



Deliver Us:
JESUS
SETS US FREE

This year the narrative of Jesus' victory over sin and death is viewed against another emancipating act of God: Israel's exodus from Egypt. Seen against the Old Testament backdrop of Israel's captivity, *Deliver Us: Jesus Sets Us Free* illuminates the Passion story with crisp clarity and insight. Using Scriptures from the Gospels and the book of Exodus, these meditations show God at work—calling us from sin's oppression to a new life in Jesus Christ. As God has acted in history, calling and redeeming people everywhere, so too today does He offer us His freedom—and fellowship—accomplished once and for all through the cross of Christ.



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These Lenten devotions were written by Dr. Kari Vo.
As an added feature, there are reflection questions for each day's messages that can be used for self-study or as prompts for discussion when reflecting as a group.

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NOW WHAT?

Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying, “I will sing to the LORD, for He has triumphed gloriously ... The LORD is my strength and my song, and He has become my salvation.” (Exodus 15:1a, 2a)

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

It’s the day after Easter. Jesus is risen, the house is a mess (well, my house!), and it’s time to get on with life. What comes next?

We celebrate. How could we *not* celebrate? Jesus has set us free from slavery to sin, death, and the devil. We are God’s free children, and death cannot destroy us. Jesus is with us forever, and He will come again to bring us to Himself. How could we not celebrate such great news?

“Praise Him with sounding cymbals; praise Him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!” (Psalm 150:5-6)

But there’s more. Jesus calls us to *share* this great news, to tell it to everyone around us, and ultimately to the whole human race. He says, “Go and make disciples ...”

Share this joy that God has given you. Ask Jesus to give you the Holy Spirit’s help so you can do this—God doesn’t expect you to manage this on your own! Live your life in such a way that people want to know what’s going on—why things are different for you than for them. And then tell them. It’s the best news ever! May God bless you as you celebrate Jesus and the wonderful freedom He has won for us.

Dear Lord Jesus, thank You! Help me to rejoice in You and give me the Holy Spirit’s help to tell others about You, too. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What kinds of things do you do when you’re happy and celebrating?
2. How does Jesus’ resurrection give you joy?
3. Take a moment to pray and ask the Lord to teach you how to talk about Him with people you love.

JESUS SETS US FREE

Now about eight days after these sayings He (Jesus) took with Him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And as He was praying, the appearance of His face was altered, and His clothing became dazzling white. And behold, two men were talking with Him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His departure, which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ... And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!” And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. (Luke 9:28-31, 35-36a)

It’s common for us to talk about what Jesus did to save us in terms of substitution. We say He “took our place,” He “carried our cross.” Sometimes we use the language of atonement—we talk about sin and forgiveness, merit and “making up” for the evil we have done.

But these are not the only ways the Bible helps us think about how Jesus saves us. There are many other powerful word-pictures, such as the language of slavery and freedom, of deliverance and becoming God’s own people. This is the language of Exodus.

Exodus means “going out,” the name we use in English for the second book of the Bible. It tells the story of how God saw His people suffering as slaves in Egypt, and used Moses to bring them to freedom.

But did you know that the whole Exodus story is a foretelling of the much greater rescue God did for all of us in Jesus’ death and resurrection? It’s true. There’s a reason Jesus suffered, died, and rose at Passover time. There’s a reason He is called the “Lamb of God.” And there’s a reason why Moses and Elijah talked with Him about His departure, His death—His “exodus” is what the Greek says!

Let’s walk together through the second, greater Exodus—through the story of how God Himself came down to rescue the human race from slavery to sin, death, and the devil. Let’s wonder at His great love, and celebrate His mercy. Because the God of Exodus is the God of the Gospels, who rescues us and makes us His free people forever.

Dear Lord, give us Your Holy Spirit so that we can see how You have set us free, both now and forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What do you think of when you hear the word “freedom”?
2. When have you felt the most free in your life? The least free?
3. Does it surprise you to think of Jesus as your freedom-bringer? Why or why not?

STARTING OFF RIGHT

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately He went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on Him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:13-17)

You may remember the story of Moses and how he started his work. God found him tending sheep in the wilderness, and He spoke to him through a burning bush and sent him to set the people of Israel free. What you may *not* know is that Moses had already taken a whack at that job, 40 years before. He had attacked an Egyptian slave driver who was beating a Hebrew man. Moses' self-appointed rescue job didn't work out. He was accused as a murderer and had to run for it. It was another 40 years before God called and sent him back to do it right (see Exodus 2:11-25). God's call makes all the difference.

Jesus knew that, too. And when the time came for Him to leave His quiet life in Nazareth and start actively walking the path to the cross, He didn't hesitate. He came to the place where God was calling—to the place where the prophet John the Baptist was preaching and baptizing people at the Jordan. This wasn't any fancy place—it was out in the wilderness, far from any palace or big city. But it was where God was at work. And Jesus was baptized.

To be sure, Jesus had no sin of His own that would make Baptism at all necessary. But we certainly did! And since He was coming to be our Rescuer, He submitted Himself to the same Baptism that marks our lives as God's people. It was the right start. He joined Himself to us in Baptism so that we ultimately would be joined to Him in His suffering, death, and resurrection.

Lord Jesus, thank You for joining Yourself to us so that we could belong to You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Have you ever started a job wrong and then had to re-start it right?
2. When were you baptized? What do you know about the circumstances of your Baptism?
3. In Baptism, God marked you as His own child. What kind of a start has that given you in your life?

DON'T BE AFRAID!

And Moses said to the people, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD ..." But the people of Israel walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. Thus the LORD saved Israel that day. (Exodus 14:13a, 29-30a)

But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, as He said. Come, see the place where He lay. ..." So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell His disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid." (Matthew 28:5-6, 8-10a)

Death is terrifying. The people of Israel knew this, caught between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea. Jesus' followers knew this as they dealt with the aftermath of His crucifixion. I know this whenever my asthma acts up and I fumble for my inhaler. You know this, when you face the fact that someone you love is dying, and there is nothing you can do to prevent it.

God knows we are afraid, and His heart goes out to us. And so He says to us: "Do not be afraid!" "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord." "Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Matthew 28:10b; Exodus 14:13b; Isaiah 43:19a)

To all our fears, God gave one overwhelming, everlasting answer: He raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus is the first of the human race to rise from death, never to die again. But He will not be the last!

Jesus is the guarantee of our own resurrection, because everyone who trusts in Him will share His victory. This is why we can say with Paul: "'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' ... Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:54b-55, 57).

This is the answer to our fear—a Savior who loves us and who has conquered death. We do not face death alone. He is with us, and He will bring us back.

Lord, when I face death, be my strength and comfort. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Whom do you love who has died?
2. When you are afraid, how do you deal with it?
3. What does Jesus' resurrection mean to you personally? Mention one or two specific things.

PAUSE

After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus ... Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came ... Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there. (John 19:38a, 39a, 41-42)

Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night. (Exodus 14:19-20)

I love Holy Saturday. It's a nice pause between Good Friday and Easter Sunday—a time to rest, catch your breath, and get ready for what God is going to do next.

The people of Israel needed just such a pause. They were free and on the move within hours of the final plague—the sun hadn't even risen when Pharaoh told Moses to take everybody and leave. And yet there was one final obstacle they hadn't faced—the Red Sea.

Jesus' followers needed a pause, too. As far as they were aware, Jesus' death was the end of the story. They had no idea what God was preparing for them on Sunday. All they knew was that God had provided a rest for them on the Sabbath—and they took it. A last chance to sit still. A chance to take a deep breath, before the miracle.

God provides these kinds of rest for us as well. We face major events in our own lives—changes in our health, new or lost jobs, marriage breakdowns, the deaths of people we love. It's okay to take the rest God provides for you, whether you know what's coming next or not. You may not know the future—but you know the God who loves you, and who laid down His life for you. He has given you the blessing of rest.

Dear Father, thank You for giving me rest when I need it. Please strengthen me in Your Son Jesus. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When you have a break from your regular activities, what do you do?
2. Do you need a rest right now? If so, why?
3. How does God refresh and strengthen you in Jesus?

LEANING ON THE WORD OF GOD

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. ... And Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time. (Luke 4:1, 12-13)

Testing. Nobody likes it. It's uncomfortable. It offers the possibility that you could fail. And the consequences—well, let's not think about those!

But we all know that testing comes along early in practically every important thing we do. Moses faced it the first time he went to tell Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go free. How nervous he must have been! Imagine having to go tell a hostile king that you've been hearing voices (well, one voice), and you have a message from God that the king isn't going to want to hear. Not fun. Dangerous, even. How do you keep your courage up in those circumstances?

Moses leaned pretty heavily on the Word of God that he had heard during the episode of the burning bush. He didn't try to come up with smart ideas on his own—just stuck to God's Word and passed it along. And we can see God's own Son Jesus doing the exact same thing in His own testing, during the 40 days He spent in the wilderness being tempted by the devil.

Think about that for a moment. Here is God Himself in the flesh being tempted by evil—and whenever He answers a temptation, He says only, "It is written ..." (or as we would say, "The Bible says ..."). As God, surely Jesus could have just made something up. He had the wisdom. But He didn't do that. He leaned on God's Word, the Scripture, and used that as His sole defense—just as Moses did. Why?

I think Jesus did it for us. Because what wisdom or understanding do we have besides what God gives us in the Bible? When we are tested, there is no better place for us to find help and hope. Because that is where we find Jesus—and the Holy Spirit plants faith and hope in our hearts.

Lord Holy Spirit, help me to understand and trust the Bible—please teach me to hear Your voice. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What part of the Bible do you know the best? The least?
2. What part does the Bible play in your daily life?
3. Who or what could help you grow in your appreciation of the Bible?

DARK DAYS AND A NEW LIGHT

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the Gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel." (Mark 1:14-15)

"After John was arrested ..." Can you hear the despair in that sentence? I suspect a lot of John's followers were deeply disturbed when King Herod threw John in jail—and even worse, when he murdered him. If I had been there, I would have been asking, "Why did God allow this to happen? Why take our teacher and prophet away, and leave us sitting in darkness?"

They did not know—could not have known—that God was already doing something greater than they could ever dream of. God Himself had come to earth as the Man Jesus Christ. God had come in His own Person to rescue and save and deliver His people. Yes, John was a great prophet—the greatest!—but Jesus was more than that, the One that all the prophets pointed to—from Moses onward.

Now that John is off the stage, Jesus moves to the center. He is no fool—He knows perfectly well that His teaching and preaching and healing will all end up with an execution outside Jerusalem in a very few years. John's fate points to Jesus' destiny. And because He loves us so much, Jesus goes ahead full speed, preaching the Good News to all of us: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe the Gospel!"

Let us listen to Him.

Lord Jesus, when I walk in darkness, help me to trust in You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Do you sleep with a nightlight? Why or why not?
2. Do you ever think of brighter days in the past? If so, when were they?
3. How do you find strength and comfort in God when you are living through dark days?

FREE AT LAST

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. ... When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:50-52a, 54)

At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt ... (Pharaoh) summoned Moses and Aaron by night and said, "Up, go out from among my people, both you and the people of Israel; and go, serve the LORD, as you have said." (Exodus 12:29a, 31)

It was an amazing and terrifying night. Pharaoh went to bed the overlord of a million slaves. By morning he was a bereaved father, and those slaves were free—on their way out of the country to a new and better land.

It was an amazing and terrifying day, that first Good Friday. Satan started it as the oppressor and enslaver of the whole human race. By nightfall he was a dethroned tyrant, and those slaves were free—rescued by the Son of God and delivered into God's kingdom forever.

No wonder the earth shook! No wonder the rocks split! The universe had never seen anything like this—that God Himself would lay down His own life in shame and suffering, killed at the hands of His own creation. Who could have predicted such a thing? What kind of a God is this, who gives up His own life to set His people free?

This is a God who loves us, against all logic and common sense. This is the Son of God who cooked up this whole plan in the counsel of the Trinity, with the Father and the Spirit, one God. His intent has always been to rescue us, ever since we fell into the power of evil way back in the Garden of Eden. And now He has accomplished it—at the cost of His own life.

This is a truly Good Friday, because we know what happens next, now that Jesus has set us free. He Himself will be our Leader, now and always—as the crucified and risen Son of God.

Dear God, thank You for setting us free. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Are there occasions that are both sad and happy for you? When?
2. If you were in God's shoes, would you have rescued humanity the way He did? Why or why not?
3. If you are willing, describe one particular area of your life where you were enslaved—and Jesus set you free.

SAVED BY HIS BLOOD

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." And He took a cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:26-28)

(The Lord said) "And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt." (Exodus 12:13)

It was Passover that night, when Jesus met with His disciples for dinner. The lamb was roasted; the bread was baked; the wine was poured. They came together to remember God's mercy when He saved the people of Israel from death and delivered them from slavery in Egypt.

Blood was a major part of the first Passover. God told Moses to tell the people of Israel to kill a lamb for dinner and to use its blood to mark the doorposts of their homes. When God brought judgment on Egypt, the children of Israel would be safe. The blood was their salvation.

This story was on all the disciples' minds, because it was retold every year at the Passover celebration. But Jesus knew what the disciples did not. He knew that within 24 hours, God would carry out an even greater salvation than the rescue of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. God was setting all of humanity free from their slavery to sin and darkness. And Jesus was the Lamb whose blood would deliver them.

No wonder Jesus took the cup of wine at supper and said, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." This is the blood of the Lamb of God, whose suffering and death on the cross set us free from the power of death. No one who trusts in Him needs to be afraid of God's judgment. His blood protects us. And Jesus' resurrection from the dead is the guarantee that we will all share in His everlasting life—no longer as frightened slaves, but as God's joyful people.

Lord, give me Your body and blood to eat and drink at Your Supper, because You are my life. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What is your favorite holiday? What does it commemorate?
2. What do you personally remember when you go to Communion?
3. What is one specific thing Jesus' blood has set you free from?

PRIVILEGED TO SHARE THE WORK

While walking by the Sea of Galilee, He (Jesus) saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. (Matthew 4:18-20)

Have you ever stopped to think about how very odd Jesus' plan is?

He is perfect God and perfect Man. He has all power and could do any number of miracles. He definitely doesn't need human help to carry out His plans. And yet, when it comes to rescuing God's people from slavery to sin, death, and the devil, what does He do? He calls on ordinary people to help.

And boy, are they ordinary! Some fishermen. A tax collector. A revolutionary. Later on, a guy who waited on tables. A tentmaker. A young man from a mixed-race family. A woman who sold purple dye. A slave.

These are the people the Lord chose to help lead God's people out of the darkness into the light of His salvation. They are people like you, and like me. As Paul says, "Consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1 Corinthians 1:26). Nevertheless, God chose you to become His son, His daughter. You believed in Jesus, His Son, who saved you, through His life, death, and resurrection from the dead. Now God would love to use you to tell that story of Jesus to others just as ordinary as you.

Dear Lord, please show me in baby steps how I can share Jesus with those around me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Do you like to help people with their work? What kinds of work?
2. Would you call yourself ordinary? Why or why not?
3. What is difficult for you about sharing your faith? What is easier?

SIGNS

On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee ... When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine." ... Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." ... When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, (he said) "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now." This, the first of His signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested His glory. And His disciples believed in Him. (John 2:1a, 3, 7a, 9a, 10b, 11)

When God called Moses to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt, He gave him the ability to do three signs so people would know God had sent him. Moses' stick could turn into a snake; his hand could turn leprous; and he could turn water into blood.

I don't know about you, but I am infinitely grateful that Jesus' first sign was a happy one!

I suppose it makes sense if you think about it. Moses was coming to speak to a king who refused to let his slaves go, in spite of plague after plague, disaster after disaster. It makes sense that the opening "signs" Moses gave would be ominous, scary, threatening. They were a foretaste of the things to come.

Jesus' first sign is also a foretaste of the things to come—both for Him and for us. The wine He made for this village wedding foreshadows the wine of the heavenly banquet in the kingdom of God. It is a sign of celebration to come.

But it is more than that. We can hardly avoid being reminded of the Communion wine—of Jesus' blood, shed for us on the cross. And so this sign reminds us of the price Jesus paid to free us from death and evil—and of the joy we have with Him as we share His resurrected, eternal life.

Dear Jesus, please bring many more people to celebrate with You at the heavenly banquet. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Do you like parties? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever had to deal with a crisis at a celebration or party you planned?
3. If God had told you to choose Jesus' first miracle, what would it have been, and why?

ENTRUSTED

Standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then He said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. (John 19:25-27)

My husband and I made our wills some time ago, and one of the questions we had to consider was what would become of our son if we were to die at the same time. Who would take care of him? Who would love him and be there for him?

Jesus faced the same sort of question about the people He loved. There was His mother, Mary, who believed in Him and followed Him, even to Jerusalem and the shadow of His cross. She couldn't be left alone with that grief—or sent back to live with Jesus' hostile brothers. Mary needed someone who would care for her and comfort her, not say "I told you so" or worse. And so Jesus entrusted her to His disciple John. John would take her into his own home and care for her as for his own mother.

This was good for John, as well. Jesus knew that Mary would love John as her own son—would comfort him, pray with him, and help him through the devastation of Jesus' death. And so Jesus entrusted them to one another.

Jesus could do this with confidence because He entrusted all of His people, whether living or yet unborn, to God the Father. Jesus said, "My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all, and no one is able to *snatch* them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:29) If you trust in Jesus who died and rose again to set you free from evil, then you are in the Father's hand, and the Holy Spirit is watching over you. What safer place could you be?

Lord, thank You for entrusting me and all Your people to the Father. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When have you trusted something valuable to the care of a friend or family member?
2. What is the most valuable thing anybody has ever trusted you with?
3. Whom is God entrusting to you, to care for and help meet their needs?

BETTER THAN WE DESERVE

And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on His right and one on His left. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." ... One of the criminals who were hanged railed at Him, saying, "Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." And He said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise." (Luke 23:33-34a, 39-43)

I wonder if it haunted the soldiers—those words of Jesus, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." They must have been used to screams and curses. They could probably tune those out. But having your victim pray for you? That's a recipe for a sleepless night.

But Jesus was right, wasn't He? They truly didn't know what they were doing. They didn't know this was the Son of God. They probably didn't even realize it was an innocent man. And so Jesus seizes on the one thing that could be held in their favor—their ignorance—and appeals to God on their behalf.

He does this later with the criminals who had been yelling at Him. One of the men had a change of heart and asked Jesus to remember him. Such a small thing—especially since his behavior at first had been so awful. And yet, here is Jesus, seizing on the small good thing—and returning a blessing that he could never dream of. "Today you will be with Me in paradise."

Jesus is like that—slow to judgment, quick to forgive, always ready to give us twisted, broken people gifts that are far, far better than anything we could ever deserve or even dream of. It's why He went to the cross in the first place—so that He could forgive us, rescue us, heal us, and bring us into His Father's kingdom of freedom and joy.

Thank You, Lord, for giving us so much better than we deserve. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Do you find it hard or easy to give people better than they deserve?
2. When did someone in your life give you something better than you really deserved?
3. Is there someone right now to whom you could show this kind of mercy? (Don't identify the person if it should stay confidential.)

BEING UP FRONT WITH US

Now when Jesus saw a crowd around Him, He gave orders to go over to the other side. And a scribe came up and said to Him, "Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." (Matthew 8:18-20)

Revolutions are not easy. Taking part in one is rarely clean or nice. This is also true for the revolution Jesus was beginning—the revolt against the devil, the breaking of his power over the whole human race, and the beginning of our glorious freedom as children of God.

But first comes the suffering. And so anyone invited to take part in such a revolution needs to be aware of what they are getting into.

Take the man in the Bible passage above. "Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go," he says. But was he still saying that after Jesus warned him that it would involve homelessness? I hope so. But we don't know, do we? Possibly because Jesus wants us to consider the same question, though in a larger sense.

What does following Jesus cost for us? It may not be homelessness or persecution or loss of family for you. It might be something more subtle—a failure to be promoted at work, maybe, because your conscience won't let you use the tactics that other candidates do. It may mean taking someone into your family—a relative who falls on hard times, or a student who suddenly loses grant funding and can't afford an apartment. It might mean giving that old car to a single mother who needs one, rather than trading it in.

As a Christian believer, you have Jesus living in you, and He shows Himself through the things you do. There is a cost—plenty of annoyance and frustration and burdens to bear. But ask those who are serious about following Jesus, and they will tell you—they'd never trade it for anything else.

Lord, live through me, and help me to be glad to serve You in the ways You set before me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Have you ever made a commitment too quickly?
2. What has being a Christian cost you?
3. What has being a Christian given to you? Be as specific as you can.

A SURPRISING RECEPTION

And He (Jesus) came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as was His custom, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and He stood up to read. ... And all spoke well of Him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from His mouth. ... When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and drove Him out of the town ... so that they could throw Him down the cliff. (Luke 4:16, 22a, 28-29)

What a weird reaction—to go from “all spoke well of Him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from His mouth” to trying to throw Jesus off a cliff! And in such a short time, too. Something certainly got them riled up.

And if we look at Jesus’ sermon, we can see what it was. They were happy as long as Jesus was proclaiming God’s mercy for them. But then Jesus started proclaiming God’s mercy to foreigners! He said, “But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when ... a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian” (Luke 4:25-27).

They really didn’t want to hear that. Surely, God belonged to Israel only! They were so enraged that they tried to murder Jesus.

It seems ridiculous—and yet we see people behaving like this today, too. We behave like this any time we refuse to share God’s blessings with others in need, just because they are different from us. Against this attitude Jesus urges us, “Freely you have received; freely give” (Matthew 10:8b, NIV). God’s mercy is for all the world—not just physical blessings but the best gift of all, His Son Jesus Christ, our Savior, who died and rose for us.

Dear Lord, give me a generous heart to share Your love with everyone. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When do you find it easiest to share? Hardest?
2. What gifts has God given to you? List as many as you can.
3. How has Jesus helped you to bless other people?

HE SEES YOU

And there followed Him (Jesus) a great multitude of the people and of women who were mourning and lamenting for Him. But turning to them Jesus said, “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us,’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?” (Luke 23:27-31)

Have you ever been in the middle of terrible suffering? If you’re like me, it gives you a kind of tunnel vision. I can’t concentrate on anything but the pain. Oh, somewhere in the back of my mind I know that life goes on—that other people still exist—even that they might be suffering, just as I am. But it’s incredibly hard to put my own suffering aside to focus on theirs. My own suffering takes up all my energy.

But Jesus is different. Just look at Him on the road to the cross! He’s already been beaten, tortured, kept up all night, put through five separate trials—and yet He still notices the women on the side of the road who are grieving for Him.

In fact, He goes further than that. He lays His own suffering aside and takes a minute to warn them of what’s on the way—their own suffering at the fall of Jerusalem. Those days will be so horrible, He says, that being childless will look like a blessing. After all, if such evil things are happening now, while God Himself is still walking the face of the earth, what will happen when He is no longer visibly present?

Jesus sees us just as clearly as He saw those women. He sees you—your situation, your needs, your suffering. He is concerned for you. Your suffering is the reason for His suffering. As Isaiah put it, “Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4-5). He loves you this much.

Dear Lord, help me to respond to Your love with love. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When you have pain and medicine isn’t helping, what do you usually do?
2. Who in your life has cared for you in spite of their own suffering?
3. Does it comfort you to know that Jesus sees you clearly? Why or why not?

A TIME FOR JOY

And throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. And as He rode along, they spread their cloaks on the road. As He was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the whole multitude of His disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the King who comes in the Name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” And some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Him, “Teacher, rebuke Your disciples.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.” (Luke 19:35-40)

Sometimes Palm Sunday reminds me of a rollercoaster. You know how there’s always one point where you find yourself sitting at the very top of a tall, tall hill, as the car moves slowly, slowly toward a huge, deep drop? That’s Palm Sunday. You know that any moment now you’ll be heading for the ground at a terrifying speed—but right now, at the top of the world, the view is amazing.

It must have been like that for Jesus. He knew perfectly well what was coming up—the cleaning of the temple, the Last Supper, the betrayal, Gethsemane, arrest, trial, torture, and death. But for just a short time, He was looking at a tiny preview of the way it will be at the end of the world—when humanity is set free and celebrating: “A great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Revelation 7:9b-10)

That was what He came for—to turn wretched, shivering slaves of sin into the free, joyful people of God. And Palm Sunday was a foretaste of the joy that would be His—and all of ours—on that final day when Jesus returns to bring us into God’s kingdom. No wonder He said, “If these (people) were silent, the very stones would cry out!” Palm Sunday is a time for joy, because our Savior has come and is setting us free.

Dear Father, thank You for giving us a foretaste of this joy. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Name one of the happiest celebrations you can remember. What made it happy?
2. Have you ever been there when an unplanned celebration broke out? What happened?
3. What do you most look forward to about Jesus’ return?

FREE FROM SHAME

A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, “Give Me a drink.” ... The Samaritan woman said to Him, “How is it that You, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.” (John 4:7, 9-10)

Do you ever wish you could just start your life over?

I think that’s the way it is for a lot of us. Take the woman Jesus met at the well in Samaria. She was there to get water—but not at the normal time, at the start of the day. She was there in the heat of noon, when nobody else was there. Why? Well, probably to avoid her neighbors. Better to suffer from the heat than from the sting of malicious tongues.

You see, she had been married five times, and was then living with yet another man—possibly someone else’s husband. It’s pretty clear that her life was a mess. And when she saw Jesus sitting at the well, she braced herself for another battle. Because Jesus was clearly a Jew, and she knew full well the Jews were prejudiced against Samaritans.

But Jesus hadn’t come to heap yet another burden on this woman. He had come to take her burdens away—to set her free. He spoke to her gently, treating her with respect, making it clear He knew her history and still valued her in spite of it. He offered her the living water of the Holy Spirit, who plants faith in us. And she was so amazed that she ran back to tell her neighbors all about Him.

You may be at a point in your life where all you can see is a mess—regrets, wrong turns, shame, broken relationships. Jesus sees past that. He sees you, and He wants to set you free. He offers you living water so that your thirsty soul will be satisfied. Let Him give it to you.

Lord, give me this living water so that I may be satisfied in You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. In what situation does water taste the best to you?
2. Have you ever avoided people? When?
3. When do you feel most thirsty for a drink of Jesus’ living water?

GIVING FREELY

These twelve Jesus sent out, instructing them ... "Proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without paying; give without pay." (Matthew 10:5a, 7-8)

What is it worth to you, the new life Jesus has given? What is the value of your faith, your forgiveness, your freedom in Christ?

This is an easy question to answer for people who come to faith later in life. They remember the darkness, what it was like to live without Christ. They remember—and shudder. Ask them if they'd ever go back—and prepare to have your hair blow back from the explosive "No!"

But what about you? Chances are you were born into the faith—born to Christian parents, who had you baptized as soon as possible and brought you up in the church. If you've always lived in the light, you may find it hard to value what you've always had.

What have you received? Forgiveness—all your guilt taken away, removed forever. Covering for shame—you are clothed in Christ, all your nakedness hidden. Strength for today, whether it's an ordinary, humdrum day or a time of crisis. A solid foundation under your feet in times of doubt and fear. The knowledge that God's arm is there, holding you up, even in the most terrible storms. Love—a love that does not depend on your own lovability, but on the never-changing character of God Himself.

This is what God has given to you. Pass it along to others!

Lord, help me to see the worth of what You have given me—and to pour myself out willingly for the people around me, the people You love. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Has anyone ever given you a gift you cherish? What was it?
2. What kinds of things do you find easy to share? What kinds are hard?
3. Pray for someone you would like to share God's gifts with.

HAIL, KING OF THE JEWS

Then he (Pilate) released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, delivered Him to be crucified. Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole battalion before Him. And they stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on His head and put a reed in His right hand. And kneeling before Him, they mocked Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they spit on Him and took the reed and struck Him on the head. (Matthew 27:26-30)

The usual picture of a king is a man dressed in fancy clothes, with a crown on his head and a scepter in his hand. He has all the power—he gets to do whatever he wants, and everybody else has to do what he says.

Jesus' kingship is a bit different. He has the fancy clothes, if you want to call them that. But the crown on His head is a crown of thorns, and the royal robe is probably a cape borrowed from one of the soldiers. He even has a scepter—though it's only a stick, and the soldiers keep taking it away from Him to hit Him over the head.

But what about the power? The soldiers would never believe it, but He has that, too. What is happening to Him inside headquarters is happening by His permission. He could call down a legion of angels to save Him if He chose, but He doesn't. He submits to their abuse.

Why? Because Jesus is a true King—and He knows that a king's real purpose is to care for the people. If the people are in danger, the king's job is to save them. And Jesus sees very, very clearly that God's people are in danger. The human beings God created and loves are being harmed—held prisoner by the devil, in danger of everlasting death. They need saving—and Jesus is in the process of doing it. It doesn't matter what it costs Him personally.

You, too, are one of the people Jesus came to rescue. You are one that He loves enough to suffer and even die for. His intention is to give you life—everlasting life—just as He has risen from the dead and will never die again. He is your king, and He wants you in God's kingdom.

Lord, You are my king. Help me to trust in You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When you were a child, did you pretend to be royalty? How?
2. Have you ever held an important job or role? Did the responsibilities outweigh the personal benefits?
3. What does it mean for you personally, that Jesus is king?

WHAT KIND OF KING?

So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to Him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about Me?" Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You over to me. What have You done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But My kingdom is not from the world." (John 18:33-36)

Pilate was confused. The prisoner, Jesus, was not behaving in any way that Pilate could understand. He refused to answer the charges against Him. When He did speak, He gave mysterious answers. And He agreed that He was in fact a King—but not the kind of king Pilate was familiar with.

Pilate was a soldier, a governor in service to the Roman emperor. He understood fighting, understood using your power to take what you wanted. But here was Jesus saying the exact opposite: "If My kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting.... But My kingdom is not from the world."

What kind of a kingdom was that? What kind of a King was that—One who would choose to wear a crown of thorns, and take a shameful cross for His royal throne?

This is the king who came to set us free, God Himself in human flesh. He was turning the world upside down—setting the prisoners free, breaking the power of evil, destroying the power of death. And He chose to win this war in a way that nobody had ever seen before—through His own suffering, death, and resurrection.

This will never make sense to people who see the world as a place to use your power and take what you want. But for everyone who receives the free love and mercy of God, it makes perfect sense. Jesus didn't come to destroy or to dominate. He came to save us, to lift us up and make us free.

Dear Lord, thank You for giving Yourself for us. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Have you ever been under the authority of someone who managed people by fear? How did you feel about that person?
2. Have you ever been under the authority of someone who served people from a heart of love? How did you feel about that person?
3. Was there ever a time when you could have used your power against someone and chose not to? What was their reaction?

WRONG-HEADED—AND PRECIOUS

When the days drew near for Him (Jesus) to be taken up, He set His face to go to Jerusalem. And He sent messengers ahead of Him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for Him. But the people did not receive Him, because His face was set toward Jerusalem. And when His disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do You want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But He turned and rebuked them. And they went on to another village. (Luke 9:51-56)

I have some sympathy with James and John. They saw Jesus insulted, and they wanted to avenge Him. No doubt they felt very holy and righteous about it!

But Jesus rebuked them. They didn't see what Jesus saw clearly—that He had set His face to go to Jerusalem to die, to be nailed to a cross for the very people who were insulting and rejecting Him. For all their wrong-headedness, the people in that village were precious to Him—so precious that He would lay down His life to save them. He had no intentions of burning them up!

This is the story I try to remember whenever one of my own enemies does something horrible—whenever I feel the desire to pull out my handy-dandy flamethrower and rid the world of them. I hear Jesus' voice in my ear, saying, "I died for them, too, you know." At which point I whine, "Aw, Lord ..." and put my vengeance away.

You are precious to Jesus, for all of your wrong-headedness. And so are your enemies—even the worst of them. Give it a try—pray for them. Even if you have to grit your teeth.

Lord Jesus, help me to deal with person's name here in mercy, remembering that You love that person enough to give Your life for him/her. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Did you have enemies when you were a child? How did you deal with them?
2. How do you deal with enemies now that you are older?
3. Take a moment to pray, asking God to give something good to one of your enemies.

GOD'S "NO" AND GOD'S "YES"

Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, He said to him, "Do you want to be healed?" (John 5:2-6)

Today we have the story of Jesus healing a man who'd been sick for 38 years. Jesus found him in the crowd of sick people lying near the pool of Bethesda, and He healed him and sent him home.

Whenever I read this story I wonder about all the other people lying there. Why did Jesus choose this man, and not someone else? Why not heal the whole lot of them and send them home?

I don't know the answer to that question. I do know that God still operates the same way today—healing one, and not another, fixing this situation, and allowing another prayer to go seemingly unanswered.

In a way, it comforts me. At least God is consistent. If He says "No" to me, He also said it to other people even in Bible times, when Jesus physically walked the earth. I don't need to worry that I am doing something wrong or that I don't have enough faith, just because my prayer is not getting the answer I want. God has His reasons, even though He doesn't choose to share them with me—just as Jesus had His reasons, though they are unknown to us, even now.

That doesn't mean I'm going to stop praying or trying to get God to change His "No" to a "Yes." But it does mean that God has said Yes, Yes, a thousand times Yes to us forever, through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus our Savior. If He loved us enough to do that, I can bear his "No" now—because I have His "Yes" forever.

Lord Jesus, help us to deal with Your "No" and to remember that You have said "Yes" to us for all time at the cross and empty tomb. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Have you known a little child who was going through a say-no-to-everything phase? What was that like?
2. What are you praying for now that could get either a "Yes" or a "No" from God?
3. How do you deal with it when God says "No" to you?

A MISSED CHANCE

When he (Pilate) learned that He (Jesus) belonged to Herod's jurisdiction, he sent Him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see Him, because he had heard about Him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by Him. So he questioned Him at some length, but He made no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing Him. And Herod with his soldiers treated Him with contempt and mocked Him. Then, arraying Him in splendid clothing, he sent Him back to Pilate. (Luke 23:7-11)

Pilate was playing political hot potato that Friday morning, trying to push off the responsibility for dealing with Jesus on to someone else. That's how King Herod got his chance to see Jesus up close and personal. What an opportunity! He had God Himself in the flesh standing in front of him—the Savior of the world in his court.

What would Herod ask Him? Herod had any number of problems he could have laid before Jesus. First and foremost was his responsibility for the death of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin. Herod carried a lot of guilt and fear over that death, because he knew John was a holy man.

Or Herod could have asked Jesus about other problems—like how to deal with his illicit marriage to his own niece Herodias, who turned out to be a bloodthirsty person. He could have brought up his personal attraction to the Jewish faith, his fear of the supernatural, or his complicated family problems.

But Herod threw away his time with Jesus, mocking and mistreating Him. Herod missed his chance.

The apostle Paul urges us not to make the same mistake. He says, "Now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Whatever you are going through, now is the time to lay it before Jesus. He is always willing to listen and help. Let Him set you free from whatever is oppressing you. He loves you. After all, He has already laid down His life for you.

Dear Savior, please help me with the problems that lie heavy on my heart now. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Have you ever "missed a chance" to do something and regretted it later?
2. When you have heavy burdens, how do you deal with them?
3. What would you like to talk about with Jesus now?

WHO STRUCK YOU?

Then those who had seized Jesus led Him to Caiaphas the high priest ... And the high priest said to Him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard His blasphemy. What is your judgment?" They answered, "He deserves death." Then they spit in His face and struck Him. And some slapped Him, saying, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck You?" (Matthew 26:57, 63b-68)

It was a sadistic little game they were playing, slapping and hitting Jesus, and asking, "Who struck You?" I didn't understand the point of the question until I saw Luke 22:64, which says they blindfolded Jesus. Apparently, they were "testing" His abilities as Messiah. After all, the Son of God should surely be able to tell who was hitting Him, blindfolded or not!

What they didn't realize was that Jesus already knew the answer to that question—and on a deeper level than the purely physical. Just hours before, Jesus had warned His disciples, "You will all fall away, for it is written, 'I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered'" (Mark 14:27b). Who was doing the striking there? Not just human beings. It is God Himself.

Jesus was quoting Zechariah 13:7. This came true in Jesus' suffering and death. By God's own plan, He bore the harm, and His followers were scattered.

Yet it didn't end there. God took that evil and turned it to our salvation. As He goes on to say, "They will call upon My Name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are My people'; and they will say, 'The Lord is my God'" (Zechariah 13:9b).

So now we know the answers to these questions. Who are You? God. Who struck You? God. Who received the benefits—forgiveness, mercy, and life? God's people—everyone who puts their trust in the Lord Jesus.

Lord, thank You for what You bore for me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Have you ever played guessing games? When?
2. Have you ever borne suffering for the sake of someone else? When?
3. Why do you think God made sure that the suffering for human evil fell upon Himself?

MEETING HUMAN NEEDS

Now when Jesus heard this, He withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by Himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed Him on foot from the towns. When He went ashore He saw a great crowd, and He had compassion on them and healed their sick. (Matthew 14:13-14)

There is a cost to freedom, and sometimes we aren't the ones who pay it. We are used to thinking of Jesus as the only sufferer in the story of his Passion—and obviously he is the main person, the one we should love and honor and glorify.

But others paid a price, too, and Jesus knew that would happen—and it grieved him. In this case it was his cousin, John the Baptist. God sent John to prepare the way for Jesus, and John did this with all his heart—preaching, teaching, and baptizing, always pointing the people to Jesus, who was coming.

But then King Herod got angry with John for criticizing him, and he threw him in jail. That was hard on John, and probably hard on Jesus as well, especially after John appeared to be having second thoughts about him (Matthew 11). And then came the final blow, when Herod had John killed. "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself." He wanted to be alone to grieve.

But the crowds wouldn't even let him do that. People followed him, their minds on their own troubles, and Jesus would not turn them away. He healed them and taught them. This is how much he loved them, and how much he loves us—that he is willing to pay the price of grief so that we could be rescued from the power of evil. And even more than that, he is willing to put his own human needs aside to care for us.

He loves you with this same love even today. He is aware of your needs. As Paul puts it, "Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Romans 8:34-35)

Dear Lord, thank You for laying aside Your own needs to meet ours. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When you are grieving, what do you do to feel better?
2. When do you have to put aside your own needs to care for someone else?
3. How does it make you feel, to realize Jesus would do this for you?

BREAD FROM HEAVEN

Now when it was evening, the disciples came to Him (Jesus) and said, “This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” But Jesus said, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” (Matthew 14:15-16)

The people of Israel were fond of remembering the days when Moses led them through the wilderness and God provided them with everything they needed, including food. The people could not farm, so God sent them manna, a kind of bread-like substance they could gather from the desert floor each day. They called this “bread from heaven”—God’s miracle to provide for them.

Many years later, Jesus and the disciples were in a similar situation, with 5,000 hungry people out in a deserted place and nothing for them to eat. Being practical, the disciples suggested sending them away to find food for themselves somewhere else. Then Jesus said the really astounding thing: “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

Sometimes it feels like God has given us Christians the same ridiculous order. You may have someone in your life that God seems to have dropped into your lap—a friend, neighbor, or family member you are attempting to care for. But their needs are so great, and your resources are so small! You are overwhelmed. I know the feeling well. We’ve spent 30 years trying to care for a refugee community with very few resources indeed.

So what can we do? We can be as honest as the disciples and admit, “Lord, I can’t do it. I don’t have the resources. You have to tell us what to do.” And then we can pray and keep an eye out to see how God provides. He is able to care for us and the people we love, even today.

It is right for us to turn to Jesus in every need, because as He says, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is My flesh” (John 6:51). The same Lord who gave His life for us on the cross will care for us in every need of body and spirit.

Dear Lord Jesus, You know the needs we are facing. Please help us. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. How has God provided for your needs in the past?
2. What needs are you asking God for help with right now?
3. Is there someone you are caring for right now who has needs you can’t meet? Take a moment to pray for them.

THE END—OR NOT

Then those who had seized Jesus led Him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered. And Peter was following Him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest, and going inside he sat with the guards to see the end. (Matthew 26:57-58)

I’ve often wondered why hope is considered to be a virtue. They call faith, hope, and love the three theological virtues, and I can see the point for faith and love. But hope? I’m used to thinking of that as something that just happens to me, depending on my life circumstances. I don’t usually think of myself as *responsible* for having hope!

But then we have Peter in this story—and I begin to see the point. What is going on in Peter’s head? Whatever it is, it doesn’t include hope at all, in spite of everything Jesus has said so clearly about His death and resurrection. Peter *goes to sit with the guards*, of all people. He doesn’t stand with John or the servants. He is sitting with Jesus’ oppressors—the people who look like the winning side.

And Matthew says, “He sat with the guards *to see the end.*” Peter is *expecting* an end—an end to Jesus, in the most literal sense. He is not expecting anything good, in spite of Jesus’ promises about His death and resurrection. For all the hope Peter has, Jesus might just as well have never said a word about the future.

I imagine Peter cringed when he thought about this later in life—after the resurrection, when it became clear that all Jesus’ promises were true. But at the time, it seemed reasonable. Maybe that’s the point. Because there are times in our own lives when losing hope in God’s promises seems like the reasonable thing to do. Hope looks foolish. We are tempted to go and sit down with the guards.

So how do we keep up our hope when we are surrounded by trouble on every side? We remember God’s good promises. None of them have ever failed—not “I forgive you,” not “I will be with you and deliver you,” not “I will come again and take you to Myself.” Jesus is utterly trustworthy. You know it from your own life. Put your hope in Him when things seem darkest—and wait to see what He will do.

Lord, help me to hope in You when things seem hopeless. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What are you hoping for right now—whether great or small?
2. When has God helped you in a hopeless time?
3. What promise of God means the most to you at this time?

JESUS IN COMMAND

So Judas, having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to Him, came forward and said to them, "Whom do you seek?" They answered Him, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus said to them, "I am He."... When Jesus said to them, "I am He," they drew back and fell to the ground. So He asked them again, "Whom do you seek?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus answered, "I told you that I am He. So, if you seek Me, let these men go." (John 18:3-5a, 6-8)

How strange it must have been for the soldiers who came to arrest Jesus! No doubt they had arrested many people before, but this must have been the first person to take total command of the scene. Look at the language: "Jesus, knowing all that would happen to Him, came forward ..." Who does that, willingly stepping forward to be arrested?

And then He confirms His identity twice over, in case they didn't catch it the first time. He uses the very Name of God about Himself—the words "I am He" point us to "I AM," God's Name for Himself which He revealed to Moses in Exodus 3. No wonder the soldiers fell to the ground. That is the Name of ultimate power. It must have been clear to the soldiers that they could do nothing to Him unless He permitted it.

Which is exactly what He did. Instead of using His power and authority to save Himself, He used it for one purpose only: "If you seek Me, let these men go." Jesus was focused on protecting His followers. None of them would be lost on His watch.

I imagine the soldiers were thoroughly shaken up. They arrested none of the disciples. Jesus surrendered Himself, and the disciples went free.

And that, of course, is exactly what Jesus has done for us as well. Suffering and death? He chose that part for Himself. But freedom—He chose that for His disciples, including you. He chose protection, safety, freedom, life. Those are the gifts that He bought for you with His own life. He loves you that much.

Thank You, dear Lord, for giving me protection and life. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Have you ever seen an arrest in real life or on the news? What happened?
2. When have you protected someone else at your own cost?
3. Why did you protect that person? What does that tell you about Jesus' motives?

GETTING IT RIGHT

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:13-16)

My husband is a pastor with a mischievous sense of humor. Every time I ask him what he's preaching on this week, he says, "I'm going to preach on 'Who is Jesus?'" If he had preached on that topic every time he said he would, we'd be up to about 5,000 sermons on it so far!

Still, he's got one thing right. The question "Who is Jesus?" is very important. Peter got it right—he answered Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." What does this mean? And what does it mean for us?

First of all, Jesus is the Christ—the Anointed One, the One God chose to be our King and Savior. He is the One God promised long ago to send into this world. All the prophets foretold His coming.

This means that we can rely on Him. He is not some self-appointed Messiah who will let us down in hard times. The full authority of God lies behind Him. Whatever He says and does is what God sent Him to do and say. He is utterly trustworthy.

Second, He is the Son of the living God. Jesus is not simply a man, no matter how great or wonderful. He is in fact God Himself—the Second Person of the Trinity, sent by God the Father to become a human being among us. This means He is not limited. As the Bible says, "He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him" (Hebrews 7:25a). Because He is the Son of God, His suffering and death on the cross are enough to rescue every one of us—and to raise us from the dead, just as He Himself rose.

Lord, help me to know and trust that You are who You say You are. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Who are you? What are the first three quick answers that spring to mind?
2. Which name or title of Jesus is closest to your heart, and why?
3. Why does it matter who Jesus is?

GETTING IT WRONG

And He (Jesus) began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And He said this plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. But turning and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." (Mark 8:31-33)

Ouch! That must have hurt, having your Lord and Master call you "Satan" and rebuke you for having your mind set on human things instead of God's. And yet Jesus was right. Satan was acting through Peter at that moment—trying to turn Jesus aside from the path God wanted Him to walk, the path to the cross.

Peter had gotten the first part of the test right—he answered the question "Who do you say that I am?" with "The Christ, the Son of the Living God." But he completely missed the second, implicit question, "What am I here to do?" He wouldn't figure it out until well after Jesus completed His mission—until Jesus indeed suffered, died, was buried, and rose from the dead. Then Peter finally got it.

I am so very, very glad that Jesus didn't listen to the devil speaking through Peter. The devil would have kept us all in slavery to sin and death. But Jesus wasn't going to have that. He came to give us freedom, to give us life—and that abundantly.

Jesus is human as well as divine. It couldn't have been easy for Him to walk around knowing the precise pattern of His death so far ahead of time. It couldn't have been easy to set His face toward Jerusalem, knowing what waited for Him there. And yet He did it. He did it because of the prize, the joy set before Him—because of you and me. His suffering and death would mean our everlasting life. His resurrection would be our joy and happiness forever. In His eyes, it was worth it. *You were worth it.*

Lord Jesus, thank You for loving me enough to bear the cross to set me free. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. How would you feel if you could know the exact details of your death ahead of time?
2. Have you ever had to bear pain in order to help someone else? When?
3. How did you feel about the pain you bore for that person? Do you think Jesus felt similarly about the pain He bore for you?

SUFFERING AND LOVE

And they went to a place called Gethsemane. And He (Jesus) said to His disciples, "Sit here while I pray." And He took with Him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And He said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch." And going a little farther, He fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him. And He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Remove this cup from Me. Yet not what I will, but what You will." (Mark 14:32-36)

I find it very difficult to write about this passage. My mind and heart stand in awe of Jesus' suffering—and of the great love that He has for us, to go through this for our sake. His humanity is on full display in this story. We can see that He is fully aware of what's about to happen, and as with any human being, His body and soul shudder at the prospect. No wonder Luke says His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground! No wonder He prayed, "Remove this cup from Me." His suffering had already begun.

But there are other, smaller things to notice. He took His friends with Him, almost to the very spot where He ended up praying on the ground—Peter and James and John, the ones closest to Him. Jesus didn't want to be alone as He struggled with what was to come. And look at the name that He used for God—"Abba," which is the term a child would use for his dear father.

All of this shows us someone who clearly loves us very much, to go through all of that and still pray, "Yet not what I will, but what You will." Most of us never get the choice when it comes to suffering. It is forced on us by the circumstances of our lives, and we simply have to muddle through. But Jesus—He chose it. He chose obedience to the Father He loved. And He chose salvation for the people He loved—for you and for me. His suffering, death, and resurrection have given us life.

Lord Jesus, help me to grasp Your great love, and to love You back. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When have you suffered the most?
2. Do you think it is easier or harder to suffer when you know you have another option?
3. What good has God brought out of the suffering in your own life?

PROMISES

Then Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away because of Me this night. For it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” Peter answered Him, “Though they all fall away because of You, I will never fall away.” Jesus said to him, “Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.” Peter said to Him, “Even if I must die with You, I will not deny You!” And all the disciples said the same. (Matthew 26:31-35)

It looks like a throw-away line: “After I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” Certainly, the disciples treat it that way—they are all so fixated on the words “You will all fall away because of Me this night” that it’s like they don’t even hear the rest of Jesus’ sentence. Instead, Peter bursts into indignant denials. “That will never happen, even if I have to die with You!” And all the other disciples said the same.

It’s not really surprising. Nobody wants to think of themselves as cowardly, unfaithful, apt to run away. Nobody wants to admit that they could be capable of denying a friend, let alone their Lord and Master. And so they won’t listen. They are so afraid of hearing the bad news, that they never notice the good news.

Because it *is* good news: “After I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” Jesus says this in such a matter-of-fact way, He doesn’t even give His resurrection a sentence of its own. No, He simply dumps it into an introductory phrase, and instead puts all the emphasis on where He plans to meet them in a few days. It sounds almost like a man planning to meet his friends at Starbucks!

And it sails right over the disciples’ heads. But it should not sail right over our heads, because we know that Jesus keeps His Word, good or bad. Jesus will succeed in rescuing us—will set us free from sin, death, and the devil through His death on the cross—and will give us everlasting life through His resurrection. What an awesome promise!

Lord Jesus, thank You that all Your good promises come true, even the ones we overlook. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Did you ever totally miss what somebody said and have to have it repeated to you?
2. What would you think if a dying friend of yours started calmly making plans for next week?
3. Why do you think Jesus can think about the resurrection right now and the disciples can’t?

WHEN PAIN CAN’T WAIT

Now He (Jesus) was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. When Jesus saw her, He called her over and said to her, “Woman, you are freed from your disability.” And He laid His hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God. (Luke 13:10-13)

Imagine the scene: Jesus is teaching in a synagogue when He suddenly notices a woman who is bent over and can’t straighten up. Something is seriously wrong, and she is doubtless in a lot of pain as well. He stops in mid-sermon, calls her over, and heals her immediately. She is set free from her trouble.

I love this story, because Jesus doesn’t care that He’s just interrupted His own sermon and the whole worship setting. He sees someone in need, and His reaction is to help. Right away. No waiting. She matters to Him.

That was not the attitude of the synagogue ruler, who got all upset over the fact that Jesus healed on the Sabbath. All he could see was a broken rule. He didn’t see the broken person—now made straight, healthy, and strong, because Jesus cared enough to help her.

This is Jesus’ attitude toward you and toward me. He sees someone broken, in trouble, enslaved—and His first thought is to heal them, help them, set them free. Is it the Sabbath day? Why, then, all the better: as He says, “And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?”

Jesus shows God’s heart to us—a heart that is always seeking to free us from our griefs and burdens. Our pain matters to Him. We matter to Him. He doesn’t mind if He catches flak for helping us. He doesn’t mind if He suffers personal humiliation, grief, sorrow, pain, and shame either—so long as He can rescue us, can set us free into the glorious life of the children of God. He will go to the cross to make it happen. He will even rise from the dead to make us His, safe and free.

Lord and Savior, thank You for caring so much about us and our pain. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Have you ever helped someone who was sick or injured?
2. Did you ever break a rule or expectation to help someone?
3. Tell a story about a time when someone did something that proved to you that you mattered to that person.

FREEDOM FROM THIRST

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" Now this He said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37-39)

Most of Israel is by nature a dry land. There is the Jordan River, but most people in Jesus' day got their water from wells or cisterns—places where they kept rainwater so they could use it during the dry months. In a land like that, water is valuable. Quenching your thirst takes more work than simply turning on a faucet.

And that was the context in which Jesus cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" Jesus was teaching in the temple when He made this offer. How many people must have heard Him!

They knew, of course, that there are many other kinds of thirst than that for plain physical water. There is the thirst for meaning in your life—the desire to know that what you do makes a difference, that life is more than just empty posturing before you die, and everything is lost. There is the thirst for the presence of God—the desire to be close to Him who made us and continues to care and provide for us. There is the thirst for life—not just mere existence, but real, abundant, overflowing life, filled with joy and a sense of purpose. All of these things Jesus offers us.

And how? Because He has promised us His Holy Spirit, God Himself to live within us and transform us into God's own children. With Him living in us, we will never again go thirsty for meaning or life or God's own presence. Jesus made this possible when He went to the cross for our sakes. By His suffering and death, He set us free from the power of sin and the devil, and by His resurrection He gave us everlasting life and final victory over death. He sent the Holy Spirit to live with us forever at Pentecost. What wonderful gifts!

Lord, give us this living water forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When have you been thirstiest in your life?
2. How does Jesus' work give meaning to your life?
3. When have you been most aware of the Holy Spirit living within you?

PICKING UP TRASH

A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And He (Jesus) said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. ... I am among you as the one who serves." (Luke 22:24-26, 27b)

In the earliest days of our refugee church, we had a problem with trash. Our members believed that picking up trash was a lowly, servant-like thing to do—and people who have lost everything will sometimes cling to their social status because it's all that they have left. So no one was willing to humble themselves enough to put trash away in public.

At one church potluck, my husband and I decided "Enough is enough," and we grabbed a wheeled trash barrel. He began rolling it around the tables while I collected used napkins and plates and threw them in. The people were shocked. "Pastor, you shouldn't be doing this!" they said. It gave my husband the chance to explain to them what Jesus considers greatness. We never had a problem like that in the church again.

This is one of the many kinds of freedom Jesus won for us—the freedom to serve without worrying one little bit what other people will think of us. It simply doesn't matter. The real question is this: what will *Jesus* think of us? As long as that point is covered, we no longer mind being caught washing dishes or cleaning toilets or (as on one memorable occasion!) standing down in the sewer with a shovel, mud to the ears. We are free to do whatever needs doing—because our status in Jesus is set forever.

And what is that status? Child of God, born of the Spirit, beloved of Jesus Christ, citizen of the kingdom of heaven. Nothing can take away from us what Jesus suffered and died to win for us. This status is ours forever. Better yet, Jesus Himself is ours forever.

Dear Savior, help me to serve with the utter freedom You served, knowing who I belong to. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What is the most humble chore you've ever had to do?
2. Are you ever embarrassed to be caught doing a particular job? If so, what and why?
3. What was embarrassing about the "job" Jesus did for us—and how does it show the depth of His love to you?

WASHING FEET

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside His outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around His waist. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around Him. (John 13:3-5)

Have you ever had to wash someone? It's a very intimate act—so intimate that it makes a lot of us uncomfortable. We feel awkward—should we really be doing this? If we are on the receiving end, we may try to refuse out of embarrassment.

And yet so often it is necessary. If you care for small children, you know that washing them is part of their daily care. They can't handle it for themselves. The same is true if you are caring for a disabled or sick person. Because you love them, you do for them what they cannot do themselves. And if it is you who is receiving the care, you try to do so with grace and thankfulness—glad that someone loves you enough to care for you in this way.

What, then, was Jesus doing when He washed the feet of His disciples? They were neither sick nor disabled—in their own opinions, anyway. But Jesus saw the truth of their situation. They needed washing desperately—the forgiveness of sins that God gives us at Baptism, and then gives us anew every time we confess our sins and ask for forgiveness. They needed daily washing, just as each of us do. And Jesus was not too proud to give it.

Picture Him there, down on His knees, dressed like a servant, washing the mud and the stink of the day off your feet. Jesus does not grudge you this. It is an intimate act of love that He performs for us—why? Because we are the people He loves and came to set free from sin and death. Because we are the people He died and rose for. Because we are the people He baptized and made into His own family, children of God.

Jesus washes you because He loves you. Never forget it.

Dear Lord, thank You for loving me so, and help me to love my brothers and sisters in the same way. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. When did you ever wash someone else? How did it feel?
2. Who has washed you, and when?
3. Peter was embarrassed to let Jesus wash his feet. Would that be a problem for you?

FREEDOM FROM SHAME

Early in the morning He (Jesus) came again to the temple. All the people came to Him, and He sat down and taught them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery ... (John 8:2-3a)

Shame is a horrible thing. This woman had sinned greatly, yes, but who would not feel sorry for her, dragged out into the light of day to face public shame in front of the religious leaders at the holy temple—alone, possibly half-dressed, with no one to defend her, and even her lover missing from her side? And she would have known there was worse to come. Such women were stoned for their sin. She would lose her life, and if she had children, they would lose their mother. There was no hope for her.

But though she didn't realize it, there actually was hope. Jesus Himself was there, in the middle of her horrible situation. But ... what was He doing? Writing on the ground? She didn't understand, but she knew one thing—He was not joining the chorus of condemnation all around her. He was silent, busy writing. When they kept bugging Him, He finally stood up long enough to say just one thing: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7b).

You know the rest of the story—how the leaders slunk away, one by one, till nobody was left but Jesus. The woman was safe—and free. And Jesus' final word to her was "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more" (John 8:11b).

Jesus shows an amazing gentleness to a sinner caught in the deadly trap of shame. He does nothing to add to it; indeed, He gets rid of the audience that is gloating over her embarrassment. He reminds them of their own sin and shame, and they leave. And then, in private, He sets her free. The sinless Son of God refuses to condemn her. He will bear her shame and ours instead, on the cross.

This is comfort for anyone who has memories that make them cringe in shame. Jesus calls us to Himself, not to condemn but to forgive, cleanse, and relieve. He takes our shame from us and puts it on His own back. He nails it to His cross. He sets us free—free of sin, free of shame, free to live as God's forgiven people. Even you. Even me.

Thank You, dear Lord, for setting me free from sin and shame. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. If you are willing, tell about something that embarrassed you long ago.
2. How do you deal with the pain of shame?
3. Jesus covers all our shame and gives us His own honor and dignity. How does that make you feel?

FREEDOM FROM SIN

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed Him, “If you abide in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” They answered Him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that You say, ‘You will become free?’” Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:31-36)

I have a hard time getting over what the people said to Jesus: “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone.” How in the world did they manage to forget slavery in Egypt? It was the major focus of their biggest national holiday, the Passover—remembering how God saved them and set them free! How could they ever forget?

And yet, we show a similar forgetfulness sometimes, don’t we? Our slavery was to something even bigger and more dangerous—to the power of sin.

What exactly is sin, anyway? It’s that horrible twist in our nature that makes it impossible for us to go on doing right, even when we desperately want to. It’s that tug that pulls us to do what we know is wrong, bad, harmful, and no matter how hard we fight it, we still find ourselves slipping and giving in. It’s that addiction, that pull, that slavery, as Jesus calls it, which rules our lives and distorts all the good things we try to do. It’s the reason nobody honest can ever say, “I have totally clean hands. I have never done anything bad or shameful.”

God knows we need help. You know we need help, if you have ever struggled with sin with all your might and still come up short. And Jesus promises us that help. He promises to set us free: “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

How can He set us free? Because of who He is—Son of God and Son of Man. Because of what He has done—because He has paid the price for our freedom through His suffering, death, and resurrection. Because of His love for us, which gives us our freedom as a gift with no strings.

Lord Jesus, give me this freedom and help me to live within it by the power of Your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Have you ever been trapped and unable to move? What did that feel like?
2. What is one temptation to sin you have struggled with?
3. How has God helped you gain freedom?

FREE TO LOVE

So they gave a dinner for Him (Jesus) there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with Him at table. Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (John 12:2-3)

Did you grow up in a family that said “I love you” a lot? For some people, this is very easy; for others, they have a terribly hard time getting out the words—except in really unusual circumstances.

There had certainly been enough unusual circumstances in the life of Mary and Martha. Not long before the dinner party, Jesus had raised their brother Lazarus from the dead. Their hearts were still overflowing with thankfulness and love. And so, Martha did what she did best—she made dinner. Lazarus himself was at the table with Jesus. And Mary?

What Mary did was scandalous. Not only did she use the best ointment she could get her hands on, but she poured it over Jesus’ feet as if it were nothing but water. Then she took down her hair and used it to wipe His feet clean—in public, in front of all the other guests, kneeling at Jesus’ feet.

What Mary did was nothing short of spectacular. But did she care? No, not at all. Jesus had raised her brother from the dead, and her heart was overflowing with love.

Jesus still inspires this sort of love in the people who know Him. We have even more to be grateful for than Mary did; only a few days later Jesus willingly went to the cross to rescue us all, laying down His life so that we could be freed from the power of evil and given new, everlasting life. And this is personal; He did it not for humanity-as-a-whole, but for each of us, personally. He loves us that much.

That sets us free to love Him in return. Granted, we will have to get creative about it, since we don’t have access to His physical body in the same way Mary did. But this is the same Lord who said, “As you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me” (Matthew 25:40b). How will you show your love for Jesus?

Lord, give me a heart that responds to Your love with love of my own. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Think of someone you love. How does that person know you love them?
2. Do you think love is a matter of feelings or of actions?
3. What is the most unusual thing you have done for your love of Jesus?

WHAT DO YOU LOVE MOST?

Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in Him (Jesus), but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God. (John 12:42-43)

Some years ago, I was talking to a lady about driving refugees to church. "I believe God is telling me to do it," she said. "It's like I can hear Him." And then she took my breath away. "But I'm not going to do it," she said with a smile. "I just decided I don't want to." And she walked away.

My jaw hit the floor. Fool that I am, it had never occurred to me that someone would hear God calling—a Christian, even!—and just blithely tell Him "No" and walk away. How does that even happen? I'm still flabbergasted, years later.

And yet, that's exactly what the priests and scribes and leaders in this Bible reading chose to do. They recognized Jesus—they saw and believed that He was the Messiah, the Chosen One of God. Surely, they would follow Him—right?

Wrong. There was something they cared about more. They didn't want to lose their power and honor in the eyes of the community. To put it plainly, "they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God." They heard Jesus calling—and they walked away.

This kind of thing scares me. It makes me search my own heart. Do I have any idols I love more than the truth, more than Jesus? Is there anything that would make me walk away from Him when He calls?

I don't want there to be anything like that. Choosing anything over Jesus is a kind of spiritual insanity. Jesus is my Savior and my Life and my Hope and my Redeemer. How terrible it would be to lose Him! He died on the cross to give me life—how could I leave Him? May God protect us all from having anything else that takes us away from Jesus.

Dear Father, keep us always close to Your Son Jesus in trust and love. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What three or four things are most important to you in your life?
2. Have you ever struggled with something that threatened to pull you away from Jesus?
3. How do you stay close to Jesus in faith?

CRYSTAL CLEAR

As He (Jesus) passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. ... (He said) "As long as I am in the world, I am the Light of the world." Having said these things, He spit on the ground and made mud with the saliva. Then He anointed the man's eyes with the mud and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing. (John 9:1, 5-7)

As I write this, I am facing eye surgery for a macular hole—a problem that has taken out a tiny part of my central vision. I envy this man. What a blessing to have the Creator of the universe step in and personally fix your blindness! He even did it with mud, in an echo of the original creation.

And yet, Jesus did more for this man—and for us!—than just fixing his physical vision. Take time to read John 9, the whole chapter. This man is crystal clear on who Jesus is and what He has done for him. He is the One who has rescued his eyesight and who has done a miracle that nobody has done since the beginning of the world—something only God can do. He is clear that God is with Jesus. And once Jesus meets him again in the temple, the man's vision is even sharper. He recognizes Jesus as the Son of Man and as God Himself—that's why he worshipped Him.

My physical eyesight is not so great, and yours may not be either. But if you recognize your Savior Jesus, your spiritual eyesight is 20/20. This is the Son of Man, the One that God promised to send into the world to save us all. This is the Son of God, the One who used His own blood to heal us of our spiritual blindness. And He will set us free in God's timing from all our weaknesses, even our physical problems—because Jesus is the Author of the new creation which God has promised, and in which we will live forever with Him. Because of His death and resurrection, we have the hope of total renewal, both body and soul, when Jesus comes again, according to His promise.

Father, help me to recognize and trust my Savior always. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Have you ever had eye problems? What is it like to live with them, if so?
2. Why do you think Jesus used His spit to make mud instead of just saying the word and healing the man?
3. How does your heart recognize Jesus?

CAST OUT, BROUGHT NEAR

Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him He said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is He, sir, that I may believe in Him?” Jesus said to him, “You have seen Him, and it is He who is speaking to you.” He said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped Him. (John 9:35-38)

Yesterday we looked at the story of the blind man Jesus healed. His story didn’t end with the healing, unfortunately. Because the whole thing happened on the Sabbath day, the Pharisees poked their noses in. They forced the man to give an account of his healing. And when they couldn’t believe his story, they brought his parents in to testify.

The man’s family was understandably scared. As John explains, “they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue” (John 9:22b). Faced with excommunication, they chickened out. “We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. But how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself” (John 20b-21).

How horrible, to be abandoned by your family! But the man had courage. He told the truth about what Jesus did—and got kicked out.

Abandoned by family, abandoned by the church—these are things that should never happen to anybody. But they do happen, and to far too many people, even today. They may have happened to you. If so, you know the devastation.

Jesus did, too. And so the first thing He did when He heard about it was to search out the man and make sure he was okay. Notice—God Himself went looking for this man who had been abandoned and excommunicated. And when He found him, He brought him into a different kind of community—the community of the children of God, those who belong to Jesus and will never ever be abandoned by Him.

If you are facing abandonment, run to Jesus. He can help, and He will. His heart hurts for yours. Cling to Him with all your might. He lay down His life for you. You can be absolutely sure He will never let you go.

Lord Jesus, help those who are alone and abandoned, and bring them close to You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Do you know anyone rejected by family or church?
2. When, if ever, have you felt alone and outcast?
3. How do you find help in the Lord during those times?

“YOU WERE NOT WILLING”

(Jesus said,) “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord.’” (Matthew 23:37-39)

What happens if you try to set people free—but they are not willing? It sounds like an odd problem, but it’s one that Moses faced with the people of Israel, again and again, on their journey out of slavery to the promised land. God led the people in the pillar of cloud and fire; He provided food and water for them by miracle; He protected them from danger—but again and again, the people changed their minds. They wanted to go back to slavery—where, they thought, things were easier.

In our reading today, Jesus is grieving over the same behavior in the people of Jerusalem. He came to save them from the power of evil—but already the leaders of the city were plotting against Him, and the common people would follow their lead. In just a few days, they would be shouting “Crucify!” Jesus wanted to set them free—but some of them didn’t want to be free.

Many people ask, “Why doesn’t God just overrule people? If they are rejecting Him and insisting on a path that leads to hell, why doesn’t God just magically change their minds?” But God respects our free will—even when we are fool enough to refuse Him. If we insist on staying in slavery, He does not set us free. He will do any number of miracles, but this He will not do: overrule our freedom to reject Him.

This is still true today. Jesus calls, argues, draws, woos us to Himself—but He does not force. He laid down His life for us on the cross—He rose from the dead, to share His victory over death with us—but He does not force anyone to take the gift. How He loves us! And so He waits, patiently, calling us to Him in faith, waiting for us to respond to the work of the Holy Spirit and say, “Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord.”

Lord, let Your Holy Spirit strengthen my faith in You, and turn my heart to follow You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Why do we resist what is good for us?
2. What do you do when someone you love refuses something that is good and necessary for them?
3. Is there something you are saying “No” to God about, even though you know it’s for your own good?

OCCUPIED TERRITORY

(Jesus said) "Finally he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him." (Matthew 21:37-39)

The story of the wicked tenants is a strange one. A man plants a vineyard, rents it out, and goes away to a far country. When the harvest comes, he sends servants to collect his share of the fruit. The tenants refuse. Instead, they beat the servants, kill some, and throw them out of the vineyard. After several episodes like this, the landowner sends his son. Exactly the same thing happens—as anybody could predict.

This story bugs me. "Why are you bothering?" I want to ask. "It's just a vineyard. Human lives are worth more than a vineyard. Your son is worth more than a vineyard. Just give it up."

If this was just any ordinary vineyard, perhaps the owner *would* give it up. But it's not. This is God's vineyard, which He created. This is Jesus' inheritance as the Son of God. In short, this is God's world, and we are the vines in it. He isn't going to give us up.

And yet we are occupied territory. So many of those who rule over us have no fear of God and no desire to give Him what belongs to Him. This includes everyone from bullying bosses and abusive parents to corrupt politicians and world leaders. And neither they nor the devil himself who influences them are willing to surrender what they hold.

Into this occupied territory comes Jesus, the Son of God. He is not stupid. He knows what will happen to Him. And yet He goes through with it, knowing that His death will turn the world right-side-up, and His resurrection will set us all free.

Are you suffering under the power of someone who refuses to listen to God? Take courage, because God has not forgotten you. He has already sent His Son to rescue you. And He will finish the job—soon now, very soon!—when Jesus comes again, to take up His rule over all the universe. We are waiting for that day.

Lord, look on us when we suffer under the power of evil, and set us free. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. Has anyone ever taken away from you something that was rightfully yours?
2. When were you under the power of someone who did not follow God?
3. Take a moment to pray for those who suffer under the power of evildoers.

FREEDOM FROM DEATH

When He (Jesus) had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." (John 11:43-44)

Death is unnatural. It is wrong. We all know that, in our hearts and in our guts—no matter who tells us it is "natural" and "to be expected." It's not.

Jesus recognized that fact, too. When His friend Lazarus died, He wept. Jesus was facing the doom of Genesis 3:19b applied to someone He loved: "for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Jesus shared our response to death. But then He did what only God can do—He raised Lazarus from the dead. And He promises to do the same for everyone who trusts in Him on the day He returns to bring us all into the kingdom of God. This is our great hope and our comfort as we live in a dying world.

Death was mainly theoretical to me when I was younger. But after four deaths in the family last year, I'm holding on to the words Jesus spoke to Lazarus' sister with all my strength. He said, "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die" (John 11:25-26a). I hope you are, too, as you face the death of those you love—or your own death.

The Bible tells us that Jesus came into this world to set us free from death. "He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:25-26). Jesus does this, not as we might expect, by brute force. Instead, He did it by laying down His own life—God Himself, the Author of Life, submitting to death on a cross—and then rising to life again, on the third day. Who could have predicted such a wonder?

Lord, You have power over death. Make us alive with You forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. How old were you when you first understood what death is?
2. Are you grieving right now? For whom?
3. How does Jesus' victory over death give you hope?

A TERRIBLE, WONDERFUL JUSTICE

And He (Jesus) entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And He would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And He was teaching them and saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." (Mark 11:15-17)

If you read the Gospels, you could easily make a case that this is the turning point—the moment when the chief priests and religious leaders made up their minds to kill Jesus. Up to this point, Jesus has done many things which annoyed the leaders—He has healed on the Sabbath, run rough-shod over human traditions such as hand-washing rules, criticized their hypocrisy, and become hugely popular with the people. But when Jesus threw the merchants out of the temple, He was tackling corruption in the house of God itself—in God’s church, which they considered their personal property. It was the source of their money, prestige, and power—and He was cleaning out their wickedness.

Evil within the church is perhaps the worst kind of evil, because it masquerades as good. The businesses Jesus threw out were there to make money, yes—but their excuse was that they were supplying animals for sacrifice. People would buy these animals for use during worship. The moneychangers were useful to worshippers who came from foreign places, but they were also involved in banking activities—including acts that broke the Law of Moses and exploited the poor.

Never mind the excuses. God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, wasn’t having any of it. He was going to sweep it clean. The temple was for God, period—not for money, not for power or prestige, not for any human activity that was not in accord with God’s own heart.

God still feels this way—about the church, and about your heart. If you let Him, He will sweep these holy places clean. He will make them places of worship, places where God’s people can be free to love God and one another. Will you let Him?

Lord, cleanse Your church—and cleanse my heart, too. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What do you like most about cleaning? What do you hate?
2. How can we prevent problems in the church that go directly counter to God’s heart?
3. Write or say a prayer asking the Lord to clean out a particular problem in your life.

THE WISDOM OF THIS WORLD

The chief priests and the elders of the people came up to Him (Jesus) as He was teaching, and said, "By what authority are You doing these things, and who gave You this authority?" Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you one question ... The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And He said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." (Matthew 21:23b-24a, 25-27)

The next day, Jesus returns to the temple—to face angry questions. “Who gave you the authority to clear the temple?” He answers a question with a question: “Who gave John the authority to baptize?”

The leaders go away and discuss it. They consider one answer, and reject it because it would let Jesus point out their inconsistency. They consider another answer, and reject it for fear of riots. Finally, they give up—and Jesus refuses to answer them either.

So far, so typical. Jesus wins that exchange. But did you notice the really sad—and funny—thing about the way the leaders are reasoning? *They never bother to ask what is true.* The only thing they are interested in was political expediency—what answer is going to help them manipulate people the best.

We see this in our world today, too, don’t we? Sometimes it’s reports of local or government corruption. Sometimes it’s much closer to us, as people we work with or live with make decisions based on something other than truth. And if you protest, you get this answer: “Honesty is all fine and good when it comes to religion, but we’re dealing with real life here!”

So is Jesus. There is nothing more real—more true—more desperately important—than the life Jesus died to win for us. Jesus came to free us from the power of this sinful world and to make us children of God. This so-called wisdom is not for us. Let us follow Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and leave the dishonest schemes of this world behind.

Lord, set my heart to follow You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

1. What examples have you seen of people choosing expediency over truth?
2. Has anyone called you naïve because you were honest?
3. How do you deal with it when you have to choose between the world’s way and God’s way?