



2026 LENT DEVOTIONAL

THE STORY OF God
the Story of Us

BY THE PEOPLE OF
MARVIN METHODIST CHURCH



Foreword

Marvin Methodist Church, once again presents its tenth book of Lenten Devotionals written by the laity of the church. It's hard to believe we have been doing this for ten years. This book is the product of the study, thoughts, prayers and reflections of the writers. Each devotional is written on a scripture passage assigned for that day. Often that passage is assigned in the daily readings in the Lectionary. This edition is covering Year A of the Lectionary. To get us ready for Easter Sunday, we have included passages covering the days prior to Jesus' death and resurrection.

This Lent is a little different for me. Developments in my life and in our community have led me to reflect on the condition of my soul. Am I going through the motions or really seeking Jesus? Lent is a time to seek Jesus, reflect on what Jesus has done for us, what his life, death and resurrection mean to us now and renew our commitment to faithfully follow Jesus Christ. Many of the devotionals will have a prayer or raise a question for that day.

The devotionals begin with Ash Wednesday and end with Easter Sunday. Sunday devotionals are included, forty-eight days in all. To get my heart better, I have written on most of Holy Week. Years ago, the first year I led this project, I counted 40 days starting with Ash Wednesday and assigned scripture passages to the volunteer writers for those 40 days. At the deadline for the devotionals to go to the church for printing, I checked the calendar and I was a week short. The 40 days do not include Sundays. I had to write seven additional devotionals for that last week, Holy Week. It was not a problem. It was a blessing. This year a number of our writers needed to take a break. While a couple of new writers volunteered, there were days needing writers so I assigned most of Holy Week to myself. Again, a blessing and especially needed for me this year. This is not to pat myself on the back, as many of our writers would write more inspirationally than I do. Rather, this was a pruning of wasted time—a deliberate choice to use that time for something I believe God has called me to do.

As you read the scriptures and the devotionals, it is our hope that you want a deeper relationship with Jesus. It is easy to say we want more of Jesus. It is not so easy changing our habits to actually get more of Jesus. For many of us, complacency with our lives, our comfort, our hobbies, even our daily routine of Bible reading, prayer and study, may keep us from getting more. While Lent is often seen as a time to "give something up", perhaps it is time to focus on adding something and if giving something up is your practice, try to fill the missing something with a focus on obedience.

Please read the scripture passage in full as part of your use of this book. As you read the scripture and the devotional, you will likely draw other insights from your reading. Enjoy your time studying and open your hearts and minds to these new insights and understandings. We hope you will discuss the devotionals with your fellow church members, your friends, neighbors, and others. You might write down a few thoughts if you are journaling. Perhaps the devotional will spark a discussion that allows you to share your faith story. We have included the email address of the writer so that you may contact the author if you want.

Twenty-eight writers participated in this project, and without exception, all were richly blessed by their efforts. Please enjoy your time reading, praying, reflecting, contemplating and discussing.

John Berry
jfberry@JBerrylaw.net

Acknowledgments

This devotional guide was written and produced by members of Marvin Methodist Church in Tyler, Texas. It is meant for the reader to use during the forty days of Lent, plus the Sundays during Lent, beginning on Ash Wednesday and ending Easter Sunday. The scripture passages were generally taken from the Revised Common Lectionary furnished by the Vanderbilt Divinity School (Year A) plus much from the Matthew passages on the events starting with Palm Sunday and ending after the Resurrection. When the subject is scripture, you cannot go wrong. There is always something to gain.

Each day provides the reader with a scripture passage to read and thoughts to ponder. Some raise questions, some end in prayer. All point to the powerful message of Jesus at the cross, His death and resurrection.

Thanks to our contributing writers: Chris Hill, Debbi Hill, Charles Hill, Christy Hill, Paul Breedlove, Catherine Gaertner, Suzy Bruce, Linda Armstrong, Gail Hollenshead, Danielle Strain, Jake Strain, Dale Ross, Peggy Berry, Regina Childress, Dona Julian Cassel, Laurie Tuttle, Louise Dyer, Joseph Boudreau, Heather Jones, Karen McBee, Mac Griffith, Suzannah Bozarth, Randy Cook, Tamikia Bell, Shawn Odenthal, Kathy Carlton Willis, David Ward, and John Berry. Again this year, John Berry spearheaded the project. Special thanks to Marc Donaldson for his leadership, to Cyndi Behrend for her design work, to Danielle Strain for her publishing expertise, and to many other members of the staff and volunteers of Marvin Methodist Church for help in printing and assembling the devotional books.

Let me know if you want to write next time.

Most of all, thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for giving life to us all, giving us minds and hearts to read, hear, understand and speak. May God be glorified and may you be blessed.

Soli Deo Gloria

Ash Wednesday
February 18, 2026
Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Desperate

Welcome to Lent 2026.

We start with a passage in Joel that tells us to "rend our hearts and not our garments". This sounds funny to me—what does "rend" even mean, and why would our garments or our hearts need to be rended/rent? Rend means to just rip it up. Instead of ripping up your clothes out of confession and repentance or to mercifully ask God's provision, Joel admonishes us to rip up our hearts, not our clothes.

Think about it a bit. Do you remember stories of Old Testament kings or prophets or Israelites tearing their clothes and putting on sackcloth and sitting in ashes when they were mourning or asking for deep forgiveness? Does King David come to mind when Nathan confronted him with his sin and David "got it" and begged God for forgiveness after he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth?

The idea behind rending is to change your path and return to God. Outwardly, it's relatively easy to rip up your clothes. You were tired of that old garment anyway. However, in the days of Joel, the Israelites had gotten so far off the path of righteousness that Joel was sent as a prophet to warn the people and its leaders of what their future might be. Joel implored them to rend their hearts, not their garments. To do more than just go through the motions of repentance, but to make a heart change that would last and be meaningful. And what's more, Joel recites the reasons to return to the LORD, your God. In the face of their rebellion, by rending their hearts, God may relent from giving the Israelites what they deserve—eternal punishment. For God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and He relents from sending calamity. He may even turn and relent and leave behind a blessing.

Verses 15 through 17 encourage a united plea to be spared punishment and to be found in God's favor again. No one is to be omitted from the plea. All are to gather for this consecrated assembly.

There are so many truths in this passage.

God desires our hearts. He cares not about our outer garments, and He knows when our repentance is true or when we are just going through the motions.

We are in desperate need of God, His forgiveness, His compassion, love and mercy. Our hearts are not right without it. We do not deserve it, but we so desperately need it. We need it so much that we all must unify and cry out to God for forgiveness.

Lent is a season of reflection. I wonder when I last felt such a desperate need for God and recognized His mercy? Is my goal for Lent 2026 to be desperate for God—to know Him better, to understand His attributes, to acquire His attributes in my own life? Can I get down on my knees, and cry out for the God of my salvation to draw close? This will be my quest during Lent 2026—to be desperate for God, to cling to his mercy, to claim forgiveness, and then to bring into my own heart, the same spirit of mercy, love and forgiveness. Let's not just go through the motions. Let's mean it this season.

John Berry
jfberry@jberrylaw.net

February 19, 2026

Romans 1:1-7

Ravenous for the Lost

Paul begins his letter by introducing himself as a "bondservant of Christ Jesus, set apart for the gospel of God" (Romans 1:1). Like the recipients of the letter of Romans, we have not met Paul. We know him only through his letters, through testimony, rather than personal familiarity.

Saul of Tarsus was a Benjamite, a tribe described by the Patriarch Jacob as "a ravenous wolf; in the morning he devours his prey, and in the evening he divides the plunder" (Genesis 49:27). Saul's name and pedigree echoed Israel's first king, and that lineage burned with an insatiable intensity.

As a powerful and well-educated religious leader, a Pharisee, Saul was zealous, devout, and fiercely committed to upholding the purity of the Law. The book of Acts describes Saul as a proactive leader in the persecution of the early church — an orchestrator of violence, kidnapping, and imprisonment (Acts 8:1-3), a "devourer" in the name of righteousness.

On the road to Damascus to arrest Christians, the risen Jesus asked him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4b). A light came from heaven so holy and so bright his eyes were blinded. For three days, he neither ate nor drank. Darkness. Isolation. Stillness. Thirst.

The annual Lenten season is typically not nearly as dramatic, but is still a merciful interruption. It is a short season where our appetites are exposed: what we reach for, whom we rely on, what we think will save us. Like Saul, we fast, meditate, and surrender to the radical grace of Jesus.

Grace interrupted a "ravenous wolf," transforming the powerful Saul into the apostle Paul (meaning "small", "humble"), a bondservant of Christ Jesus. It is a gift for all — the well-intentioned, the violent, the legalistic, the proud. From that grace comes a new vocation of apostleship, to become a bridge builder and ambassador, learning to become "all things to all people" for the sake

of the Good News (1 Corinthians 9:20-23).

Where are we still called by our old name? Where do we "devour" others in the guise of defending what's right?

Suzannah Bozarth
suzannah.bozarth@gmail.com

February 20, 2026

Romans 1:8-17

Knowing Right—Doing Right?

Approximately 25 years after his conversion experience on the road to Damascus to continue his mission to imprison the Christians, Paul is on a spirit-led journey to honor the changes God had made in him. Not long out of jail, he was on his way yet again, to share his relationship with Jesus to the new Christians (Jews and Gentiles) in Rome.

Paul writes his letter to believers in Rome while in prison in Jerusalem. It is a familiar opening as we have come to appreciate (Romans 1:1-7). The journey to Rome was not easy, as noted by theologian Chuck Smith. Although a spiritually prosperous journey, fourteen days at sea had made everyone sick, but Paul still continues his letter, "For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift to the end that you may be established (Romans 1:11).

Paul tells them he wants to minister to them and be ministered to by them (Romans 1:12). There is always mutual benefit to the believer for being ministered to. Paul implores them to show fruits of their conversion and to be steadfast in their faith. (Romans 1:12-17).

Paul goes on to tell them that their salvation was purchased with the blood of Christ and cautions them against the sins of ungodliness which are outlined in the first four commandments detailing man's relationship with God. Paul also instructs them to refrain from all unrighteousness as outlined in the remaining commandments (Romans 1:18).

We, like the Christians in Rome, know these commandments well. Are we doing right in our relationship with God? Are we doing right in our relationship with others?

As pastor and author Colin Smith reminds me, it is a step by step, day by day journey. Only with the strength of the indwelling Holy Spirit and the grace of God can the journey be successful.

Come Holy Spirit!

Mac Griffith
mac.griffith@att.net

February 21, 2026

Psalm 51

Joy, Gladness, and a Pure Heart

*"Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy
and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins and blot all my iniquity.*

*Create in me a pure heart,
O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy
Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and uphold me with a willing spirit."*

Psalm 51:7-12

The season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday. Lent is a season of reflection and repentance. Psalm 51, written by David, is a featured Scripture in Ash Wednesday services and is a beautiful penitential psalm that expresses sorrow for sin and a plea for God's mercy and forgiveness. Psalm 51 captures the heart of Lent.

The background for David's writing of Psalm 51 can be found in 2 Samuel 11-12. This is the account of David's adultery with Bathsheba, who became pregnant, and in his attempt at a cover up, ended with the murder of Bathsheba's husband. David's sins separated him from God. God would use the prophet Nathan to speak to David.

Confronted by God through Nathan, David realized the depth and consequences of his sins and that forgiveness and restoration would only come through confession, repentance and forgiveness from the mercy and grace of God. He asked God to blot out his iniquities. But the depth of his sins revealed the need for God to cleanse him, to create in him a pure heart and a right spirit within him.

David's sin had distanced him from God. He pleaded with God not to remove His Holy Spirit from him and to restore the joy that came from His salvation.

In his book *The Ten Greatest Struggles of Your Life*, Colin S. Smith considers David as saying, "If You forgive this sin, but You don't change my heart, it won't be long before I find myself doing the same thing all over again. I need more than forgiveness. I need You to change my heart."

Smith calls sin a disease. He states, "There are many ways to deal with the symptoms, but only Christ can deal with the disease."

Sin can lead to sorrow and shame. In verse 8, David says, "Let me hear joy and gladness." David sought not only to be cleansed but the restoration of the joy of God's presence. Joy in David's soul would influence many of the Psalms he wrote and would bear witness to God's presence in His life. In Psalm 16:11 he expresses joy in God's presence, "In Your presence there is fullness of joy." I believe that despite all the strife and loss David had experienced in his life, his joy never left after God restored it.

I read this week that "the inner joy of salvation fuels outward praise." I think when we show praise, we show our joy. David certainly did. In the same article, a question was posed: "When you confess and repent of your sins, do you not feel joyful that your sins are forgiven?"

Lent is a season of reflection and repentance, which sometimes can be somber. But God's promise of salvation brings joy, as it did to David. Lent gives us the opportunity to acknowledge our sins and receive absolution. It is a time to reflect on Christ's sacrifice on the cross for our sins, His resurrection and the promise of eternal life. And for that, I am thankful and joyful!

I found an article on the joy of Lent that stated, "The joy of Lent is not loud or boastful. It is quiet, steady, and deeply personal. Joy grows when we trust God enough to let Him reshape our hearts."

David Ward
southernpines@suddenlink.net

February 22, 2026
Matthew 4:1-11

No, the Devil Can't Make You Do It

Do you remember back in old TV land when a comedian (Flip Wilson) made America laugh when he claimed that the devil made him do it? Can that happen? The answer is up to you.

Part 1: The Wilderness

The graphic story of Jesus being tempted by the devil for 40 days is almost unbearable to think about. We can only imagine the condition of His body when the angels took him away.

Part 2: The Hymn

In 1868, Horatio Palmer understood the power of the devil over human frailties. We sing his helpful lyrics...YIELD NOT TO TEMPTATION. He will carry you through.

Part 3: Reality Check

1. But...everyone does this.
2. But...nobody will ever know.
3. But...I'll do better tomorrow.
4. But...times have changed.
5. But...nobody seems to pay attention to me.

Ad Infinitum

Sleepless Questions

1. What if my family finds out?
2. What if I lose my job?
3. What if I can't stop?
4. What if my reputation is ruined?
5. What if I disappoint God?

Ad Infinitum

Part 4: Conclusion

Our sins are washed white as snow. According to Psalm 103: 12, as far as the East is from the West, God remembers our transgressions no more. People say they forgive us, but won't forget. We should all try to be more forgiving as well as forgetting.

ANSWER:

NO, the devil can't make us sin. We have choices. Jesus survived the unbearable days of temptations. Surely we can tell the devil NO!

Dona Julian Cassel

February 23, 2026

1 Kings 19:1-8

The Hunger of Elijah

And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and withal how he had slain all the prophets with a sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, "So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." And when Elijah saw that, he arose, and went for his life, and came to Beersheba, which belongeth to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, It is enough now, O LORD, take away my life for I am no better than my fathers. And as he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold then angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat. And he looked, and, behold, there was a cake baken on the coals, and a cruse of water at his head. And he did eat and drink and laid him down again. And the angel of the LORD came again the second time, and touched him, and said, Arise and eat: because the journey is too great for thee. And he arose, and did eat and drink and went in the strength of that meat forty day and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God.

1 Kings 19:1-8

Elijah looms large in the Biblical Landscape. In preparation for this devotional, I was shocked to see the majority of Elijah's literary presence is confined to 1 Kings 17-19. The Mega-Prophet is scantily clad in Scripture.

But, O' What Scripture!

The Commission: DO the WORD OF THE LORD until completion.

The Task: Speak only what is commanded by the WORD OF THE LORD; it will not be easy.

The Adversary: Expect relentless disapproval and extermination for obedience.

The Reality: Spiritual, Mental, Physical Exhaustion follows every success. How to hold it together?

I am struck by the recurring theme of Elijah being nourished by the WORD OF THE LORD.

Query: What is our relationship with the WORD OF THE LORD?

I am struck by Elijah's submission to Do All He is commanded by the WORD OF THE LORD.

I am struck by Elijah's power and potency to affect change in micro and macro events, i.e. forecast a 3-year drought, feed the widow and son, resurrect the dead, challenge the Wicked Kingdom, reign down fire.

Lastly, I am struck by Elijah's exhaustion and by his need for the God of the Universe to hold him together. Elijah came and sat under a juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die; and said, it is enough; now, O LORD take away my life; for I am no better than my father.

I am impressed by the HUNGER OF ELIJAH.

In Elijah's immediacy of obedience and willingness to Obey the WORD OF THE LORD; he was Divinely Nurtured.

Lent is The Opportunity to rebuild our Altar to the One True God; abandoning our way and word for THE LORD'S WAY and WORD.

Lent reminds me of the sacrifice provided to create the resurrection. Great depends on a connection to supernatural sustenance. As we are motivated to "give up", let us be reminded to "EAT from the WORD OF THE LORD."

Captain Laurie Tuttle
anahgrace@yahoo.com

February 24, 2026

John 7:53-8:11

The First Stone

This passage brings us to the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus had come down from the Mount of Olives and spent His morning teaching, sharing the gospel of God's Kingdom coming to Earth. There He sits, surrounded by disciples and those curious to listen to what this audacious young rabbi from the countryside in Galilee is proclaiming when Pharisees, having plotted to entrap him thrust a woman to the center of this crowd. The dilemma is simple but seemingly inescapable. If Jesus assents to stoning the woman, he will be set against the Roman authorities over executions. Refusing to support her condemnation required by Mosaic Law would shatter his claims of inheritance to God's commands to the Hebrews.

Take a few seconds to stand in this moment as if you were there. Looking upon a frightened woman enveloped by a mob and trembling for her fate. The high officials arrogantly awaiting the response they plan to condemn. The lowly Rabbi visiting from Galilee hadn't answered but instead stooped to trace his finger in the dust. Feel the tension of the confrontation and the faces of the woman, the Pharisees, the disciples and the crowd, and finally, Jesus.

Imagining myself there in Jerusalem among these figures, would I be with the haughty crowd or near to Christ awaiting what wisdom he would utter? But even more so, when I sit in reflection of this scene, I see myself as I am today. Not thrown in front of a crowd of accusers, yet aware of the sins I've committed and the harm they have brought in my relationships with God and with others. I see myself with stones still firmly grasped in fists, carrying more than self-righteous vengeance.

One of the enduring beauties of scripture is its universality. Invariably we can find our own experience of moral life and conflict in these ancient acts. In the woman, in the crowd, in the Pharisees, and finally, in Christ.

These figures don't stand across from each other only in

our minds or in the temple that day. They can often stand together inside our soul. In the same breath, I can be the one exposed by sin and eager to expose another. I can be guilty and still try to grasp righteousness as a weapon. Yet Christ stands in me resolving those two postures. Between my sinful shame and cruelty. He refuses to endorse either.

I have been a member of the crowd, stone heavy in hand to cast at those whose sins have pulled them to the center of my attention. I have been the woman, accused and facing significant consequences with no defense but a plea for mercy.

Can I, in my limited capacity, imitate Christ's posture?

We stand before God and the world already both accused and guilty. Not hypothetically but caught in the act of sin as this woman was. The response is often to gather ammunition in the form of evidence, judgments, verdicts,

According to the law, the crowd is righteous. Christ's response points beyond that to the source of the Law itself. The Giver who provided these regulations as a grace to His people and who now stands before them in humble, human flesh.

The scripture does not fill in the details of the woman's fate. It leaves her where it leaves us. Called by grace to repent. Rather than letting fly our outrage and righteousness toward ourselves and others, let the first stone be the one we set down so that the woman can hear the gospel, the angry mob can disperse back into a beloved community, and we can respond with open hands to the voice that says: go, and sin no more.

Joseph Boudreau
jbdreau@gmail.com

February 25, 2026

Psalm 32

Wasting Away

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long, then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD." And you forgave the guilt of my sin. Psalm 32:3 & 5, NIV

My sin tends to be anxiety and worry about things outside my control. Since most everything is outside my control, this sin can be overwhelming. Lately, the anxiety has centered on a legal case I am handling with unsavory lawyers on the other side. What is exacerbating the anxiety is that the preliminary decisions of the judge have gone against my arguments and my position. I see a path to victory, the judge has indicated as much, but that path is still months away and rests on decisions outside my control. Generally, my groaning is not only all day long, but I am awakened in the night, thinking of arguments I should have made, questions I should have asked, words I should have written, and concluding that I will see huge injustice, all due to my acts and omissions in representing my client. The role of an attorney is difficult. Rather than work cooperatively to reach a common goal—restored health of an ill person, design of an engineering solution to a problem—our role is to fight and win.

David's masterpiece of Psalm 32 hits us all where we are. Despite the nature of our sin, the results of wasting away are universal. Fortunately, so too are the results of confession of our sins and acknowledging the forgiveness that God gives us so completely and mercifully. I encourage you to reread this Psalm. Consider the transgressions and sins you have committed. Then confess and breathe. Really and seriously confess—name that sin. Then rest in the glow of forgiveness and mercy.

Envision being set high on a rock, hidden from your enemies, protected from the rising mighty waters that are seeking to carry you away from protection. And consider God's care for you in verse 8. "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you."

Remember and consider that God has his loving eye on you. He is there to counsel you. He is there to instruct and teach you. For me, this eases the anxiety, and I can rest knowing that whatever the outcome, I trust God. I trust that HE hears my cries, and HE will instruct me in the way to go. I trust that the outcome may not be as I wish. I trust that the outcome is out of my control and ultimately in God's control. It is this attitude of acknowledging forgiveness and restoration that removes the anxiety. Sure, I will be awakened again with the same nightmarish dreams and thoughts of the missed question, the missed argument, the missed pleading. But again, recalling that hiding place, high on a rock above the treacherous waters, I am comforted. Rather than groaning, I can praise God. I can rest in His forgiveness.

John Berry
jfberry@jberrylaw.net

February 26, 2026

Isaiah 51:1-3

Don't Forget Your Raisin'

My maternal grandmother, Mavis, was the second of five sisters born on a small farm outside of tiny Bradshaw, Texas. Through the Great Depression, her father somehow scratched a livelihood for his family out of the dry and dusty West Texas soil. Without a brother in the bunch, the five sisters worked the fields and did chores in and around a small clapboard farmhouse. The sisters' stories of their parents always reminded me of the proverbial Jack Sprat and his wife: full-figured Claudia chuckled easily and was steadfastly happy-go-lucky while the rail-thin, Rothmer was tall, brooding, stern, proud, no-nonsense. My grandmother was very much her father's daughter. She was not a cuddle and eat candy kind of grandma.

The surest way to disappoint my grandmother was to forget your raisin'. Rules of proper behavior were taught. Expectations were clear. Misbehavior or bad judgment reflected poorly not only on the wrongdoer but the entire family. "You were raised better," was a common lament/admonishment. Sometimes her tongue was sharp. Often her message should have been tempered by grace, but it was rooted in love and deep conviction that her loved ones knew better than they often behaved and their lives would be better if they would remember their instruction.

Paradoxically, the immovable object that was my grandmother gave birth to the unstoppable force that is my mother, a born rebel, who now, even in her 80's, revels in breaking or bending rules to her own will. Why shouldn't an octogenarian sport fuchsia hair? The battle of wills that defined their relationship produced profound disappointment for my grandmother, epic frustration for my mother, and heartache all the way around. By the grace of God and with sands of time smoothing some rougher edges, they eventually reached détente and enjoyed several years of peaceful coexistence before my grandmother's death.

When I read Isaiah 51:1-3, an echo of my grandmother's admonition comes to mind. The prophet, with more grace

than chastisement, gives this encouragement: Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were cut, the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father, to Sarah who gave you birth. When I called him, he was only one; I blessed him and made him many. For the Lord will comfort Zion; He will comfort all her waste places, and He will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the Garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving, and melodious song.

The takeaway? If you feel derailed, discouraged, or defeated, then remember where you came from! If God can make a great nation from one barren old couple, then he can revive Zion into a joyful new Eden. He can restore broken relationships. He can redeem a broken world. In fact, He is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think. Ephesians 3:20.

Heavenly Father, this fallen world can be a dark and heavy place. Sometimes we get discouraged. We lose our way. We forget our raisin'. We forget what you have done in the past and what you are capable of doing today. Help us remember the rock from which we were cut and the quarry from which we were dug. Help us rest in your promises to comfort and restore, to make the wilderness of our lives like Eden, and to make our deserts like the Garden of the Lord. Lord, you alone are able. Amen.

Randy Cook
rjdkcook@gmail.com

February 27, 2026

Micah 7:18-20

The Ups and Downs of Sin in the Face of Mercy

The book of Micah unfolds in a series of repeating patterns or cycles. Each begins with judgment and ends with grace and hope. In many ways, Micah reads like a sacred composition in movements:

Chapters 1-2: Judgment

Chapters 3-4: Promise

Chapters 5-7: Mercy, Hope, and Resolution

With this brief framework in mind, we now turn our attention to Micah 7:18-20.

Micah opens with a question that arrests the soul: "Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity?" In the season of Lent, our focus is repentance—but true repentance requires that we know **who God is** and **before whom we repent**. A.W. Tozer wisely observed in *The Knowledge of the Holy* that the more deeply we know God, the more we are overwhelmed by who He truly is.

Lent is about returning to the God whose mercy is deeper than our sin. Sin is serious, and judgment is real, yet mercy is God's preferred work. As the Puritan Thomas Brooks wrote, "Mercy flows from God's nature, not merely from His decision."

Richard Sibbes, in *The Bruised Reed*, emphasized that Christ is extraordinarily gentle toward the weak, the brokenhearted, and the spiritually bruised. With the tenderness of a faithful pastor, he offered the sin-weary soul this healing salve: "There is more mercy in Christ than sin in us." Thomas Watson echoes the same hope, reminding us, "God is more ready to pardon than we are to repent."

Micah speaks of mercy with carefully chosen Hebrew words—but even before he speaks, **his name itself is preaching**. Micah means, "Who is like the LORD?" The answer unfolds in God's steadfast, forgiving love. He is a God who does not retain His anger forever, but who **delights in mercy**. The Hebrew word *hesed*—translated "steadfast love"—speaks

of God's loyal, covenant-bound mercy that endures despite human failure.

In verse 18, the phrase "pardoning iniquity" is formed from two Hebrew words. The verb *nasa* means to *lift up*, to *carry*, to *bear*, to *take away*. The noun *āwōn* describes *perveristy*, *guilt*, *depravity*, and the *punishment of iniquity*. Together, they paint a vivid picture of what God does with our sin.

As I reflected on this, one word in particular stood out: *nasa*. In English, we recognize NASA as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, established in 1958. As far as I can tell, no one intended the connection to the Hebrew word for pardon—but the image is striking. When a spacecraft is launched, it is:

1. Lifted up
2. Carried away
3. Bearing a great load
4. And once released, much of it is gone forever—never to be seen again

So too with Christ. In our place, He was lifted up on the cross, bearing the full weight of our sin, carrying it away, and removing it forever. As Micah declares in verse 19, "You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." Never to be seen again. God's steadfast love reaches both the heights of heaven and the depths of the sea.

How great is our salvation!

Mercy, Micah tells us, passes over transgression—or as the Hebrew indicates, the rebellious act. This is grace that does not pause to condemn but moves forward to redeem. It is covenantal forbearance grounded in steadfast *hesed* love.

The picture of God's people makes this mercy even more astonishing. Here stands a poor, dirty remnant—survivors of a once-glorious nation—marching arrogantly in pride, holding God's merciful character in contempt. Yet God does not cling to His right to punish. Why? Because He delights in mercy. His default posture toward His people is compassion. *Who is a God like You, O LORD?*

In all of this, God is fulfilling His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Faithfulness and steadfast love overflow.

Dale Ralph Davis poses the final, penetrating question:

"Why does Yahweh not hold on to His anger forever? Because He delights in mercy. But why does He delight in mercy? It is simply the way He is." We cannot fully explain it. We can only stand, humbled and grateful, and adore Him.

Shawn Odenthal
shawn@betterbenefitsgrp.com

February 28, 2026
Luke 7:1-10

Is Jesus Amazed at Your Faith in Him?

After reading and then looking at portions of God's scripture today, we look at Capernaum located on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. This city, with a population of 1,000 or less, was the center of Jesus' early ministry.

It was the home for both Gentiles and Jews. There was a Roman centurion who was in command of the 100 Roman soldiers living in the city. In the first five books of the New Testament, Roman centurions are presented as men of moral character and this centurion was exceptional. The Jewish people did not want Roman soldiers in their cities, but this centurion was well respected and loved the Jewish community and had even built a synagogue for the Jewish people.

He had a position of authority and his soldiers obeyed him. The centurion officer heard of Jesus and that He commanded diseases in the same way. The love for a servant who was dying from a paralyzing disease caused the centurion to ask some of the Jewish elders to go to Jesus and tell him about the servant. When the elders went to Jesus, they pleaded for Him to go to the centurion's home because he had done so much for the community. So, Jesus went with them. When they were not far away, the centurion sent friends to tell Jesus that he was not worthy of having Jesus in his home. We are not only impressed with this man's amazing love, but also his humility, because the Romans were not known for displaying humility to their Jewish subjects. Jesus did not go into the home. When the friends left Jesus and returned to the centurion's home, they found the servant healed.

What impressed Jesus was the man's faith. He then turned back to the crowd that was following him that day and said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith, even in Israel." There are only two times Jesus marveled.

It was here in Capernaum and also at the unbelief of the Jews in Mark 6:6. We need to also realize this Roman man had very little spiritual guidance but a very strong faith.

Unlike the Roman officer, we live in a world with many books, Bible studies, and 2000 years of church history to strengthen our faith, and yet we have "no" or "very little" faith.

Precious Lord, may we pray for increased faith like that found in Matthew 17:20-21.

Louise Dyer
ofmontessori@aol.com

March 1, 2026

Matthew 17:1-9

Where to Worship

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

Matthew 17:5

Jesus took Peter, James and John up a mountain to witness his transfiguration. Moses and Elijah appeared before them and spoke with Jesus. The disciples were understandably awestruck, and Peter promised to set up shrines on the spot. But God spoke and declared Jesus as his son. Listen to him!

God is obviously not opposed to physical structures where people gather to worship him. He gave Moses very detailed instructions for constructing the tabernacle that moved with the Israelites while they wandered the desert before entering the Promised Land. Later, he gave the plans for the temple and instructions for temple operations to King David. These plans were passed to Solomon, who oversaw the actual construction of the first temple. For hundreds of years, Israelites traveled to the temple during important festivals to offer their sacrifices to God.

So why would God have rejected the idea of a shrine on the mountain where Jesus revealed his divinity to his disciples? When Jesus was talking to the woman at the well, she asked him who was right—the Samaritans who worshiped God on Mount Gerizim, believed to be the place where Abraham almost sacrificed Isaac, or the temple in Jerusalem? Jesus answered that soon true worship will not be required to happen in a particular place but will be based on what is in the heart of the worshiper.

If God was extremely detailed in his plans for what the tabernacle and temple looked like and how the priests were to approach worship, don't you think he would be even more interested in what is going on in the heart of every worshiper? Because Jesus came to sacrifice himself and reconcile all of mankind to God, the temple in which the Spirit of God resides is now our hearts. The way to make our hearts an acceptable temple is to ask Jesus to live there and guide us as we allow him to change us into

people who love God and love others. And how do we change? By listening to Jesus!

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for loving your people and being involved with us. Help us listen to you so our hearts are an acceptable place to dwell.

Regina Childress
rchildress@marvin.church

March 2, 2026
Psalm 128

Staying Ready

*Blessed are all who fear the Lord,
who walk in obedience to him. Psalm 128:1*

This psalm is a song of ascents, sung by pilgrims as they made their way up to Jerusalem, usually for one of the major feasts that commemorated a time that God had intervened on behalf of his people. These songs served to get the pilgrims in the right mindset to worship God and remember his goodness. We do the same thing during Lent as we prepare to celebrate Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

But we know that God deserves to be worshiped every day, not just at Christmas and Easter. There are always reasons to be grateful, if we only look. But we must be ready to see God's blessings, and that can get lost in everyday life. One of my favorite phrases about preparations comes from a middle school coach, "You don't have to get ready if you stay ready." Yes, we prepare for the big blessings, like Christmas and Easter, but if we don't stay ready, we will miss the blessings of a random Tuesday.

Psalm 128 outlines the blessings of an ordinary life—family, work, religious and civic life. Just as we train our bodies and minds, we must train our spirits for readiness to recognize what God has provided for us. And we must always be ready to serve as a witness to God's goodness to those who do not know him. Who wants to follow a God that has only sad and angry people in his flock?

So, as we travel through Lent, train your spirit to look around for ways that God has blessed you personally or blessed all of mankind through his creation. And after Easter, stay ready to thank God for your everyday blessings. His light will shine through you and land on someone who needs to know about God and his love and redemptive power. And the privilege of being the messenger is a great blessing indeed.

Today, try to find a new blessing that you can be thankful for, and thank God and pass it along to someone else.

Regina Childress
rchildress@marvin.church

March 3, 2026
Romans 4:6-13

The Gift of Salvation

*Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven,
whose sins are put out of sight. Romans 4:7 NIV*

Righteousness...I never thought that word would ever apply to me. In my thoughts, righteousness was used to talk about someone that was sacred, holy, and pious. Those words only applied to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I knew I was nowhere close to being righteous. Later, I realized that I never really understood the true meaning of the word.

When I was a freshman at Baylor University, I had to take two extremely difficult classes. One was the Old Testament, and the other was the New Testament. After two semesters of studying the Bible, I realized that I am righteous! What a gift! All the way back to Genesis, God made Abraham the spiritual father for all who trusted Him. When God spoke to Abraham and told him of all the promises that He would bless him and his family with, Abraham never doubted God. He did not know how or where the Lord would lead him, but he became fully invested in his new life and a new country. Courage, compassion, and obedience led him to become the mediator of God's blessings to all the families on earth. He was always so faithful. Abraham was the first person to have a covenant with God.

Righteousness is credited by faith, not by works and not by obeying laws. In Romans 4:6-13, God declared Abraham righteous through his faithfulness, before the law for the Jews was established. Both Jews and Gentiles were circumcised or uncircumcised by faith, not the law.

This wonderful gift is for all of us who trust God. The law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression. Therefore, we receive God's undeserved grace. Such a beautiful foreshadowing of God's precious Son, our Savior.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, there is no amount of praise that we can give to You for Your gift of salvation. We pray that we never forget to give You all the glory and praise for our

righteous lives. We pray this prayer in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Gail Hollenshead
hhollenshead@gmail.com

March 4, 2026

Genesis 4:1-6

More Than Meets the Eye

In Genesis 4:1-6 we learn of Adam and Eve's sons. Abel, who kept flocks, and Cain, who worked the soil. We learn that both sons made an offering to God, yet somehow Cain's offering is not looked upon with favor.

I am not sure how many times I have read this passage, but it's a lot and I always find myself wondering why? Why was Cain's offering not good enough?

We know that God is a just God who does not use trickery, changing the bar depending on his whims. So why did God not approve of Cain's gift from the soil? All through the Old Testament, God accepts offerings of grain as well as animal sacrifices. So, it is not that God somehow didn't value the offering from the soil simply because it was from the soil. We know that God even made provisions for the poor who couldn't afford a lamb to give a dove. It has never been about the economic value of the offering. It has always been about the giver's heart. The widow's mite is a great example of this when Jesus declares in Mark 12:41-44 that the widow's two small coins were worth more to God than all the other gifts. God has always kept accounts differently than man.

So, I have to assume that the rejection of Cain's offering is more likely to do with Cain's heart and motives than the actual gift. If we continue to read Genesis 4, God even asks Cain, "if you do what is right, will you not be accepted?" It certainly appears that Cain not only did less than God expected of him, but Cain also knew where he was wrong. That realization has greater implications for you and me as believers than if it had just been an issue with the quality of the produce. It means that our offerings to God are not as simple as a matter of being sure to budget the proper 10% or even 11% just to be safe. It matters how we give. It matters why we give. Are we giving with a joyful heart or is it just a box we check?

Reading further, we see that this heart issue in Cain's giving leads to a deep spiral of tragedy and sin. Maybe that is why our heart matters so much to God when we give back to Him what He has so generously given to us.

Maybe this simple act of giving back in gratitude is a defense against temptation. As we view this scripture through the lens of Easter, I'm so grateful God gives us His generous heart. Even to the point of giving us His son.

Chris Hill

chris@programforhumanitarianaid.org

March 5, 2026

Psalm 95

A Call to Obedience

If only you would hear His voice... Psalm 95:7

"I thought I already told you..."

"Why didn't you listen to me?"

"We've been through this before."

"Did you think there wouldn't be a consequence?"

"Well, what did you believe would happen?"

My, humans haven't really ever changed, have we? I know that I have been on both sides of these statements more than once, even as an adult. I get cocky, think I know a better way, or am too apathetic or lazy or distracted to get started when I should. I know that something bad might happen, but what if it doesn't? This time anyway. Most of us can relate to these statements, with our parents when we were young, as parents of our children (no matter their current age), our coworkers, bosses, friends. As a teacher, I say these things often. Nowadays, I try to find "the lesson" that is the most effective. If we don't mess up every now and again, how can we grow? But there's usually still a consequence.

Psalm 95 was most likely written by temple personnel for worship "in the style of David" one of my study materials notes, and is a part of a collection of Psalms that share similar themes: worship fully the Lord for absolutely everything and remembering what being disobedient can get you. The psalmist reminds the people who are in the worship service (and us now as we study and read the words) that we are here on this mighty world because we are a part of God's creation. He made all of it. We are to kneel, not just in submission, but because He will protect us through redemption.

Then, the reminder: "If only—" There are many scriptures imploring us to open our eyes to see and ears to hear, to see and taste the goodness of God and abundance of blessings. Two places are brought up; two places that the studied Hebrew would immediately know and understand the reference: Meribah and Massah. These two names are

the ones given to the location where Moses struck the rock to bring forth water for the people. Meribah means rebellion and Massah means trial. Even though the Israelites were firsthand witnesses to one amazing thing after another, they still found room to complain and find fault. It got to the point where God finally said "Enough! I'm tired of this and you aren't listening! You don't get to go anymore!" The only phrase missing from this scolding is "Do you want me to turn this caravan around?" He probably didn't say that because they were already whining about how good it was back there.

For us today, are we listening? Are we recognizing the good God has placed in front of us, even if it doesn't look like what we wanted? Are we letting ourselves become distracted by things of the world, by man's law, by chaos and turmoil, to the point that we lose focus that our ONLY salvation is through Christ Jesus. In Hebrews 3, the author cites this verse, reminding readers of that day that to doubt God's will on your life is to call him a liar. These days it might be easy to think that God has forgotten you, forgotten all of us, but He hasn't. We must fall on our knees in full and complete worship of the Almighty, the Lord of all creation, and follow him out of the desert to the promised land—eternal rest in the arms of Christ.

Prayer: Elohim, Adonai, Lord God of the Universe—show us places in our lives where we can strengthen our obedience of your will. Give us opportunities to encounter others to guide them to a more complete obedience or learn from them how. In your Name, Amen.

Catherine Gaertner
catgaert@gmail.com

March 6, 2026
Ephesians 2:11-22

There Is No Other Option

Divisions among various tribes, nations, languages, and tongues have been around since Genesis. Even today, divisions seem to permeate our culture. We are divided over politics, religion, and even sports. Sometimes, we think the world today is more divided now than ever before, but when you look at the divisions that began forming in Genesis, you quickly see that people have always divided themselves into groups. It seems to be human nature, at least since the fall, to divide our world into two groups—insiders and outsiders. It is human nature to want to be in the right group, to be an insider.

The Church of Ephesus was divided between the Gentile Christians and the Jewish Christians. There was tension and hostility between the two, with both desiring to be the right group, to be the insiders. As Paul writes to the Ephesians, he does something rather brave and not only reminds them of their differences, but also their similarities. Both groups have one thing in common that is more important than anything that could divide them—both have been saved by grace through faith.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he is offering an alternative to the divisions permeating the culture and showing them the path to unity. In the passage, Paul tells us to remember the time when we were without Christ, the time when all were outside of God's grace, mercy, and love. Paul reminds the Ephesians that to live as a united community in a divided world, they must look to Jesus. He reminds the Ephesians that Jesus, in his flesh, "has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." Jesus came to put an end to there being two groups in the church. He came to break down the walls and put to death the divisions between the two groups.

The Jesus who came to put an end to the division between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians is the same Jesus who wants to put an end to the divisions we see in our culture. I wonder what would happen today in our culture if we heeded the words of Paul. I wonder what would happen if

we paused to remember the time when we were without Christ and without the grace, mercy, and love of God. Like the Church of Ephesus, we will never achieve unity by trying to convince the other group that we are right. We will not achieve unity through politics, compromises, or debates. In fact, the only way you can achieve unity is not by achieving it at all, but by discovering it in Christ. In Christ, and only in Christ, we are joined and built together. In Christ we all work together as one toward the mission that he has given to His church: To love and bless the world in the name of Jesus. There is no other option.

Danielle Strain
dstrain@marvin.church

March 7, 2026

John 7:53 – 8:11

Justice and Mercy

Then they all went home, but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." John 7:53-8:11

This story in John 8:1-11 powerfully reveals how Jesus handles a situation filled with judgment, mercy, and the opportunity for transformation. When the religious leaders bring a woman caught in adultery, they do so to trap Jesus, trying to force Him into a difficult position—either upholding the law of Moses or showing mercy. Instead of falling into their trap, Jesus responds with divine wisdom. He begins by writing on the ground, and when pressed further, He challenges those without sin to cast the first stone, exposing their hypocrisy. One by one, her accusers leave, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus and the woman remain. Jesus then gently asks her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" When she replies that no one has, Jesus declares, "Neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin." This story teaches us that Jesus sees beyond our faults and offers grace instead of condemnation, giving us hope for renewal and change.

In applying this passage to our lives, we learn vital lessons about judgment, mercy, and transformation. We often find ourselves in the roles of both the accused and the accusers—either condemning others or feeling shame when we fall short. Jesus' example shows us how to navigate these situations with both truth and compassion. He reminds us that no one is qualified to judge others because all have sinned. When we catch ourselves judging others, it's an opportunity to pause, recognize our own need for grace, and extend that same mercy to others. Our hearts can become hard and cold if we let judgment take root, but Jesus calls us to be softened by His mercy, which transformed our lives, so we can do the same for those who are caught in sin.

This story also highlights that Jesus balances justice with mercy, standing against sin while always seeking restoration. His words confront sin honestly but with the intention of helping people find forgiveness and new life. We are called to imitate His example—speaking truth gently and helping others rise rather than crushing them under condemnation. True spiritual maturity is shown not in pointing out failures but in helping others find freedom through Christ's grace. When others stumble, we should be quick to lift them, not to judge or condemn, but to guide them toward healing and renewal.

The woman's encounter with Jesus reminds us that no matter how deep our shame or how great our failures, God's mercy is greater. Jesus' words—"Neither do I condemn you"—bring hope to anyone feeling overwhelmed by guilt. His grace frees us from the weight of condemnation and empowers us to turn away from sin and walk in the freedom He provides. Experiencing His forgiveness should motivate us to leave behind shame and embrace the new life He offers. It's important to remember that His grace is not a license to continue sinning but a divine gift that transforms us from the inside out, giving us strength to obey His call to live differently.

Reflecting on this story prompts us to examine our own hearts and attitudes. Are we quick to judge others, or are we extending grace like Jesus? Do we recognize our own need for forgiveness and allow that awareness to soften our hearts? How has God's forgiveness changed our view of sin and brokenness? As we pray and seek His guidance, let us ask for His Spirit to fill us with compassion and

wisdom, so that we can speak truth in love, offer hope instead of condemnation, and be instruments of His restorative grace. May we remember that Jesus lifted this woman from shame, set her feet on solid ground, and sent her on a new path. His example calls us to do the same—meeting others with grace, offering forgiveness, and helping them find their way back to Him. In doing so, we participate in His divine mission of redemption, transforming lives through the power of His mercy and truth.

Jake Strain
JStrain@cenikor.org

March 8
Exodus 17: 1-7

Remember Who God Is

But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" Exodus 17:3

The Israelites originally settled in Egypt to escape a famine during Joseph's time. Eventually, they were enslaved, and after hundreds of years God sent them a deliverer named Moses. The people witnessed many miracles as God worked to free them from the mighty Egyptian kingdom. The people were happy enough to be out of bondage, but it didn't take long for them to start complaining about their new circumstances. They wondered why Moses had delivered them from slavery only for them to die in the desert. Their taskmasters had been harsh, but at least they had food and drink.

God wants us to look back and remember where we came from, but that remembering must be framed by what God has done for us. When the Israelites remembered Egypt, they thought about the food and water, but not about their position as slaves. They were very quick to forget that God had worked on their behalf to get them started on the way to the Promised Land, where they could be a sovereign people with the Lord on their side.

Unfortunately, we often have the same attitude. God sacrificed his one and only son so that we could have a relationship with him. We were slaves to sin and death, but Jesus delivered us from that fate. He lives in our hearts now, and one day we will dwell with him for all eternity. But when we are faced with difficulty, it is all too easy to focus on the trouble and not remember that Jesus is always with us and works for our good if we believe in him and follow his guidance. We must remember who God is so that we can allow him to work in us and through us.

How many times have we complained about a situation and worked to fix it ourselves, when God is right there, ready to show you and others how much he cares for us. Don't miss an opportunity to allow God to show you his power and love.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, please help us to look at life through the prism of your love for us. When things are not going right, let us remember who you are so that we call on you for help. And help us remain grateful for who you are, what you have done, and what you are yet to do for your people.

Regina Childress
rchildress@marvin.church

March 9, 2026
Psalm 81

Life is Found in God Alone

There are many lessons that I have had to learn over and over again. At times, I am quick to forget the lessons I have learned and receive a regular reminder of the lesson I previously learned. Unfortunately, I am not alone in this. Throughout scripture, we see God's people forgetting the lessons He has taught them and seeking life outside the One True God and being forced to learn a lesson they had already been taught.

In the Old Testament, we read of the deliverance from Egypt. Immediately after the deliverance from Egypt, when they lacked food and water, God's people looked not to Him for help but longed to return to slavery in Egypt. Throughout their history, they followed the same pattern. When they were in need, they looked for rescue elsewhere. They looked to the false god, Baal, for hope. They looked for rescue from a King, rather than the King of Kings. They looked for help from their pagan neighbors. God brought His people out of slavery and Egypt, brought them to the promised land, but they continued to abandon Him. They did not learn the lesson and in verse 10 received a reminder from God about their covenant relationship with Him. God is upset with His people but is also persistent in His loving call to worship Him.

Although I wish we did not have to learn the lesson over and over again, even today, our own hearts look for life outside of God. We may not worship a wooden statue, but we look to idols for help and hope just the same. We pursue success, affirmation, wealth, or status to give our lives meaning and purpose. We look for hope and joy in changed circumstances and new things. We attempt to fill the void with relationships and experiences, only to crash into despair when they fail to deliver.

Psalm 81 reminds us our God is a generous God. He is rich beyond measure. All that we need is found in Him, and He is happy to supply it. Didn't He prove this to us by giving us the greatest gift of all, His Son, Jesus Christ? In Christ, we are blessed beyond anything the psalmist could have imagined. He made us right with God. He opened the way

into the holy of holies so we could come to the throne of grace. He blessed us with eternal life and joy forever with him. Real life and lasting satisfaction is within our reach, all we have to do is look to Christ to find and receive it.

Danielle Strain
DStrain@marvin.church

March 10, 2026
Genesis 29:1-14

All in the Family

When my parents took our family on vacations, part of the trip included our father searching through telephone books to find any possible relative. This was his quest. All my brother and I wanted was a motel with a swimming pool!

In this scripture we see a very happy and surprised Jacob as his travels had led him to his kinsmen. How could he have understood that this new adventure would affect the history of Israel?

Relationship.

Humans have a strong desire to connect to family. There's Ancestry.com and "Finding Your Roots" on PBS to assist us. The scriptures place a great emphasis on lineage. For many years it was a trend to own a huge Bible with front pages filled in by hand to record important family events. The Bible was usually in a place of honor in the family, such as a coffee table in the parlor or a special bookcase. The Bible was not only the word of God, but a repository of family history. It was a lineage of family history.

Reunions.

Have you attended a family reunion? The shared stories are priceless. I have a witty cousin who once said she didn't care about our roots unless there were some royal blood. Funny. While it's been a few years, this may be the year my cousins help organize a gathering of our family members. Our lineage is Christian and there is no royalty that we know of.

But please consider this. Jacob didn't know his future with his kinfolks, nor do we know our unwritten legacy. Faithfulness to God should be embraced as our family motto. Then, the results will bear fruit as the branches of the Family Tree continue to spread. That faithfulness will be your royalty, as you will have crowns in heaven.

Dona Julian Cassel

March 11, 2026
Jeremiah 2:4-13

A Warning for Then and Now

Hear the word of the Lord, you descendants of Jacob, all you clans of Israel. This is what the Lord says: 'What fault did your ancestors find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves. They did not ask, 'Where is the Lord, who brought us up out of Egypt and led us through the barren wilderness, through a land of deserts and ravines a land of drought and utter darkness, a land where no one travels and no one lives?' I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. But you came and defiled my land and made my inheritance detestable. The priests did not ask, 'Where is the Lord?'

Those who deal with the law did not know me; the leaders rebelled against me. The prophets prophesied by Baal, following worthless idols. "Therefore I bring charges against you again," declares the Lord. "And I will bring charges against your children's children. Cross over to the coasts of Cyprus and look, send to Kedar and observe closely see if there has ever been anything like this: Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols. Be appalled at this, you heavens, and shudder with great horror," declares the Lord. "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water. Jeremiah 2:4-13

Jeremiah came to the calling-out-of-the-people game with some serious credibility. He was both prophet and priest whose book is the longest in the Bible. His ministry lasted through several rulers who really allowed evil to permeate throughout the kingdom, to the point of Baal worship (v8). He was the one whom God told the famous predestination verse: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." (Jer 1:5). God sent him out after having touched his mouth, putting His words in Jeremiah's mouth (Jer 1:9).

Jeremiah became God's mouthpiece to accuse the people of Israel of two sins in particular. One, they had forsaken their "glorious God" (v11), the "spring of living water" and the other, they had "dug their own cisterns...that cannot hold water" (v13). Worshiping other gods, Baal, and what that entails, being one of them.

God was especially done with these people, the Israelites because He had saved them miraculously from slavery in Egypt and sustained them as He led them to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. He then placed men after His own heart (David and Solomon) to build their country into a mighty kingdom.

Lo and behold, the leaders of the people (allowed by the people?) had背slidden to the point of depravity and Jehovah was about to administer some justice. The "gods" they had forsaken God for caused a brokenness and separation from God the Provider. God's patience has always run thin when it comes to exchanging His blessings for anything that shows apostacy toward Him.

Lest we be too quick to point a finger at those Israelites, remember that when we do, there are three fingers pointing back at ourselves. It doesn't take much perception to see grave similarities between them and us. As with Israel, there has been a great departure from God that has occurred in our once humble and subservient culture.

We are the remnant praying for deliverance through revival. Don't forget, we are the only Bible some people ever read. Pray that God will use each of us to further His kingdom, "one soul at a time"!

Come, Holy Spirit, come!

Paul Breedlove
paul@breedlovelandscape.com

March 12, 2026

Psalm 23

The Valley of the Shadow of Death

Today we read and study everyone's favorite psalm. Or if it is not your favorite psalm, it is likely the one you know the best. Psalm 23. The LORD is my shepherd. I bet you can recite it by memory, if not all of it, most of it.

For this devotional, I'm reading it not as if it is about David or about me, but about Jesus. I am especially intrigued with verse 4 from the Revised Standard Version of my youth, the version that I memorized decades ago. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou are with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."

This translation is not "the valley of death" but the "valley of the shadow of death". What's the difference? What does it matter?

I surmise that one cannot walk out of the valley of death. Once you enter, there you die. Your earthly life ends and your next life begins. While this could have been the intent of the psalmist, and it would be treacherous to walk through the valley of death, it is more treacherous to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. This is a much more common valley. In this valley, death is a constant shadow—not imminent, not immediate, but still ever present. And while you walk through it, you know what surrounds you. More importantly, you know who walks with you. For it is the LORD who walks with you, that same LORD who is your shepherd. That same LORD who provides rest, restoration, righteousness, comfort, goodness and mercy. Finally and importantly, a shadow indicates light. Without light there can be no shadow. This revelation can be attributed to my wife, Peggy. In the valley of the shadow of death, one is able to walk to the light. It's at the end of the thing that is obstructing it. That mountain that is blocking the sun. Just keep walking in faith and the mountain/obstruction will pass and you will be fully in the light again.

We all know that Jesus was an actual person—fully man, who walked this earth. During Lent we focus on his death

and resurrection and the need for that to occur—for our salvation. While also fully God, I can sense Jesus walking in the valley of the shadow of death—knowing that death is certain and purposeful, aware that it is coming. I can imagine as Jesus drew close to Jerusalem for that last Passover that he walked through that valley—the valley of the shadow of death. I have full confidence that he was comforted during that walk by his father, our LORD GOD. I also have full confidence that he knew no fear. And by giving up his life for our sake, he kept walking through that valley into unimpaired and pure light.

Reading this psalm from the perspective of Jesus is new to me. It has opened my eyes. All of this was planned and implemented in perfect fulfillment of prophesy, with psalms providing comfort when we all face trials and the unknown. I am comforted in a new way by the Psalm. Yet, this is not about me. It is about what the LORD has done for all of us.

John Berry

jfberry@jberrylaw.net

March 13, 2026
1 Samuel 15:22-31

Genuine Obedience is Better Than Partial Obedience

But Samuel replied: "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? **To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.**" 1 Samuel 15:22-31

As we walk through Lent, many of us have given up or have added a spiritual discipline we felt called to. While these practices are very meaningful and valuable to deepen our personal relationship with Christ, this scripture challenges us in its revelation that God desires genuine obedience.

We get a proper glimpse of how King Saul's partial obedience to what God had commanded him to destroy revealed that his heart was more concerned with outward appearances and personal gain for himself instead of fully submitting to God's will. Samuel goes on, not holding back, explaining that King Saul's outward expressions of worship are meaningless to God if they are not rooted in sincere genuine obedience.

No one likes the idea of comparing themselves to Saul, but I can think of several instances throughout my life where I have unintentionally been somewhat obedient and then turned around and justified my partial obedience by the good I was doing. Lent always invites me to reflect and examine every nook and cranny of my heart to consider where I might be holding back from fully surrendering to God.

It poses the gut-wrenching question: How and when have I been like Saul?

My revelations:

- Sometimes I have the best intentions of doing something I really want to do, and I will allow circumstances or business to rationalize my lack of follow through by explaining the other good things I was doing with my time instead.

- I have justified a non-essential purchase I made (that I really wanted) under the guise, "I deserve it because I am generous with my money and give to the needy."
- Other times, I have kept quiet in an uncomfortable or bad situation when I should've spoken up because I just don't have the margin or energy to pour into it. I save my energy for my family.

While I still wrestle with falling short often, I am very aware and know my need for Christ. I have comfort and freedom knowing His presence is always sanctifying and working in my heart. I've learned over many years that rationalization is the way of sinners and repentance is the path of saints. That's what I aspire to be.

Remember that we are journeying towards the most meaningful moment in history where Christ, in full and absolute obedience, took upon Himself my sins, your sins, and died on the cross. As I write these words through soft tears, I am confident that in that moment while He was nailed to the cross that He knew His obedience would save me, you, all of us from our moments of partial obedience. Oh, how He loves us.

I encourage you to spend some time today considering any moments in your life where you realized that partial obedience was actual disobedience. Have a dialogue with God about it and thank Jesus for His obedience in going to the cross so that we could know and experience God's mercy and grace when we are disobedient.

Heather Jones
Heather.erjones@gmail.com

March 14, 2026

I Samuel 15:32-34

Agag Theology

1 Samuel 15 is one of the most tragic chapters in all of Scripture. It centers on Israel's first king, Saul. When the elders of Israel demanded a king "*like all the other nations*" (1 Sam. 8:4-5), they were not merely requesting new leadership—they were rejecting the covenant God as their King. In response, God directed Samuel to anoint Saul, a Benjamite, as king over Israel. Saul became the visible replacement for the invisible rule of God.

From the beginning, Saul never fully submitted to God's kingship. Though commissioned with a clear calling—"the *prince of My people*"—his heart increasingly drifted. Early success bred self-dependence, pride replaced humility, and fear of man displaced fear of God. The man described in chapter 10 as having a *new heart* slowly became unrecognizable. His relationship with Samuel deteriorated, and with it, his communion with God. This is a tragic and sobering account, and it is therefore a difficult—but necessary—lesson for Lent. Scripture makes clear that God is not a therapist who soothes us with vague reassurances that "all will be well." Grace does not imply indulgence, nor is it *cheap*, as Bonhoeffer famously warned. Holiness is costly and unwavering. God will not have His holiness treated lightly.

To understand Saul's collapse, we must look back to 1 Samuel 13, where his downward trajectory becomes unmistakable. Saul begins to reveal deep insecurity—protecting his authority, guarding his reputation, and demanding loyalty. Fear of man becomes his defining characteristic. This fear eventually erupts into jealousy, most notably toward David, but it deeply affects Jonathan as well.

The focal point of Saul's rejection, however, is found in his encounter with Agag and the battle against the Amalekites. Saul was courageous and did deliver Israel from their enemies, but here repentance is put to the test. God, through Samuel, commanded Saul to devote everything to destruction—man, woman, child, livestock—leaving nothing untouched. Saul obeyed selectively. He

spared Agag and preserved the best of the spoil, destroying only what was worthless and despised. Scripture states plainly: "*All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction*" (1 Sam. 15:9).

In verses 10-36, the consequences of selective obedience unfold. God reveals Saul's disobedience to Samuel, and the prophet grieves through the night. Though Samuel loved Saul deeply, confrontation was unavoidable. When confronted, Saul shows no genuine remorse. Instead, he declares confidently, "*Blessed be you to the LORD. I have performed the commandment of the LORD.*" What follows is a series of excuses, deflections, and outright falsehoods. Samuel responds with one of the most sobering statements in the Old Testament: "*To obey is better than sacrifice.*"

This lesson extends far beyond Lent—it is a call for life. God desires an undivided heart. Selective repentance is false repentance. This becomes personal, because many of us recognize ourselves in Saul. We surrender some sins while protecting others. We say, "*I will give up these—but not that one.*" Like Saul, we offer God what costs us little and retain what we treasure most.

The damage of this is not merely behavioral; it is relational. Selective repentance destroys intimacy with a God who delights in mercy, forgiveness, and grace. Where repentance is true, God draws near with joy. Where sin is cherished, distance grows. Often this is driven by fear of exposure, fear of losing reputation, fear of surrender. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones observed in *Spiritual Depression*: "*Many believers are orthodox, active, and sincere, yet live without joy. Why? There is some known sin not being dealt with.*"

Where sin remains alive, assurance weakens and intimacy fades.

So, in this season of Lent, we do not rush past the Cross, nor do we come hiding behind explanations as Saul did. We come because we are called. The Bridegroom Himself invites us away from the noise, the chaos, and the sins we have clutched as though they could give life. He does not shame us for the dirt we carry—He asks us to bring it. "*Come now, let us reason together,*" He says—not to condemn, but to cleanse. Lent is the gradual return of the heart, the laying down of false loves, and the costly turning toward the One who loved us first. And in coming

to Him, we discover that what we release was never precious at all—only what He gives truly is.

I am thankful even for the distance I sometimes feel, for it reminds me that I am a child who needs his Father.

Let Richard Sibbes have the final word: *"Christ is not driven away by your weakness but drawn to you. He does not wait for strength before He gives comfort, nor perfection before He grants communion. The soul finds its deepest joy not by looking inward at its own repentance, but by looking outward to the gracious heart of Christ, who delights to dwell with the humble and revive the weary. Where there is honesty and lowliness before Him, there Christ makes His sweetest abode."*

Amen.

Shawn Odendhal
shawn@betterbenefitsgrp.com

March 15, 2026
Ephesians 5: 8-14

Living Light

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. This is why it is said: "Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." Ephesians 5:8-14

The darkest times I have experienced in nature were camping in wilderness areas. When lying in my tent at night, it is so dark that I cannot see my hand in front of my face. Noises outside my tent seem amplified and at times I am a bit fearful. Then I turn on my headlamp and I can see a wide range of light around me as I exit my tent. Just the small light from my headlamp dispels the darkness.

Our scripture today reminds us of our role as being light in the world. The Message paraphrase version by Eugene Peterson describes vvs. 8-10 in this way, "You're out in the open now. The bright light of Christ makes your way plain. So, no more stumbling around. Get on with it! The good, the right, the true—these are actions appropriate for daylight hours."

As a Christian, I don't live in darkness. Christ's light makes my way plain. Christ has turned my 'headlamp' on for others to see.

These verses bring questions to my mind. Am I dispelling darkness as I live my life? Does my life reflect the good, the right, the true and point people to Christ? Am I inviting others to respond to the light of Christ?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, let me not take your light in my life for granted. Fill me with your spirit this day so I shine your light to those in my pathway. Amen.

Karen McBee
klmyellowstone@aol.com

March 16, 2026
Psalm 146, Verses 3-4

When the Heart Failed, God Did Not!

Do not put your trust in princes...when their spirit departs, they return to the ground!

On August 28, 2025, I underwent heart bypass surgery! What was supposed to be a normal surgery that would take about 3 hours, turned into a nightmare with doctors fighting to save my life! I was experiencing congestive heart failure, and I was unaware, at the time, that for 6 days after surgery, under constant anesthesia and 9 procedures later, I awakened, hooked up to all kinds of lifesaving medical equipment. I see now that God was in charge of everything! I am called God's Miracle, and I am happy to go with that!

Psalm 146 reminds us that there comes a moment when human strength reaches its end. I encountered that moment on August 28 and the subsequent days following when God's earthly physicians and their life-saving equipment literally saved my life! In those fragile moments, God was not absent, he was there, standing by, directing the organization of everything.

"Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God." He definitely was my help! When my Church family heard that I was given only an 8-10% chance of living, the prayers went up by the hundreds. God heard them and said, "Fear Not, for I am with you"!

My praise is no longer theoretical. It is lived. Psalm 146 begins and ends with praise and so does my story. As long as I live, I will praise the Lord...not because life is easy, but because God is faithful. He saved my life and now my life belongs to him. I know he saved me to serve a purpose and I pray I am up for the challenge, whatever it is!

Prayer: Lord God, you are the giver of life and the sustainer of every breath. When my strength failed and my heart could not carry me on its own, you did not fail me. You held my life in the palm of your hands when I could not hold it myself. Thank you for mercy I did not earn, for time I did not deserve, and for breath restored by your hands. Teach us to trust you more deeply than anything this world offers. Let our lives note a living song of praise to you.

As long as I live, I will praise the Lord! Amen.

Suzy Bruce
bsuzy6@gmail.com

March 17, 2026
Colossians 1: 9-14

There is Only One Truth

This year's Lenten devotional guide rings especially deep and true for me since traveling to the Holy Land in October of last year. Seeing Scripture through the lens of the actual environment in which it occurred and was written has forever changed my heart and understanding of God's Word.

Colossians (Colosse was an ancient city in present-day Turkey), was written by the Apostle Paul during his time in a Roman prison. Before Paul was transferred to Rome, he was imprisoned in Herod's magnificent Mediterranean seaside villa in Caesarea Maritima, which our tour group was privileged to see. One thing that our Jewish scholar tour guide said to us as we entered Jerusalem seems especially apropos for this devotional message....'You are about to see many wonderful and amazing things from Biblical times, but please make sure that you do not find yourself worshiping a location.'

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul was addressing theological errors that had crept into the Colossian church. (Errors such as angel worship, reliance on human wisdom and tradition, ceremonialism, secret knowledge and asceticism.) In these verses, Paul is asking God to give the Colossians a complete understanding of what Christ longs to do in their lives and Paul also addresses their need for spiritual wisdom. The theme here is that Christ is the head of the church and His divine purpose for all of us is to be the embodiment of Christ, no other.

I recently attended a memorial service for the spouse of someone I care for deeply. As the service progressed, I realized there had been no prayer, no acknowledgment of the gifts that God had given to this person; just a tribute in love where "anything goes." Jesus, Buddha and Mohammad were all mentioned by name, as if all theologies were of love and represented the ultimate Truth.

I rather guess that, in a way, Paul might have been lovingly addressing the Colossians about the same types of misinformation, the same confusions and the same

untruths, based on their fears of darkness and uncertainty of the times. Paul prays for the Colossians' patience and endurance so that they may grow to know God better and better and that they might be people of the Light.

I dare say that this might be Paul's letter to the "Marvinites" of today as well. (Doug lovingly called our tribe by this name on our tour of Jordan and of Israel.)

Let us pray: Father, we thank You and glorify Your holy name — You are the Sustainer of life, the Giver of all blessings and TRUTH, the ONLY Truth, of all spiritual quests. You are Life, our Home and our Redemption. Your precious Son purchased us with His own blood so that we might live and live abundantly! Help us to ground ourselves in You, Father, so that when the chaos of our times threatens to pull us into misinformation, fear and doubt, we may hold fast to Your anchor, and we may find peace once more in the sanctity of the Word, in our loving faith community that surrounds us, and in your Divine absolution, by the power of Your precious and Perfect Holy Spirit within all believers. We love You and are so thankful for the call to be Your true disciples and to be messengers of Truth and of Light. In Your precious Son's name we pray, Amen.

Linda Armstrong
songbirdlinda40@gmail.com

March 18, 2026

Mathew 9:27-34

Eyesight or Vision?

Today's passage tells us a short story of Jesus healing the eyesight of two people. Jesus and his disciples are confronted by two blind men crying out, "Son of David, have mercy on us!" As the men follow Jesus inside, they demonstrate their faith and convince Jesus to heal their sight. Jesus says " According to your faith, let it be done to you." Because of their joy over their eyesight, they disobey him and go tell everyone of his great deeds!

Now look at the reaction of the Pharisees who "saw" the whole thing..."It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons."

I think it's interesting that the men who were blind saw Jesus as the Son of God while the supposed religious leaders, the Pharisees, were blind to the miracle they had witnessed with their own eyes.

How often do we miss the miracle that we just saw?

Prayer: Father God, I pray that you will open my eyes and heart to the miracle of your only begotten son, Jesus. Help me to see the miracles you have in store for my life!

Amen.

Charles Hill
cghill5169@gmail.com

March 19, 2026

Psalm 130

Never Have I Ever

You know the game.

Picture middle school. Maybe a slumber party, pajamas, best friends gathered in a circle. Someone says something they've never done, and anyone who has must admit it. Usually in a way that's slightly embarrassing.

Let's be honest. By that age, your best friends already know your deepest secrets. The game isn't really about discovery, it's about bringing into the light what's already known.

As we get older it seems that we have more and more "deepest, darkest secrets" but... they aren't so deep. Sometimes they are right on the surface and known by everyone. And they aren't just our secrets. They are our struggles and often our pain.

So let's play for a moment.

Never have I ever...
wanted a child and couldn't have one.

And because I've never had a child...

Never have I ever been kept awake night after night by a crying baby.

Never have I ever raised a medically fragile child.

Never have I ever lost a child.

Never have I ever lost a parent or a spouse.

Never have I ever been divorced.

Never have I ever faced cancer, lost a job, been arrested, or made a mistake that seemed to ruin my life.

I could keep going, but I don't need to list every possible heartbreak for you to understand the point.

Never have I ever *"cried out to the Lord from the depths."*

Never have I ever been in the lowest possible place either physically or spiritually.

Am I grateful for that? Absolutely.

Do I know that one day, in some way, those depths will

come for me too? Also, yes.

Psalm 130 begins with these words: "Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord."

Those words were not written from comfort. They come from someone who knows the depths of loss, despair, waiting, sin, longing. The psalm doesn't deny the pain of the depths. It acknowledges them and then dares to cry out from within them.

Never have I ever lived in a country at war.

One of our ministry partners in Ukraine said early in the full-scale invasion that she didn't know how someone without faith could endure such things.

I have another friend who says she wishes she could experience coming out of the depths without actually having to be *in* them. I may be paraphrasing, but the heart of it remains.

I sometimes wonder. Can we truly know the depth of God's grace, mercy, forgiveness, and love if we've never needed them to pull us out of the depths?

Lent invites us to sit with that question.

As we look toward Jesus on the cross, we do so honestly. We acknowledge suffering, waiting, and the depths of human brokenness. But we do not stay there. We also look forward, in hope, to the empty tomb.

Psalm 130 reminds us that our hope is in the Lord...

in His word,
in His mercy,
and in His forgiveness.

Even from the depths,
especially from the depths,
we wait for Him.

Christy Hill
christy@programforhumanitarianaid.org

March 20, 2026

Revelation 11:15-19

The Seventh Angel Sounded His Trumpet

"The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Messiah, and He will reign for ever-and-ever' and the twenty-four elders, who were seated on their thrones before God, fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying, 'We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken Your great power and have begun to reign.' The nations were angry, and your wrath has come. The time has come for judging the dead, and to reward your servants the prophets and your people who revere your name, both great and small – and for destroying those who destroy the earth. Then God's temple in Heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his Covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a severe storm." Revelation 11:15-19

The Lenten Season is a forty-day period of repentance, reflection and preparation for Easter, the celebration of the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our devotional Scripture today reflects the future fulfillment of God's eternal plan for our salvation that began in the Old Testament, "In the beginning" with the Book of Genesis, and culminates in the final book of God's Word, Revelation, with the return of His Son Jesus Christ and the establishment of His kingdom. Revelation 11:15-19 describes the time the seventh angel sounds his trumpet proclaiming, "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and his Messiah, and He will reign for ever-and-ever (15)."

This inspiring passage of Scripture reminds us of God's ultimate sovereignty over the chaotic world in which we live. There will be times when we are overwhelmed by the events of this world over which we have no control. This passage reminds us of the certainty of His eternal kingdom. God's covenant was never forgotten; His

promise will be fulfilled. By reflecting on this Scripture, we find strength and encouragement as we await God's final judgment. And through our own strength, we can encourage others.

There will be judgment. God alone and His kingdom to come will ultimately prevail over evil, and He alone will exercise His wrath to the unbelievers. As we advance in spiritual maturity, we take comfort in knowing God's judgment will be just and righteous and our faith and obedience will be rewarded. We trust God's mercy and grace and can find peace in knowing that our sins will be forgiven through the blood and sacrifice of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

We can use Lent as a time for renewal and commitment to worship, repentance, prayer, forgiveness and the study of God's Word. As a witness for Christ and His kingdom to come, we may encourage others to do the same.

David Ward
southernpines@suddenlink.net

March 21, 2026

Luke 24:44-53 (also Matthew 26:14-25)

The Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus

As we look back to the beginning of Luke 24 where the women go to the tomb to anoint Jesus after the crucifixion and bring spices to show proper respect for the dead, the discovery of the empty tomb brings confusion. Bodies that are dead presumably remain dead. The women receive a message that is counter to what they believe to be true. There's nobody! Angel messengers appear to them and say, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen."

That is the Easter message. Would it be easier if they had seen Jesus rise and walk from the tomb? Maybe. But they got the message, the same one we receive today. The women take the message of resurrection to the apostles, and the apostles respond as thinking people regularly respond: they thought that the message was "an idle tale, and they did not believe them" (24:11).

Yet here is where the Easter message begins its work, by challenging our certainties. Experience teaches that death wins and that even the strongest succumb to it. Experience teaches that life is what you make it, so get what you can while you can because it will be over soon enough. And the Easter message says, "Really? How can you be so sure?" Death is real, but it is not final. **In Jesus, life gets the last word.**

The Easter message calls you from your old belief in death to a new belief in life. The claim that the tomb could not hold Jesus, and the idea that the one who died by crucifixion has now risen is so outrageous that it might make you wonder whether it just might be true. The apostles seemed convinced that the message was nonsense. Death was death. Yet the message was so outrageous that Peter had to go and take a look for himself. He had to wonder, "What if it is true?"

Jesus appears to the apostles that evening and startles them, wishing them peace. He explains that His suffering and resurrection were foretold in the Law, Prophets, and Psalms. He commissions them to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in His name to all nations, starting in Jerusalem, and He promises the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus then led his disciples to Bethany, blessed them and He ascended to

heaven. The apostles celebrated and worshiped Him with great joy. They understood His victory over death.

Great Omnipotent Father,

As we come to understand how scripture was fulfilled, let us open our minds and eyes to really see who Jesus is. Further, let us understand our commission to spread the Gospel and be a witness for Him. Thank you for the hope we can only have through the resurrection. Amen.

Debbi Hill
debbi.elmer@sbcglobal.net

March 22, 2026

Romans 8:6-11

The Right Mindset

The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of[b] his Spirit who lives in you.

Romans 8:6-11 NIV

In these verses, Paul compares the two different types of mindsets of all people. One mindset is of the "flesh" (verse 7; the lost) which is hostile to God and in rebellion against Him, which is built into our sinful nature. When we are a lost person, we are incapable of submitting to God.

The other type of mindset is of the Spirit of life (verse 10; saved, or Christian). Christians have the Holy Spirit, who comes from Jesus Christ, and we belong to God the Father.

When at times God seems strangely absent, the problem is not that He has disappeared. We simply lack a "God" mindset.

The things of the world can steer us away from the truth of God's word and our relationship with Christ which is the source of true joy and peace. You may have noticed that when we become interested in buying something like a new car, we begin to see that make of car everywhere. That's because our mindset causes us to find what we're looking for. As a Christian, we need to have our mind set on the Holy Spirit. When we do, He becomes apparent all around us.

It is with a mindset on the Holy Spirit that we gain the power, already within a believer through faith (verse 9), to change bad habits or resist temptations. It is by the Spirit that we gain self-control; it is when we live by the Spirit that we gain life and peace.

These statements are assuming the reader is a believer in the Gospel message. Should there be a doubt as to your eternal life being secured with His promise, you can pray the prayer that is answered one hundred percent of the time:

"Dear Lord Jesus, I know I am a sinner and ask for Your forgiveness. I believe You died for my sins and rose from the dead. I turn from my sins and invite You to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow You as my Lord and Savior. Guide my life and help me to do Your will. Thank You for giving me eternal life and for the new life I now start with You. Be the Lord of my life. In Your holy name, I pray. Amen."

May we all receive the Spirit of life that is righteousness (verse 10)!

Paul Breedlove
paul@breedlovelandscape.com

March 23, 2026

Acts 20:7-12

A New Beginning, A Restoration of Life

On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "He's alive!" Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.

The story of Eutychus in Acts 20:7-12 is a powerful reminder of how our Christian life is full of real moments—sometimes messy, sometimes surprising, but always full of hope. Here we see Paul teaching late into the night, and Eutychus sitting in a windowsill, trying to stay awake. After hours of listening, he becomes so sleepy that he falls from the third story. It's a shocking scene—one that reminds us that even in our best efforts, fatigue and distraction can lead us to moments of failure or despair. When Eutychus hits the ground and everyone sees he's not moving, it's easy to feel hopeless. It's a moment that could have been the end of the story—except that it wasn't.

Instead of panicking, Paul rushes to Eutychus, throws himself onto him, and declares, "Don't be alarmed; he's alive!" And by God's grace, the young man's life is restored. The people are filled with relief and joy—what the King James calls "not a little comforted." It's a moment of divine intervention that reminds us that no situation is beyond God's power. Even when things seem hopeless, when death looks like the final answer, Jesus has the final word. Life can and does triumph over death, and hope can be restored in the most unlikely circumstances.

This story also tells us about how we should respond when others fall—whether physically, emotionally, or spiritually. When someone we care about is hurting or overwhelmed, are

we quick to run to them with love and compassion? Do we believe that Jesus can bring new life into their situation? Paul's immediate response teaches us that when someone falls, our role is to be there, to embrace them, and to remind them of the hope we have in Christ—that resurrection power is always available.

Additionally, Paul's persistence in talking until dawn shows us that faithfulness matters. Sometimes the journey takes time, and lasting change requires patience. But we can trust that God is active in our everyday moments—when we're tired, distracted, or discouraged. His power is at work, bringing life where it seems impossible.

So, the key takeaway is this: No matter how far we fall, or how hopeless a situation might seem, Jesus is the resurrection and the life. His power can restore what is broken and bring new hope to any situation. When you see someone struggling, don't turn away or dismiss them—reach out with love, believe in their potential for renewal, and trust that God can do what seems impossible. In Christ, every fall can become a new beginning, and every life can be brought back to life through His power. Let's hold onto that hope and be willing to act on it, trusting in the God who specializes in making dead things alive again.

Jake Strain
JStrain@cenikor.org

March 24, 2026

2 Kings 4:18-37

The Dream

"Did I ask you for a son, my lord?" she said. "Didn't I tell you, 'Don't raise my hopes'?" 2 Kings 4:28

Have you ever desired something but felt hesitant or afraid to ask God for it? Perhaps you thought it was too big for God, you worried about what people would think or say, maybe you felt undeserving, not good enough. Whatever the case may have been, you have chosen to tuck it deeply away in the secret and tender places of your heart. The thought of it still lingers from time to time, coming and going, sometimes remaining steady like a heartbeat, other times becoming a distant thought. It may be a missed or untaken opportunity, a dream that seems unreachable, a broken heart, which refuses to trust or love again, or negative words spoken, dissuading you from pursuing more.

If I were to ascertain anything from the above statement made by the Shunammite Woman, she too had a desire, one unspoken, tucked so far away, she no longer hoped for it, and prayer, was no longer a consideration. The text doesn't name this woman; however, she is described as wealthy, generous, and hospitable. She used her wealth to honor the prophet Elisha, a man of God. Her husband built a room for the prophet Elisha to rest, whenever he was in town. Her gesture deeply moved Elisha, prompting him to express his gratitude, but she declined any form of payment.

"What can be done for her?" Elisha asked. Gehazi said, "She has no son, and her husband is old." Then Elisha said, "Call her." So, he called her, and she stood in the doorway. "About this time next year," Elisha said, "you will hold a son in your arms." "No, my lord!" she objected. "Please, man of God, don't mislead your servant!" 2 Kings 4:14-16

One year later, her dream became a reality, hope deferred was no longer her story, she had given birth to a son. Unfortunately, when he was about 10 years old, he became ill and died. Despite losing her only son, the following verses focus solely on what she did, not on how she felt.

1. She laid her dead son on Elisha's bed.
2. She told her husband she was going to see the man of God.
3. She gave her driver a firm directive- don't slow down.

When she reaches Elisha, she can no longer contain herself.

"When she reached the man of God at the mountain, she took hold of his feet. Gehazi came over to push her away, but the man of God said, "Leave her alone! She is in bitter distress, but the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me why." "Did I ask you for a son, my lord?" she said. "Didn't I tell you, 'Don't raise my hopes.'" 2 Kings 4:27-28

Her dream had seemingly become a nightmare. Her hope no longer deferred, but lost. Gehazi went to raise the child at Elisha's request, but the child did not respond. Elisha then went to the house and raised the boy. He was alive once more.

This story not only highlights the faith and perseverance of a mother's love. But more importantly, it gives credence to the value of trusting God in the process. The Shunamite woman pondered many things in her heart (like Mary, the mother of Jesus). Things like uncertainty, fear, anxiety, and wonderment of what others were thinking or saying about them. In addition, both women had peculiar situations with their husbands. Mary, an unwed teenage mother, while the Shunamite was an older, wealthy woman with an even older husband, but she had no son, no heir.

Neither woman chose her circumstances, yet both trusted God during times of uncertainty and adversity.

During this Lenten season, reflect on the following:

***Do you trust God with the unspoken areas of your heart?
If not, will you trust him enough to submit and surrender it all?***

Tamikia Bell
empowered2parent@gmail.com

March 25, 2026

Psalm 143

My Spirit Fails

So my spirit grows faint within me; my heart within me is dismayed. I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done. I spread out my hands to you; I thirst for you like a parched land.

Answer me quickly, Lord; my spirit fails. Psalm 143:4-7 NIV

Recently my desire to sense more of God's presence collided with a struggle to put words into prayer. Explaining my needs to God exhausted me, and often I didn't even know the solutions I should request. But God knew it, if I could just relax into His presence—abiding in Him and He in me. I wasn't losing faith; I was losing words.

I discovered Protestant (Anglican) prayer beads. No special words to say. I could craft the prayer with words to fit a theme or have spontaneous conversation. No magic in the beads. Simply a tangible way to stay present and grounded with fewer distractions for a time with God. The use of the beads anchored me in God's refuge.

"Lord, hear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy; in your faithfulness and righteousness come to my relief." (Psalm 143:1 NIV)

Read Psalm 143 and highlight the words you most relate to. How can you turn them into a Lenten prayer?

Lent is a season when we simplify our lives and reduce the clutter surrounding us and inside of us. A time of transparency with God, in a spirit of lament. Reflecting on Psalm 143, I ask myself what I've been trying to carry on my own. Grief? Fear? Weariness? Longing?

As I consider what happened before the resurrection of Jesus, I see He endured the wilderness. He fasted. He tasted sorrow, betrayal and suffering. Lent encourages me to sit in the middle of His story (and my story). Before the Good News. Yes, even the struggle that happened before the cross is part of the gospel story. I might see brokenness now, but resurrection is coming. Rather than seeking a shortcut to that good end, I'm asking God to hold my hand in the wait.

PRAYER: Oh, Father, this pain hurts. I'm bringing it to You because it's too big for me to carry. I trust You with my heart

and with this struggle. I confess I've tried to resolve this on my own. I recognize that my self-reliance has compromised the depth of relationship I can have with You. Thank you for giving me something to hang my hope on. You hold a candle in the darkness and guide my way to the Light. Help me make room for the healing yet to come by embracing peace even in this moment of unrest.

Lent is our season because life as we know it isn't tidy. I invite you to not rush past the pain, but to let it draw you to Jesus and the fellowship of His suffering.

Kathy Carlton Willis
kathy@kathycarltonwillis.com

March 26, 2026

1 Samuel 16:11-13

How Do I Look?

Question: When you were in high school, did you notice certain students seemed to be winners? They found success in most everything. They always looked just right, acted just right, were athletic, popular, smart.

Reality: In the real world, not the world of high school, we still watch to see who is chosen...

Who gets the job
Who gets the girl/boy
Who gets the award
Who wins the prize

But as time passes, we may see these so-called winners may not be the most attractive or best dressed. Sometimes, the new winner may not look the part, but has qualifications or is the most reliable person.

David, the Chosen.

The Priest, Samuel, listening to God, knew David would be the appointed one. God knew David's heart. David got the job even though his brothers all looked the part better than David did.

Job Applicants

Some final questions:

Are you the right person for the job God wants done?
Are you God's servant who is willing and able if called upon?
Are you being prepared for a special task?
Are you praying for God's guidance?

Do others see you as a Christian who is obedient, faithful and patient?

Let's eagerly await His call.

Dona Julian Cassel

March 27, 2026
Matthew 26:14-25

Betrayal

Then one of the twelve – the one called Judas Iscariot – went to the chief priests and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?” So, they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over. On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?” He replied, “Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, ‘The teacher says: My appointed time is near, I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.’ So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover. When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.” They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, “Surely you don’t mean me, Lord?” Jesus replied, “The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to the man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.” Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, “Surely you don’t mean me, Rabbi?” Jesus answered, “You have said so.”

Matthew 26:14-25

Who was Judas Iscariot? Judas was born in a small town in southern Judea as the only child of wealthy Jewish parents. He grew up in Jericho. In Greek, the word Judas means “praised”, or “let him be praised”. In Hebrew, it means “praised” or “celebrated”. Judas did not live up to his name. Jesus chose him to be one of the Twelve Apostles. The Disciples must have seen something special in Judas’ character by their selection of him to be their money man, the treasurer entrusted with the alms received for the poor as well as funds for their needs. Judas was a witness to Jesus’ miracles, His healing of the sick and raising of the dead. He was a trusted member of Jesus’ inner circle. What we would have given to have that same opportunity!

John 12:3-6 reveals Judas’ real character when he objected to Mary’s use of a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume,

by pouring it on Jesus’ feet. Judas said, “Why wasn’t the perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It’s worth a year’s wages.” According to the Scripture, he didn’t say this because he cared about the poor but because “he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it.”

Jesus knew that He would be betrayed and that Judas would be the betrayer. Jesus’s betrayal by a trusted friend was prophesied in the Old Testament Psalms 41 and 55 long before Judas came along. And the payment to Judas from the temple priests for his betrayal, thirty pieces of silver, which was the redemption price of a slave, was foretold in Zechariah 11, as was the wounding of the Shepherd, and the scattering of His flock.

As for Judas, he had the opportunity to be a committed and valued member of Jesus’ chosen and trusted discipleship. But instead, his heart was elsewhere, consumed with greed, selfishness and spiritual weakness. Judas felt remorse for his actions, and although he confessed as he threw the thirty pieces of silver at the feet of the chief priests, he did not call upon God, or Jesus or repent of his sin. His life ended by suicide, hanging from a tree.

Despite the betrayal by Judas, the denial by Peter, and the scattering of the disciples, Jesus’ love was unconditional. He loved Judas. He would have forgiven Judas. The same is true for us. No matter what we do, or how bad our sin, Jesus will love us and forgive us.

A devotional about the betrayal of Judas is not an easy task. We are not like Judas, but we do share one thing in common – the sin of Adam. Let Judas serve as a reminder of the importance of examining our hearts and remaining faithful, and loyal, to Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

David Ward
southernpines@suddenlink.net

March 28, 2026
Matthew 26:26-30

One Table, Shared in Love

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. Matthew 26:26-30

Today's scriptures are central to our faith story, and there is far more here than we can fully unpack in one setting. At the Last Supper, Jesus shares a final meal with His disciples, reveals that one of them will betray Him, and introduces the new covenant.

This moment takes place during the annual Passover Feast—a celebration that remembers how the Israelites were spared from the final plague in Egypt when the blood of a perfect lamb marked their doorframes. That plague ultimately led Pharaoh to release the Israelites. Passover is rich with meaning: unleavened bread, symbolizing the removal of sin; the careful choosing of a perfect lamb; and the blood of the lamb representing atonement for sin (see Exodus 12).

You may picture Leonardo da Vinci's The Last Supper as we reflect on this scene. Jesus is reclining at the table with His disciples, but He offers the Passover meal in an entirely new way. Pay close attention to His words: gave thanks... gave it to them... take... eat... my body... drink... blood of the new covenant... forgiveness of sins... I will drink it new with you in my Father's Kingdom.

Jesus gives thanks to the Father and offers Himself—the only bread He alone can give—representing His body. As participants, we receive the bread and take in the fullness of His sacrifice. We drink the wine/juice representing His blood, which establishes the new covenant. The old covenant has passed. Jesus takes upon Himself your sin, my sin, all human sin, for all time—offering His body and blood as the perfect sacrifice.

Jesus came to earth as the perfect sacrifice (Lamb). Through His crucifixion, death, resurrection, and ascension, He paid the price for everyone – forgiveness of all sin. One table, shared in love, now invites us all—anyone who willingly accepts His gift of forgiveness and lives in relationship with Him. This new covenant is permanent, established by His own sacrifice. Unlike the old system of repeated animal sacrifices, the new covenant brings an inner transformation with the indwelling Holy Spirit. God's presence transforms and empowers us to live according to God's will. Living in Christ offers the assurance of eternal life and fellowship with God in this world and the one to come.

When we take communion, let us remember what Jesus did on the cross—for you and for me. Jesus didn't merely cover our sins; He removed them completely.

Communion may sometimes feel ordinary or routine, but it should never be. Let it remind you of His love for you, and let it rekindle your love for Him.

Jesus' final words at the supper point forward to His ultimate glory with God and with us—a final heavenly banquet.

Have you accepted Jesus' invitation and offer of His body and His blood given for you? Are you ready to be part of the heavenly feast?

Note: You've seen the Last Supper painting by Leonardo da Vinci. There is an exact replica of the painting in Tyler! Marvin members Carolyn and Tim West own the Last Supper painting and it is magnificent! They love sharing the painting and welcome your visit to see it. The original painting is in Milan, Italy at a convent. In 1652, the painting was altered by monks who removed Jesus' feet from the painting so that a doorway could be built through it. The West's replica painting includes Jesus' feet. Gertrude Windsor, a Tyler philanthropist, originally purchased the painting in the 1970's.

Peggy Berry
peggy.p.berry@gmail.com

Palm Sunday

March 29, 2026

Matthew 21:1-11

Jubilant

We've made it to Palm Sunday. We are in the final week of Lent. What a remarkable array of passages we have studied. We are now entering Holy Week where we will experience the final week of the earthly life of Jesus before his resurrection. Knowing the outcome takes away some of the mystery and drama of the story, but nothing can take away its impact and importance. This week changed the world. We are going to participate in it and I hope we all learn something new and experience Jesus more deeply.

Jesus first instructs two disciples to go to a village ahead of them as they are on their way to Jerusalem. They're close. They are in Bethphage on the Mount of Olives. This is east of Jerusalem on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. It's distance is the limit of a Sabbath day's journey from Jerusalem. Practicing Jews could walk a short distance on the Sabbath without running afoul of the law against "working" on the Sabbath.

So, our two unnamed disciples go to the village, and find a donkey tied there with her colt tied next to her. The disciples are prepared about what to say if anyone accuses them of taking the donkey and colt unlawfully. Jesus, the Lord, needs them. That answer does the trick. Doesn't it always?

And amazingly, this small act of untying a donkey and her colt, fulfill the prophetic words of Zechariah 9:9. "Say to Daughter Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" Reading this passage once again, it is clear to me that there are two animals involved. Which of the two Jesus actually rode on is unknown. I suspect that he had brought provisions for himself and the disciples to Jerusalem for Passover. He might have ridden the colt, as the provisions may have been too large and heavy for it. Or vice versa. It does not matter, but the use of the two animals strengthens the truth of the Zechariah prophesy—in both there is a donkey and her colt or foal. It is perfect in its fulfillment. This is a big lesson!

Then there is jubilation. The Son of David. The King of the Jews. The Deliverer from their oppression. The gentle one on

a donkey and her colt. The worshipers are loud. This is unmistakable. All of Jerusalem is stirred and asks about who it is who comes into the city in this way. The crowd around Jesus praises Him. Blessed is Jesus, who comes to us in the name of the LORD. He is the LORD. Hosanna, meaning Save!

I suspect the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, were not too happy to see and hear this. I suspect the praises of the crowd led to fits of rage. Surely they knew of the Zechariah passage. How dare this Galilean come into the city in this way! The battle lines are drawn. The final week begins.

We know that in this last week, we will see the jubilation of what we consider Palm Sunday turn into the darkest and most desolate time earth has ever experienced. How can something so jubilant end in such misery, death and darkness? Just like the donkey and her colt, the LORD needs it to happen in this way. And our lesson is not to be a fickle follower who joins the crowd in jubilation, only to join the crowd later to seek crucifixion. We are not to follow the crowd. No, we are to follow the LORD.

Let's experience this week together.

John Berry
jberry@jberrylaw.net

March 30, 2026

Matthew 27:1-19

Can You Even Imagine?

This passage has 2 distinct aspects – one has to do with Judas' remorse and the other with Jesus before Pilate. While there is much to be gleaned from Judas' attempt to redeem himself via the chief priests, yet failing to seek the only true redemption from God – we will leave that for another day.

Instead, I want to discuss the section relating to Jesus before Pilate in terms of the classic spaghetti-western "The Good, The Bad and The Ugly". Now you do not need to have seen the movie, nor even like westerns to participate in this reflection. However, you do need to understand that in the very early parts of the movie, three individuals are shown and labeled as the Ugly, the Bad, and the Good. After watching the movie, you quickly realize these labels simply identify one aspect of each individual for none are completely ugly, bad or good, but are all ugly, bad and good.

Let's consider Matthew 27:1- 19 in this light and label Pilate as The Ugly, Barabbas as The Bad, and (of course) Jesus as The Good.

It is easiest to start with Barabbas. He is a notorious criminal currently being held in prison for having taken part in a rebellion against the Roman government. Although arrested along with others who committed murder and on death row, many among the Jews considered him a hero. Ironically,

Barabbas was guilty of the crime for which Jesus was accused - political sedition. **Can you even imagine**

Barabbas' shock when given the alternative to save either him, a murderer, or Jesus, a popular religious teacher, the Jews chose him? His salvation came at the price of The Good...a model of things to come!

Let's consider Pilate, The Ugly. I label him ugly not due to his physical appearance, of which I have no clue, but due to the ugly situation he has created for himself. Pilate ruled as governor in the region of Judea, which was little more than a hot and dusty outpost of the Roman Empire. The Roman government could not afford to put large numbers of troops in all the regions under their control, so one of Pilate's main duties was to do whatever was necessary to maintain peace. We know from historical records that Pilate had already been

warned about other uprisings in his region. Although he may have seen no guilt in Jesus and no reason to condemn him to death, Pilate wavered when the Jews in the crowd threatened to report him to Caesar. And so he attempts to free The Good through a lame and unsuccessful attempt to make the Jews recant their demands. **Can you even imagine** the frustration Pilate felt when Jesus refused to succumb to his provocations and even more so when the Jews did not ask for Jesus' freedom? I think we know, and I think Pilate knew, Jesus was innocent yet Pilate could not save him...the irony being Jesus could have saved Pilate!

Finally, we come to The Good, Jesus! This is where we diverge greatly from the movie. For while none of the titles placed on the individuals in the movie or in our scripture text accurately capture the full essence of their being, this one does! The one response Matthew records from Jesus during this incident is His affirmation that He is a king. Pilate was in fact partially correct in asserting Jesus was King of the Jews, but what he had no way of knowing was that the question could have been "Are you the king of all mankind?" and Jesus would have again been able to answer, "It is as you say."

Perhaps during this season of reflection, we too should be saying to ourselves "**can you even imagine?**" what it means for Jesus to affirm that He is our King! That He is indeed The Good and He wants good for us through a relationship with Him. A relationship that can recast our current "title" of bad or ugly to that of good.

Lord, help me imagine you more clearly!

Dale Ross
rowdydar@gmail.com

March 31, 2026
Matthew 27:27-31

Catching the Bandwagon

The Roman soldiers take Jesus into a large room where the whole company of soldiers were around him. These soldiers have just witnessed their governor, Pontius Pilate, wash his hands of whatever happens to Jesus. Still, Pilate had these soldiers flog him and take charge of him in preparation of the crucifixion. So now it's time for the Roman soldiers to have a little fun with Jesus. He's beaten. He's bleeding. His flesh is torn. But that is not enough. The soldiers lead Jesus into a large room where the entire company of the soldiers is present. They take off his clothes and put a scarlet robe on Jesus, mockingly kneeling before him proclaiming Hail, king of the Jews! They twist together thorn filled branches into a circle and clamp it down hard on Jesus' head. They put a staff in his right hand and the scene is complete. Kneeling before Jesus, his bloodied body, enrobed in scarlet, they kneel and proclaim him king of the Jews, with all the irony they can muster. Everyone gets a turn at mocking Jesus, knocking him on the head with the staff, spitting on his face. Consider the faces of the soldiers—their glee at having the opportunity to mock a nothing person like this Jesus, who one day is adored and worshiped by the Jews, and a week later is berated by the Jews to the extent that they call for his death. He is nothing to them. Just as He is nothing to the Jewish leaders.

Do you wonder if any of these soldiers had second thoughts? Do you think they return home in the evening and are ashamed at what they have done? Do you think they wonder at Jesus' ability to stand there and take it? To not object? To not flinch away from their mocking words, spits in the face and beatings. They are licensed bullies—able to do anything they want to this man, without any fear of reprisal. The governor has allowed it, perhaps even encouraged it. This Jewish fellow is a nothing among nothings—a people occupied by the great Roman army. Hail Caesar, you little nothing of a Jew.

We may hear more from some of these Roman soldiers later. For now, they have made their opinion of Jesus clear.

Do they even know that this person they have tormented,

beaten, mocked and spat on holds the power to save their very souls?

Do we?

John Berry
jberry@jberrylaw.net

April 1, 2026

John 13:21-32

Following Jesus

Simon Peter asked him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later." Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." John 13: 36-37

We all remember Jesus' words to his disciples: "Follow Me". These twelve men who have accompanied Jesus where he has gone over the past three years have physically followed him and spiritually followed him. They've traveled with Jesus across Galilee, Samaria, up to Jerusalem, down to Jericho. They've witnessed miracles and as we know from Mark 7 and Matthew 10, they have been sent by Jesus, two by two, to perform miracles themselves. They are a band of brothers, who find themselves in Jerusalem for their third Passover with Jesus.

And now Jesus says he is leaving them. He is going to a place they are not able to go to. He speaks that he will be with them only for a very short while longer. Then he will leave and these disciples will look for him. Peter's questions are understandable. Think--Jesus, we have been with you through everything for three years, how can you leave us now and not let us continue to follow you? And what's all this talk about only being with us a short while longer? We've been together for three years, what's going to keep us apart?

Jesus's parting words are for them to love each other.

So, we are left with two words to focus on—love and follow. Jesus stresses love. It is the trait that will keep these disciples together, focused, supported, and unified. For as many miracles as they have seen and even performed, it is the love that binds them together among themselves, binds them with Jesus and now, binds them in unity with God in heaven. All of their ministry ends in this one word, LOVE.

What about the word, follow? It is easier to follow than love. For we can follow those we doubt, those we question, those we don't really like. Jesus's first words to these disciples, as he met them where they were, was to "Follow me." And they did. They left their old lives and followed Jesus. They did not know what they would encounter along the way. Yet, they

love Jesus, at least to the extent they can imagine love. They trust Jesus, at least to the extent that they can trust anyone. And now, all of a sudden, Jesus is leaving them alone to fend for themselves and go to a place they cannot follow him. Among the questions in hearing this, do they feel betrayed? Are they all thinking what Peter is saying—How can you leave us and not let us continue to follow you?

Finally, we consider "later". "You will follow later." More questions—how long from now? Why not now? If not now, then when? Why the delay? What do we need to do to be able to follow now? WE know how the story ends. These disciples did not. They lived it moment by moment, seeing their jubilant entry into Jerusalem spiral down into secrecy, fear, and denial.

Jesus said the disciples would look for him. That was true then and is true now for current disciples. Where are you looking for Jesus? What are you finding?

John Berry
jberry@jberrylaw.net

April 2, 2026, Maundy Thursday

Matthew 27:32-53

The Crucifixion

I am not worthy to write on this passage. There is so much in it and to it, and I do not want my words to change how you read it and how you understand it. There are so many details to the story that we can visualize what happened, but there are so many details not stated that our imaginations must fill in what we so desperately need to see.

A few thoughts, then, as we prepare for this:

"They" mentioned in verses 32-37 means the Roman soldiers. They were in charge of this crucifixion. It is these soldiers that forced Simon from Cyrene to carry the heavy cross, as Jesus could no longer carry it. After all, Jesus had been so badly beaten that it is amazing that he could even walk. And certainly no Roman soldier is going to lift a finger to help out a Jew, much less a Jew going to his death on a cross. No, they enlisted Simon for this job. And now, Simon is a part of the most important story ever told.

These same soldiers affixed Jesus to the cross, lifted it up, divided his possessions, and then they sat down to watch and wait. To complete the mocking, they installed a written sign above his head: This is Jesus, the King of the Jews. Golgotha being a public place, believed to be on a busy road near a big intersection, many people walked by. These passersby, likely the same who called for his crucifixion, kept yelling insults at Jesus demanding that he save himself and come down from the cross if indeed, he was the Son of God. Later, among the spectators were the chief priests and teachers group. You know, the group that convinced Pilate that Jesus needed to be crucified in accordance with Jewish law. They mocked him as well. Let God rescue him if he wants him. After all, he said, "I am the son of God."

Also among those there were followers of Jesus. All of them are not named, but we know a few of them. We do not know how many, but we know that for three hours the sky became incredibly dark. Jesus cried out and they thought he was calling for Elijah. Finally, when his body could take no more, it was over with one last great cry—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The earth shook, rocks split, bodies of the righteous came out of their tombs and were raised to life. The curtain of the temple was torn from top to bottom. It was not man who tore the curtain, but a higher power.

Read this passage again and close your eyes. What do you see? What do you smell? What do you hear?

The dust and dirt from the splitting of the earth. The pealing of rocks splitting. The dry, dusty air. Sweat, vinegar, smoke. The cries of those who were there. The continued mocking by those who were there. Do you sense the fear of the followers? What are they going to do now? Their leader has been put to death before their eyes. The Jewish leaders will likely be looking to quell any rebellion and will be searching for them. The soldiers will be on alert to keep order. Do we hide ourselves or do we keep watching?

What are we to do?

Indeed, what are we to do?

John Berry
jberry@jberrylaw.net

Good Friday
April 3, 2026
Matthew 27:54-66

Preparing for What Comes Next

The soldiers of the governor beat Jesus, mocked him, took his clothes and sent him to his death on the cross. They were uniform in their treatment of Jesus. They gave him no relief and spared no torture. Jesus has given up his spirit, breathed his last breath and is no longer alive. Soldiers were stationed to keep watch over Jesus. They, too, experienced the darkness of the daytime sky, the earthquake, the split rocks, shaking earth and opened tombs. It is at this point that these soldiers are turned. They were filled with awe and said, "Truly, this was the Son of God!" It is as if they have turned 180 degrees. What was once ordinary has become unearthly unique.

We know, too, that many women were there. They had been following Jesus into Jerusalem from distant Galilee. They were looking from afar, so as to not be noticed and to watch it all from a full vantage point. While the scripture doesn't say, I suspect there were many guards there as well, likely the same soldiers who had reviled Jesus and then become awestruck by the moment of his death.

Joseph of Arimathea was also there. When Jesus died, he went to Pilate. Joseph, being wealthy, would likely be able to obtain an audience with Pilate. Joseph asked for the body so he could bury it properly. Into Joseph's own tomb the body went with Pilate's consent. I suspect Pilate wanted to further wash his hands of Jesus. Letting him be buried by a wealthy Jew would have been a solution to an unstated problem.

Pilate, once again, is met with the chief priests and Pharisees. They want guards—lots of them. They recalled Jesus saying that he would be risen from the dead and feared that the disciples would steal Jesus' body and fraudulently state that Jesus has risen. Things would then go from bad to worse. Pilate confirms the request of the Pharisees—you have all the guard of soldiers you need, so they went to the tomb and sealed it with a stone. It was kept under guard.

Contrast how the soldiers reacted to the death of Jesus from the reaction of the Pharisees. The soldiers state that surely Jesus was the King of the Jews. What they have just

experienced leaves no doubt. It is as if all of the earth has convulsed in reaction to the death of its creator. These soldiers may have been vile in their treatment of Jesus, but they were not fools. They could see what happened. On the other hand, the Jewish leaders and Pharisees continued their prideful, paranoid way. Their eyes are shut. They do not question themselves or the events that just occurred—the darkened sky, earthquake and tombs being opened. They are still in charge and will not vary from their pride and stubbornness. Still, their paranoia continues. If they were so sure, why would they worry about a resurrected Jesus? Couldn't they explain it all away that it did not happen. And they did what schemers do. They assumed on their opponent what they would do if in the same circumstances. They would lie, so they assumed Jesus' followers would also lie. Hence guards and more guards.

But Jesus' followers did not need to lie. There was no grand scheme to forge a resurrection. And soon we will all find out the TRUTH.

John Berry
jfberry@jberrylaw.net

Saturday, April 4, 2026

Matthew 28:1-15

The Resurrection Revealed

Then Jesus said, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me." Matthew 28:10

After an exhausting few days, the women followers went to the tomb. As they arrived, yet again, there is a huge earthquake. An angel of the Lord descended from heaven, in shekinah glory and appeared. The angel rolled back the stone and sat on the very stone that had sealed the tomb. But what about the guards? Hadn't they promised to keep the tomb sealed? Well yes they had promised. But that was before the angel in his brilliant glory rolled the stone away and sat on it. They were scared stiff. Trembling, they could do nothing. And who could blame them? They were not fools. They had pronounced Jesus as the King of the Jews. They had experienced two earthquakes now and had been traumatized by the heavenly being.

The angel turns toward the women, saying "Do not be afraid." He does not utter this to the soldiers.

Then the most important words ever uttered in history, "He is not here; for he has risen!"

Unlike the soldiers, still in dead-man shock, the women do as told. They gather themselves and start running to tell the disciples that Jesus has risen from the dead, just as he said. Along the way, Jesus appears to them. Isn't this amazing? He greets them and they take hold of his feet and worship him. Can you imagine this event? Their joy. Their tears and their fears removed. Then Jesus tells them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me." Again, the natural reaction of fear is quelled. It is commanded away. Do you wish you had more details? Do you wish you could see these events as they occurred? This most historic of all events, and these women, who loved Jesus so much and cared for him so well, actually saw the risen Jesus.

Back to the guards. It's almost a shame to have to revisit them and consider their reaction. They do not report to Pilate. They report to the Jewish leaders. The chief priests call together all the elders and devise a plan. Just in the same

way that they had presumed the followers of Jesus would lie about his resurrection, they pay the soldiers a small fortune for their silence and to perpetuate the lie. Tell the people that Jesus's disciples came by night and stole the body while the soldiers slept. If the governor hears of this, we will back you up. The soldiers took the money and did as directed.

How sad for these Jewish leaders. They had seen the miracles, heard the wisdom, and even experienced the earth shaking at the death of God's son. Yet, their pride blinded them to the Savior. All of their learning, memorization of rules and regulations, all of their pride in their position had kept them from the only truth that mattered then and that matters now. Jesus is the Savior of the World.

Tomorrow we rejoice. Jesus is risen. But today, we mourn that fear and pride can blind us to the Truth.

John Berry
jfberry@jberrylaw.net

Easter Sunday
April 5, 2026
Matthew 28:16-20

Go

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. 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 lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." Matthew 16-20 RSV

The eleven disciples do as instructed and go from Jerusalem to Galilee. This is not an overnight trip. Depending on where in Galilee they went, it would be 90 to 120 miles. There were no buses, trains or planes to Galilee. This would be a walk, up and down mountains, on rocky terrain. And just as we recall the walk from Galilee to Jerusalem was treacherous—either through Samaria or on the road to Jericho where robbers were waiting, these disciples made this treacherous journey yet again. We know nothing about it. All we know is that Jesus said he would meet the disciples in Galilee and he appointed the place.

At first, I was distracted and troubled by verse 17. How could some doubt the resurrected Jesus? But I reread the passage again more closely. They doubted when they first saw him from a distance, but as Jesus came to them and spoke to them, the doubts melted away. There they stood face to face. We know from other passages that Thomas was a doubter, and we presume that the doubter here is likewise Thomas. It is not important who it is, but it is important that the doubt went away when Jesus stood face to face with these disciples.

Could this language in verse 17 be included to let us all know that it is okay to doubt? Thomas was one of the original twelve. He had seen the miracles up close. He had heard the teaching in small rooms where conversations with the Rabbi continued hours upon hours. He had witnessed the crucifixion and had heard from the women who accompanied them to Jerusalem for that last Passover. Thomas was no betrayer,

but he wanted to not merely rely on words. He wanted to touch the wounds and physically see them.

Is doubt like this a function of separation from Jesus, doubt which melts away when you come back to Jesus, face to face? When we consider history, read the New Testament passages about the resurrection and the Galilean meeting with Jesus, do we draw closer? When we hear that all authority on heaven and earth is entrusted to Jesus, do we let our fears go? Finally, do we rest in the blessed assurance that Jesus is with us always. Not just sometimes, not temporarily. No, He is with us always, even to the end of all times. Ponder this for a moment (or longer).

So, He is with us in life and in death. We need not fear and we need not wallow in our doubt. We walk face to face with our Risen Savior. We feel His power. We are transformed.

The scriptures are treasures of assurance, mercy, grace, peace, forgiveness and love. We need nothing else to allay our doubt but to read and reread, study and treasure these words and consider their power and majesty. We believe them. Away with doubt.

Still, there is work to do. Disciples to make. Baptizing and Teaching. The LORD is risen indeed. Let's get moving.

Happy Easter!

John Berry
jberry@jberrylaw.net



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