESPOND

God, you are the great designer and have everything laid out before us. Forgive me as I waste time doubting and second guessing you. Please receive my burdens, those things that weigh me down and hinder my ability to run the race.

WHO DO WE FOLLOW

READ

'I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.' (1 Cor 1:10ff)

REFLECT

As a dad, one of my greatest joys when the teens were little was to watch my them play together without fighting. It didn't happen as often as I would like, but when it did I just wanted to take a picture and cherish the moment forever. I think this is often how God feels when he sees his children get along and work together. It is one thing merely to tolerate one another, but when we actively pursue relationships with other people in God's family, especially those we might have difficulty finding commonality with, I believe God is pleased. I like to think that this heart and attitude brings a smile to God's face.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, *'I wish you would all agree... some say 'I follow Paul,' or 'I follow Apollos,' or 'I follow Cephas,' or 'I follow Christ.'* I have been reminded recently in some of my friendships when discussing holiness how easy it is for us to still say, *'I follow Brengle', or 'I follow Wesley,' or 'I follow Coutts,' or 'I follow the Pope.'* It is interesting how even saying, *'I don't follow any denomination, but only follow Jesus'* even works to put us into a corner and can bring about division.

Paul reminds us that Christ and his gospel is not divided. Yes, there may be room for different interpretations and teachings, but at the end of the day we are all part of the same family and are part of the Body of Christ. It is my prayer that we continue to seek out things that unite us rather than things that keep us separated as we actively work together to build up the body of Christ, and not to tear it down.

RESPOND

Jesus, as you prayed that your followers would be unified help me to seek unity over division.

MERCY, NOT SACRIFICE

READ

'As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at his tax collector's booth. "Follow me and be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed him.' (Matthew 9:9)

REFLECT

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?' On hearing this, Jesus said, *'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'* (Matt 9:9-13)

This passage reveals so very much about the person of Jesus and his mission. As I read and reflect on this passage, these are some of the things that challenge me:

Jesus calls people of all walks of life to follow him, even tax collectors.

When Jesus calls someone and they respond, he appears to be his desire of entering into their lives, their houses, their networks of friends and acquaintances.

Jesus is not a respecter of persons. He is unconcerned about what people think, about what is proper. He is counter-cultural. He goes right to the heart of things, seeking only to be marching to the drum of his Father.

Jesus has the solution, the treatment, the cure for what ails every person, just as a doctor has what a sick person needs. He is the divine physician. Jesus wants us to reflect deeply on the meaning of his Father's words from the prophet Hosea *'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'*

In this Scripture if we seek to go deeper and discover Jesus' very personhood, his desire to have a friendship with us, his deep love and mercy for us as people, as his brothers and sisters, then the possibilities for joining him in his work are so much more sustainable and effective for the world that he created and loves so much.

RESPOND

Jesus, draw me day by day into a deeper encounter with you as my Lord. Remove whatever blinders I have allowed to limit my view of what is possible in my relationship with you.

NEW LIFE THROUGH THE RESURRECTION

READ

'But when Jesus heard about it he said, "Lazarus's sickness will not end in death. No, it happened for the glory of God so that the Son of God will receive glory from this."' (John 11:4)

REFLECT

As Jesus' friend Lazarus had died his sisters felt that they would not see their brother again. But Jesus assured them if they would believe they would see their brother again. They said, 'I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother shall rise again.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believes in me, though he were dead, shall live, Lazarus, come forth.'

The moment you and I believe in Jesus, we pass from death into life in him. We move from thinking and focusing on today and start viewing life with an attitude of BEYOND ME allowing the Holy Spirit to continually transforming us a little more each day.

RESPOND

Lord, help me to live in the eternal choosing to allow your Holy Spirit to continually transform me from who I was to who I am in Christ.

PICK IT UP

READ

'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.'
(Galatians 5:22-23)

REFLECT

How are you doing with your New Year's resolution? Still avoiding cake? Attending the gym 4 days a week? Praying for an hour every morning? If you are succeeding, Congratulations!!

If like me, you are falling short of that goal set 8 weeks ago, fear not! Lent is here! Many Christians follow the invitation to observe this season in ways that will draw them closer to God. A few days back you were encouraged to put down a burden. Today's invitation is to pick up a positive habit as a replacement. For some it is a matter of reframing. Want to quit eating cake? How about, 'I will be eating a piece of fruit before anything else.' Trouble showing up 4 days a week? Consider scheduling a date with yourself and your favourite treadmill every Tuesday and Thursday before work.

Prayer time? Reread the scripture. It is easy to get lost in the trees of devising a detailed plan to lost weight. The 9 Fruit of the Spirit are intangibles. If diet and exercise are needed to get your personal fruit basket in shape, go for it!

Pray while walking, ask God to develop fruit rather than focusing on failure. Choose to look BEYOND ME and allow the Spirit to increase your capacity to grow spiritual fruit.

RESPOND

Lord Jesus. We live in a world where success is measured in physical fitness and image, instead of spiritual growth. Guide us to a space of clarity where we can adopt a new habit which glorifies you.

REMEMBERING GOD'S PROMISES

READ

'Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; so she said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So, after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.' (Genesis 16:1-4)

REFLECT

Reading Genesis and travelling with these early stories - stories of migration, of promise, of sin and family. The season of Lent is also infused with these themes, and it's the story of Sarai and Hagar that has hit me hardest during these scriptural pondering.

Sarai and Abram have already received God's promise of descendants, as many as the stars in the sky. They've seen God's blessings in their own long lives. And yet, here they are manipulating God's plan because they cannot imagine it working as promised. Sarai turns her slave Hagar over to her husband as a surrogate for motherhood. Abram goes along. The child of Hagar and Abram is born and the resulting conflict rolls through generations. All because they could not wait on God. All because they took matters into their own hands... or rather, forced their own will on others, others like Hagar, who find themselves on the receiving end of more powerful peoples' anxieties, doubts, and need for control.

I find myself wondering this season about how our own inability to trust in God's promises visits hardship and suffering on the lives of others. Where my own impatience with God's timeline or my doubt in God's plans creates and multiplies pain in the lives of those around me. I draw hope from the end of the story - God turns even Hagar and Ishmael's pain into blessing. No matter how we damage others with our lack of trust, God still creates good for them. They are blessed despite our brokenness.

RESPOND

God, help me to honestly repent my own pain, doubts, and lack of trust in you so that I do not put it on others. Help me to stand on your promises.

WHEN DOES GOD MOVE?

READ

'The Lord turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?"' (Judges 6:14)

REFLECT

Gideon was hiding in a winepress, a deep pit meant for crushing grapes, not for threshing wheat, which is what Gideon was trying to do. He was in the pit hiding from the Midianites, the neighbouring bullies who were bent on stealing Gideon's crops. Gideon was helpless and hiding.

When does God move? I want him to move when I have a handle on the situation, when I see a clear path to the solution. I want him to do the thing I ask him to do, just when I ask him to do it. But God often comes to me when, like Gideon, I am in the pit, helpless and hiding. 'Go in the strength that you have. Am I not sending you?'

I don't like feeling helpless, but I am thinking that God is honoured, and that I am accepting reality when I accept my helplessness. I love the Lord's response to Gideon. Go, step out of the pit, just as you are, helpless and hiding, I am sending you. Nothing more is required. Then Gideon goes, doubting and fearful, but he goes. And God moves.

RESPOND

Father, I feel helpless, and I want to hide. Help me to give myself to you, just as I am.

ALL ABOUT GOD

READ

'When you fast, do not look sad as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.' (Mat 6.16-18)

REFLECT

A few years ago I really messed up Lent—and I have Facebook to blame for it (not really...it was my fault, but Facebook definitely played a part).

I had chosen to give up all coffee other than water as a Lenten fast, and I announced that decision on my Facebook page. This drew some attention from several friends and acquaintances who 'liked' this decision and encouraged me in the comment section. This would have been all well and good, had I just made that one announcement and appreciated those responses. But I had to take it one step further by posting a few days later about how challenging this fast was for me and asking my friends to pray for me.

This is when I blew it. I had completely lost sight of what Lent is all about— focusing on devotion and faithfulness to God and God's ways—and instead I had made it all about myself. Thankfully, an old friend gently nudged me into repentance by posting the reference for the verses above. I felt embarrassed but was thankful for his correction. From then on, I fasted from posting about my fasting.

I continue to be thankful for that simple comment on my self-centred Facebook post, as it is now a yearly reminder that observing a Holy Lent is not really about me at all. No, this season of intentional fasting, prayer, and service is all about drawing near to God. It's not about accolades and a pat on the back. It's about honouring God, which is rewarding in and of itself.

RESPOND

Lord, I thank you for the gentle reminder to look BEYOND ME and to focus on JESUS in this season of Lent.

SEEING IN THE MUNDANE

READ

'Can anything good come from Nazareth?' (John 1:46)

REFLECT

Nathanael's response to Philip's telling him that he found the Messiah is worth pondering. The Gospel of John is filled with accounts of people discovering that Jesus was not who they expected him to be. He was both less than they anticipated and far more than they had hoped. Wondrous things would spring forth from lowly Nazareth.

We may take some satisfaction in our after-the-fact awareness that we now have this paradox down pat. But the lessons of John's Gospel can and do puncture the inflated expectations we have of divine arrivals from above. Jesus is in our midst in everyone we meet. He most especially calls out to us in the lives of the poor, the lonely, the downtrodden and the suffering. Whereas we may be accustomed to looking toward the end of life for his arrival, our faith encourages us to open our eyes and look around. It is the hurting of this world that pulls us out of ourselves so as to enter more deeply into the life of Jesus.

RESPOND

Jesus, so often I look for you in the supernatural and miss you in the mundane. Allow me the opportunity to see you in the public place alongside the prayer closet.

REMAINING

READ

'...decide today whom you will serve...' (Joshua 24:15)

REFLECT

Joshua challenges the Israelites on their tendency to waffle between serving the true God or the pagan gods around them. And he makes a strong personal commitment: *'As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.'*

We do well to ask ourselves, Have I put something other than God in first place? Material things, my career, entertainment, sports, a relationship?

The culture around us keeps promising that these "gods" will fill up the empty places in our hearts. But they always leave us disappointed. Jesus insists that to be his disciple, we must realise that he is our God and nourish our souls in relationship with Him.

Even among the disciples, some can't deal with this; they walk away. But Jesus does not back down. He says to his chosen apostles, "Do you also want to leave?" And here Peter gets it right: *'Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!'* (John 6:67-68). Let's resolve today: We are going to stay--with Jesus Christ and with His Church, his Body.

RESPOND

Jesus, so often I struggle to follow you. Society seems to unconsciously cause me to focus on earthly things rather than on you, help me in this season of Lent to look BEYOND ME and to focus on following you.

IMPARTING WISDOM

READ

'If any one of you falls short in wisdom, they should ask God for it, and it will be given them.' (James 1:5)

'But the wisdom that comes from above is first holy, then peaceful, gentle, compliant, filled with mercy and good fruits, unbiased and sincere.' (James 3:17)

REFLECT

I grew up in a non-practicing Roman Catholic household thinking that Lent was just a time of self-denial and punishing yourself. But I now see that Lent is so much more.

As we remove distractions from our life, God wants to fill us with Himself. As James says, He wants to give to us His wisdom, which is very different from the worlds. As you recall when King Solomon became king, he asked God for wisdom in order to rule his people. Wisdom is a gift that God wants to give to us so that we can serve others.

RESPOND

Jesus, you taught your disciples that when the Spirit came, they would know all truth. In these days of Lent send your Spirit of Truth to enlighten and give me understanding beyond my natural thought processes.

WAITING

READ

'They that wait upon the Lord will renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they run and not faint.'
(Isaiah 40:31)

REFLECT

I am in the season on counting the days until a big event in life. Each Saturday I look in the diary and notice that the weeks are going down, 40, 39, 38...30, 29,28...22,21,20. Alongside the marking of the dates is the excitement and anticipation of what is to come but equally the challenge of waiting can be hard work.

We have all had those things in life that we anticipate. Perhaps a holiday, a trip of a lifetime, or even a ministry opportunity that we have wanted for a long time, and it does not take long for us to realise that God has gone before and opening up our path as we walked through each of our days. Days that are so full and rich with unexpected treasures, both in the people we meet and the places we visit.

G. Campbell Morgan once wrote:

'I arrive nowhere but that God has been there before me.'

We quickly need to adopt this mentality as the theme for our life's journey. Waiting on God each morning for our day and receiving the fullness of what He has given and where He will lead brings us a deep inner peace and freedom, builds our faith and trust in Him and develops a greater capacity in us of gratefulness and praise something we strive to keep in our walk with Him.

Today...I did not search - I watched, I did not ask - I listened, I did not run - I wait!

RESPOND

Father, today You taught me so much. May each of our days be spent watching and waiting on a Father who loves us so.

HOW DO WE KNOW IF IT'S TRUE?

READ

'God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses...' (Acts 2:32)

REFLECT

As a corps officer, I am often asked 'How do you really know that Jesus died and was resurrected?' None of us who are alive now have actually seen the risen Lord. How do we really know that what we believe as Christians is true? We know that prior to Jesus' death the disciples argued about many things including who was going to be the greatest among them. They got frightened when Jesus was arrested and deserted him and denied even knowing him. Yet, when we turn to the book of Acts after the resurrection of Jesus, we see these followers acting in a very different manner.

In Acts 2 we read of how when Peter stood to address the crowd in Jerusalem at Pentecost – the other 11 disciples stood with him – they were one body. As he began to speak to the crowd that day, he had courage and power that was non-existent earlier. He spoke of Jesus' death and resurrection and said 'God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.' They all risked their lives that day, because they could have been arrested and killed for what they said. Yet, they stood as one and a key verse is in Acts. 2:32 *'God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses.'* They were transformed by their encounter with the risen Christ, and they had courage and boldness to testify to what they had seen and heard – not just on this day, but for the rest of their lives. And because of their faith the church came into being and we are here today because of what they said and did. We have the assurance that it is all true because of the remarkable changes in those earliest followers.

The question for us is – How are we different because of our encounter with the risen Lord? What kind of witness are we every day of our lives?

RESPOND

Jesus, may my encounter with you influence how I live my life every day. May people realise that you are truth because I choose to live BEYOND ME.

BECOMING LIKE JESUS

READ

'And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.' (2 Corinthians 3:18)

REFLECT

What began as an eternity-shaking, immediate transfer from darkness to light, from death to life, at the time of salvation, continues as a progressive work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The goal of the Spirit's work is to glorify the Father and the Son.

Followers of Jesus are being transformed—progressively, degree by degree—into the image of Christ. That is God's will for us. That we be progressively conformed to the image of Christ, that we might reflect his glory. We are to become like Christ and grow in our capacity to show Christ by being like Christ. To say it another way, we are transformed into his image by looking at his glory. You become like what you constantly view.

If we want to show Christ so that people can see him in us, our strategy must be to see him. To see him for who he really is. To fix our gaze on him and look to him and think about him and put Jesus before us again and again. This is the key to becoming like him. Seeing is the key to showing.

RESPOND

Holy Spirit, continue the work of transformation in me, that I might be made more into the image of Jesus Christ. Remove the objects of my gaze that filter out and diminish the glory of Jesus. Open my eyes that I might see his glory fully and be fully changed by it. And may this change in me become an amplifier of the glory of Jesus.

PREPARE THE WAY

READ

'John the Baptist is sent to prepare the way for the Lord. He does this by "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"' (Luke 3:3)

REFLECT

In her book, *Openness Unhindered*, Butterfield writes,

'Of course, there is only one thing to do when you meet the living God. You must fall on your face and repent of your sins. Repentance is bittersweet business. Repentance is not just a conversion exercise. It is the posture of the Christian. Just like a dancer's body finds its points and an equestrian incorporates her body weight into the movement of the horse, the Christian learns how to melt her will into God's. Repentance is the threshold to God. When heat meets ice, the solid substance liquefies completely. Repentance liquefies the will of the flesh. Repentance is our daily fruit, our hourly washing, our minute-by-minute wakeup call, our reminder of God's creation, Jesus' blood, and the Holy Spirit's comfort. Repentance is the only no-shame solution to a renewed Christian conscience because it proves the obvious; that God was right all along.'

This is why we seek to live humbly and confess our sins to each other and to God. We are preparing the way for Jesus to bring us his mercy and forgiveness.

RESPOND

Dear Father, thank you that you have given me the rhythm of regular repentance. Help me to cooperate with you as you do your work in me.

PAYING THE PRICE FOR ME

READ

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest. Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.

In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them.

To you they cried and were rescued; in you they trusted and were not put to shame. But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by mankind and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they make mouths at me; they wag their heads; "He trusts in the Lord; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!"

(Psalm 22:1-8)

REFLECT

Long before the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus, David wrote of the suffering and pain which the Messiah would undergo for the sake of His people. We are not a stranger to feeling forsaken by God. It is the natural outcome of the sin which we've chosen. It is the price we pay for 'loving the darkness rather than the light' (Jn 3:19).

But it was an experience Jesus had never felt until that moment on the cross when he took our sins upon himself. God's perfect holiness, unable to look upon such sin, turns His face away and Jesus is left truly alone.

As lent continues consider:

What it means for Jesus to carry your sin.

How have we 'mocked' our Lord by our action or inaction

What does the fact that, God is holy mean to your daily life?

How might you live life more aware of the depth of Christ's love for you?

What can you do today to put this to work?

RESPOND

Jesus, so often we romanticise the cross and forget the real pain and separation you experienced from the Father. This Lent season help me look BEYOND ME and consider the pain my sin placed upon you.

BEING OVERJOYED

READ

'Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.' (1 Peter 4:12-13)

REFLECT

I've been thinking about taking up my cross lately. Why would anyone want to endure pain of any kind, much less a fiery ordeal? Well, it can't be for the joy of being in pain, that's for sure!

I think about the reason Jesus chose to endure the cross. He loved us so much that He chose to go to the place of the greatest suffering. He wanted to be in the place He was most needed and least experienced. He did not want the pain or rejection. But if that's what it took to love, He was willing to go there. He went so that our lives would be transformed by His being with us in our pain and transforming it with His love.

Am I willing to look for places where people are suffering and most in need of God and choose to be there? Being with hurting people is not easy. I get hurt! Talk about fiery ordeals! Not to mention that I might be out of my comfort zone!

I will only do it if it I am there with God, where their painful circumstances can be transformed because He and I are there together. I want to be closer to Him, work more as His partner, and see Him work in powerful, healing, freeing ways. If that is where He is and how He works, I will take the fiery ordeals. They will become my cause for joy. I want to not just be joyful but overjoyed! God's glory is revealed as He transforms lives through love. It doesn't get any better than that! It's worth whatever it takes.

RESPOND

Father, show me where you are working. Help me be willing to enter the lives of those who are experiencing pain, even if it is uncomfortable or even painful for me. Thank you that the overwhelming joy of being with you there is worth it. Help me to see your glory revealed as I share your love.

SUFFER AND HATED FOR THE SAKE OF CHRIST?

READ

'If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world — therefore the world hates you.' (John 15:19)

REFLECT

During Lent as we consider the suffering of Christ, does it shock us that so many have hated Him? Our Saviour, who only came to reconcile our relationship with God, was spat upon and ridiculed, mistrusted by those in authority, and reviled by the crowds. What did Jesus do to deserve such animosity?

Considering this I find it shocking how desperately the church longs to be loved by this world. To be fair, I think our motive is that people will remain open to following Jesus. And certainly, we are not called to be horrible in Jesus' name and write the world off, quoting the words above. But sometimes I wonder if our need to be liked means that we do not stand out in the eyes of this world? We are just another voice among millions with nothing to differentiate us from the multitude of other cultural voices crying out for everyone's attention.

Jesus lived and spoke with the purest of hearts and a profound love for ALL of humanity, yet His life and actions led to His ultimate suffering and death. His words to us are 'I have chosen you out of the world — therefore the world hates you.' I realise these thoughts can stir up a lot of feelings and are deserving of more dialogue, but ultimately, I ask – are we willing to suffer and be hated for the sake of Christ?

RESPOND

Lord, I do not want to be hated for being hateful, but I do want to be willing to suffer and be hated as one who is striving to be a faithful and loving witness to You.

A STORY OF RETURNING

READ

“I will leave this place and go to my father and say, “Father I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men.” So, he left the place and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him.” (Luke 15:18-20)

REFLECT

The Christian story is one of returning. We have been and are always being invited back by God, to return to our Creator. We are invited back despite what we have done. We are beckoned into worship by God. Our loving Father longs for our return. As Christians, we strive to be the best we can, to live our lives in accordance with Scripture with all the love God has placed on our hearts and as Christians we fall short of this goal. God’s invitation back to His loving arms, his love and rejoicing of us, is not dependent on our actions.

The story of the Prodigal Son is a story of returning. The son returns to the father and the father rejoices. Here we have a father moved with compassion, gentleness and patience. A father who celebrates his son coming home!

But what of the son? What were the son’s motivations to return to his father? Was he truly repentant and broken? Were his motives pure? No. A look at the story shows the son was hungry and wanted something from his father. He wanted to be fed. He had a speech prepared for his father, nice words that would hopefully get him back in favour with his dad. The amazing part of the story is that he did not even have to say those words. His motives didn’t matter. He had chosen to return and oh how the Father rejoiced! He RAN to meet him. He recognised his son from far away. The father did not need words or pure motives. The father longed for the returning.

Our Father in Heaven longs for our returning. We get so trapped in our own shortcomings, our own desires, our own shame and guilt and we make our faith so complicated. Our responsibility is to return to God. When we return, our God runs to embrace us and gives us the love and peace we so desire.

RESPOND

What steps in prayer do I need to take to return to the Father?

SHELTER IN A STORM

READ

'Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty. This I declare about the Lord: He alone is my refuge, my place of safety; he is my God, and I trust him.' (Psalm 91:1-2)

REFLECT

We've had quite a few storms in recent weeks. There were downpours of rain and then very strong windstorms brought down trees, even near the quarters. I sat and watched as the trees almost seemed to bend in the middle as the winds carried off anything that was not tied down. We usually don't get this level of severe weather in our area, but when it comes it is amazing to see the power behind the storm.

The eye of the storm is the place of peace and calm. There is safety in the midst of the raging winds that circle around the eye. The Lord is like that to us. In the midst of whatever storms may be raging in our lives, we can find peace and hope with Jesus. He is our rock and fortress that will protect us from the storms that try to destroy us. May we always look BEYOND ME and know that we can find safety in the loving arms of Jesus.

RESPOND

Lord, in the storms I am facing in life this day I ask you to help me see that I am protected in your love and by your grace.

IMITATION

READ

'Have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had...' (Philippians 2:5)

REFLECT

Christ's humility sets a clear example that we are called upon to imitate in everyday living. There are a lot of voices calling out to you every day. It is important for us to know where those voices are coming from. We are given a good starting point in the verses listed in Philippians 2.

As we press forward in following Christ are we:

- ...Experiencing encouragement?
- ...Receiving comfort from His love?
- ...Common sharing in the Spirit?
- ...Tenderness and Compassion?

As we have received, we in turn are called to give out: (with the same mind of Christ)

- ...Same mind
- ...Love
- ...Unity
- ...Without selfish ambition
- ...Value others above yourselves
- ...Look to the interests of others, not your own

BE IMITATOR'S OF CHRIST & MOVE BEYOND ME!

RESPOND

To be like Jesus, this hope possesses me...

EXPANSE OF THE KINGDOM

READ

'May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.'
(Matthew 6:10)

REFLECT

Your Kingdom come, Your will be done... do we mean it? We often overlook this part of the Lord's Prayer as we hurry to ask for our 'daily bread' needs to be met. Jesus calls for our perspective to be changed, that we would be focused on honouring the Father and praying for His Kingdom to come and for His will to be done. We certainly can agree with Jesus' sentiment and hope for God's Kingdom to be active and for His will to be obeyed, but are we doing anything about it? Sometimes we pray that part and expect nothing of it because it is a tradition we do, just words memorised. Oftentimes we pray that part and expect God to do all the work – that His Kingdom would come, and His will would be done in someone else's life. Perhaps Jesus' intention was that and more!

Will we pray for His Kingdom to come, and how we can be a part of the expansion? Can we pray that His will would be done in our lives as we obey His call to follow? Perhaps we can obey His will as we live in Christ's love and grace, extending that same love and grace with all those we come in contact. We have a response of action to those two lines of prayer. God will certainly expand His Kingdom and share His will, but it happens through our involvement as members of the Kingdom and followers of His will.

How are we helping expand His Kingdom? How are we listening to and following His will to share the love and grace of Christ? What lessons have you learned helping you to look BEYOND ME in your head and heart?

RESPOND

Father, you are truly holy and amazing. We thank You for Your gift of love and grace. God, may Your Kingdom come upon this earth as we look to help it expand into the hearts and lives of those that need Your grace. We also ask that Your will would be done in our lives and through our lives as we follow the example of Your Son, Jesus. You have loved us and called us to love, so give us the ability to do so unconditionally. You have extended grace to us through Jesus; may we offer that same grace to others. Thank You always, God.

FOLLOW ME!

READ

Then Jesus told him, "Follow me." (John 21:19)

REFLECT

He knew He was a merciful and forgiving friend, this Jesus, he had travelled with Him for three years. He was even the first of the twelve to declare Him Messiah!

Of course, Jesus had forgiven him, but was this some curse Jesus had left with him? No! He would never do that! He loved them, look at how we found Him on the beach after that awful day alive again and cooking breakfast for us for heaven's sake...and what about all the fish? We had fished all night and caught nothing! and then so many fish we almost sunk under the weight of them!

But Peter could not get that night out of his head. It seemed so dark, darker than any other night he had known when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus why didn't He fight? Jesus just stood there and even admitted that He was the one they were looking for why did we all run and leave Him? I was so scared! I followed them from a distance and was even in earshot when they questioned Him.

It was so cold, I couldn't get warm, even standing by the fire that others had huddled around. I was so cold! And that woman, why couldn't she just be quiet? why did she keep saying that I was one of His disciples? Why couldn't she just be quiet? I didn't want to lie about it, I don't know why I denied Him? I was just so scared; the words of denial came out before I could stop them and then...

That rooster! That blasted rooster begins to crow. The words Jesus had spoken to me at supper when I swore to Him that I would even die with Him if it came to that! I meant those words, but now his words so loud inside of me with every squawk that comes out of that bird! 'Peter, do you love me? Peter, do you love me? Peter, do you love me?' Of course I love Him -"feed my sheep", He said.

Was it a curse? No, not a curse at all but a reminder. He gave me a daily reminder that keeps me humble knowing how weak I am without Him. Hearing that rooster every morning, a gentle reminder at the breaking of each new day to pick up my own cross, to say no to my will and yes to His. Lord you know I love you.

'Feed my Sheep' – Learn to look BEYOND ME and only to Jesus

NEVER ALONE!

READ

'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.'

(John 14:18-19)

REFLECT

Chapters 14-17 of John's Gospel provide us with unique insight into the concerns of Jesus as He shares with His disciples just hours before His death. Earlier Jesus spoke of His departure from this world that had left His disciples deeply troubled, but now He leaves them with these encouraging words: 'I will not leave you orphaned.' He clarifies this when He says, 'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth... he abides with you, and he will be in you' (John 14:16-17).

The death of Jesus makes it possible to be forgiven of our sin and to be reconciled in our relationship to God, but His death and departure also make something else possible: the intimate presence of the Holy Spirit of God in our lives – moment by moment, day by day, forever. As we meditate upon the suffering and death of Jesus, let us also contemplate the doors that are now flung open to us as a result. One is the door into our heart that is now open to the very presence of God in the form of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit abides in the hearts of all who believe – now and forever.

RESPOND

Jesus, as we contemplate your suffering and death – we are humbled by your sacrifice. We are also encouraged, as your death and resurrection have made eternal life possible – a life given to us daily through the presence of yourself in the Holy Spirit. Spirit of the Living God, be renewed in us today that we might live BEYOND ME in mission, ministry and lifestyle.

RESURRECTION SUNDAY

HOPE IS ALIVE!

READ

*'...the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you...'
(Luke 24:5b-6a)*

REFLECT

The narrative shows us a picture of a group of downtrodden women. The man they had followed, who had brought healing to their physical and emotional hurts, the man who had valued them against everything they knew to be true in society at the time was dead.

The least they could do was to offer the usual rituals of spices and cleansing of the dead body. It was a job that brought closure, a job that would help them process what had happened and release them into the future, but their plans were wrecked.

Jesus wasn't where he should be! Had someone stolen the body? Had the Romans or even the Jewish religious leaders taken the corpse to prevent any further problems for themselves?

Or was what He had said true? In their distress and concern in a dark smelly tomb God shows up! The question, *'Why do you look for the living among the dead?'* invited them to remember his teaching publicly, his comments in the upper room and at other times when they were together only interrupted by the words, 'He is not here, HE HAS RISEN!'

RESPOND

Jesus invites us to know Him as the Resurrected Christ! Spend time in prayer and praise remember that we have hope and can 'Give ↑' because Jesus is alive, death has been defeated, You have rescued me, HALLELUJAH – Jesus is ALIVE!