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"BUT JESUS, OUR HIGH PRIEST, HAS BEEN GIVEN A MINISTRY THAT IS FAR SUPERIOR TO THE OLD PRIESTHOOD, FOR HE IS THE ONE WHO MEDIATES FOR US A FAR BETTER COVENANT WITH GOD, BASED ON BETTER PROMISES."

HEBREWS 8:6 NLT

This Devotional Belongs to:

Cornerstone

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If you are familiar at all with the common observances of Lent, words like "Celebrate" and "Joy" don't seem to have a connection. I've always known Lent to be a somber time of giving things up, fasting, and being reflective for the 40 days leading up to Easter." So, I get why you might think that. Let's talk.

First of all, if you actually count, there are more than 40 days between the start of Lent and Easter. There are 46. There's a reason for that. When the days of Lent are counted, there are exceptions. Sundays are "little Easters" because that is the day Jesus rose from the dead, defeated death once and for all, and walked out as our Forever King. From that day forward, Sundays are always days of celebration for Jesus-followers.

Secondly, the Sunday before Easter is Palm Sunday and Holy Week begins. The Wednesday before ends Lent and Thursday to Saturday of Holy Week is called the Triduum, which is Latin for "three days." It begins with Maundy or Holy Thursday, the day Jesus celebrated the last supper, the Passover meal, with his disciples. They then went to the Garden of Gethsemane where he prayed, and then was betrayed, arrested, and taken to trial. He was scourged and beaten and tried before several authorities all night long. Friday is Good Friday, the day he was crucified, taken from the cross, and put in the borrowed tomb. Holy Saturday or Silent Saturday is the day he lay in the tomb. Those days are not counted in Lent either, leaving 40 days.

The first official mention of the observance of Lent was in 325 AD, recorded in the Councils of Nicaea. They baptized new believers on Easter Sunday, and felt that a 40-day preparation would be helpful. 40 days is a time period noted throughout biblical history, most significantly referring back to Jesus' time in the wilderness before he began his public ministry. The traditional elements of Lent are prayer, fasting, and alms-giving, which means charity, and serving.

So, you may be asking, "What about the joy part? Where's the joy in all of this?" We start the discovery of true joy on our very first day. So, let's go...it's far better than you might think!

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"And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne." Hebrews 12:1b-2

Jesus is our forever example, the one we follow and emulate, and he was marked by purposeful joy. He knew from the very beginning he was here to serve, sacrifice, and die. Even though he faced hostility and pain we cannot imagine, he did it with a settled spirit, treating others with kindness and looking to his Father with perfect trust.

As we follow the steps of Jesus during the original time we now mark as Lent, we see that his behavior was so normal for him; so purposeful and uplifting that no one realized what was about to happen. Even his disciples, the ones he repeatedly told he was going to surrender his life and die, missed it. He didn't act with the negative emotions one would expect from a person who was walking that path. He knew the path he walked led to an unimaginable better for the world he loved.

How did he do it? How did he get through the spiritual, emotional, and physical pain? How did he keep his head up and remain confident despite the ridicule and humiliation heaped on him? Because he never lost his focus on what was ahead. Jesus knew that his faithful Father would not leave him. He knew that God would more than reward his surrender. Jesus knew that Resurrection Day, Easter, was the certain result of faithfulness! The maximum joy to come buoyed him through the storm and struggle.

You know the familiar strains of "Pomp and Circumstance"? That's the song played as students who have labored hard to earn degrees march to when they are officially graduated in recognition of their accomplishments. When my husband and I were in graduate school, we had demanding schedules (we pastored a small, struggling church as well), our finances were wretched, often having no grocery or gas money (but God always came through). Some of the classes were exceedingly difficult—Greek and Hebrew? Really? But we had a deal that helped us. We had a joy-producing habit. Whenever one of us knew we were starting to lose perspective and become discouraged, we would start loudly humming the distinctive strains of "Pomp and Circumstance" and march around the room, quickly laughing. Because of the joy we knew was just ahead of us, because we knew we were on the way to better, we had room and heart for joy in the moment.

Lent is a time for joy! There's a better life because of Jesus and we are going there!

REFLECTION: Who needs the joy from me? Jesus, help me focus on the better ahead!



"Come close to God and he will come close to you." James 4:8

James, a younger brother of Jesus (just to be clear, he was the biological son of both Mary and Joseph, while Jesus was supernaturally conceived by the Holy Spirit, so in essence they were half-brothers) didn't follow Jesus until after the resurrection. In fact, they were confused, disturbed, and embarrassed by his impossibly large claims. Identifying himself as God and talking about his kingdom was making everyone angry, so his mother and brothers went to try to persuade him to calm things down. "He is insane!" they said. (Mark 3:21)

But after Jesus resurrected in power and showed himself many times to his family and followers, James was thoroughly convinced. This was better than he had ever dreamed possible. He became an ardent follower, calling himself "James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." (James 1:11)

James became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. His constant focus was better relationships. The letter by his name directs the Christians to guard their relationships with each other by equality and avoiding favoritism; treating everyone equally regardless of social status or wealth. He highlights the importance of using words carefully, warning against gossip, slander, and using the tongue to hurt others. The letter encourages believers to be humble, readily admit their own faults, and be quick to forgive others. The entire letter emphasizes that true faith is demonstrated through actions, including how we treat others in our relationships.

James knew from his own experiences that none of those directives are natural or easy to fulfill. We need our relationship with God to be our top priority. When we have a better, more focused relationship with God, better relationships will follow. He makes a simple, clear statement about how a better, growing relationship with God happens: "Come close to God and he will come close to you." (James 4:8)

During these next days, this is the goal—come close to God. As we do that, everything else comes into focus. You can come close to God by setting a time each day to talk to him, reflecting on his love for you, and his plan and purpose for your life. You might even want to pick a place for it. Perhaps where you drink your coffee in the morning. Maybe in your bedroom before you leave for the day. It could be in your car before you go in to work. Perhaps it will be best for you to find a guiet place at night before you go to bed. Just make certain you find a time and a place to regularly to "come close to God." These daily devotionals will help you focus better and when you get to Easter, you will find your closeness and confidence much better than when you began.

REFLECTION: When and where will you regularly come close to God? Pray about it.





"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever! Amen." Matthew 6:9-13

The men who followed Jesus observed him closely. When they said "yes" to his call to follow him, they had no real idea what would be ahead of them except that they were thrilled and honored. He was a rabbi, and they saw greatness in him. Who were they? Mostly common fishermen, and a disliked tax collector. Why would he choose them? He was certainly a step ahead of them, and it was an honor to be associated with him.

As they followed him, heard his teaching, witnessed his love for others and experienced his love for them, participated in his miracles, watched and heard him slip away to talk to God—he called him Father—they realized he was truly not like them. He was far better. Everything he did and everything he was, was better. One day about 18 months into following Jesus, the disciples observed his prayer time again, and when he was finished, they asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray!" That was a somewhat unusual request because they were all Jewish boys. From the ages of 5-13, they went to synagogue school before they learned a trade. There they memorized scripture from the Law and the Prophets, learned about all the festivals and feast days, they learned the importance of going to the Temple, and they learned to pray. So why now did they ask Jesus to teach them to pray?

They saw the way he prayed was far better than the way they prayed. He talked to his Father. He had an intimate close relationship with him. We call the prayer he taught them "The Lord's Prayer," but it can truly be described as "The Follower's Prayer." We can cover every important area of life when we pray this "better" prayer. How about trying this guide to pray better way yourself?

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Express how you feel about him. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Ask God to help you actively work for his will to be done in your life, your family, your community, and our nation. Pray about specific issues where you realize we are not living his way. Give us today our daily bread. Gratefully thank him for meeting your needs and let him know where you need his supply now. And forgive us our debts. Repent and ask forgiveness for anything he brings to your mind. As we also forgive our debtors. Ask him to help you forgive those who have wronged you. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one. Ask him to make you wise to Satan's schemes and strong to stay away from wrong influences. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever! Amen. Praise Him!

REFLECTION: Jesus, teach me to come to you humbly and confidently like a child. I want to know you better and I want to pray better.



A Better Fast

"When you fast, don't put on a sad face like the hypocrites. They make their faces look sad to show people they are fasting. I tell you the truth, those hypocrites already have their full reward. So when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Then people will not know that you are fasting, but your Father, whom you cannot see, will see you. Your Father sees what is done in secret, and he will reward you." Matthew 6:16-18

"I will tell you the kind of fast I want: Free the people you have put in prison unfairly and undo their chains. Free those to whom you are unfair and stop their hard labor. Share your food with the hungry and bring poor, homeless people into your own homes. When you see someone who has no clothes, give him yours, and don't refuse to help your own relatives." Isaiah 58:6-7

Fasting is commonly known as willingly giving up something significant to your daily life (food, drink, and activity) in order to focus on God. Jesus talked about how easy it was to make fasting exactly the opposite of focusing on God—trying to get others to focus on you and what you are doing. Jesus said when we choose to fast, we should not draw attention to ourselves. It doesn't mean we can't join in group fasting, but ultimately, the heart of Jesus' message is that fasting is about humility. There is no room to brag about how much we have given up or complain about our sacrifice. It is our joy to show our love. Jesus said that kind of fasting is much better, because our Father God will take note of our love and sacrifice. What can you cheerfully give up for these weeks that will cause you to focus on your need for God more often?

God talks about a better fast through Isaiah. He wants our fasting to move us to action. Fasting certainly draws us closer to God personally, this spiritual discipline is better than that. It is about intentionally caring about what God cares most about: people. Our world is increasingly self-centered, and it can be quite easy to ignore the needs of the people around us. When we get too focused on our needs, it is easy for forget that Jesus came for the whole world, and he calls his followers to love and care for others as he loves and cares for us. Instead, God calls us to a better way, to stand with the poor and needy, and stand against the injustices of the world. He calls us to show deep love to our own relatives.

As you fast, ask God to open your eyes to the people he is calling you to love and serve. Make this a better fast—one that moves you to prayer and action.

REFLECTION: Who can I help in the name of Jesus? How can I stand against injustice? Who in my own family can I serve in Jesus' name? This offering of resources and service is the "almsgiving" of Lent. Maybe it's time to join Ministry Partnership at Cornerstone. You can check it out this weekend.



"But now Jesus, our High Priest, has been given a ministry that is far superior to the old priesthood, for he is the one who mediates for us a far better covenant with God, based on better promises." Hebrews 8:6

If you have been around Christian teaching much, you have probably heard God referred to a "covenant-keeping God." A covenant is a binding agreement between two or more people. That's why marriage is referred to as a covenant, not a simple promise. It is intended to be permanent. The "Old Covenant" refers to the agreement between God and the Israelites, established through Moses at Mount Sinai. God gave the Law (including the Ten Commandments—truly a table of contents for 613 other laws) regulating the Israelites' behavior in rituals, customs, social justice, and personal morality.

They were required to obey specific rules in exchange for God's protection and blessings. To break the rules was to break God's law and relationship with him. There were many details and rituals for a person to perform to get back into God's good graces after failing to keep his or her end of the covenant. God's presence came and went, symbolized by fire and a cloud.

Then came Jesus with a new and better covenant through his death on the cross. The old covenant relied on ritualistic sacrifices and strict adherence to the law, yet could never once and for all atone for sin. Jesus opened a new covenant based on relationship. We come to God just as we are, knowing we don't perform rituals or perfect our behavior to be acceptable to God. Jesus paid the debt for our sins and offers us complete and lasting forgiveness.

God doesn't "come and go," based on our human efforts to adhere to the law. Through Jesus, God is with us forever. Jesus assured us that he is with us always, even through the end of the world (Matthew 28:20). The new covenant is all about better—the superior grace and mercy available through Jesus Christ.

Since it became so good through Jesus, why was there an old covenant to begin with? Well, remember that humanity's journey with God began in the Garden of Eden, and soon sin entered the world. It spread like the world's greatest virus, and earth quickly became a pagan planet with no knowledge of God or his ways. God's covenant established a special relationship between a holy, sinless God and the Israelites, providing them with a way as sinners to approach God and receive his blessings. It enabled them to live in proximity with the other peoples, yet ultimately serving as a way to point them towards the coming of Christ and his New Covenant which would offer full forgiveness and redemption to the whole world. The Old Covenant and the impossibility of keeping the rules revealed God's character and highlighted humanity's need for a Savior.

REFLECTION: Spend a few minutes thanking God for the better covenant brought by Jesus.



"For the law was given through Moses, but God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ." John 1:17

No mistake about it, the Old Testament law was a gift. After God delivered Isarel from 400 years of slavery in Egypt, leading them through the Red Sea and destroying Pharaoh and his pursuing armies, he was with them in their years of wandering and struggle in the wilderness. Then he met them at Mt. Sinai, and from the top of the mountain, he delivered the law to Moses. Throughout the centuries Jews have revered Moses and the Law.

The Law was a true gift. It revealed the absolute holiness of God and established the boundaries for every area of life that would cause them to thrive and be a people blessed among all the peoples of the earth. However, the law was demanding and detailed. Paul, a man who was a scrupulous Jew before meeting Jesus, referred to how hard it was when he said, "Those who depend on the Jewish laws to save them are under God's curse, for the Scriptures point out very clearly, 'Cursed is everyone who at any time breaks a single one of these laws that are written in God's Book of the Law.' Consequently, it is clear that no one can ever win God's favor by trying to keep the Jewish law." (Galatians 3:10-11)

He was quoting from the Law of Moses, recorded in Deuteronomy 27:26. To break one law was to break them all. Can you imagine? I would have been sacrificing all the time, even when I was trying!

The Law was a good gift, because it did make them different and made their lives and relationships better than any other people at the time. However, the Law actually pointed out the distance between humankind and God, and how excruciatingly difficult it is to live up to the requirements of intimacy with a holy God. The Old Testament Law created a longing for the Messiah, too. Nothing created more guilt than the law, and people knew that they had to have the promised Messiah to ever be free. Jesus—the Messiah—came, and he was better. He was better than the law.

But most of the Old Testament Jews were so attached to their old ways of doing things, so connected to performing and rating themselves and each other by their attempts to earn salvation, that they couldn't see who he was. They rejected the only One who could save them. To the Jews, nothing was more sacred than the Law. But Jesus was and is better! He fulfilled the requirements of the Law forever by his death and resurrection, and now our guilt is gone. Jesus is better!

REFLECTION: The gulf that separated you from God's holiness was huge. But Jesus came to you and for you. He is your Savior, your better way. Praise him! Your guilt is gone!

WEDNESDAY Better Than My Works 12

"In the past we also were foolish. We did not obey, we were wrong, and we were slaves to many things our bodies wanted and enjoyed. We spent our lives doing evil and being jealous. People hated us, and we hated each other. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior was shown, he saved us because of his mercy. It was not because of good deeds we did to be right with him. He saved us through the washing that made us new people through the Holy Spirit. God poured out richly upon us that Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ our Savior. Being made right with God by his grace, we could have the hope of receiving the life that never ends." Titus 3:3-7

Read those first two sentences again. Honestly, doesn't that sound just like you were once? Foolish, rebellious, wrong, slaves to your desires? You wasted your life doing bad things and being jealous of others. Your relationships were not good. But you would occasionally feel so guilty and bad about yourself that you would try to make a new start. You'd ask forgiveness from at least a few people and try to start out on a new path. You tried so hard to do enough good things that it would make up for the past. But the guilt never quite went away. You continued to suffer, try, and fail far too often.

Paul and Titus, his young pastor friend, were just like us. They knew what it was like to try and fail, to never measure up to even our own standards, no matter how hard they tried. And they did try! Paul even said he was a superstar at keeping the law (Philippians 3 lists his whole law-keeping, good-deeds-doing, trying-so-hard resume), but he said it was no use.

Then Jesus came. It wasn't any of Paul's efforts that impressed God enough for forgiveness. It was what happened when Jesus came. It was the better way! Because of God's mercy that came through Jesus, he didn't just give us a new start—he made us new people! That is so far better than simple forgiveness.

Paul says that when Jesus came and we received him, he saved us, made us new, poured the Holy Spirit out on us richly, made us right with God, and gave us the life that never ends! That could never happen with my good works. As the song "Reckless Love" shouts: "I couldn't earn it, I don't deserve it, still you give yourself away! Oh, the overwhelming, neverending, reckless love of God!" And it all comes to us through the better way: Jesus Christ, our Savior.

REFLECTION: What was your life like before Jesus came? How did you try to deal with your guilt? Thank Jesus for the love and forgiveness you could never earn or deserve.





"For Christ's love compels us..." 2 Corinthians 5:14

Every interviewer for job placements knows that one of the best questions in an interview is, "What motivates you?" That question is so likely to be asked that multiple pages will immediately come up if you do a Google search advising how to prepare for an interview. You will find suggestions for answering well, even if they aren't your real motivations.

Perhaps you are motivated by negative forces, like fear, insecurity, loneliness, need, obligation, or guilt. Some will frankly own that financial compensation, titles, recognition gets their heart racing and pulse beating faster than anything else. Having a big challenge with a big reward is motivating. Each person knows rewards that would make their effort more worthwhile than something that would fulfill another person in the same way.

I studied current research on motivational factors which speak to the average person for life satisfaction. I found that some individuals are continually reaching for a higher level of personal best. Others desire recognition for influence. Still others want harmonious relationships and are motivated by what raises that likelihood. Some look for continuity, consistency, and predictability, and others are motivated by risk, change, and uncertainty. The research summarized the categories of motivation as Achievement, Power, Affiliation, Security, and Adventure (Leadership IQ).

As I considered those, and my own motivation, I couldn't help but realize that I had discovered not a single one of these motivations I tried had ever truly lived up to their press in my mind. I'm not fully in charge or in control of any of the elements required for them to go well enough to produce what I want. No matter how highly motivated I am, how much capability I have, and how hard I try, the results I seek can so easily slip through my hands. What motivation is better? What is guaranteed to never disappoint and to provide the better, even the best, motivation? The love of Christ Jesus.

Paul described it. He was motivated for the most satisfying, best life possible, and he found it when the circumstances of life would have stripped the power from any other motivation. But Jesus was better. The love of Jesus for Paul motivated him to keep going, because Jesus loved him so completely and well. The love of Jesus IN him kept him motivated to serve and love others when the easiest thing would've been to stop. The motivation of Jesus wasn't behind him, pushing. It was in front of him, calling and compelling him.

Try that motivation. The love of Jesus is better, truly the best.

REFLECTION: What honestly motivates you most? How would focusing on the love of Jesus be a driving force in your life and service?



A Better Hope

"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In God's great mercy he has caused us to be born again into a living hope, because Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Now we hope for the blessings God has for his children. These blessings, which cannot be destroyed or be spoiled or lose their beauty, are kept in heaven for you. God's power protects you through your faith until salvation is shown to you at the end of time. This makes you very happy, even though now for a short time different kinds of troubles may make you sad." 1 Peter 1:3-6

We all put our hope in something or someone. We hope we will find a relationship to make us happy. We hope that our careers and hobbies will give us fulfillment and purpose. We hope that our bank accounts and investments will give us security. We hope working out and eating well will extend our lives. We hope that successful, "good" children taught in good schools will be our legacy. We hope activity, entertainment, and adventure will give us laughter and joy. We hope the government will protect us and keep us safe. The list can go on and on. Even those who are currently hopeless are quick to share that they hoped in something that simply let them down. Their hope object was not strong or capable enough.

Peter wrote to "God's chosen people" who were scattered all over Asia because as followers of Jesus they were persecuted and rejected. They had lost the things in which they once had placed their hope, even their homes and communities. But Peter encourages them to embrace their new identity as God's holy people (1 Peter 1:1-2).

Because of their faith in Jesus, they have been born again into a new and better hope. It is a living hope, one that will never fail, because Jesus Christ rose from the dead! Though everything else in which we place our hope may fail, our new and living hope in Jesus is better. It promises us blessings God has for us as his children. Unlike everything else in which we have previously hoped, these blessings can't be destroyed or spoiled. Their beauty will never disappoint or dissipate. The blessings we have through our better hope are protected and guarded by God himself for us.

This better hope that comes from Jesus is able to keep us encouraged and joyful even when we are in storms, trials, and difficulties that typically destroy hope. Even in sorrow, our better hope keeps us looking up! Jesus has conquered death itself, and made us conquerors, too. That makes our hope invincible. It's a better hope, a hope that will not fade.

REFLECTION: Jesus, too often I hope in instant gratification and am far too easily satisfied with things that fade and perish. I can hope in tangible experiences that always let me down. In you I have a lasting, living hope that will never let me down. Help me intentionally focus on that eternal, living, better hope and future you give me.



The First Better Promises

"But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises." Hebrews 6:8 NIV

"But now Jesus, our High Priest, has been given a ministry that is far superior to the old priesthood, for he is the one who mediates for us a far better covenant with God, based on better promises." Hebrews 6:8 NLT

It doesn't matter what translation in which you read it, Hebrews 6:8 is great news. The prophet Jeremiah recorded in Chapter 33 of his messages what the better promises would be about. He was directly speaking God's message regarding when the Messiah, Jesus Christ would come, and he said, "This is the agreement I will make with the people of Israel at that time," says the Lord: 'I will put my teachings in their minds and write them on their hearts." Instead of laws written on stones and scrolls, through Jesus' new covenant and the one new command, our obedience would come from the heart.

"I will be their God, and they will be my people." His love would no longer be based on our sacrifices. Throughout the Old Testament, you will read promises of God that are attached to a condition of behavior. If the people didn't perform actions in a specific way, they would be disqualified from the promise. For example: Deuteronomy 28:1-15 lists the many blessings the Hebrews would receive: "...If you diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today..." But with Jesus it would no longer be an "if you do, I will" conditional arrangement. We would forever be his people, and he would be our God. "People will no longer have to teach their neighbors and relatives to know the Lord, because all people will know me, from the least to the most important," says the Lord. Israel would no longer be exclusively "God's people" with "outsiders" excluded from the family.

The Messiah would come for the whole world and be the great equalizer of people. "I will forgive them for the wicked things they did, and I will not remember their sins anymore." The new covenant was established on this promise: the sacrifice of Jesus would pay the sin debt of all people. It would be final. Once, and for all.

Romans 8:3-4 tells the perfect fulfillment of these promises: "The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So, God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins. He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our sinful nature but instead follow the Spirit." Incredible! Better promises indeed, now fulfilled for all who choose to believe.

REFLECTION: An old song says, "Jesus paid it all!" He promised, and he fulfilled it when you believed. Whatever your "it" amounts to, he has paid it all. Praise him!



"For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God." 2 Corinthians 1:20 NIV

I remember when I was a child, we had a little well-worn promise box filled with little dog-eared cards about the size of address labels in a variety of colors. On both sides, each card had a promise from God in the Bible. I remember my amazement that there were enough promises to fill that many cards, times two. I was simply amazed.

My mother was grateful. At some long past time when she felt deeply desperate for the assurance Jesus came to provide, she bought this little stash of promises and began the practice she shared with me—she would pull out a card in the morning and claim the promises on that card all day long. She shared all through the years, right up to her meeting him face-to-face at 84 years old, that he was a "faithful, promise-keeping God."

How many promises? How big are they? My granddaughter went through a stage when she answered my, "I love you" with "I love you to infinity and beyond!" She explained that meant she loved me more than I could imagine.

That's how it is with God's promises in Christ—so much better than we can imagine. Paul assured the Corinthians and us all these years later that it doesn't matter how many promises God has made. When we count on those promises, a big "yes" is the answer, because of Jesus Christ. He is the one who fulfills all those promises.

Here are just a few I am sure you are finding to be better than you imagined:

- Jesus promised rest (Matthew 11:28–30). He lifts our stress and gives comfort to weary hearts.
- Jesus promised "life that is really life" to those who follow Him (John 10:10). Following Jesus brings us more fulfillment than we could have anticipated. We leave boring behind.
- Jesus promised this life eternally to those who trust Him (John 4:14). And the good life doesn't start when we die. It starts right now and then when we die, he is with us, and our last breath here is our first breath of heaven's air.
- Jesus promised all our needs will be met from his riches in glory (Philippians 4:19 & Matthew 6:33) and that if we put his Kingdom first, he will meet all our needs.

REFLECTION: There are so many more and better promises. All of them find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Why not fulfill your part of this of this right now by saying your own "yes" and "amen" in thanks to God for the promises Jesus is keeping to you?

WEDNESDAY Better Than the Prophets

"Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he created the universe." Hebrews 1:1-2

"Jesus deserves far more glory than Moses, just as a person who builds a house deserves more praise than the house itself. For every house has a builder, but the one who built everything is God. Moses was certainly faithful in God's house as a servant. His work was an illustration of the truths God would reveal later. But Christ, as the Son, is in charge of God's entire house. And we're God's house, if we keep our courage and remain confident in our hope in Christ." Hebrews 3:3-6

It's hard to imagine what a new thought this was. We are accustomed to the idea that the prophets, Moses being the first and greatest, were great men, but certainly nothing like Jesus. The people who walked with Jesus before and after the resurrection knew there was nothing like him. But the new ones with whom the message was being shared after Jesus returned to Heaven had to take the same leap of faith we must take. Moses was their national hero, the one God used to deliver them from bondage in Egypt. They celebrated it every Passover, but now they were being told that Passover was a prelude to what Jesus did. The church celebrated Jesus' death and resurrection at the celebrations now. And the rest of the prophets? They were the ones who never gave up on them when they sinned. They prayed to God for them and encouraged them when they were in exile and distress. They were the ones who assured them God would never forget. They had grown up on the words from the prophets written on the sacred scrolls in the synagogues of their youth.

Now they were told the prophets and Moses were God's voices to them "long ago and in many ways," but now he had spoken in a far more powerful, better way. Jesus Christ, the Son, deserves to be praised and honored more than any who had come before. God promised everything to the Son. Through Jesus, God even created the universe! As good as they were, the prophets couldn't compare to Jesus. They were servants and he was the Son. Jesus deserves far more glory than Moses. He was the illustration of the truth, but Jesus was Truth personified.

Suppose a seven-year-old child had a wonderful father who was a hostage in a foreign land since he was an infant. He had all the stories his mother told him about how proud his Dad was when he was born. She could tell him many stories about what his father was like and show him a thousand pictures and videos every day, but they would be far inferior to his in-person Dad. The pictures and videos would always be treasured, but his Dad would be the better prize. Likewise, Jesus is our in-person Better! No one can compare!

REFLECTION: Before Jesus, everything was simply an illustration. Now we have the real thing—a living King and Savior who is always with us. Thank him!

THURSDAY Better Than Angels

"The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command. When he had cleansed us from our sins, he sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven. This shows that the Son is far greater than the angels, just as the name God gave him is greater than their names." Hebrews 1:3-4 NLT

The Bible tells us many wonderful things about angels; among them, that angels minister to and protect God's children, and they are servants of God who faithfully execute his will and carry out the things he assigns them. Numerous people in the Bible saw angels, for instance when Jesus was born, angels appeared to both Joseph and Mary, and to the shepherds.

When he rose back to life, there were angels at the tomb. Angels delivered Daniel and the three men in the fiery furnace. There are famous stories like that, and even today people occasionally see angels. The summer our son Zachary was five, he nearly died twice, and that summer he saw "his angel." It was quite an experience—but nothing like knowing Jesus personally! He is far better than the angels.

The Hebrew writer gives us evidence from God himself that, as wonderful as the angels are, Jesus is far better:

- Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father, the place of honor (Hebrews 1:3).
- Jesus is the Son with a name far greater than the angels. Hebrews 1:4-5 asks the question: "What angel has God ever called Son?"
- God the Father instructed all the angels to worship Jesus (Hebrews 1:6).
- The Father says in (Hebrews 1:7-10) that he sends the angels to work for him and they are like flames of fire. But he calls the Son "God" and says that his throne will last forever. He also says: "You rule with a scepter of justice. You love justice and hate evil. Therefore, O God, your God has anointed you, pouring out the oil of joy on you more than on anyone else." Can't you feel and hear the pride and joy of the Father over his Son, Jesus, who is far better even than angels?
- God gives Jesus credit for creating the heavens and earth and says that though they will collapse and die, Jesus, the Creator, will live forever. God said he never told the angels that he would put their enemies under his feet, but he told Jesus that. (Hebrews 1:10-13).
- The writer concludes in Hebrews 1:14, saying: "Therefore, angels are only servants—spirits sent to care for people who will inherit salvation." That means they are sent to care for us, the ones who have been saved by the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus, the Better One!

REFLECTION: Angels are wonderful and impressive! But Jesus is so much better! Hallelujah!



A Better Counselor

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor..." Isaiah 9:6

I'm a counselor. I try hard and work hard. I pray for the people I counsel. I do my best. But there are far more skilled and trained counselors out there, and sometimes I refer a counselee to someone else I believe can do better. But as helpful as a good counselor can be, there's no one like Jesus. He is infinitely better. God told the prophet Isaiah long before Jesus Christ came to earth that the Child who would be born, the Son who would be given, would be the Wonderful Counselor.

How is Jesus a better counselor than the best skilled human counselor you could ever find?

- You don't have to wait for an appointment. He is always with you and listens every time you open your heart to him. He is accessible at any time of the day or night in any location.
- Jesus has perfect knowledge of the human heart, mind, and understanding. His guidance is not based on his best efforts, but on the supernatural, divine wisdom of the one who created us.
- A counselor can try to put himself in our shoes, but Jesus can fully understand our struggles, and offers guidance based on his intimate and complete knowledge of us. This means he can provide deeper and better comfort and direction than any human counselor.
- A counselor can help us cope with our past, present, and future, but Jesus offers forgiveness, salvation, and transformation, leading to real healing.
- Counselors care—that's why they do what they do. But Jesus is far better. He gives unconditional, non-judgmental love 100% of the time.
- Counselors have a limited perspective. They only know the facts you tell them. They can't see the future. But Jesus knows everything. His perspective is eternal.

Think about this. Jesus knows the best plan for you. He can give you extraordinary strength and wisdom to carry it out, and he will always be with you. He is truly the Wonderful Counselor. Better than you can imagine.

REFLECTION: There's nothing wrong with human counselors. Often God will use them to help you with very practical support. But the best human counselors are working with Jesus, letting him counsel them. That makes them better! And never substitute human counseling for receiving the counsel of the better One—Jesus, wonderful Counselor. He's as near and close as your breath and is just waiting for you to ask him for help.



A Better Leace

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called...Prince of Peace." Isaiah 9:6

"I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid." John 14:27

A familiar joke about beauty pageant contestants was that when asked what they most wished for they would flash an award-winning smile, saying, "I wish for world peace." A smattering of laughter and applause would follow because it was such a predictable, bland answer. But still, the answer did carry truth. There's not a person who has lived past childhood who hasn't earnestly desired peace at one time or another, probably many times. And, sadly, many of our little ones have lived in such chaos that they wished for peace as well, long before they could ever express it.

Nations, businesses, unions, marriages—all hire negotiators in the hopes of securing peace. Sometimes peace is secured, but most often it's tentative and often more of a temporary truce than actual peace. But the peace of Jesus is expansive and effective. He is called the Prince of Peace. The title "Prince" means that he is the leader, the ruler of peace. The word "peace" is the Hebrew word shalom which means "peace, completeness, soundness, and welfare." The night before Jesus went to the cross, the disciples had no idea what they would be facing in a matter of hours, but he assured them that peace was the gift he was leaving with them. It was something the world could never provide.

Jesus brings peace with God. Through faith in him our sins are forgiven and the lost relationship between us and God is restored. Jesus offers peace in circumstances. In the middle of the biggest trials and tribulations, the circumstances that are most out of our control, Jesus offers peace. He assures us he has overcome the world, and no problem is too big for him. Jesus brings peace in relationships. The most broken friendship, marriage, family can find peace through Jesus. Jesus even can bring peace between enemies. And, whatever else is going on, Jesus brings peace to the heart. Colossians 3:15 urges, "...let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts." Better peace is available to all of us.

REFLECTION: How do you get this Better Peace? Paul experienced exceedingly unpeaceful situations and tells us how: "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:6-7



"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep." John 10:11 NLT

Do you have a furry loved one? I'm talking about your pets. They do become members of our family, don't they? Hardly a day goes by that I don't see someone on social media grieving a beloved pet or asking for prayer or "good vibes" sent for one that is sick. When we have a pet we love, we make sacrifices to care for them. When we travel and can't take them with us, we look for someone who has a compassionate, caring heart to look after them. Most of us want someone who knows them well and we know will care for them with great kindness. This is one of the most tender conversations recorded in the Gospels where Jesus described himself to people who very well understood the relationship between sheep and their shepherds. Shepherding was a vital occupation in Jesus' day.

There was a difference in the care given to sheep. Jesus noted it, and everyone knew what he was talking about. There were good shepherds who took care of their own sheep, and then there were hired hands that wealthy people employed to handle their flocks. The care of a hired hand was typically quite different. Jesus told them he was the good shepherd, the better shepherd, and defined in very plain terms what that meant. Read John 10:1-21 if you want a first-hand account of his tenderness towards us, his sheep...

- The Good Shepherd leads, guides, and protects his sheep (John 10:1-4).
- The Good Shepherd doesn't manipulate or do anything underhanded. He knows his sheep and they know his voice. They have a true relationship (John 10:4-5).
- The Good Shepherd wants his sheep to have rich and satisfying lives. He will make sure they have good pastures in which to thrive (John 10:9-10).
- The Good Shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep. If a predator comes, a hired hand runs away and leaves the sheep defenseless. But the Good Shepherd gives his life for his sheep (John 10:11-15).
- The Good Shepherd loves all sheep. The Good Shepherd goes looking for lost, wandering, defenseless sheep them and takes responsibility for them (John 10:16).

Doesn't that sound like your experience with Jesus, your Good Shepherd? No other "shepherd," protector, guide, or caregiver can do what Jesus can do and will do for us. He is the Better Shepherd. He says, "No one can take my life from me. I sacrifice it voluntarily." Jesus is a loving and selfless shepherd who willingly sacrificed his own life to find and protect his sheep, actively seeking out the lost, and showing unwavering devotion to them, even when they stray.

REFLECTION: Jesus was talking about things we fear and said to his disciples with great tenderness: "Don't be afraid and anxious, little flock..." What concerns you? Your Good Shepherd knows you and cares. Talk to him.



"The Son of Man...feasts and drinks, and you say, 'He's ... a friend of tax collectors and other sinners!" Luke 7:34

"I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn't confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me." John 15:15

To call Jesus a fiend of sinners may not raise too many eyebrows today, but in his day, it was a major insult. Jesus seems to have had a penchant for going places, doing things, and connecting with people that the religious crowd didn't think were appropriate for a devout, God-fearing Jew. Even sometimes his disciples forgot where they were when he called them and looked down on others. Can you imagine what the earliest called disciples, ordinary and poor but acceptable working fishermen, thought when Jesus called Matthew, the tax collector who was a traitor working for Rome, to be his disciple? But Jesus had no problem with association with anyone others found to bedeficient. He was a better friend to people with flaws than anyone else would ever be.

This is a great source of hope for every honest person: Jesus willingly accepted the designation of "friend of sinners." We don't like to think of ourselves in that way, but that's how we all started out with Jesus. That makes him an amazingly better friend. Then, as we choose to follow him, we find the depth of friendship with Jesus is like no other. He is not "picky" when he calls us. Jesus comes into relationship with us regardless of where we are to start. But then he shares himself with us in such a deep way that as we follow him, we begin to be like him. He transforms us through that close relationship.

Jesus lifts his followers above the relationship of followers and students, though we are that. He calls us friends, elevating us to a level of intimacy and trust. He said that the greatest love a person could ever display is to lay down his life for his friends, and then he did that for us (John 15:13).

Jesus is a friend that never leaves or deserts us. He rejoices with us on our best days and stays with us on our most discouraging days. A true friend wants to share with us everything good. That's why young people often talk about their "besties." They share all their secrets with each other. Jesus is the most amazing friend—in this deep, trusting relationship, he tells us everything the Father tells him. We have access to the wisdom of the ages. The old hymn says, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus!" It's true! He's the better friend!

REFLECTION: List three characteristics you love about your friend Jesus. Share them with someone today.



"The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven." Hebrews 1:3 NIV

"The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command. When he had cleansed us from our sins, he sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven." Hebrews 1:3 NLT

One of the most frustrating but necessary words in the English language to me is "indescribable." There are many things so beautiful and awe-inspiring they are impossible to adequately describe. Try to adequately give a picture of the ocean. It is full-screen, wall to wall water, pounding waves rolling in and out, water shallow enough to walk in and yet deeper than the tallest skyscraper imaginable, teeming with creatures so miniscule they can barely be seen and whales as big as three school buses placed end to end and weighing over 400,000 pounds. Try to describe the shades of water ranging from teal to the deepest of blues with foaming white waves. Then, try to get a country girl whose familiarity with a body of water is the thin, winding creek behind her farmhouse. You just can't explain. My husband Charlie's mother was like that. She had never seen the ocean and decided ahead of time she was unimpressed. She had no desire to be near the ocean. She told us if we were going to the ocean not to take her, just put some sand and water in the bathtub, throw in a couple rocks and shells, then drag a few weeds through it. That would be enough for her. We gave up on her.

Until Jesus, there was untold confusion about God. Anyone who doesn't know Jesus still has it. The Old Testament writers stumbled over themselves trying to describe God. But true words like holy, just, perfect, loving seemed to conflict with each other and give an inadequate, inaccurate picture of God. The people wanted to know God, but too often he seemed distant and intimidating. Like the song "Our God is Love" says: "Whatever picture I have isn't big enough! Whatever picture I have doesn't sum you up—it couldn't sum you up!"

Then came Jesus. Overwhelming love and compassion, perfect understanding, in-person wisdom, perfect grace and truth—everything. But he's not a different God. He is not just the better representation of God. He is the perfect representation of God. He is God. He expresses the very character of God. He radiates God's own glory. He sustains all things by his powerful command. We see him! What indescribable majesty and tender love! He must be experienced. He can be experienced. He is the better, perfect representation of God.

REFLECTION: If anything, you have heard about God doesn't make sense or makes it hard to know him, filter it through Jesus. If it's not like Jesus, it's not truly God.



"Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign...forever; his Kingdom will never end!" Luke 1:31-33

"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." Revelation 11:15

David was the king that stood head and shoulders above all the kings of the world. Despite his human flaws and failures, God said he was a "man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14) and the Jews looked back longingly to the days of this legendary throne and rulership. Imagine Mary's incredulous hearing that the supernaturally conceived child she would bear would be the Son of the Most High God. He would receive the throne of David, but he would be far bigger than David—her Son's kingdom would never end! The Son she was to name Jesus would be the forever King of the world!

Somehow, we have lost sight of what God says, from the very first time Jesus was mentioned. He did not come to earth to be just friend, priest, healer, or even our favorite term, Savior. He is far more than a forgiver and ticket to heaven. Those are all functions he handles perfectly, better than anyone else could, but he is far more than any of those. As Andy Stanley says: "My wife Sandra is the one who cooks at our house, but I have never introduced her as 'Sandra, my cook.' She is so much more. That's a responsibility she handles very well, but she is my wife."

Jesus is so much more than any of the other titles we give him—yes, even greater and better than Savior. He is King. Not "will be King." He is King now. That is the way he refers to himself and he says he came inaugurating a Kingdom that will never end. It will endure and he will reign forever and ever. In fact, a person that receives the salvation rescue Jesus gives us as Savior, but does not give their total loyalty and following allegiance to him as the One and Only Forever King, has missed the point. He is much bigger than your Savior, as wonderful as that is. He is the Ruler, the Forever King.

No king that has ever lived can match him. He is almighty, all powerful. He will never be dethroned. He is forever victorious. He carries with him all the authority and power in heaven and earth. He is the Once, Present, Future, and Forever King!

REFLECTION: Jesus is the forever King! But the question is—does he have your complete allegiance? Or do you gratefully accept his rescue and forgiveness, yet live in rebellion to his Kingship and authority? One day every knee will bow and confess he is Lord and King of all. It is our joy and privilege to recognize him as our King now.



Not Just Better-Best!

"Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see—such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through him and for him. He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together. Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body. He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead. So he is first in everything. For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross. This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault." Colossians 1:15-22

You know what it means to call someone the GOAT, right? When are saying that person is the greatest of all time in one arena or another. These verses in Colossians comprise just one of the many places in Scripture where Jesus is declared and described as the GOAT in every way. He is the One and Only King. The last book in the Bible, the Book of Revelation, is above all a celebration of Jesus, the King. In the center of the throne room and the center of the action in Revelation, the Lamb is the Lord Jesus Christ. He has many names and attributes, including Jesus, Messiah, Faithful Witness, First Born from Among the Dead, Ruler of the Kings of the Earth.

He loves us, he liberates us, he is Alpha and Omega who was, and is, and is to come. He is the first and last, the Living One, he holds the keys of death and hell. He is the Lion, the Lamb, the Logos, the Light. Every word represents the Lord over all, Lord and King over all kings, who, by his willing choice, became the Savior of the world, our Redeemer by his blood. Whew! The GOAT indeed! The greatest King in time and eternity.

REFLECTION: Did you know that "Christ" is not Jesus' last name? It's not just a complimentary term of some kind. Every time Jesus was called "Christ" or "The Christ" it declared that he was the anointed King and Messiah. It still means that. Even when someone uses the name profanely, they are declaring Jesus is King. When our pastor gives the blessing at the end of our services by saying: "May Jesus Christ, our God and King Forever, be with you this day and every day!" he is declaring our allegiance. He is the perfect, once and forever King. He's more than Jesus. He is Jesus Christ. Jesus, the indisputable King. Praise him for who he is today.





"As the time drew near for him to ascend to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." Luke 9:51

Today we turn a corner in our better worship. Today we begin looking at the final journey of King Jesus, the Last and Forever King. Because Jesus was God, he knew that his time here on Earth was coming to an end. Luke tells the story of Jesus' time here from the news given to Mary that he would be the child of God, supernaturally conceived, all the way through to his death and resurrection victory.

Galilee was where Jesus felt most at home. Mary and Joseph were from Nazareth in Galilee. This is where he grew up, where his ministry began—away from the Roman authorities in Jerusalem—and where he performed many miracles. He became a carpenter, trained by his earthly father, and Luke tells us that he "grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and all the people" (Luke 2:52). When he was about 30 years old, he left the carpentry shop, went to the Judean desert to be baptized by John the Baptist, and then came back to Galilee to begin his official ministry. That is all covered through Luke 9, but Luke, as do the other Gospel writers, gives the largest part of his book to Jesus' last two weeks here. Luke has 24 chapters. Jesus steadfastly and resolutely began to walk to death in Jerusalem from Luke 9 all the way to the triumphal entry to Jerusalem in Luke 19.

What's remarkable about all this? Well, it's remarkably unexpected. Think about it. When a person knows they are going to die, they want to be home. They want to be surrounded and supported by the people they love most. Jesus steadfastly refused the call of his earthly home in order to fulfill his mission. It's remarkable because on his walk to Jerusalem, his walk to betrayal, rejection, and a tortuous sacrifice death, his attitude and actions remained the same as they had been. No one paid an emotional price because Jesus "had a bad day." Jesus still loved and met the needs of others before his own. There were no signs of rush or panic, no indicators of a man under duress. Every day of his life he had faithfully done the will of the Father. He did what needed to be done every single day, so when it came time to die, that's all he had to do. His affairs were always in order.

Satan and the powers of darkness didn't expect this. Before Jesus even started his public ministry, Satan met him in the wilderness with confidence that one of his amazing offers to pull Jesus from the path of sacrifice would work. But Jesus was going to go through with it—who could believe it? Jesus was better than expected, better than anyone could imagine. That's because Jesus is not simply better—he is the best, the one and only King! He knew that his obedient, steady walk to the cross was actually the road to his forever coronation.

REFLECTION: Jesus, you are my King. Thank you for walking that road for me. You have my allegiance. I have decided to follow Jesus—no turning back. Help me live so when it is time to die, that's all I have to do.



"The people were amazed at his teaching, for he spoke with authority." Luke 4:32

From the very beginning of his ministry after his baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus was teaching. He taught some in the synagogues, often to large crowds who followed him and his disciples. He used their attendance and attention to teach principles of life in the new Kingdom of God. But when we get to the last few weeks as he headed to the cross, the target of most of teaching narrowed and the verbal teaching increased. If you have a red-letter edition Bible, the actual words of Jesus are written in red. You will see in the early chapters of the gospels, there are more words in black, talking about things he did and the reactions of the religious leaders, the people around him. He did teach, but on his way to the cross he seemed to hone in on things the disciples then, and the ones who would follow them later (think you and me!), needed to understand. Then after his betrayal in the Garden the red words are few. But his actions were teaching the world what would change everything forever.

Jesus was repeatedly clear about the Source of his authority to teach: "I don't speak on my own authority. The Father who sent me has commanded me what to say and how to say it. And I know his commands lead to eternal life; so I say whatever the Father tells me to say" (John 12:49-50). He and his Father were One in every way. When you read the word of Jesus, you can be sure that you are hearing the very voice of God.

Frequently at Cornerstone you will hear Pastor Jacob pray before he speaks. He says: "Father, help me and help us. If we leave here today simply hearing Pastor Jacob's opinion, it will have all been a failure. We need to hear from you." That's always the way it must be with any teacher. Power to transform people's lives does not come from any individual's words —it comes from God's Word. If you are going to have a life that really counts, then you will prioritize God's Word and his ways, not your preferences and opinions.

Jesus gave us better teaching. It wasn't that he was charismatic, had a carefully trained speaking voice, or the best tech or visual aids. Even in the last days with the cross ahead three elements characterized his amazing, authoritative teaching: It was rooted in the Word of the Father. The people compared him to the religious leaders and said he was different from them because he spoke with God's authority, not opinions. Jesus applied his teaching—he told his listeners what to do with what he taught. Jesus never taught for simple knowledge. He taught for application and action. Jesus lived what he taught. He taught with integrity. His words and his walk exactly matched. He was better—the Best Teacher Ever.

REFLECTION: Jesus doesn't teach you for you to be a smarter sinner. He always teaches with transformation as the goal. Where is there a gap between what you know and obedient application/action? Talk to Jesus about it.



What the Teacher Wants

"The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life." John 10:10

I had a teacher in graduate school who was a great professor but was quite frustrating personally. I would turn in projects/essays I knew were good, better than several other students who were struggling so badly that I routinely I helped them with their work, yet often they would get a better grade. I asked myself: "What does he want from me?" One day when our semester notebooks full of the homework we had done were returned, a friend came to me and, grinning, asked to see my grade. I showed him my B+. The class was known for toughness, rare A's. He began laughing and opened his notebook to show me his grade...an A-. My jaw dropped. I was flabbergasted. At least a third of his notebook he had photo-copied from my work, with my name plainly on it. How was it possible that he got a higher grade than I? My friend urged me to ask.

So, I waited after class and as respectfully as possible asked Dr. Turner his rationale for the grading. With a slight smile he replied, "I was wondering when you would ask me. I believe your friend is turning in the best work he will ever do. But you've got more in you. I want to see it. I want you to be who you can be."

In a far greater sense, that's what the Better Teacher wants for and from us. He wants the most. He wants us to be better listeners. He said, "So pay attention to how you hear. To those who listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given. But for those who are not listening, even what they think they understand will be taken away from them" (Luke 8:18). That's very serious for our futures.

Jesus wants us to be better followers. He asked directly, "So why do you keep calling me 'Lord, Lord!' when you don't do what I say? I will show you what it's like when someone comes to me, listens to my teaching, and then follows it. It is like a person building a house who digs deep and lays the foundation on solid rock. When the floodwaters rise and break against that house, it stands firm because it is well built. But anyone who hears and doesn't obey is like a person who builds a house right on the ground, without a foundation. When the floods sweep down against that house, it will collapse into a heap of ruins" (Luke 6:46-49). The quality of our following determines the quality of our lives.

Jesus wants us to be better listeners and better followers because his goal is for us to have a rich and satisfying life, beginning now, and the transformation he makes possible is the only way. As Pastor Andy Stanley says, "Following Jesus will make your life better and make you better at life." That's what Jesus, the Better Teacher wants for you.

REFLECTION: Jesus teaches because he wants better for us. Ask honestly, "Am I listening and following in a way that will lead to the better life Jesus desires for me?"



Otill Teaching—The Kingdom

"Whoever is the least among you is the greatest." Luke 9:48

As you read all four gospel accounts (Matthew, the tax-collector becomes a disciple; Mark, Peter's scribe who recorded Peter's story; Luke, the scholarly doctor; John, the disciple so close to Jesus he become Mary's "adopted" son) record the same vital facts and teachings. As you read, you will see that the "upside-down" nature of the Kingdom Jesus came to inaugurate is a central topic. This Kingdom was very hard for them to accept because they were like us—they wanted flash and dash, power and control. In Luke 8:43-56 there are three short vignettes of Jesus' patiently teaching three principles of the Upside-Down Kingdom they eventually got in retrospect but flew right over their heads in the moment.

First, in v. 43-48, we see the crowds were astounded at Jesus' great miracles, but Jesus was not fooled. He knew they were fickle. Luke tells us while the people were milling around and marveling, Jesus said privately to his disciples, "Listen to me and remember what I say. The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of his enemies." He referred to himself that way many times. But the disciples didn't get it; they didn't understand and didn't want to know. The account specifically points out they didn't want to ask.

They immediately moved on to something else. They began arguing about which one of them was greatest. Can you imagine? Like little boys comparing muscles. Mark/Peter expands on the story (Mark 10) and includes that Jesus described in detail what was going to happen to him—betrayed, then flogged and killed by the Romans. But they passed completely over his words. No reading the room, for sure. Brothers James and John, part of the squabbling group, stepped up and said, "When you sit on your glorious throne, do us a favor. We want to sit on your right and left." Wow. What were they thinking? "Yeah, tough stuff, Jesus. You're gonna die and go through some things—but what about us? When you get through it all, what do we get?"

When the disciples heard what James and John asked, they were truly ticked. But not on Jesus' behalf—for themselves. What if Jesus said "yes" to James and John? Then Jesus delivered the first principle of the Upside-Down Kingdom: Leadership in this Kingdom does not come from power and privilege, but from sacrificial service. Mark records it in full: "You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of everyone else. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:43-45). Whew. Speechless. Crickets. Not a word in response.

REFLECTION: Now about you. It's your turn to grapple with this. Is your style of leadership more like the world or the Upside-Down Kingdom?



Otill Teaching—The Kingdom 2

"Don't stop him! Anyone who is not against us is for us...If anyone gives you even a cup of water because you belong to the Messiah, I tell you the truth, that person will surely be rewarded...Salt is good for seasoning. But if it loses its flavor, how do you make it salty again? You must have the qualities of salt among yourselves and live in peace with each other." Mark 9:39-41 & 50

As Jesus was on the way, John came to him with an update: "Master, we saw someone using your name to cast out demons, but we told him to stop, because he isn't in our group." Did you get that? "Because he isn't in our group?" That's not my clever, manipulative phrasing. That's the direct text in Mark 10:49. John clearly thought he had done the right thing, because he was in the right, right? He knew he was with Jesus. Jesus launches into another Upside-Down Kingdom Leadership Principle: There is no room for competition in the Kingdom where Jesus is king.

Jesus had told them long before at different times and in different ways that he was the judge, and he would handle his own servants. Each one answers to their own master. Paul follows up in Romans 14. Jesus encouraged them to accept everyone who believed in his name and accept their service. He warned them against causing others to fall because of their judgementalism and to concentrate on the quality of their own life and service.

Jesus had also told them that his followers were to be salt in the world to flavor it so well that people would want to taste and see that God is good! Salt removes the blandness from food, melts the iciness of the cold, preserves, and keeps what is good. Jesus said, "Don't lose your saltiness! How will you get it back if you do?" Good questions for today's disciples. There is so much friction and back-biting among believers that it has caused untold numbers of people, especially the young, to leave the Church. Jesus could not have been plainer: "You must have the qualities of salt among yourselves and live at peace with each other." That requires no deep theological discussion. We get it. We just don't do it enough.

Jesus' final prayer for his disciples in John 17 was that we would be one, and amaze the world with our love. My Dad told Charlie and I when we got married that the secret sauce to his and my mother's long, happy, and productive marriage was that their only competition ever was to try to out-love and out-serve each other. No wonder their marriage thrived and their relationships within the wide Kingdom did as well.

REFLECTION: Jesus has defined his Kingdom so clearly we can't miss it. There can be no competition or the jealousy, envy, judgment, snide remarks, and lack of cooperation that easily follows in his Kingdom.



Still Teaching—The Kingdom 3

"As the time drew near for him to ascend to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. He sent messengers ahead to a Samaritan village to prepare for his arrival. But the people of the village did not welcome Jesus because he was on his way to Jerusalem. When James and John saw this, they said to Jesus, 'Lord, should we call down fire from heaven to burn them up?' But Jesus turned and rebuked them. So they went on to another village." Luke 9:51-56

We live in a world of hurts and traumas going back centuries. Because that is true for everyone, it is easy to go through life with a chip (or a truckload of chips) on your shoulder, making you easily offendable. It's understandable—but unacceptable if we are following King Jesus and living in his Kingdom. You can choose to be unoffendable.

There's always a backstory to our offenses. There was a long history in Isarel where the tribes were divided and many taken captives because of rebellion and sin. There's a long history of captivity but remaining solidly Jewish for those in captivity. For those remaining in Samaria, there was much intermarriage and mingling. After many years the Jews were brought back from captivity and they looked down on the Samaritans, considering them a "mongrel race." On their end, Samaritans were not inclined to do any favors for Jews, especially Jews on their way to Jerusalem. Samaritans were not welcomed to worship there. Refusing to let Jesus and his group of Jewish men stay overnight was a no brainer.

So, James and John spoke up again. You see why they were nicknamed the "Sons of Thunder!" They had hot tempers and were easily offended. They wanted to retaliate because, obviously, they were in the right. They were with Jesus, after all. It's amazing how in every generation we are able to retrofit scripture to justify anger, judgment, retaliation, and harshness. But Jesus, the true one who was not welcomed, didn't rebuke the Samaritans for their treatment of him. He rebuked James and John for their anger and offended attitude. You can twist scriptures as you isolate them and use your own sense of justice as your filter, but in many instances Jesus took time on the way to the cross to teach a better way. A true Jesus-follower always filters his/her decisions and actions through the character and attitude of Jesus. In the Upside-Down Kingdom, grudges, bitterness, revenge, and anger are replaced by a determination to be unoffendable.

It's better than fair. Peter learned this eventually. He wrote much later, "He did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered. He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly" (1 Peter 2:23). It's always the better way. King Jesus will have nothing else.

REFLECTION: The more grateful that we are for our own forgiveness; the more we truly want to become more unoffendable? The less people are on our "gotcha" list. Would the people who know you the best say you are more often a self-described proponent of righteous anger or an unoffendable follower? Are you a citizen of the Upside-Down Kingdom?



"One day Jesus called together his twelve disciples and gave them power and authority to cast out all demons and to heal all diseases. Then he sent them out to tell everyone about the Kingdom of God and to heal the sick." Luke 9:1-2

As our King steadily and confidently walked to Jerusalem and the cross, his priorities remained the same. Obedience to his Father, fulfilling the mission, building the Kingdom, loving, and caring for people—it's just what he always did. From the beginning of his ministry, he gathered and trained those who could and would continue his work. Early in his walk he sent out his followers in groups to do the work of building the Kingdom without him, having them come back and report on the work. One of the most inspiring moments is in Luke 10 when 72 disciples reported on the amazing work of sharing Jesus, teaching, and healing. They joyfully reported to him: "Lord, even the demons obey us when we use your name!" (Luke 10:17) Jesus was overjoyed! They got it! They were going to continue building the Kingdom. But he quickly reminded them that there would never be a greater miracle than salvation. He didn't ever want signs and wonders to get in first place. He applauded them and their work and then said, "But don't rejoice because evil spirits obey you; rejoice because your names are registered in heaven" (Luke 10:20).

These last days were filled with the disciples getting more experience in continuing Kingdom work, but he continued as well. It is hard to imagine that Jesus could put aside his own imminent death, his physical needs, and the fact that he had left his closest loved ones and would not see them again until he hung on a cross. But he did. We see specific instances of Jesus' compassion and love still at the forefront, still caring for all the needs of people. In Luke 11:14-27, a mute man was healed when Jesus cast out a demon. Luke 13:11-17 records healing a woman on the Sabbath whose back was so bad she had been unable to stand straight for 18 years. The enraged religious leaders were fueled more to have him killed. In Luke 14 he healed a man, Luke 17 records ten lepers being made whole, and Luke 18 shows a blind man healed.

But the most remarkable, the better/best miracle, happened in the Garden of Gethsemane as the mob arrived with soldiers and accusers. "When the...disciples saw what was about to happen, they exclaimed, 'Lord, should we fight? We brought the swords!' And one of them struck at the high priest's slave, slashing off his right ear. But Jesus said, 'No more of this.' And he touched the man's ear and healed him" (Luke 22:49-51). Incredibly, the mob was so filled with hatred that no one spoke a word about the healing or the fact that Jesus cared an enemy, or that he refused defense. But Jesus did what he did, not for applause, but because he was better, the Healer of body and soul, the better and best forever King.

REFLECTION: What about the man who felt the sword slice his ear off and then looked through pain into the eyes of the one who healed him? Do you think he ever got courage to follow?...How about you? Has what Jesus has done for you led you to follow?



The King—Otill Seeking

"For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost." Luke 19:10

As much as he taught and healed, the central pillar of building the Kingdom was always seeking the lost. His most famous parables were about seeking the ones who knew they had gone astray and were hopeless (The Lost Sheep in Matthew 18, The Lost Son in Luke 15) and the ones who were haughty and judgmental, lost right in the Father's house (The Older Brother in Luke 15). He was seeking everyone who was broken and struggling in the whole world: "For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:16-17).

Jesus walked through the streets with his eyes watching, his ears listening, and his heart focused on his mission, the reason he came. As he continued towards Jerusalem, he welcomed children to come to him. The disciples had the average attitude of the day and shooed them away. Instead of scolding the children, he chidded his disciples. He said that his Kingdom belonged to those who were like children—it took their humility and to trust enter the Kingdom. He held them and blessed them (Luke 18:15-17).

Shortly after that time with the children, Jesus' seeking heart found a man who was exactly the opposite of the children. He was rich, well-known, but lost and needy—and he didn't know it. He was a religious leader, a very prominent man who was proud of his goodness. He said he had followed all the commandments since he was young, but he still had no assurance of eternal life. Jesus identified that this man's reliance was on his own goodness and wealth instead of on God. Jesus told him it would require leaving his old reliance and following Jesus. Though he was personally sought by the King, he went away very sad. The cost was too much for him (Luke 18:18-30).

On the other end of the spectrum from the children and the rich man, was a tax collector who had become extraordinarily rich through overcharging. He was short in stature. The crowd waiting to see Jesus as he passed through Jericho was exceptionally large, so the man climbed a tree. Jesus, always seeking, looked up into the branches of the tree and called him by name. "Zacchaeus! Come down! I must be a guest at your house today!" Zacchaeus excitedly came down, and his encounter with Jesus changed him. He declared he would pay back all he cheated. Jesus told the crowd: "Today salvation has come to this house....for the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost" (Luke 19:1-10). He never wavered from his purpose. Jesus the King willingly chose to become the seeking Savior. In Gethsemane, right before the cross he prayed: "Now my soul is troubled. Should I pray, 'Father, save me from this hour'? But this is the very reason I came!"

REFLECTION: The King came seeking you. Remember how he found you and thank him for it.



The King—Raising the Dead

"Jesus told her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this, Martha?" John 11:25

You've heard the story—probably many times. Jesus' close friend Lazarus was extremely ill. His sisters sent a message to Jesus, currently a distance from Bethany in Judea where they lived. Jesus often stayed with them when he traveled through. But Jesus told his disciples this illness wouldn't end in death, but in God's glory. He stayed where he was for two more days. When he did gather them to go, the disciples advised himagainst it, reminding him that only a few days before the people in Judea were trying to stone him. He told them that Lazarus was dead, and he was going to go there now so that they would truly believe.

The disciples bravely went with Jesus, assuming they would die with him. When they arrived, Lazarus was dead, and the sisters were brokenhearted. Jesus spoke hope to Mary and Martha, but they were inconsolable. They were surrounded by wailing mourners, and there was no hope. This was not a coma. Lazarus was dead-dead. Wrapped-in-grave- clothes-in-the-grave-for-four-days-dead. The grave was a tomb with a stone rolled across the opening. Jesus stood before the tomb and prayed aloud to his Father. He said, "Father, you always hear me, but now I say it aloud so everyone will hear me and know that you have sent me. Then he showed his power and Kingship over life and death when he stood before the grave and shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" To everyone's shock and amazement, the dead man actually walked out, wrapped in grave clothes and his head wrapped in cloth.

Amazing true story. But here's the startling true story many do not know. Instead of universal thrill and wonder that this had happened, the religious leaders were angry. Can you imagine being so caught up in your own agenda that a dead man being restored to life sends you into a rage? The religious leaders met to decide what to do about it, and their first decision was that definitely Jesus had to die—they knew this was a real miracle, and they said, "If we allow him to go on like this soon everyone will believe in him!" (John 11:48). So they began to plot how to do it. Jesus knew what they thought, and he stopped his public ministry then and went into the wilderness to pray. The leaders publicly ordered that anyone who saw Jesus must report it immediately so they could arrest him.

The day before what we know as Palm Sunday, Jesus returned to Bethany to his friends' home. News spread that Jesus was there. People flocked to see him and Lazarus, too. Now he was a local celebrity. "Then the leaders decided to kill Lazarus, too, for it was because of him that many of the people had deserted them and believed in Jesus" (John 12:11).

REFLECTION: Is there anything sadder than knowing the truth and rejecting it because you won't give up control? Jesus had life for them, yet they hung on to the illusion of control. Do you still cling to control?



Lalm Monday

"Jesus replied, 'My light will shine for you just a little longer. Walk in the light while you can, so the darkness will not overtake you. Those who walk in the darkness cannot see where they are going. Put your trust in the light while there is still time; then you will become children of the light'...Jesus shouted to the crowd, 'If you trust me, you are trusting the one who sent me. I have come as a light to shine in this dark world so that all who put their trust in me will no longer remain in the dark." John 12:35-36

Palm Sunday was full of excitement. Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, and now he was leaving Bethany and going to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. The religious leaders hadn't seen him, but were constantly checking out the Temple, because so many were coming for purification ceremonies, but they said: "He surely won't come for Passover, will he?" (John 11:56)

When the news swept through the city that he was leaving and on his way to Jerusalem, a large crowd of Passover visitors got palm branches and gave Jesus a king's triumphal entry as he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy: "Don't be afraid, people of Jerusalem. Look, Your King is coming riding on a donkey's colt." John tells us that the crowd was so large was because they wanted to see this one who had raised a dead man back to life.

On Palm Monday, people were still following Jesus, but Palm Sunday had not been a true reflection of their hearts. Jesus spoke to the crowd one more time and John spares no words in telling the truth of the situation: "But despite all the miraculous signs Jesus had done, most of the people still did not believe in him...Many people did believe in him, however, including some of the Jewish leaders. But they wouldn't admit it for fear that the Pharisees would expel them from the synagogue. For they loved human praise more than the praise of God" (John 12:37 & 42-43).

Can't you sense the loving passion of Jesus, his desire for them to believe, as he shouts to the crowd? They didn't know it, but this was the last time he would teach them. This was their last encounter with him. Some refused to believe still, just wanting to be entertained. Others believed, even some of the Jewish leaders. But they loved being a part of the powerful in-crowd. They loved people's approval more than God's. So, they let the light go out and remained in the dark. Darkness after there has been light is really, truly dark.

REFLECTION: What do you believe keeps people from recognizing the truth? What is the reason you are sometimes slow to accept truth? Sometimes we do believe truth, but don't own it because we filter what we do through other people's opinions and reactions. We must turn that around. We must filter opinions through the Truth of Jesus; not Jesus through our opinions. Jesus doesn't simply tell the truth. He is Truth.



No "T Told You To!" Here

"But as he came closer to Jerusalem and saw the city ahead, he began to weep. 'How I wish today that you of all people would understand the way to peace. But now it is too late, and peace is hidden from your eyes. Before long your enemies will build ramparts against your walls and encircle you and close in on you from every side. They will crush you into the ground, and your children with you. Your enemies will not leave a single stone in place, because you did not recognize it when God visited you." John 19:41-45

It's impossible to capture in words the incomprehensible love of Jesus for us, his creation. He loves us so much he wants the absolute best for us. He is so wise he knows exactly what that best is. He is so powerful that he can provide exactly what is best. But he is so committed to honoring our choice that he will not force us to follow him.

When I visited Israel, we walked down the winding road, looking across the Kidron Valley to Jerusalem, and saw the city much as Jesus saw it. Unexpected tears slid down my cheeks. Imagine his anguish. In the midst of cheering people his heart broke. He saw the future. Jerusalem rejected him, the only hope for peace. "Dominus Flevit", a small teardrop shaped church, is built on the supposed site where Jesus stopped and wept. We wept, too. He was not speaking of punishing them. He was speaking about the natural consequences of putting put your hope in yourself and your own power instead of God, our only true hope. But this was an unthinkable prophecy. He would never say a flippant or angry: "I told you so!"

He was giving his life for them. But he knew arrogance would lead to total loss—unpreparedness and defeat—it always does. The gospel writers all believed this prophecy because they knew Jesus was God and truth personified. Though they did not live to see it, and the walls of Jerusalem were perceived impenetrable, it happened in tragic detail. In the winter of 69 AD, Titus led approximately 50,000 troops into Judea. By spring, they encircled a packed Jerusalem, swelled for Passover. The city was already weak from infighting. Now they were cut off from supplies. Many died from disease and starvation. After months, the Romans scaled the city walls, killing many inhabitants, enslaving others, and displacing the rest. Total destruction. Those strong walls? We saw those, too. What's left of them, At the foot of the western wall of the Temple Mount, near its southern corner, there is a jumble of large stones, each weighing 2-3 tons. Legions of Roman soldiers pulled together and threw them down when they destroyed the buildings on the Mount in 70 AD. But why? They didn't recognize the path to peace. They didn't recognize God when he visited them. But this was not met with an "I told you so!" from Jesus. His heart is broken when his gift is rejected.

REFLECTION: Do you recognize and understand the path to peace? Are you recognizing God when he visits you? Cornerstone is acknowledging the presence, power, and peace of King Jesus. Don't miss the visitation of God. It's better than you can imagine.



"Then Satan entered into Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve disciples, and he went to the leading priests and captains of the Temple guard to discuss the best way to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted, and they promised to give him money. So he agreed and began looking for an opportunity to betray Jesus so they could arrest him when the crowds weren't around." Luke 22:3-6

Three of the Gospels (Matthew 26, Mark 14 & Luke 22) tell us about what is called "The Bargain of Judas." It's the day the deal was made between Judas, a man Jesus called to be his disciple, a man who had spent three years in the closest of relationship with him, and the religious leaders who hated him and wanted him dead. We know Judas did it. We all know the story. His name is infamous and is a code word for betrayal. But not many know the back story.

Every one of the accounts tell what happened just before Judas went to make the deal. For Judas, it apparently was the last straw in the issues he had with Jesus. Judas Iscariot was likely a Zealot. His surname, Iscariot, means "dagger-men." These "Iscariots" were known to carry daggers at all times in case of an assassination attempt. Zealots were at first attracted by Jesus because they hoped for an overthrow and earthly Kingdom. Judas likely became disillusioned when Jesus didn't fulfill his dream. Perhaps it was easy for him to excuse his moral decline. He was the treasurer of Jesus' itinerant non-profit. John 12:6 tells us Judas would help himself to the money bag, stealing whatever he needed. He became obsessed and selfish. John 12 records when Mary poured perfume on Jesus' feet, Judas had criticized Mary's "extravagance"—saying the money should have been used for the poor. Jesus told him to leave her alone.

It was right before Passover was to begin. Jesus was at the home of Simon and another gift of perfume was poured over Jesus' head to anoint him. Once again, Jesus chastised the critics of her worship (this time including others at the table). That did it. Jesus said: "Wherever the Good News is preached throughout the world, this woman's deed will be remembered" (Mark 15:9). The next verse says that Judas then went to the leading priests to arrange to betray Jesus.

Judas allowed his heart to have a rival to Jesus. He didn't like the way Jesus handled his business. He kept a secret sin and didn't repent. He became resentful and rebellious. He tried to force Jesus' hand. And there was a day he had never thought he would be capable of any of that. He was called by Jesus, after all. But betrayal doesn't happen overnight. It happens when we fail to guard our hearts and keep our passion focused on Jesus.

REFLECTION: Judas had his amazing opportunity, yet a fatal fall. How will you continue following Jesus closely and keep your love for Jesus on high flame? Is your walk and relationship better?



The Triduum—Holy Thursday

"When the time came, Jesus and the apostles sat down together at the table. Jesus said, 'I have been very eager to eat this Passover meal with you before my suffering begins. For I tell you now that I won't eat this meal again until its meaning is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God." Luke 22:14-15

Yesterday was officially the end of Lent—the 40 days we observe the better walk of the best King and Savior. The next three days are called the Triduum, a Latin word for commemorating the sacrificial death of Jesus, leading to his victory.

Thursday evening Jesus was anxious to celebrate the Passover with his disciples. They were accustomed to it every year —it was their holiest feast, the one when they celebrated God's deliverance of the Jews from slavery in Egypt. They celebrated it with meaningful rituals, highlighting the sacrificial lambs and the fact that the blood of the lambs on the doorposts identified them as belonging to God. When the death angel came through Egypt, they would be kept safe. Imagine their shock when Jesus took the 15 centuries old traditional use of the bread and wine used to honor Moses, their great leader, and God's deliverance and said: "From now on, do this to remember me. This is my body and my blood given for you." That would sound like Pastor Jacob telling us at Christmas: "This year we're starting something new. This year and for all future, Christmas will be about me and my birthday!" It would be shocking! Rightfully so. But Jesus was different than Pastor Jacob. They had seen the signs that he was from God. They didn't get it all yet, but they stayed.

They stayed and Jesus washed their feet...even the feet of Judas. They were embarrassed and humiliated. They hadn't even thought about who would wash the dirty feet of Jesus and his disciples, as was the custom. It was a servant's job. It couldn't be Jesus! He insisted, a slowly washing each man's feet in the silence, each one taking in Jesus' teaching that leadership in his Upside-Down Kingdom was selfless service. Judas left without explanation, and Jesus spent the next hours teaching the most wonderful truths. He was going away to prepare them a place in his Father's house. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would come to them when he left. He called himself the true vine and challenged them to remain on the vine in order to bear much fruit. He said they would be sad for a time, but then their sadness would be turned into great joy. Then he asked them to go to the Garden of Gethsemane with him to pray. They fell asleep. But Jesus prayed.

Read his prayer that includes you and me in John 17. It's still what he prays for us.

REFLECTION: Soldiers and Judas arrived with the betrayal kiss. Everyone deserted him. Jesus went willingly. He was beaten, abused, flogged, blindfolded, stripped, and mocked. He was held underground in a dark, dank, small prisoner's dungeon, pungent with the permanent smell of prisoners awaiting crucifixion. For you. For me.



The Triduum—Good Friday

"The time for judging this world has come, when Satan, the ruler of this world, will be cast out. And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself." John 12:31-32

After a night of torture and no sleep, a shackled Jesus was dragged before the high council. They demanded to know who he was—the Messiah? The Son of God? The King of Jews? He simply reminded them that they had said so. Then they took him to Pilate, the Roman governor. Funny how a common hatred draws people together. When King Herod and his soldiers began mocking Jesus, draping him in a purple robe, then sent him to Pilate, "Herod and Pilate, who had been enemies before, became friends that day" (Luke 23:12).

A crowd gathered as news spread. Pilate's wife was very troubled by Jesus' fate, so Pilate tried to appease the crowd. He offered to crucify Barabbas, a well-known violent criminal, and release Jesus. The crowd roared, demanding Barabbas be freed and Jesus crucified. Eventually, Pilate washed his hands, signifying he didn't take responsibility for the choice, and wrote the decree of sentencing. Jesus was led away and forced to carry his own cross.

It was my holy privilege to walk the Via Dolorosa, the way of the cross, in Jerusalem to Golgotha, the place of the skull outside the city gates. The cobbled streets mark stations where memorable events happened. A cross weighed over 300 lbs. The crossbeam, or patibulum, that a condemned man carried, weighed around 100 lbs., far too much for the broken and beaten Jesus to carry. He fell twice. A man named Simon was forced to carry it for him. But no one but Jesus, the perfect King, could carry the weight of the sins of the world—past, present, and future. He comforted his mother and the women who followed along. Except for John, who stayed with Mary, his disciples deserted him in fear.

And then he was stripped and nailed to the cross between two violent criminals. Only the worst were crucified. The sign above his head said, "King of the Jews." Soldiers gambled over his perfect, seamless rabbi robe. He spoke seven times. One of those times he inconceivably asked his Father to forgive his persecutors. Another he gave forgiveness and the assurance of Paradise to one criminal who recognized him as King. Then he cried: "It is finished!" and committed his Spirit to his Father. His mission was accomplished.

REFLECTION: It didn't look like a victory yet, but this was the death blow to Satan. Satan bet that Jesus would choose his own way, as he had. But Jesus was faithful. In this moment, the head was cut off the chicken. Satan would run around and splatter blood as he died, but his end was certain. Jesus had been lifted up, and for all eternity, everyone would know the true King. The cowardly pretender to the throne was defeated. As the Father predicted in the Garden, Jesus crushed his head (Genesis 3:15). Bow your heart and your head in gratitude.

SATURDAY Moril 19

The Triddum—Vilent Saturday

"Afterward Joseph of Arimathea, who had been a secret disciple of Jesus (because he feared the Jewish leaders), asked Pilate for permission to take down Jesus' body. When Pilate gave permission, Joseph came and took the body away. With him came Nicodemus, the man who had come to Jesus at night. He brought about seventy-five pounds of perfumed ointment made from myrrh and aloes. Following Jewish burial custom, they wrapped Jesus' body with the spices in long sheets of linen cloth. The place of crucifixion was near a garden, where there was a new tomb, never used before. And so, because it was the day of preparation for the Jewish Passover and since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there." Luke 19:38-42

After the long, loud Friday of anguish and weeping, Jesus was taken from the cross where he had hung for six hours. Typically, the bodies were left to rot on their crosses as horrific visual warnings to passersby. Someone had to ask for permission to bury them otherwise. They had to act quickly, because the Jewish Sabbath, Shabbat, started at sundown on Friday evening, and no work was permitted on Saturday, the Sabbath. Only waiting.

The Romans, with no such rules, did the dirty work for the religious leaders. As the leaders waited in fear and suspicion, they asked for an armed guard to be posted and the tomb sealed with a massive stone, supposedly so Jesus' fanatic followers wouldn't steal his body. But they were truly afraid. They had seen so much. What if?

Jesus' followers were especially silent in grief, humiliation, desperation, and fear. They had left everything to follow Jesus. Could this be how it ended? The leaders and Romans had killed the most spectacular and powerful person they had ever known. What would happen to them now? They went into hiding.

Jesus' mother, Mary...I can't comprehend her grief. To see her pure, spotless, supernaturally promised son, go down like this was incomprehensible. He was the Son of God, wasn't he? No one but her knew for certain the circumstances of his birth. Joseph was in heaven now. Is this truly what God wanted?

We can't truly feel all of this with them because we live in the victory of what was yet to come. But they didn't know the end of the story. They didn't know that Sunday was coming, and the Son of God would rise. They just knew it was dark and silent. The darkest, bleakest day of their lives.

REFLECTION: Fearful Fridays are intensely awful as things fall apart in front of us. But as long as there's life, there's a smidgen of hope. Maybe something can change. But on Silent Saturday, there is no hope. It's quiet, except for your tears and sighs. What are you fearing and grieving this Silent Saturday? Give it to Jesus, the Grave Robber! While we are waiting he is working.



The King is Alive!

"Early on Sunday morning, as the new day was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went out to visit the tomb. Suddenly there was a great earthquake! For an angel of the Lord came down from heaven, rolled aside the stone, and sat on it. His face shone like lightning, and his clothing was as white as snow. The guards shook with fear when they saw him, and they fell into a dead faint. Then the angel spoke to the women. 'Don't be afraid!' he said. 'I know you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He isn't here! He is risen from the dead, just as he said would happen. Come, see where his body was lying. And now, go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and he is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there. Remember what I have told you.' The women ran quickly from the tomb. They were very frightened but also filled with great joy, and they rushed to give the disciples the angel's message. And as they went, Jesus met them and greeted them. And they ran to him, grasped his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Don't be afraid! Go tell my brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see me there.' As the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and told the leading priests what had happened. A meeting with the elders was called, and they decided to give the soldiers a large bribe. They told the soldiers, 'You must say, 'Jesus' disciples came during the night while we were sleeping, and they stole his body.' If the governor hears about it, we'll stand up for you so you won't get in trouble.' So the guards accepted the bribe and said what they were told to say. Their story spread widely among the Jews, and they still tell it today." Matthew 28:1-15

Sunday morning! The Son has Risen! Jesus Christ, the forever King, has risen in triumphant victory over sin, death, and Satan, the nemesis of humankind! There is no more silence—the dark hallways of Hell are screaming in fear and rage. "He has done it! The King has won!" The religious leaders and the Romans are conspiring, chattering in fear. How can they possibly conceal the news that the Carpenter and Rabbi called his shot of resurrection and actually pulled it off? The disciples are delirious with a mixture of disbelief that this is true and profound wonder that it is! They are talking over top of each other as they deliver the news!

But Mary—she is silent, except for her joyful sobs. Once again, she is pondering these things in her heart again, and she sings: "I know that my Redeemer lives!"

REFLECTION: Make a joyful noise! Many of them! The better, best, Forever King of Kings—He is alive! Forever joy is here! Thank Jesus for his victory over sin and death and what it means for you.

