



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH OF EDMOND

# Freedom in the Father



40-DAY LENTEN DEVOTIONAL  
ON THE LORD'S PRAYER  
2021



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH OF EDMOND

Dear friend,

This 40-Day Lenten devotional is a gift for you from First Presbyterian Church. Our elders at First Pres are calling all of us to our core practices of praying together and reading and practicing Scripture during this time of Lent—Ash Wednesday to Easter.

This devotional on the Lord's Prayer is a companion piece to our current sermon series, "Teach us to Pray." It is called Freedom in the Father, and it takes the Lord's Prayer nearly word by word exploring its deep meaning and application for our life. There is a tremendous freedom in turning over the daily components of our life to a loving and gracious Father and increasing our dependence upon Him. The Lord's Prayer allows us to do just that. Unlike most of our devotionals, I am the author so the person speaking is me and the examples are from my life.

This devotional is designed to be used daily individually or as part of your family devotional. It is also designed to be used by a micro-group. We have written some reflection questions to be done once a week exploring how the Spirit and the Word have spoken to you during the last week.

I hope you will make this devotional a part of your daily routine alongside your Church family. We are seeking unity in the Holy Spirit and the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3) so that we may share "New Life through Jesus for Edmond and the world!"

In Him,

Rev. Eric Laverentz, D. Min.  
Lead Pastor

# 7 Core Practices



**1** SHARE who you are

**2** CARE for one another



**3** READ and PRACTICE scripture

**4** PRAY together

**5** INVEST in people



**6** SERVE community

**7** CREATE and SEND leaders

# The Lord's Prayer

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." 2 And he said to them, "When you pray, say:

"Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

3 Give us each day our daily bread,

4 and forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

And lead us not into temptation."

- Luke 11:1-4

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"He gives his own glory to us. He raises slaves to the dignity of freedom. He crowns the human condition with such honor as surpasses the power of nature. He brings to pass what was spoken of old by the Psalmist: 'I said you are Gods and you are all children of the Most High.' He rescues us from the measure of slavery, giving us by grace what we did not possess by nature, and permits us to call God, 'Father,' as being admitted to the rank of sons. We received this, together with all our other privileges, from him. One of these gifts is the dignity of freedom, a gift particularly befitting..."

-Cyril of Alexandria, 376-444 AD

## Micro-Group and Small Group Reflection Questions

1. Begin by PRAYING TOGETHER. Invite the Holy Spirit to be present to lead and make your time together fruitful and edifying.
2. Next, READ and PRACTICE SCRIPTURE. Pick at least one of the Scripture readings for the week and read it silently. Pause, take 30 second to reflect, and read it again out loud together. Share any way the Word spoke to you.
3. SHARE WHO YOU ARE by asking each person to:
  - A. Share how you did keeping up with your daily devotional during the week. Was it easy or difficult to do? Did you struggle to find the time or did it come naturally?
  - B. Share what Scripture or even part of the devotional reading spoke to you this week.
  - C. Share any special insights into your walk with Jesus. Was your understanding of the Lord's character altered in any way? Did you come to understand anything new about yourself.
  - D. Share how the Lord is calling you to any change in habits, new way of life or any concrete action in response to the Word? Is the Holy Spirit calling you in SERVE COMMUNITY or INVEST IN PEOPLE in any way?
4. CARE FOR ONE ANOTHER by following up on last week's prayer requests and taking new requests.
5. Close by PRAYING TOGETHER incorporating your requests.

# **“Ten Commandments” To Get the Most from Your Small Group**

1. Read the Scripture lesson beforehand and pray before you read it asking the Holy Spirit to speak with you.
2. Attend regularly; make being there a priority.
3. Read and pray about the questions beforehand.
4. Be fully present in the group (put your phone aside).
5. Trustfully and truthfully share who you are.
6. Keep what is shared in the group in the group; don't share outside the group.
7. Listen to what others have to say.
8. Write down the prayer requests and pray daily for the others in your group.
9. Do something together to serve your community.
10. Invest in someone in your group, cultivate a friendship.

# February 17: Introduction

Matthew 3:13-4:11

The Word teaches that Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He went immediately after He was baptized by John, when the heavens opened and the voice of the Father spoke, "This is my son with whom I am well-pleased." Jesus knew supreme intimacy with the Father at that moment.

After 40 days of fasting he was hungry and thirsty and that is when Satan struck—when the flesh that had been pressed on the Son of God was at its weakest. Jesus began His test when He knew supreme intimacy with the Father. The Holy Spirit drove Jesus, God in the flesh, to be tested so He might know His humanity better.

How do you feel today? Tested? Tired? Do you have any intimacy with the Father? What we want to do today and for the next 40 days is allow our spirit to be tested so that we might know God better. We want to be "weighed in the balance" and see where we are wanting so we can ask the Holy Spirit to minister to us. Our goals in all of this is are:

- A more complete knowledge of who God made us to be;
- Greater intimacy with the Father;
- A laying aside of old hurts, pain, and sinful impediments;
- A realignment of our priorities, values, and actions for proclaiming Jesus' Kingdom.

There are a few things I want to ask at the outset that will help you get the most out of this experience. Do them as soon as you can. If you cannot do them today, that's okay, just get them done soon.

**First, write down at least three things you would like to see God do in your life.** They could be small. They could be big. Remember that James taught we do not have because we do not ask.

**Second, set aside a time to do this devotional daily.** This time is between you and God, but your sacrifice of it is your offering to Him. You may not feel like you have the time, but remember that Jesus is the Lord of time! He will return the time to you as His Word promises, "pressed down, shaken together, and running over."

**Third, ask some people to go through it with you. Do it together as a micro-group.** It could be your spouse, your entire family, co-workers, some neighbors or even your micro-group from the Jonah study. A group of 3-4 would be ideal. Their job will be to help you stay on task, help you discern what the Holy Spirit is doing, follow our seven core practices and take a next step. You will not be asked to share anything that makes you uncomfortable and our standards for micro-groups are to hold all things in confidence.

40 days is a biblical period of testing. Moses remained on Mount Sinai in God's presence for 40 days. The Hebrew spies searched the Promised Land for 40 days. For 40 days and nights it rained while Noah, his family, and a cavalcade of creatures bobbed in the ark. Elijah fasted for 40 days as he undertook a journey into the wilderness. I am excited to see what this 40 days of testing reveals for you.

## Questions for reflection:

- What do you expect to be your biggest obstacles in completing these 40 days?
- Do you have any anxiety about what you may discover?
- What is most exciting to you about this journey? Name one way you are resisting or even running from God's good plan for your life. What would it look like to stop resisting and running from God? Spend time in prayer asking God to show you how to wait upon Him.

**Prayer:** Father, thank you that you love us enough that you want us to know you intimately. Would you order my time for the next 40 days, to make the time I need to spend with you daily? During that time would you help me to block out all distractions and simply focus on you? Help me to find someone to hold me accountable during this time. Finally, Lord, please help me to be transparent before you, realizing that you know me intimately and love me still. I ask all this in the name of my Savior, Jesus. Amen.

## February 18: “Our Father in Heaven”

Isaiah 43:1-7

Mark teaches that when Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, He used a very specific word that night to call upon God, “Abba.” Abba is an Aramaic colloquialism that means “Father.” A closer translation is “Daddy.” At a prayer meeting in seminary the person leading the prayer started by saying “Daddy God.” The speaker that night, a philosophy professor who was generally regarded as the most intelligent man on campus, began his remarks with a rebuke: “You know, God is not your pal down the street.”

I agree with both. God is not our pal down the street, but He also desires a closer relationship than any of us imagine. God remains immortal, invisible, untouchable, holy, and righteous. But at the same time He desires for us to know Him intimately, to be closer to Him than we are to anyone else. There is a reason why the Church, God’s chosen, is so often referred to as His bride. Just as the husband and wife are two who become one flesh, God desires to be closer to us than our own flesh. This does not diminish His stature as God. It only enhances it.

Becoming a father myself has only impressed this further on me. It is pure joy to be near to one of my children or hear their laughter or feel their love and acceptance. It was a matter of some debate in our house who got called “Mama” or “Dada” first. We both want that honor. Getting close to my kids, by wrestling on the floor, playing football in the yard, or acting like a goofball to make them laugh, does not make me less of a daddy - it makes me more of one.

It can be difficult to picture God in those terms. The culture has beat into us a picture of a grey-bearded old man sitting on a throne, aloof, shaking his head disapprovingly at silliness. Yet, the God revealed by the Bible is one who took on flesh and became one of us to rescue us from sin so we could revel perpetually and eternally in His presence, and He could lavish us with his love. The Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us John teaches. “And we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) God’s glory is not in His aloofness from us. It is in His union with us.

Isaiah teaches us that we are precious in the Father’s eyes. We are so precious that He has given Jesus’ life in exchange for ours. He has given the weight of the world as our ransom. Isaiah 43:4 minces no words, the LORD says, “I love you.” Isaiah goes on to say that our Father will be with us forever, come what may, and because of that we should have no fear of this world. We can either fear the world or we can revere God, not both. We can only experience this lack of fear of the world, when we trust that the Father is with us and loves us come what may. There is a freedom in revering and loving the Father that is simply irreplaceable. This is the great message behind the First Commandment, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, you shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:1) If we do not feel free in this life, it may very well be because we need a closer relationship with God. “Fear not little flock, “Jesus promised, “For it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” (Luke 12:32)

### Questions for reflection:

- Does it change your understanding of God to think of Him like a loving and caring Father? How?
- What lingering fears do you have in life? How would receiving God as a loving and protective father address those fears?
- What is your most intimate moment with God?

**Prayer:** Lord God, help me to understand what it means that you desire to love me like a Father. Help me, God, to know your tender and protective care and to allow you unfettered access to my heart and desires. Take away my fear, Lord, and replace it with a trust that you have the absolute willingness and ability to care for me and meet my every need. I ask this knowing that you gave your only Son for me. What more proof do I need that you will not withhold anything from those you love? Amen.



## February 19: “Our Father in Heaven”

Psalm 31:1-8

It took a long time for me to be able to think of God as a Father. The reason for that is because I was blessed with an earthly father who is a wonderful human being, whose love and care I never questioned. Although my Dad provided an incredible picture of fatherly love, somehow I felt like I was being disloyal by calling God Father as well. I had turned my earthly father’s love for me into an idol that was getting in the way of God’s love for me. I have since come to realize that it is an honor to my dad to share the title of Father with God.

For other people, calling God Father is a challenge for entirely different reasons. Their relationship with their father is painful or non-existent. The appellation of Father is a hurdle because of decades of hurt and wounds that run deep into their soul. It is also a challenge because they simply have no picture of what a loving father is supposed to be or what he is supposed to do. As one woman put it, “Growing up I had no big chest to protect me, no physical arms to wrap around me. I had to learn very quickly to be self-sufficient to survive.” Still, she carried within her for years the pain of that absent relationship, thus seeing God as Father was a very real challenge.

Despite the challenges, I don’t think we have a choice if we want to be obedient. We cannot know intimacy with God or His full plan for our life outside of obedience. Jesus’ instruction goes like this, “Pray then like this,” and then He tells us to address God as “Our Father.” (Matthew 6:9)

The best way I know of becoming obedient in something is simply by doing it, and doing it before you are ready or want to. What that looks like in prayer today is simply to begin with the word “Father.” I admit that when I first started using that phrase routinely it was awkward. As time passed, however, I realized that addressing God in that way changed how I perceived Him. It also changed how I perceived myself. As I called God Father, I could not help but begin to think of myself more in terms of being His son. Seeing myself as his son helped me to receive His promises more readily and with greater assurance—like those in Psalm 31, “Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me!” and, “Into your hands I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God!”

The good news in all of this is that we have an Advocate, a Helper whom the Word promises will cause us to call God Father. This is the work of the Holy Spirit within us, who, because we are sons and daughters of God, will cause us to call Him “Abba, Father.” In this cry of our heart there is a freedom we cannot know in any other way.

### Questions for Reflection:

- What obstacles keep you from thinking of God as Father?
- Does it feel awkward to think of God as Father or think of yourself as His daughter or son? Why?
- How has the Holy Spirit empowered or encouraged you be closer to God?

**Prayer:** Lord God, loving Father, thank you that you love me completely. Help me lay aside my idols and heal my hurts so that I may see your character more completely. Move in my heart by the power of your Holy Spirit to help me commit my spirit into your hands and to allow you to be my rock of refuge and a strong fortress. Help me abide in the shadow of your almighty love so that I might live devoid of fear, trusting in your perfect compassion and grace. In the name of Jesus I make this request. Amen.

## February 20: “Our Father in Heaven”

Romans 8:15-32

How does one person go through life filled with trials, temptations, and snares and maintain hope, yet another person is crushed by the same obstacles or even less? Years ago there was a man at the church I served who always struggled to have a good relationship with his son. He retired early so that he could caddy for his son on a professional golf tour. It did not work as he had hoped. Only a few weeks after the father returned home, he began having severe headaches and blurred vision. He was diagnosed with a fatal brain tumor and given months to live. During a visit with him we sat in his living room looking out a big window at the back of their home, watching the leaves fall in late autumn. He said, “You know a leaf buds, grows, matures, and then turns gold, crumples, and falls to the ground. And we are here at the moment it falls to watch it. It’s a privilege if you think about it.”

He was talking about himself living, growing, and now falling, and the Father’s plan for our life and the privilege it is to see it unfold, especially at the moments when we fall. Paul teaches in Romans and Galatians that it is only by seeing God as our Father that we can overcome the suffering of this world and achieve hope in the face of adversity, even tragedy. When we are able to cry out to God as “Abba Father,” our perspective begins to shift to see that any loving Father, especially a heavenly Father who knows our needs intimately, will only share good things from His hand. “What father among you, if his son asks for a fish will instead of a fish give him a serpent, or if he asks for an egg will give him a scorpion?” (Matthew 11:11-12) If we as parents are able to give good gifts to our children, how much more able is God to give good gifts to us? Any parent who has ever stood in a line 40 people deep at Toys-R-Us on Christmas Eve can tell you just how far a loving mother or father will go to give gifts to their children. There is nothing they wouldn’t sacrifice for them to put a smile on their face. How much more does God our Father know how to love us?

Understanding God as Father is the gateway to seeing Him in all the other roles the Bible teaches us that He plays in the lives of His beloved chosen ones: Provider, Redeemer, Savior, Friend, Righteousness, Advocate, Shepherd, Healer, Helper, Sanctifier, Comforter, Deliverer, King, Lawgiver, Wisdom, Power, Glory, Light, Life, Shield, Rock of our Salvation.

Of course, the greatest testimony of God’s Father-like ability to protect us from destruction and give us a future and a hope is that He gave us our Brother Jesus to pay for sin. “He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32)

### Questions for Reflection:

- What is preventing you from trusting God’s ability to place good things in your life?
- How do you see God providing for you and His plan unfolding in your life today?
- Which of the biblically inspired roles listed above do you most clearly see God playing in your life? Which role is least clear?

**Prayer:** My loving and gracious Father God, thank you for your tender care for me. Thank you for your incredible willingness to place good gifts in my life and protect me from destruction, bending evil to good. Lord, help me to know in my spirit the privilege of being your beloved, chosen one. Make plain your good gifts in my life so that I may come to see your grace and love made manifest in all the roles you play while completing your good work in me. Amen.

## February 22: “Our Father in Heaven”

### Psalm 51

The desire of our heart is to be one with God. Everything we crave ultimately boils down to a God-shaped hole in our heart. We keep tossing things into that hole (work, success, wealth, respect, love, sex) and ultimately nothing is able to fill it. Why doesn't God just make it simple? It is simple—unfortunately simple does not always mean easy.

The simple fact is we are on earth and God is in heaven. There was a time when humanity was one with God, but sin entered into the world creating a breach between God and those whom He loves. We usually feel the furthest from God when we sin, and that distance sometimes creates the impression that God is angry with us and withdrawing, just like we imperfect human beings tend to do. That is not the case. God does not move. The Word teaches that His steadfast love endures forever. Our sin walls are self-constructed not God constructed. Like David wrote, “My sin is ever before me.” Sin is like breathing polluted air. We are consistently taking it in, awash in it while it poisons us. If we had grown up only breathing polluted air, we would never know the difference. That is the case with us. Again, the Psalms teach that we were born sinful; sin was imparted to us at conception. “No one is righteous, not one. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God,” we are taught in Romans 3. It is not God's disappointment that is in the way of our intimacy, It is our sin, especially the sin to which we have grown so accustomed that it is like the air we breathe.

We will spend the next several days asking the Holy Spirit to search our hearts and reveal to us where we are in special need of His grace. That is not easy. It is invasive surgery. We are trying to remove from our spirit something that we may not even know is there, but it has come to cause a sickness in our soul that keeps us from experiencing the presence and pleasure of God. Of course, there is nothing there that will surprise God. However, what we ask Him to show us will undoubtedly surprise us and may even wound our self-esteem. But self-esteem based upon self-righteousness is the worst kind of illusion. Our only defense is a trust in God's love and grace. Francis Fenelon wrote, “Naked faith alone is a sure guard against illusion.” May our faith in His unswerving grace and undying love allow us to find ourselves naked and unashamed before our Father in Heaven.

#### **Questions for reflection:**

- How close do you feel to God today? When was the last time you felt His pleasure or presence?
- Why might you be afraid to ask God to search your heart and reveal where you fall short of His glory?
- How is your self-esteem? Is it based upon truth or an illusion?

**Prayer:** My Father in Heaven, please show me my sin. Shine the light of your truth in my spirit so that I may understand how I fall short of your glory. I know, Lord, that you can make me clean. You can wash me whiter than snow. Give me confidence in your grace and love so I may withstand the revelation of your introspection. Search me and know me. Fill my inner being with your truth and teach me the wisdom of your secret heart. Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me. Amen.

## February 23: “Our Father in Heaven”

Romans 5:1-11

If we find ourselves at a distance from someone there are two ways we can be together—either they can come to us or we can go to them. Someone must erase that distance. The first sin we want to give up is the illusion that we can make our way to God, that we can know Him through anything we do rather than by Him making Himself known to us through what He has already done. Religion is our belief in our ability to pursue God. Faith is our belief in God’s willingness to pursue us. Although often confused, they are decisively different. One takes us to God. The other takes us further into ourselves. Good works, although done with good intentions, can become one of the greatest impediments between ourselves and our Heavenly Father.

Faith, of course, sounds too easy. If that were only true! We are religious for one reason, because we want to retain some measure of control. We want to stand on our own two feet before God rather than humble ourselves entirely, placing ourselves at His mercy. Works too easily become an idol. We do not want to admit there is no health in us. However, the sooner we come to that conclusion, the sooner we are able to throw ourselves, body and soul, upon God’s mercy and begin to live by faith.

Several years ago I remember getting into a debate with someone with whom I was leading worship in the seminary chapel. I had written a prayer of confession asking God to have mercy on us for our multitude of sins. She refused to use it. “I just don’t think we’re that bad,” she said. Paul taught, “For while we were still weak . . . still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:6-7) Paul also taught that we receive access to Jesus’ work for us through faith. Brother Lawrence put it this way, “Demand from Him His grace. Offer Him your heart at every moment you can.” The more we believe we stand on our own two feet before God, the more challenging it is to offer our heart.

Unless we come to God broken, we cannot come at all. Jesus told a parable about two men praying in the temple. The first man was a Pharisee, and as he looked around, he thanked the Lord that he was not like other men, reminding God of his good deeds before Him. The second man could not even bear to look up, but he beat his chest and said, “God have mercy on me! I am a sinner.” Jesus explained it was the second man who went away right with God.

Jesus taught, “But my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.” (Hebrews 10:38)

### Questions for reflection:

- Whose approval are you really seeking? What are you doing to seek God’s approval?
- Is your belief in God more about religion or about faith? How can you make it more about the latter?
- Are your prayers more like the Pharisee or the man who cried out, “God, have mercy on me”?

**Prayer:** Father, have mercy on me. I am a sinner. I have attempted to earn your love and approval and stand in self-righteousness before you through my good works. My works are an idol preventing me from fully realizing your grace and love. I know that even my best works are simply filthy rags and they earn me nothing in your eyes. Help me, Lord, to dwell secure in my faith, trusting that I am made right by what you do for me rather than what I do for you. Amen.

## February 24: “Our Father in Heaven” Deuteronomy 30:11-20

After Adam and Eve sinned, Genesis teaches us the first emotion they experienced was fear. Adam told God that he hid in fear because he was naked. Fear is among our most powerful emotions. Fear, of course, can be a good thing. We should be afraid of touching a hot stove or standing too close to a high ledge. That kind of fear is life-preserving. However, most of the fear we experience is life-debilitating. It stops us from becoming everything God has made us to be. Fear is the opposite of faith and is usually the by-product of sin.

We fear doing the right thing because of the consequences. We fear what may happen if we lose our job. We fear what our children will become. We fear not having enough. We fear change. Although I am still far from being free of fear, there was a time when fear was simply crippling my intimacy with God and crippling me as a result. What finally broke me of that fear was seeing my fears realized and then watching God turn even those terrible circumstances into something used for my good and His glory. I would not recommend that path for anyone! But I needed some strong discipline to set me free from my desperate condition and teach me the valuable lesson of trusting God even in the worst of circumstances.

Fear can also be a powerful bondage. What makes it so powerful is that we have a tendency to legitimize fear. No one likes bad things to happen to them, so they believe it is alright to fear. That is wrong. Fear gets in the way of our relationship with the God who is able to take bad things and turn them into blessings. When we allow fear to control our decisions we are saying we have another god because we believe that Jesus cannot overcome the poor circumstances of this broken world. Fear stops us from loving God because fear causes us to make “safe” choices rather than obedient ones. Fear causes us to dwell in darkness and choose death rather than life. Fear draws our hearts away from God because it shifts our focus onto the object of our fear. Imagine being in a relationship with someone where you constantly have to guard yourself against being let down. Any kind of intimacy would be impossible. Trust is a necessary ingredient for any close relationship. Zephaniah 3:2 warns us, “. . .she does not trust in the LORD; she does not draw near to God.”

What makes this fear tragic is that it is so unnecessary. The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that our only comfort in life and death is: “That I belong body and soul...not to myself but to my faithful Savior...that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not even a hair can fall from my head.”

If God’s will prevails, is He not worthy of our trust? And if we trust Him, whom should we fear?

### **Questions for reflection:**

- What do you fear? How is that fear affecting your life?
- Do you trust God? How is that trust impacting your love for God?
- Can you think of a time when your fears were realized and God redeemed the circumstances?

**Prayer:** Father, I confess that I live in fear. Fear is bondage in my life. Please set me free so that I may experience the fullness of your plan for my life. I have allowed fear to get in the way of my trust, and it has damaged my relationship with you. Help me to dwell in the light of your promises. Draw my heart to you so that I may walk in your way, keep your commandments, and experience your blessings. Amen.

## February 25: “Our Father in Heaven”

### Psalm 24

One of the most common obstacles between ourselves and the Father is the pernicious and ever-present myth that we are not good enough for God. Psychologists might call this poor self-esteem. Of course we all fall short of the glory of God. We all miss the mark He has set. However, in our relationship with the Father, His esteem for us matters infinitely more than our self-esteem.

Psalm 24 asks a sobering question: “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? Who shall stand in His holy place?” The answer, of course, is that if it were left to us, none of us could ascend His hill or stand in His holy place. We are simply not good enough. However, Jesus ascended the hill of the Lord for us—a place made holy by the pouring out of His divine blood. When the Father looks at us, it is not our works that He sees but the works of His Son who is our representative. Paul put it this way: “. . . We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor. 5:20-21) We cannot be reconciled to God until we allow Jesus to take our sins and shortcomings and we receive His righteousness. Without this unbelievable exchange, it is impossible.

Many times I think we hide from God, not unlike Adam and Eve in the garden, behind our poor self-esteem. Without Christ, we tend to define ourselves by our failures and shortcomings, and we are wont to picture ourselves in any other way. What was once decidedly painful becomes comfortable, and most of us choose comfort rather than risk to receive joy and peace.

The magnificent exchange of Jesus’ righteousness for our sin is grounded in the first verse of Psalm 24: “The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.” We belong to God and when we receive the righteousness of Christ so does our sin. This is the pure joy of the Gospel! Watchman Nee put it like this: “It is a great thing when I discover I am no longer my own but his.”

We prayed for my grandfather to get to know Jesus for more than a decade. One day I walked into his living room when he was 92 years old, and hanging his head he asked, “Do you think Jesus would have anything to do with someone like me?” I was overjoyed to tell him that Jesus has everything to do with someone like him. We prayed right then and there for him to know Christ. Jesus lived, died, was resurrected, and ascended specifically for the people who have trouble lifting their heads in His presence.

“Who is this King of glory, lift up your heads, O gates! . . . that the King of glory may come in.”

#### **Questions for reflection:**

- Does your picture of yourself get in the way of your relationship with God?
- Is anything preventing you from allowing Jesus to exchange your sin for His righteousness?
- Does it fill you with joy or fear (or both) to know that you are no longer your own but God’s?

**Prayer:** Father, please help me to see myself as you see me—pure and righteous and set apart. For too long I have labored under, and been held in bondage by, how I believe you see me. I have hidden from you for too long behind my failures and shortcomings. Help me, Jesus, to receive your magnificent righteousness for the filthy rags of my sin. Fill me with your Holy Spirit, God, so that I may realize the fruit of my salvation in this life. Amen.

## February 26: “Hallowed be your name”

Exodus 3:1-13

There is power in using God’s name, yet we toss around His name so casually. “OMG” is common lingo. Every time we throw a U. S. dime on the counter-top, we drop God’s name. This indifference was impressed upon me deeply when I studied Hebrew. My Hebrew tutor was a Presbyterian pastor who converted from Judaism, and every time we got to the phrase that was translated as “The LORD” in the Old Testament, he would not say it. He would say, “That word.” He took saying the name of God so seriously that he did not want to profane it.

Jesus was far from alone in saying, “Hallowed be your name.” The third commandment teaches, “Do not take the name of the LORD in vain.” Should we be afraid to use God’s name then? Should we only call upon God when we really need Him? Absolutely not. A loving Father desperately desires for His children to call upon Him. We should realize what we are doing, however, the profound gift it is to speak the name of God.

Multiple times we are told in God’s Word, “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” So there is the power to seize life, even eternal life, in speaking God’s name. Three times Jesus promised the disciples, “Whatever you ask in my name, the Father will do.” There is the power to change the world in speaking the name of God. Ephesians assures us that the name of Jesus is above every other name on heaven and earth, and that at the very mention of the name of Jesus “every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth, and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” The name of Jesus has the power to humble the proud and re-establish the right order of things.

So, how do we “hallow” God’s name? How do we call upon God properly? It begins with knowing our name, who we are, and who God has called us to be. Jen calls herself my wife because I am her husband. My children call themselves our kids because we are their Mom and Dad. We cannot destroy God’s name through misuse. His name is eternal. We can, however, destroy ourselves by misusing His name because we cannot misuse His name without miscasting and mistreating ourselves. Sin is never sin only because it offends God’s eternal law. It is sin because it harms us as well. Any assault against human dignity is an assault against the God who made us and shares our flesh. To call God Father, to call upon the name of the Lord, to ask something in the name of Jesus is to make a statement not only about who God is but about who we are as well. To hallow God’s name is to claim a deep, abiding, and transforming relationship with the one whom we are naming. To hallow God’s name is to claim forgiveness and a future and a hope for ourselves.

### Questions for reflection:

- When was the last time you called upon God by name?
- Who do you believe the Father has called you to be?
- In what do you find your future and hope? Is it in the Father?

**Prayer:** My Father in heaven, hallowed is your name. Forgive me, God, when I have used your name for anything less than your majesty commands and your love demands. Help me to see myself as your daughter/son, your precious child whom you have redeemed from sin and for whom you have provided a future and a hope. Let that future and hope spring from my lips in praise of your hallowed name. Amen.

## February 27: “Our Father in Heaven”

Luke 8:40-46

Another way we create separation between ourselves and our Heavenly Father is by seeking relief from the hurts and pains of life through things of the world rather than seeking healing in Jesus Christ. Counselors call this “self-medication.” Many of us are familiar with some of the terrible forms this takes, particularly alcohol, pills, food, pornography, and other forms of false and harmful intimacy. The bondage of “self-medication” is among the strongest and most destructive. This is because it is usually too late once we discover that what we thought to be relief, in reality, saps us of our humanity and destroys our integrity. We have become addicted or come to define ourselves by it.

Of course not all of it is as obvious as drugs and sex. Some self-medicate through overwork. Some use their children. Others self-medicate by spending. Seeking praise and approval is another form. Sometimes sports or even hobbies can become exercises in self-medication. I remember having dinner at a couple’s house and the husband showing me his woodshop in the basement. He offered, “Whenever I have a bad day this is where you will find me.” His wife, who at the very mention of the woodshop suddenly grew quite tense, seemed to think he had a lot of bad days. There is no limit to how we can take God’s good gifts for our life and allow them to place us in chains.

The unavoidable shortcoming of self-medication is that we are using an earthly tool to address a spiritual problem. Imagine if while suffering from a sore throat you went to a doctor, and rather than prescribing an antibiotic he suggested, “Here is a hammer. I want you to use it. Hit yourself in the head and you won’t feel the pain in your throat.” You would think him crazy. Yet that is what many of us do. We divert our attention using a tool for an unintended and ultimately dangerous purpose. How can we know if we have strayed into the dangerous practice of self-medication? Has our pain been redeemed in any way? Do we see any evidence in it of the crucified and resurrected God’s magnificent and manifold ability to wring good from evil? Is His good plan for my life any more clear? If not, the chances are great that we have not allowed Him to touch our pain and we are relying on an earthly tool to achieve a spiritual end.

Meanwhile, there stands Jesus, the Great Physician, waiting patiently, ready to heal us. The woman with the flow of blood spent all she had seeking out doctors for twelve years, when she only needed to reach out and touch the hem of His garment. Jairus trusted Jesus to restore His dead daughter and she lived. “Only believe,” Jesus promised, “and she will be well.”

Jesus is greater than your pain. “For I will restore health to you, and your wounds I will heal, declares the Lord.” (Jeremiah 30:17)

### **Questions for reflection:**

- What forms of self-medication do you use in your life? How are you in bondage by it?
- How have you seen God redeem disappointment in your life?
- Do you believe Jesus is greater than your pain?

**Prayer:** Lord God, please release me from my chains. I have compounded my pain by seeking earth-bound comfort for a spiritual wound. I have taken your good gift and turned it into my master. Jesus, you are the Great Physician. I know you are greater than my pain and can heal me; redeem my pain for your glory and my good. Send your Holy Spirit to that dead place in me and bring a resurrection. Amen.



## March 1: “Your kingdom”

Matthew 6:25-34

After following the devotionals last week, you may be experiencing a greater measure of freedom than you have for some time. The Holy Spirit may have worked in your life to help you lay down some sinful weights and reach across the heavenly boundary to achieve a new level of intimacy with the Father. It is that for which we were intended. Paul wrote, “For you were called to freedom.” Now the question is how do we keep that freedom? We must learn, slowly and with unyielding determination, to eliminate the word “mine” from our vocabulary and employ its polar opposite: “Your.”

That little word “Your” is very important. At the same time, it can be very difficult. “Mine” is equally as important and much easier—at least at the outset. As we learn to eliminate the latter, over time, the two flip places. “Your” becomes easier and easier and “mine” becomes increasingly difficult. A “My” world is a world of scarcity, tight fists and, ultimately, slavery to those things we thought we owned. Living in a “Your” world, particularly when we say, “Yours” meaning God’s world, means living in a world of abundance, generosity, and freedom.

The second line of the Lord’s Prayer teaches us to pray for God’s Kingdom to be built on earth. It is very simple. Everything we do either builds His Kingdom or seeks to build ours. Either we trust in the Father’s ability to provide and protect His children, or we strike out on our own, clutching our inheritance like the Prodigal Son, seeking to spend our Father’s blessings on our own pursuits. Before long, however, we find ourselves serving pigs, wishing we had it so good.

The real tragedy is that it is all so unnecessary. The Father promises that if we build His Kingdom first we will get all that our heart desires and more. Jesus promises that if we place our time, energy, and efforts into building His kingdom, He will take the necessities of life off our plate so we need not worry about them. Our first instinct is to ask, “Can He really do that?” Jesus also promises that God knows our needs even before we can speak them. Can the God who spoke into the nothingness of the dark and created light create abundance for us? Can the God who knit us together in our mother’s womb knit clothes for our back? Is there anything that the God who gave us His only Son will hold back from those whom He loves?

Scripture is clear and certain. The surest way to maintain and enhance our freedom in the Father is to learn to trust Him with the necessities of life, those things which consistently and persistently demand us putting a “my” or “mine” in front of them. The issue is trust. “My” and “mine” are so second nature to us that we simply don’t trust in the power of “Yours.”

This week we will put God’s promises to the test, using our freedom in the Father’s love, care, and grace to further His Kingdom. How free do you think you will feel at the end of the week?

### Questions for reflection:

- How hard is it for you to stop using the words “my” and “mine”?
- How have you used your freedom in the past? Did it make you feel more or less free?
- Why do you think it is so hard to let God provide for the basics rather than ourselves?

**Prayer:** My Heavenly Father, I confess that I selfishly see my freedom as a tool for license rather than liberty. I have made my life much more difficult by seeking first to build my own kingdom than by seeking to build yours. I do not trust you to provide as you promise. Forgive me, Lord. Set me free from doubt and fear so that I may seek first your Kingdom and your righteousness, and maintain the freedom for which you paid so dear a cost. Amen.

## March 2: “Your kingdom come” Isaiah 65:17-25

Jesus teaches us to pray for the Father’s Kingdom to come. What does that mean? The Word speaks often and in many places about the Kingdom, but Jesus seems to define it in His very next breath as the place where “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” The Kingdom takes hold and takes root wherever we endeavor to follow the Father’s will rather than our own. If we think a little further about this, it makes perfect sense because the sinful kingdom entered into this world when Adam and Eve followed their will rather than the Father’s.

What does it look like? As Joshua led Israel into the Promised Land, God told him to not allow His law to depart from him, to meditate on it day and night, and be careful to do all that is in it. Then the Father promised, “You will get where you’re going. Then you will succeed.” (Joshua 1:8, The Message)

The Kingdom of God first lives within those who seek it. Indeed, the Kingdom will not live within this world unless it first lives within those whom God has called to be set apart from the world. Leo Tolstoy simply wrote, “The Kingdom of God is within you.” As the Holy Spirit, God Himself, lives within us, so does His Kingdom. Our prayer of “Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” comes to mean: “Continue to build your Kingdom within me.”

God’s Kingdom is strong, easily able to overcome the sinful world surrounding us. When His Kingdom lives within us and we use our freedom in the Father to allow it to expand, we discover that we cannot help but build the Kingdom in the world around us as we simply go about our daily lives. We are brought into situations where God has prepared the ground for the Kingdom to be built. As God’s Kingdom grows within us, we discover an ability to impact the world around us to a greater degree than perhaps we ever imagined. Persons, places, and things within our circle of influence begin to bend to the shape of the Kingdom of God. This yoke is, at times, so easy and light that we simply get swept up in it, carried along. The transformation happens naturally, by degrees, and without us even noticing it, until the change is so firmly underway that we could not stop it even if we wanted.

This life and this world’s natural state is the Kingdom. The Father’s Kingdom is what the world is created to be and where we are created to be. The Kingdom is also this world’s destiny. It is what this world is intended to be again. The more we align ourselves with that coming Kingdom, the easier and more joy and peace-filled life becomes. The more we resist the coming of the Kingdom, the greater we find ourselves having to pull and push and force matters. The more joy and peace become elusive because we are resisting what our Father is doing.

Instead, He commands, “Allow me to work in you and through you” and, “Be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create.” (Isaiah 65:18)

### **Questions for reflection:**

- When was the last time you prayed for God’s Kingdom to be built in you?
- How strong and vibrant does God’s Kingdom seem to be within you?
- Are you resisting God’s Kingdom? How?

**Prayer:** Father, bring your Kingdom into my life. Allow your will to be done in my life as it is done in heaven. Lord, I know that at times I have resisted the coming of your Kingdom because I have been attempting to build my own. I have brought despair, frustration, and suffering into my life and my circle of influence. Forgive me, and show me just where I have resisted and how I can live the life you intend me to live. Father, let Your will be done in me! Amen.

## March 3: “Your kingdom come”

Matthew 13:34-50

In Matthew 13 Jesus gives five descriptions of the coming Kingdom: a mustard seed that becomes a giant tree which provides life and shelter; leaven hidden in a lump that leavens the whole batch; a net which catches every kind of fish in the sea; and a hidden treasure and pearl for which a man sells everything in order obtain it.

The unique thread between all these images is the abundance of the Kingdom, abundance that stretches the very limits of our imaginations. The Kingdom’s abundance: 1) provides shelter and nurture for all who seek to make their home in it; 2) changes the character and consistency of everything into which it is poured; 3) is a treasure worth sacrificing everything to obtain; and 4) catches in it more shapes and stripes of people than we ever imagined. The Kingdom blesses everything it touches—a blessing beyond belief.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught that God’s blessing “is laid upon man and it remains upon him until it is changed to a curse.” This Kingdom is coming. There is nothing we can do about it. It is as sure as the sunrise and as fixed as the springtime. We cannot slow it down. The Word teaches there is a day that is eternally purposed, and upon which the Kingdom is coming. How we receive, anticipate, live into, and prepare for it determines whether or not we will be cursed or blessed by it.

The curse is living a lesser life than what the Father intends for His daughters and sons, experiencing despair, doubt, and fear which is unworthy of and unsuited for those whom God loves. The curse is multiplied and magnified when we realize it too late to do anything about the manner and shape of the gifts and blessings we left unopened and untouched.

The blessing is the converse. Amid the brokenness and hopelessness of this sinful world, we experience gentleness and goodness, and we are vessels for kindness, joy, and love. We are able to access our Father’s best intent for His beloved ones.

But how do we live out that blessing? I know a man who was wrongly accused of a crime, a murder of a family member. Although he was never convicted, the police investigated him at length, and whether or not he would be charged hung in the balance for months. Isolated from and doubted by even those whom he loved, he described the experience as being as close to hell as he can imagine. He survived by practicing two things. He consistently reminded himself who he was. Despite how it appeared to some, he continued to remember this was not his reality. Secondly, he envisioned that day, consistently, when he would be set free and vindicated. He chose to live like that day had already come. He did not wait for the day itself, he lived as if it had already come to pass. Even in his darkest days, he never stopped believing that great day would arrive. Had he not practiced those two habits, he believed the experience, compounded upon the loss of a family member, would have devastated him.

The Kingdom is coming. Know the Father’s abundance, blessings beyond all beliefs by living like it is already here.

### Questions for reflection:

- What blessings of the Father’s Kingdom do you see in your life?
- Are you concerned that you may be cursing yourself by not living for the Kingdom? Why?
- What could you do today to live like the Kingdom is already here?

**Prayer:** My Heavenly Father, I know your Kingdom is coming. I know that you have fixed a day and a time when your Kingdom will break free on this earth. Help me by the power of your Holy Spirit to remember who I am and who you have made me to be. Even amid this broken and troubled world, help me to live into the reality of your Kingdom and experience the blessings that you so desperately desire to give your beloved ones. Amen.

## March 4: “Your kingdom come” Matthew 25:36-51

Are you ready for Jesus to show up?

Jesus teaches us to be ready for His Kingdom. “Stay awake,” Jesus said, “For you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” No one knows the day or the hour when the Kingdom of Heaven will overwhelm this broken world and flood out forever the sin and pain, death and decay. That great day when He comes again will come without warning, Jesus teaches. Two men will be working, going about their daily business, and one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be earning their daily bread at the mill and one will be taken. Jesus promises He is coming at an hour we do not expect.

We can look forward to that great day. But we should not let our expectation for that great day distract us from looking for Jesus to show up each day. The Father’s Kingdom sometimes breaks into our daily lives, without warning, in little ways, for brief shining moments, and then withdraws again. The theologian Karl Barth called these “little hopes.” These are the miraculous moments when heaven bows low and we can seemingly touch the face of God.

We should not sleep on Jesus and His Kingdom because Jesus, through the work of the Holy Spirit, routinely delivers His Kingdom into our human hands in ways and times we do not expect, flooding out our sin and crucifying our pain. It is important that we stay awake and watch for Jesus, expect His coming, and expect His acting. This is our hope and it is no “little hope.” It is our great and, indeed, our only hope that Jesus will deliver us from our “wretched body of death.” (Romans 7:24) The only question is, are we ready? Are we watching?

When I was a boy my grandparents used to drive across the country from California to Kansas in their motor home. Long before the days of cell phones, they would sometimes take detours on the way so we would only know within a span of three to four days when they would arrive. My sister and I, barely able to contain our excitement, would watch and wait by our living room picture window for hours. Every pair of headlights at the top of the hill was a portent of joy. Every cloud of dust a mile down the dirt road a harbinger of happiness. Our grandparents never failed to show up, although seldom at the time we expected. I discovered the great part about watching and waiting with eager eyes and a hopeful heart was that the anticipation becomes as transforming and joy-filled as the reality. As I have gone through life, I have found that I can endure far longer and with greater joy as long as I do not fail to watch and wait for Jesus to show up. What would it look like today to watch and wait for Jesus to show up in your life, bringing His kingdom with Him?

“Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you!” (Ephesians 5:14)

### **Questions for reflection:**

- Have you fallen asleep on Jesus? How do you know?
- What “great hopes” do you have for today that Jesus could bring to reality?
- How would life look different if you began watching and waiting for Jesus? What is preventing you?

**Prayer:** Our Father in Heaven, your very name is holy and glorious, and your Kingdom is coming. Help us to watch and wait for your coming. Let us be filled with hope as we expect your presence breaking into the routine reality of our everyday life. Lord Jesus, whether you enter as a gentle lamb or a roaring lion, ready us to receive you with glad and eager hearts, prepared to have our sin and pain washed away by the flood of your grace. Amen.

## March 5: “Your will be done on earth”

Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus said the Kingdom will be like three servants who receive part of their master’s estate to invest and multiply while he is away. Two of the men double their master’s investment, expanding his household and receiving his approbation and joy. The third acts out of fear and simply buries his master’s treasure in the ground, handing it back to him exactly as he received it, although likely a little dusty and dirty. The first two servants receive his approval but the third is cast out of his sight.

What would have happened had the first two servants, in their enthusiasm to expand the master’s holdings, lost what he gave them? What if they, despite their best efforts, simply handed back to him an empty sack? Would they have endured the master’s anger like that directed at the servant who buried his single talent?

No. The master’s joy does not come from us increasing his already abundant holdings. His total of 15 talents is a staggering amount of money, and Jesus leaves us with the distinct impression that this is merely the beginning of the master’s resources. The master’s joy comes from seeing his servants participate with him in building something valuable. His joy comes from his servants’ knowledge of his character, and because his joy overflows, that joy falls upon those servants who were willing at once to risk everything they were given.

We can give nothing to our Heavenly Father. The Word is very clear that He owns it all. “The silver is mine and the gold is mine declares the Lord of Hosts.” (Haggai 2:6) He does not need anything we can offer. However, it fills our Father with joy when we “risk” at once everything He has given us to build His Kingdom, and that joy overflows to us.

Without “risk” we never learn the Father’s character. Without “risk” we never see how He is able to provide. Of course, I put “risk” in quotes because when we risk at once everything the Father has given us to build His kingdom, we, in reality, put nothing in jeopardy. Our Heavenly Father from whom all blessings flow is able to repay and replenish even that which is seemingly lost to recklessness. In the Father’s economy nothing is wasted—all things belong to Him and all things are being made new.

The real risk comes from failing to risk at all. We may sympathize with the third, more sober, servant who simply protects the master’s own. But this is not how the Master would have it. It is a dangerous thing to attempt to manage our own relationship with the Father. Either the Father has us on his terms or not at all. It is He who lays the groundwork to approach us, not we who lay it for Him. Augustine said, “Thou drawest near to none but the contrite in heart.”

Risk your love, your time, talent, and treasure today to build the Father’s Kingdom and see how the Father returns all good things to you—pressed down, shaken together, and running over.

### Questions for reflection:

- Are you afraid to risk for the Kingdom? What do you fear losing?
- Do you understand the Father’s character, or are you robbing yourself of His joy?
- What can you risk today to build the Father’s kingdom?

**Prayer:** My Father in heaven, I know I have risked too little. I have comfortably grasped your good gifts rather than risking them to build your Kingdom. Lord, I know that in holding on so tightly I have taken the greatest risk of all, not knowing you. Set me free, God, to do more than just protect my own. Set me free to realize everything belongs to you and all things return, renewed and redeemed, to you. Set me free from my fear of failure so that I experience your overflowing joy. Amen.

## March 6: “on earth as it is in heaven”

John 1:29-51

Are your expectations for your Heavenly Father too low? Do you believe that He will make all things new but you? The Father’s Kingdom breaking into the world is not just something that is global, affecting the entire world. It is also personal, impacting our lives at a deep, intimate level. When John the Baptist pointed out the Lamb of God, Jesus, to his own disciples, Jesus asked them, “What are you seeking?” John called Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, but Jesus’ mission for the entire world in no way takes away from His concern for these individual men. Somehow it is easier to see the Lord of the cosmos feeding the hungry and ending war and poverty than it is to see Him breaking our bonds of despair, anger, and our never-ending list of shortcomings and personal sin. This is why Jesus demands that we call God “Father” rather than merely Lord. The God of all Creation wants us to know that He loves the parts of the whole.

“What are you seeking?” Jesus asks. We may have sought for so long that we have long since given up the object of our desire as a flight of fancy or a dream, first, merely deferred and, finally, denied. Of course, not every desire we dream is God’s design. But the Word is clear that if we delight in the Lord, He will give us the desires of our heart. (Psalm 37:4) Be still for a moment and allow the astonishing truth of that promise to soak into your soul, that the Father not only knows the deepest desires of your heart but is inclined to bring those desires to pass. The only thing that stands in the way of it coming to be is our insistence upon settling for our lesser desires, utilizing our own limited abilities. If our expectations of our Heavenly Father are limited, it may very well be because He has lovingly and graciously accepted the limited role we have given Him in our lives. So our relationship is limited as is our understanding. The Father’s usual course is to respect the boundaries which we set for Him. He is patient and willing to wait until we simply run out of our own answers and give ourselves over saying, “Father, your will be done.”

When we raise our expectations for the Father we see His Kingdom break through in our lives, simply by taking Him at His word. Learning to take our Father at His word is an ever-deepening journey that draws us into greater levels of trust and intimacy. When we set the Lord before us, we will not be shaken.

This trust begins with allowing Him to provide for our daily needs, laying aside our desperate, animal-like groping for sustenance, seeking first the Kingdom of God, and allowing the Father to simply provide for His children out of His abundance. To that we will turn next week.

### Questions for reflection:

- What are your expectations for the Father? When was the last time you had high expectations?
- What are you seeking from this life? Is this close to the desire of your heart? Or, have you settled for something less?
- What is your level of trust and intimacy with God? What is in the way of it being greater?

**Prayer:** Our Father in Heaven, your name is Holy. Allow your Kingdom to break through in my daily life. I have not trusted in your good plan for my life. I have not set you before me and I have allowed my trust to be shaken. Raise my trust for you, Father! Help me to take you at your word so that I may learn to lean on your promises rather than my own potentiality. Clear away my man-made boundaries. Break through walls of conceit so that I may have an ever-increasing intimacy and love for you. Amen.

## March 8: “Give us”

### Psalm 62

The philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “Trust thyself. Every heart vibrates to that iron string.” I think he is right, but the question is, “Is that our best self? Is that God’s heart for us?” I do not believe it is.

Self-sufficiency is a marvelous fiction. We must plead, “Give me,” to someone or something in order to survive. We may push back against this, vainly believing we are a man or a woman unto ourselves, but that is a fantasy. Every breath we draw testifies that we are deeply connected to this world, more than we care to admit. The great human vanity is the indulgent illusion that we, along with all the beauty and provision that envelops us, are together the product of some serendipitous cosmic accident, so we are divorced from all responsibility and, hence, dependency before a Maker. This is nothing but a rusty cage.

God’s heart of grace is to break down all our illusions of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, help us come to realize our total dependence upon Him, and set us free. Brick by brick God desires to tear down to its roots the cracked foundation of self-reliance and rebuild, in its place, a new foundation of total dependence upon our Father, with His Son Jesus as the cornerstone—whose very presence in this world demonstrates beyond any shadow of a doubt that there is nothing our Father will not give us or do for us.

If we are blessed, we will arrive at the point where we are broken and we see no alternative but to wait for the Lord in silence, our heart poured out before Him, learning to trust in Him at all times. The more we are dependent upon our Heavenly Father, the less we are dependent upon this broken world. One is a slave master, who will seek to take from us all we have. The other made Himself a slave, giving us all He had to set us free.

Those two little words, “Give me,” do not roll so easily off the tongue. We are deeply scripted to want to do it on our own. From the time we are toddlers many of us have sought to do it ourselves. One of the first sentences we learn is, “I can do it.” Yet, a deeper stream runs within, a stream that knows the joy of allowing our Heavenly Father to meet our every need, to find our sustenance and satisfaction in His sovereignty. There is a great comfort, a miraculous peace in learning to trust in the Lord wholeheartedly and stand before Him with flattened palms turned up to heaven, simply pleading, “Give me.” There is a freedom here too—a freedom that defies reason. But we are never more bathed in freedom than when we admit our total reliance and dependence upon our Heavenly Father. Outstretched palms before our Heavenly Father deliver us from the two most devastating consequences of sin: want and fear.

**“He is my only rock and my salvation, my fortress. I shall not be greatly shaken.”**

#### **Questions for reflection:**

- How much do you trust yourself to provide day by day? Is that trust grounded in anything more than your own capacities and abilities?
- Have you ever found yourself in a position of total dependence upon God? What happened?
- What would it take to turn your palms upward toward God and say, “Give me”?

**Prayer:** My Heavenly Father, give me what I need today. Break the bars of this rusty cage in which I have trapped myself. Brick by brick, tear down to the roots of my cracked foundation of self-reliance and rebuild, in its stead, a foundation of absolute dependence upon you. My Lord and my God, flatten my palms and turn them upward toward you so that I may receive those good gifts which you have prepared for me since before you spoke into the darkness and created light. Amen.

## March 9: “Give us” 1 Chronicles 29:10-19

Part of seeing God as Father is understanding that everything we have comes from Him—especially the simple, daily things, the things which are so prevalent and automatic because they are so necessary. We cannot possibly understand our posture of absolute dependency and the Father’s absolute, prodigious provision until we face being deprived of our daily bread—at least for a time.

Ask anyone who suffers ill health, chronic pain, or depression how much they appreciate having the veil lifted even for a brief time. When I was in my early twenties, I lived for a time with no income coming in and no means by which to buy food. I did have a job but they could not pay me until they received a grant. I was too proud to ask my earthly father for any money. That summer I lost 25 pounds, in part, from having too little to eat. Every time I had a meal I realized how special it was and I was filled with gratitude—even if I did not always credit my Heavenly Father as I should have.

David was grateful to God for everything He had been given. It would have been easy for him to consider himself a self-made man. He had gone from being a skinny-armed shepherd boy, the least of seven brothers, to Israel’s greatest king and forerunner to the Messiah, Jesus. But this is not how David saw it. Maybe because he had come from so little, he understood how much his Heavenly Father had given him. Near the end of his life he prayed, “Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours....In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great, and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God.”

God as Father obliterates the deceit and conceit of the self-made individual. None of us can rightfully claim such a title. It is God who owns all things—the power, glory, and majesty, in the heavens and the earth, all the way down to the little things. In reality, each of us is an overwhelming collection of little things, knit together by the Father’s careful stitch. Because everything belongs to the Father we are in a permanent posture of saying, “Give us.” Of course the wonderful news here is that the Father’s unshakeable and immovable character is bent toward our good. He is generous beyond all measure and that generosity is especially and glaringly revealed when we learn to utter those two important words, “Give us.” As we learn to ask the Father, the beauty of especially the little things becomes more and more apparent. We also become broken of the terrible conceit and spiritual dead-end of believing that we did it ourselves. Nothing robs us of our relationship with our Heavenly Father, and becoming all we have been made to be, more than that perspective.

How strange and marvelous that coming to an understanding of absolute dependence would set us free, while believing ourselves to be self-made and independent would bind and enslave us miserably and irrevocably.

### Questions for reflection:

- When was the last time you asked the Father to give you something simple, something we often take for granted?
- Is gratitude sometimes a problem for you? Can you name 10 things for which you are grateful to God? Can you name 20? 50? 100?
- How free do you feel today? Would a change in your circumstances or change in your perspective make a bigger difference?

**Prayer:** Yours, O Father, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor, and even our daily bread, come from you. Now I thank you, my Father and my God, and I praise your glorious name. Amen.



## March 10: “Give us this day”

### Psalm 136

For most of us, it is not enough just to know that God will provide. We want to be able to look ahead and see exactly from where our next meal will be coming. Just receiving our daily bread does not satisfy us. We want monthly, yearly, life-long bread.

When we were living in Kansas City, we received a tremendous snowfall on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, more than a foot fell and blanketed everything in a pure, pristine white. Before dawn on the 26th I set out on a hike along the trails near our home. I literally saw no other person that morning and the tracks I made were the first sign of anyone at all. I stopped at a steel bridge over a stream and just bathed in the stark beauty of it all. But even as I appreciated this incredible scene, there was a little bit of sadness knowing that it would soon be gone.

When Jesus took Peter, James and John up on the mountaintop and He was transfigured, showing His heavenly glory, and was joined by Moses and Elijah, Peter wanted to set up camp and stay awhile. “Lord, let me make three tents,” he requested.

The temptation with stockpiling the Father’s blessings is that we come to depend and rely on them, perhaps even worship them rather than the God who provides. There are two problems with this. First, the blessings of this world are not built to last. They are temporary, finite, easily dismissed or damaged and ultimately disappointing. Unfortunately, this is a lesson many of us are forced to learn and re-learn again and again. Secondly, when we worship the blessings, we neglect the one Who blesses and we become greedy for more rather than generous with much.

The Psalmist is clear about whom we can rely upon this day and every day, “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.” (Psalm 136:1) He then goes to catalogue and recount a laundry list of the Father’s great works for His people: creation, delivery from slavery in Egypt, parting the Red Sea, defeating kings and kingdoms, and giving the Promised Land to His people. It is quite a lengthy and impressive list. 2500 years later we could add much to it—including Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Father’s character is consistent. He, unlike us, is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The greatest indicator of what He will give us this day and tomorrow is what He has given us in the past. Are you tempted to fear? Remember how most of your fears prove groundless. Are you tempted to doubt? Remember how the Father delivered you? Are you led to despair? Recall the reason for the hope that is in you.

God’s grace is new every morning. To be truly free and become all He has created us to be, we must learn to love and rely upon Him, not upon His blessings.

Which is greater? The gifts or the giver? We can learn anew every morning.

#### **Questions for reflection:**

- Are you tempted to stockpile God’s blessings?
- Why is it so much easier to trust in the gifts rather than the giver?
- What has God given you today that you did not have yesterday?

**Prayer:** Our Father in Heaven, give us this day your blessings. Forgive me, Lord, when I have come to love your gifts more than You. I am tempted to clutch and keep what has come freely and abundantly from your open hand. Make me generous so that I may come to understand just how generous you are with me. Help me to remember how you have provided at every turn, yesterday and today, so that I may trust you more fully tomorrow. Amen.

## March 11: “our daily bread”

### Exodus 16

Merely receiving our daily bread is not enough. What we do with our daily bread is a question of utmost importance. God is intimately concerned with how we choose to use the gifts He blesses us with, especially our daily gifts. Most of us do not want to squander our unique gifts and talents, the big gifts with which we are blessed. We don't want to squander the gifts people notice--a musical gift, a gift of leadership, athletic or speaking ability, or an artistic talent. Some of us will spend tens of thousands, maybe even hundreds of thousands of dollars developing those gifts.

Of greater importance to God and to who we become, is how we use His daily bread—those routine, even mundane gifts with which we are showered daily. In the wilderness God blessed His people every morning with manna from heaven. Although this sounds miraculous to us, and it was, time and repetition makes the miraculous routine. Some of God's people, born in the wilderness, would have only known life with manna! Manna every morning would have seemed monotonous. Still, God gave them careful instruction about how to use it. Gather it daily. Eat as much as you like. Do not leave any until morning, or it will go rotten. Gather twice as much the day before the Sabbath.

What are some mundane, monotonous gifts received daily, and how does our Heavenly Father care desperately about their use? What about time? The Puritans emphasized industry, making good use of the time we have been given, not taking God's good gift of this day for granted. Proverbs teaches, “Look to the ant, consider her ways and be wise, without any chief she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest.” (Proverbs 6:6-8) We usually do not appreciate the gift of time until the clock is running out.

What about the gift of our minds? What a gift to be able to think intelligently and creatively! To envision things that will yet come to pass! Only human beings share this privilege with God. The Word teaches, “Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 2:5) What about the gift of abundance? For all of human history, save for the last few generations, and even then not everywhere on the planet, people have spent the majority of their waking hours obtaining food. Not so with most of us. Most of us are freed from that laborious concern. We worry many times over about eating too much rather than too little.

What about the gift of redemption? There is no greater threat to joy and even our health than carrying around the weight of guilt. More lives than we can count are crushed by the weight of sin. As children of our heavenly Father, our sins are forgiven, expunged from the heavenly record by the blood of Jesus Christ. For thousands of years people have gone to exorbitant lengths of sacrifice, giving over blood and treasure and time, to see their sin forgiven. Instead, our Heavenly Father promises, “Come to me all who labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28) Rather than making atonement ourselves, at a cost we cannot afford, atonement has been made on our behalf. We must only believe and receive.

“Thanks be to God for His inexpressible gift!” (2 Corinthians 9:15) May we use them well daily.

#### **Questions for reflection:**

- What daily bread from the Father do you take for granted?
- What careful instruction from the Father are you missing?
- How could you make better use of God's gifts of time, redemption, abundance, and your mind?

**Prayer:** My Heavenly Father, give us this day our daily bread. By the power of your Holy Spirit help me to use even the gifts I consider to be mundane and monotonous for your glory. Forgive me for paying attention to only the unique gifts, the gifts that I consider great and singular. Set me free to use your daily bread to give honor and glory daily to your Holy name. Amen.

## March 12: “Give us this day”

Deuteronomy 8:1-10

What is our daily bread? What is that thing that we require daily to survive? Of course we all need food and water to survive. We cannot survive long without light. We can survive only seconds without air to breathe. In a movie I saw a few years ago, the villain, as he contemplated wiping out something that he desperately needed in order to eliminate a threat, mused, “There are levels of survival we are willing to accept.” What level of survival are you currently accepting?

This is an important question because, if we are to believe Deuteronomy, we may currently exist at a level that our Heavenly Father in no way intends for us. Just as the Israelites received manna afresh every morning, we cannot neglect to receive the Word that the Father offers us daily. We do not live by bread alone, but by every Word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. Few of us would consider going a day without eating or drinking. It is painful. We break down. Yet far too many of us go days, weeks, even months without ever seeking a Word from the Lord, either in prayer or Bible study. Immediately, many of us read this statement and we feel a wave of guilt. “I know I should pray more,” “I know I should read my Bible more,” we say, hanging our heads in shame.

If guilt is our overwhelming emotion, it is proof we are starving, accepting a very low level of survival as our reality. We have gone so long without God’s Word that we don’t even know that we miss it. Imagine going for a day without eating a meal and someone pointing out that fact and feeling guilty for it. Rather than feeling guilty, we would be hungry and probably have a pain in our stomach. We would be tired. We would be irritable as our blood sugar dropped. We have a real example of this in Martha, who, rather than sitting at Jesus’ feet and allowing herself to be taught, ran around the house doing things. She asked Jesus to rebuke her sister Mary and Jesus replied with sympathy, “Martha, you are worried and anxious about too many things. You have neglected the good part.” If we feel anxious or worried, chances are we have neglected the good part too.

We might have lived this way for so long, not seeking to feast on the Word of God daily, that we don’t know anything different. We are wasting away spiritually, starving our soul, accepting an anemic level of life the Father does not intend. This should not make us feel guilty. It should make us sad, maybe even angry at the missed opportunity, and, perhaps, even determined to do something differently. Guilt should be among the last things we feel. Guilt is usually paralyzing—especially when it is unredeemed.

Place that guilt at the foot of the cross. Lay it aside and go after the abundant life the Father intends by allowing Him to feed you daily with every Word that proceeds from His mouth.

### Questions for reflection:

- Is seeking God’s Word through prayer and Bible study a part of your daily life? Why not?
- What evidence do you have that you are starving for God’s Word? What level of survival have you accepted?
- How can you lay aside your guilt and go after God?

**Prayer:** Our Father in Heaven, I am starving for your Word. I have filled myself with other things and neglected the abundant feast of your truth and grace you spread out before me daily. Help me to lay aside my guilt and go after you. Set me free from the junk food I use to fill my soul and feed my spirit, and allow me to dine on the riches of your Word. Amen.

## March 13: “our daily bread”

Matthew 14:13-20

What happens when our daily bread seems to fall short of our daily needs? Not having enough to eat is something most of us know very little about, but many of us are increasingly learning about not having enough to pay our bills, afford car repairs, or even keep our homes. Some of us know what it is like to not have our daily allotment of patience or peace or health or joy. What do we do when what the Father provides does not seem to be enough?

Jesus faced this very dilemma when He was teaching in a desolate place. More than 5,000 people had followed Him, and there was nothing to eat as it too rapidly became evening and time for dinner. They had only five loaves of bread and two fish between them. Jesus took the fish and the bread and did three things. First, He gave thanks. Second, He looked to heaven. Third, He broke them.

When we give thanks for what we have, especially when it seems to be too little, that meager amount seems to expand. Of course, it does not usually increase in size or mass, but instead of focusing upon what we do not have, our attention is seized upon what we do have. This relieves us of so much, including worry. Paul teaches a consistent message in Philippians when he commands, “do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:6)

When we look to heaven, we acknowledge that our resources extend far beyond our own meager human boundaries. Instead, we call upon the limitless resources of our heavenly Father who is far more ready and able to give than we are to even receive. When we are faithful in looking beyond what we can merely do to ourselves and instead rely upon God, the Word promises us that He “will open the windows of heaven for you and pour down a blessing until there is no need.” (Malachi 3:10)

When we allow what we have to be broken, repurposed and redeemed for the Father’s use, we discover that He is able to do far more with it than we can imagine. This includes us. Sometimes before God blesses us, He breaks us. The author Liao Yiwu tells a story about a Chinese Christian mother who tried to provide for her family of six children while her pastor husband was in prison. One day she could not find anything to feed her children and she fell to the floor and prayed, “God, we don’t have rice. We don’t have flour. We don’t have anything to eat. It is going to be like this tomorrow. If you think that we should suffer like this, we will accept it. I will feed them with hot water.” The next day a woman she did not know showed up looking for her husband. The unknown woman handed her an envelope with 50 yuan in it—more than enough to feed the family for two months. Routinely, following that broken prayer, for the next twenty years, they received anonymous and unsolicited gifts of cash in the mail to sustain their family.

**“Set your hopes not on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.” (1 Timothy 6:17)**

### **Questions for reflection:**

- When was the last time that it seemed you did not have enough? What did you do?
- Do you have difficulty giving thanks to God? Why or why not?
- Have you ever been broken? How did God use it to bless you?

**Prayer:** My heavenly Father, you are the Great Provider. When we rely upon you, you open the windows of heaven and pour out your blessing until there is no more need. Help me, Father, to give thanks. Help me, Father, to look to you and your limitless resources rather than depending upon my limited self. Help me to rely upon and trust in you rather than myself. Amen.

## March 15: “Forgive us”

Hebrews 10:1-17

The previous clause in the Lord Jesus’ prayer begins, “Give us.” This next line begins by saying, “Forgive us.” As difficult as it is for some of us to say, “Give us,” it may be more challenging to say, “Forgive us.” We may not often link these two words but they are deeply connected. “Forgive” is simply the same word, give, with the prefix “for” attached at the beginning, meaning “away.”

To forgive, at root, means to give away. When someone forgives they give away a claim they rightfully hold against someone else. They give away anything they might be able to hold over someone’s head at any future date. If you have ever been stopped by a highway patrol officer and let off with a warning, you do not worry about that same officer pulling you over again 15 miles down the road and saying, “I changed my mind.” Perhaps the most common way we think of this is as a “debt forgiveness” program. Debts from mortgages, credit cards, student loans, and even borrowing between nations are sometimes forgiven by the lender. Most of the time forgiven debts are ones that the lender had very little chance of seeing repaid anyway—so they are actually forgiving very little.

Of course, Jesus spoke about another kind of debt forgiveness program. “Forgive us our debts,” is what He taught us to pray. There are two amazing elements of Jesus’ command. The first is the strength of His words. He does not tell us to pray, “Hold off on our debts,” or even, “Give us a little more time to pay, just until we get our act together.” Jesus commands us to ask for any present or future claim against our debts to be wiped away forever. Those sins from our teens and twenties, last year, last week, yesterday are gone forever—if we simply pray for them to be forgiven. The Word often speaks strongly to this point. Paul taught that God made us alive together with Him, “...by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside nailing it to the cross.” (Colossians 2:13-14) God promised the prophet Jeremiah, “I will remember their sin no more.” (31:33) If our Heavenly Father, against whom every sin is committed, does not keep a record of wrongs, who has the right? No one. We are free, and anyone holding our sins and trespasses against us will find themselves in a very uncomfortable place, at odds with Almighty God.

The second astounding element of Jesus’ command is that the very one who would offer us forgiveness, indeed the only one who has the authority, is telling us to do it! When I was in seminary I was offered a summer job by the school. It did not pay enough so I turned them down. Not long after that I was called into the Vice-President’s office who made me a remarkable offer. “How much do you need to make it this summer?” he asked. I hemmed and hawed and demurred not wanting to mention the exorbitant sum in my mind. Finally, he asked, “Can you write it down?” So I scrawled a number on a piece of paper, flipped it over, and slid it across the desk. He picked it up and without a moment’s hesitation he said with a smile, “Okay. Done.” It was an insider deal. Jesus brokers the ultimate insider deal. He who commands, insists, and pleads with us to ask for forgiveness is the very one, the only one, with the power to give it. “It is finished,” He said.

### Questions for reflection:

- Are there any sins which you are still hanging on to, clinging to them because you believe God remembers them?
- What sin debt would you like most to see God cancel? Have you asked Him?
- Why would any of us hold on to a sin which Jesus pleads with us to give up to Him?

**Prayer:** My Lord and my God, I know that I have been slow to ask you to forgive my debts. Your grace is astounding, your willingness so wonderful that I am slow to believe. Help me, my Savior, to do as you command. Help me, Father, to understand that you keep no record of wrongs, so neither should I. Please set me free from my own shackles so that I may become all you have created and restored me to be. Amen.

## March 16: “Forgive us”

Romans 3:9-26

I was once preaching through the Ten Commandments and a woman came up to me and said, “I am really not enjoying this sermon series. Nothing in it applies to me because I have not broken one of these yet.” I told her to hang on, that we would get to one eventually. She did not care for that response.

Speaking the words, “Forgive me,” may be more difficult than saying, “Give me.” “Give me,” of course, simply states that I need something from you. “Forgive me” says that I already took something from you. Most recognize the difficulty of this—an 80’s rock band crooned, “Don’t think sorry’s easily said.” From the time we are little children, even coming to the point of saying, “I was wrong, forgive me,” is incredibly difficult. We must come to the point of seeing no other alternative before we will allow those words to have a home in our heart, let alone escape our lips.

Why is it so difficult? And why is it so difficult when we recognize that we are far from perfect? Knowing we are imperfect and recognizing how we are imperfect are two very different things. Waving a hand and brushing off imperfection like dry flakes of skin from our shoulder is easy. There is even a certain amount of pride in generally claiming our imperfection. We are a big enough person, comfortable enough with ourselves and the balance and bulk of our attributes to say, “Well, on the whole, I am imperfect, just like you or anyone else.” This is also easier because, in comparing ourselves to the rest of humankind, we may fare pretty well. Unfortunately, the rest of humankind is not our standard. Pointing our finger introspectively toward a specific offense against someone, especially a specific offense against the eternal law of God, even God Himself, is something else. That kind of thing is much, much more difficult. When we name our sin, when we name our offense— it seems we stand alone. Or do we?

The Father stands with us even in our sin. Jesus Christ is proof of that. Paul teaches, “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8) But until we say, “Father, forgive us,” we attempt to stand alone, apart from God and everyone else. Even admitting our general deficiency and seemingly standing with the rest of imperfect humanity, we stand apart, because we are still standing upon pride and apart from God. When we plead, “Father, forgive me,” we stand with the Father because we recognize our deep connection and deep purpose in Him. We do not exist to demonstrate our own righteousness. We exist to show God’s righteousness. We do not exist to show our glory. We exist to glorify the Father. A woman or man in bondage cannot demonstrate God’s righteousness or holiness. We can never be set free for this great purpose until we unreservedly and unflinchingly confess before God, “I have sinned and I fall short of your glory.” As difficult and painful as it may be, it is necessary before God—not for His satisfaction but for our sanctification and regeneration.

“Let’s benefit from the mercy of the one who spares us for our improvement,” wrote Pope Leo. The God of the cross has the power to turn even the sin we tremble to name into a triumph to glorify His name.

### Questions for reflection:

- Do you have trouble saying, “Forgive me”? Why can it be so difficult?
- Is there any sin in your life which you tremble to name?
- What would your life resemble if you were set free from a sin which weighs on your conscience?

**Prayer:** My Father in Heaven, set me free. Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am a sinner. I am not righteous. I have not sought after you. I have turned aside. I have fallen short of your glory. Forgive me, Lord. By the sacrifice of Jesus and His righteousness, set me free, transform my sin and shortcomings into pathways of grace so that I may be a vessel for your Holy Spirit and an instrument of your glory. Amen.

## March 17: “Forgive us our debts”

Luke 15:11-31

Why is seeking forgiveness before God necessary? Doesn't the Lord of the cosmos who holds all things in the palm of His hand, the King of all creation, have better things to do than sit around waiting for an insignificant single human being to admit his or her error before Him? Is the Lord of all the seas and sky standing there with arms folded, toe-tapping, growing in anger and fury until we finally succumb? No.

He is waiting. Patiently. Our Heavenly Father is waiting because He wants desperately for us to know Him, for us to experience His intimate love again. He is not the obstacle to this Father and child reunion. We are. It is our stubborn insistence on clothing ourselves in our own shredded robes of righteousness that creates the wall of separation between ourselves and our Heavenly Father. He has already forgiven us. He has already prepared the way for our return and He stands ready to clothe us in His splendor. We do not confess to be forgiven. We confess because we are forgiven. We confess to experience forgiveness. This is so far from our human experience of seeking forgiveness that we want to reject it.

Notice the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. The son demanded his inheritance early, spent it freely and licentiously. He took a job feeding pigs and wished he had it as good as the pigs. He came to his senses and returned home, hoping to become merely a slave. Instead, his father saw him while he was still a long way off and ran to him, falling on his neck, hugging and kissing him. Only then does the son say, “Forgive me.” He had forgiven His son before he even saw him, before the son could admit any wrong-doing.

That is covenant love. The difference between a covenant and a contract is that a covenant is kept regardless of the successful execution by both parties. A contract is revocable if one party does not live up to the terms of the agreement. If I do not pay my mortgage, for example, I can lose my house. Our Heavenly Father does not deal in contracts. He deals exclusively in covenants. How could an all-knowing God, who knows precisely how we will follow through on our part of the covenant agreement, deal in anything else? He is determined to uphold His end, even if we fail miserably in our part. Isaiah 30 promises, “Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you and therefore He exalts himself to show mercy to you.”

The Father's unyielding determination to be in relationship with his sons and daughters stuns us. He will be our Father on His terms, not ours. He will allow for no pride to enter in, even the pride of recognizing the error of our ways and earning His love. Instead, while He waits in eternal splendor, our Father slowly and with relentless grace turns our steps, especially the wayward steps, in His direction—until our feet begin desperately running toward Him while we breathlessly exclaim, “My Father and my God!”

### Questions for reflection:

- Do you ever feel like you have to earn God's love? Why?
- To what shredded robes of righteousness are you stubbornly clinging?
- Can you think of any examples of covenant love in your lifetime? How is this a reflection of the Father's love?

**Prayer:** My Father in Heaven, forgive me for my debts. I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son or daughter. I have dressed myself in shredded robes of self-righteousness rather than claiming your holiness and your love for my life. Direct my steps toward you. Lead in your way back to your side, so that I may experience intimacy and glory with my Heavenly Father today and forever. Amen.

## March 18: “Forgive us our debts”

Matthew 18:21-35

What marvelous news that our Heavenly Father forgives our debts just for the asking! The Judge of all creation looks at us and pronounces the verdict, “Innocent,” simply for the asking. That is not because there is no eternal law, as some would have us believe, and all moral choices are equally valid. It is not because God simply looks the other way. To lay aside His eternal law would mean to lay it aside forever and throw the cosmos into absolute chaos. No, the Father looks at His children and pronounces us innocent because, when He looks upon us, He sees His only Son who became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God. We simply cannot fathom the depth of this costly Gospel.

We demonstrate to ourselves, the world, and our Father how much we understand and are grateful for this Gospel by how we extend its reach to others. More than just demonstrating the Gospel, we experience the Gospel by extending its reach to others. Indeed, we cannot know the Gospel without extending it, and even risk forfeiting the Fathers’ grand gift if we fail to do so.

Jesus told a parable about a servant who was forgiven a massive debt by his master, what would have been the equivalent of billions of dollars, something that no one could ever hope to repay. On the way out the door the servant saw a man who owed him a paltry sum, a minor fraction of what he had been forgiven only minutes before. That poor man could not pay the servant so he had him thrown into prison. His formerly forgiving master heard of this and had his servant jailed until he could pay his massive debt—virtually assuring he would never know freedom again. “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

The cost of the Father’s free grace is that we give up any claims we have against anyone else. Perhaps we say, “My offenses are not that great.” The Word is clear that whoever breaks one part of the law shatters the whole of it—a debt we cannot possibly repay. Maybe we claim, “You don’t know what they did to me. I will never forget.” Your Heavenly Father knows and He will give you the grace you need to forgive. Or we might even say through gritted teeth, “I want nothing to do with them ever again.” Giving grace does not always mean restoring the relationship. For our protection and others, sometimes God shuts doors. Giving forgiveness, and so extending the Gospel, simply means not carrying wrath, not necessarily a restored relationship—although we can always hope for total renewal and redemption. Amazingly, if we carry wrath against someone, we carry them with us. We sometimes have more of a relationship with people we despise than those we love. Of course, that relationship is not with the real person, but with a shadow, conjured up by our wounded soul. The surest way to wring the wrath from our soul is to saturate ourselves with prayer for them. Prayer for and wrath against someone cannot long occupy the same spirit. Even if we do not want to pray for them, even if we find uttering their name impossible, the Father will change our heart and transform our venomous wrath into victorious Gospel.

### Questions for reflection:

- Do you carry wrath for anyone in your heart? What is that wrath doing to you?
- Can you name some of the sins for which God has forgiven you this week?
- When was the last time you prayed for someone who wronged you?

**Prayer:** My Father in Heaven, forgive me of my debts as I forgive my debtors. I know that my sin has racked up a debt that I cannot possibly repay. Help me to claim the good news of your Gospel for myself by extending it to others. Help me to love my enemies and those who have wronged me. Fill me with your Holy Spirit so that I may pray for those who persecute me. Let not my heart be a repository of wrath but a vessel of your glorious grace. Amen.



## March 19: “as we forgive our debtors”

Psalm 37:1-13

A challenge to forgiving our debtors, those who sin against us, is when it seems they are getting away with it. Because we are created in the image of God, we have within us a sense of justice and righteousness, albeit marred, that rightly recoils when the evil prosper and the righteous suffer. Our overwhelming temptation is to enact our own brand of justice, to set things right according to the dictates of our own conscience and personal sense of right and wrong.

There is a time and a place for discerning right and wrong and holding others to account, but never in pursuit of wrath, and always with the aim of restoring to repentance by the means of grace. Many of us who are blessed can point back to a time when someone had the courage to challenge us to change. Forgiving our debtors does not preclude pointing out deficits, in love and humility.

But what happens when our debtor is in no way interested in reparation let alone repentance? What happens when an individual's sins against us, too numerous to count, seemingly mount day by day? Rather than clothing ourselves in wrath, we are to wear the cloak of forgiveness, turning them over to God. “Fret not yourselves because of evildoers, be not envious of wrongdoers! For they will soon fade like the grass,” sings the Psalmist. If people truly are engaged in evil and sowing seeds of suffering in God's world, we may be the least of their problems. Ultimately, they need not answer to us but to our Heavenly Father. The Word promises He will not long suffer evil. The Word assures us, “...in just a little while the wicked will be no more.”

It is so very easy to focus on those who wrong us rather than our Heavenly Father who is making things right. But when we follow that tragic path, we make two terrible mistakes. First, we underestimate God and give evil more power in this world than it deserves. This leads us away from grace and apart from our Heavenly Father. In this way evil does a double work on us—causing pain and distress twice. The second tragic mistake is denying God an opportunity to demonstrate His holiness and power. Again, the Psalmist promises, “Trust in the Lord and do good” and you will “dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness” and receive “the desires of your heart.” (Psalm 37:3-4) Jesus commanded, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” so that you may be known as sons and daughters of the Heavenly Father and know His rewards.

The God of all creation honors just intentions. We have within us a sense of justice, but justice must be justified, it must align with our Father's good and righteous command. Brother Lawrence spoke of justice this way, “We have a God who is infinitely good and knows what he is doing. He will come and deliver from your present trouble in His perfect time. Hope in him more than ever.”

### Questions for reflection:

- Is there anyone for whom you wish evil or harm because they have done evil or harm to you?
- Have you ever fallen prey to the temptation to exact your own kind of justice? What happened?
- Is there an enemy for whom you need to pray? What is preventing you?

**Prayer:** My Father in Heaven, I know that I have attempted to affect my own justice. I have set myself above those who have wronged me. I have refused to give the grace to my enemies that you have so freely given me. In doing so, I have made myself a prisoner, captive to wrath, and it eats away at my friendship and intimacy with you. Set me free to trust in you and do good so that I may dwell in the good and broad land you have set aside, and receive the desires of my heart. Amen.

## March 20: “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”

Philippians 3:12-21

The Christian life is not lived in the past. It is lived in the present and the future. Jesus’ command to give up any claim on our debts and the debts of others is clear testimony to that fact. As children of our Heavenly Father we can rest easy in knowing that our best days lie ahead, if we only trust the Father enough to lay aside the past.

Paul taught very clearly to press on to make the upward call of Christ Jesus our own. He said that he himself did this through following two practices: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead. Indeed, we cannot become everything the Father desires and intends for us to be as long as we allow the past any claim on our life.

This creeping and corrosive claim of the past happens in two ways, one quite obvious and the other quite subtle. Many of us are well experienced with allowing the pain of the past, both self-inflicted and otherwise, to determine our future. The surest sign that we have allowed the misfortunes or missteps of the past to have power over our future is the employ of those two short words that betray a long story: “Never again.” Of course, there are some things to which we should say, “Never again.” But our Heavenly Father will not redeem the shadow of something. He will only redeem the genuine article. If we move our pain to shadow too quickly, we risk the Father’s redemption of it.

Much more subtle is our dwelling upon and even idolizing the blessings of the past, wishing those times gone by were here again, and believing that nothing which lies ahead could ever match that left behind. Making an idol of our past is deadly to our future and our hope. Idolizing our past, at the expense of the present, transforms God’s good blessings into debts and deficits for the future. We cannot possibly strain forward to what lies ahead and grasp hold of the upward call of Christ Jesus while longing for what is no more. The tragedy is that the greatest clue to the Father’s good plan for our life is what He did for us, through us, and in us in the past. His character is consistent. Because He is the same yesterday, today, and forever, we can know that the past is simply a prologue, a foundation stone to the working out of the Father’s upward call for our life. Again, the Word is clear here, “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:6)

The working out of this good plan demands one thing from us—that we strain forward to what lies ahead and seize hold of Christ’s upward call. Jesus taught us something similar, saying, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:62)

We must look back as if we are looking at the sun, with a glance, and only then to better allow it to light our path ahead.

### Questions for reflection:

- Are there any past events, good or bad, to which you are hanging on?
- What would it take to let them go so you can take hold of the upward call of Jesus Christ?
- What good work is the Father working in your life? Are you on the path to completion?

**Prayer:** My Father in Heaven, bring about your Kingdom in me and through me, by allowing me to look ahead and seize your upward call. Help me to lay aside my past, not holding too tightly to my blessings nor failing to forgive or allow myself to be forgiven. I know that your character is consistent and you will bring to completion the good work that you have begun in me. Amen.

## March 22: “Lead us” Psalm 31

The focus of the final plea in the Lord’s Prayer turns toward maintaining our intimacy with the Father. Having recognized our sinful separation from Him, committing to build His Kingdom on earth, turning over the daily concerns of our life to His care, and then settling our unpaid debts—we now seek God’s power and protection to maintain our holiness, grow our friendship, and increase our intimacy with the Father.

We are in a constant battle over who will lead us—whether we will be led by ourselves or by our Heavenly Father. The great human deceit is that we can be the captain of our own ship and still be faithful to the Father. We cannot. The Word teaches that no one can serve two masters and be faithful to both—especially if one of those masters is our sinful self. We tend to admire and respect those people who seem to single-mindedly follow their own instincts against all odds, answering only to their own conscience. The poet Walt Whitman memorably wrote, “I sing of myself, and sing myself.”

Jesus teaches us that the key to maintaining and growing our intimacy with the Father is two simple words, “Lead us.” David confirmed this in the 31st Psalm when he sang, “For you are my rock and my fortress; and for your name’s sake you lead me and guide me.” In one respect it is difficult to see our problem here. Why would we not welcome the leading of our Heavenly Father whose Word makes clear that there is no good thing that He will withhold from us? With our limited understanding and capabilities, why would we not cast ourselves unreservedly upon the love and leading of Almighty God?

There is no rational explanation. But there is an irrational one—we want to be God. Being created in the image of God is not enough. Given a little taste of the divine simply whets our appetite. We should never forget that Eve took the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil so she could “be like God.” This is not our place. It subverts the natural, created order—the very order which God Himself called “very good.” This ill-fated and ill-founded desire is at the root of all sin against and separation from our Heavenly Father.

Our desire to be God is a perversion of our truest, deepest desire—to be with God. The more we follow our desire to be God, the further we are taken from that true and deep desire to be with God. In truth, every decision, every word, every breath comes down to this question: “Will I choose to be God or will I choose to be with God.” However, the Father simply loves us too much to allow us to live out this deadly illusion. This is why the great theme of the Old Testament is quite simply, “There is a God and He is not me.” This is the first principle we must practice if we want to be with God.

And this is perhaps why Jesus the man, while hanging on the cross, spoke these words from Psalm 31 for all humanity: “Into your hand I commit my spirit, you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.”

### **Questions for reflection:**

- Where have I chosen to lead myself rather than allowing my Heavenly Father to lead me?
- Why is wanting to be my own God so appealing? How have I acted on this?
- Where can I today allow the Father to lead me?

**Prayer:** My Father in Heaven, please lead me. I know that I have made myself out to be a god. I know that rather than choosing to be with you, I have made the drastic mistake of choosing to be you. This is not what I want. I want to be your child. Help me, Father, to allow you to lead and guide me. Allow me to let you be my rock and my fortress. Into your hand I commit my spirit. Redeem me daily, O Lord, my faithful God. Amen.

## March 23: “Lead us not into temptation”

Matthew 4:1-11

The Gospels teach that immediately after He was baptized by His cousin John, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit far out into the wilderness where He ate nothing for 40 days. At the end of those 40 days, when His flesh was at its weakest, He was tempted by Satan.

Satan first tempted Jesus to rely on material sustenance alone. “If you are the Son of God,” the Father of Lies said, “Command this stone to become bread.” Can you imagine the temptation of having eaten nothing for nearly six weeks and then facing the prospect of filling your stomach with delightful, fresh bread? Interestingly, Satan did not ask Jesus to do anything that broke one of the Ten Commandments. He was simply imploring Jesus to use His power to feed Himself, to meet His own needs. Don’t most people do that every day? “Where is the harm?” Satan implies.

Jesus knew better. “It is written,” He said, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Jesus knew where life springs from—the very Word of God that spoke into the darkness and created life and light. Jesus knows the purpose of humanity goes well beyond the survival of the fittest. One great human temptation is to surrender to materialism. We are constantly tempted to boil this life down to what we can merely see, taste, and touch. If it cannot feed our material appetites, we want no part of it, and even doubt its very existence. This is a common yet terrible mistake—to make material sustenance our savior.

None of this is to say that material things are unimportant or worse satanic. Escaping and embracing the world can both be equally destructive. The Bible does not teach self-denial as an end in and of itself, or as a sure pathway to enlightenment. We cannot “deny ourselves” alone into knowing God. We must do more than simply create a vacuum. “If anyone would come after me let him deny himself,” Jesus taught. But He followed it immediately with “...and take up his cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24)

There is a median. Augustine wrote: “Almighty God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you; so lead us by your Spirit that in this life we may live to your glory.” Our Heavenly Father uses the material things of this world, through both addition and subtraction, to demonstrate His character, bless us, and lead us to loving Him.

Jesus fought Satan’s lies with truth from Deuteronomy. In that book, only a few sentences after His quotation, is this command: “Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’ You shall remember the Lord your God.” (Deuteronomy 8:17-18) As tempting as it is to imagine ourselves to be free agents and actors, we cannot be sustained, either through a dependence upon or a denial of material sustenance alone. We must not allow ourselves to fall into the temptation that material sustenance is either savior or satanic. Instead, let us allow our Heavenly Father, through the goodness of His creation, to lead our restless hearts to the one in whom we will find our rest.

### Questions for reflection:

- By what material things are you tempted?
- Is your tendency to escape or embrace the world to bring yourself joy and peace?
- For what does your restless heart beat? Your Heavenly Father or something else?

**Prayer:** Our Father in Heaven, my heart is restless. I have sought salvation in sustenance and the material things of this world rather than in you. Lead my heart so that I may see your glory in the things of this world and worship you rather than them. Lead me not into the temptation that material things make all the difference. It is you who is Savior and Lord, not anything that you have made. Amen.

## March 24: “Lead us not into temptation”

Jeremiah 29:4-14

After Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, the devil employed his second temptation against our Savior and Lord—the temptation for certainty. Satan took Jesus to Jerusalem and set him on the top of the Temple Mount, at the very pinnacle, likely the southwest corner, hundreds of feet above the surface street. “If you are the Son of God,” he prodded, “throw yourself down. For it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.” (Matthew 4:5)

Satan tempted Jesus to perform a trick to make the Father demonstrate, and therefore prove his status as Savior, that He would allow no harm to come to His only Son. As with the first temptation, Jesus saw through the Evil One’s dark designs and replied using the light of God’s Word: “Again, it is written,” Jesus said, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Another great human temptation is for certainty in our circumstances. This is nothing more than forcing our Heavenly Father to prove over and over again His trustworthiness. This desire betrays a tremendous deficit of understanding in the Father’s character. The Father’s character is perfectly consistent. In Him, James teaches, “There is no variation or shadow due to change.” Hebrews states that “Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever.” The Father does not change His mind. The Father does not renege upon His promises or alter His plans to fit a change in circumstances. Changing our mind, turning away from our plans, renege on promises are human characteristics. Because of this, with human beings, we feel the need to consistently check in, touch base to see that no one’s intentions have changed, to ensure that promises will be honored.

In our relationship with our Heavenly Father this is unnecessary, unproductive, and unhealthy. In the wilderness, Jesus did not need certainty from His Father about His status. A mere month and a half prior, at His baptism, the heavens opened, the Spirit of God descended on Him, and a voice proclaimed: “This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.” At the opposite end of the spectrum are the Israelites wandering in the wilderness of Sinai, who, after the Lord delivered them from slavery, parted the Red Sea, and rained manna afresh for them in the in the morning, still cried, quarreled, and tested God asking, “Is the LORD among us or not?” We must learn to see the Father as fundamentally different from ourselves. “Surely God is faithful,” taught Paul.

The great human conceit is that we can know and control the future. We cannot. We go to great lengths to achieve certainty, to minimize risk and danger, and attempt to manipulate the present circumstances to achieve a future hope. Still we know precious little about what is to be. But, we can know the Father. His character is certain. We can also build our relationship with Him and save ourselves untold tumult and grief, if we learn to trust in His character.

If we trust in the consistency of His character we can live by the Father’s signposts—those moments in time when He speaks His Word definitively and pours out His grace abundantly, and allow those moments to lead and guide us until the Father speaks His Word again. If we have certainty in the Father’s character, we will also have certainty in His good plan for our future.

### Questions for reflection:

- Why is holding certainty about the future so tempting?
- How are you attempting to manipulate your future rather than trusting the Father’s character?
- Can you name a time when the Father spoke His Word definitively to lead you?

**Prayer:** My Father, you are the rock of my salvation. Your character is sure and steadfast. You have given me a future and a hope. Help me to place my trust in you rather than seek to craft certainty in the circumstances of my life. Let me look for where your Word has been spoken and make that a benchmark of my existence, knowing that you have crafted a marvelous plan for my life. Amen.

## March 25: “Lead us not into temptation”

Deuteronomy 6:4-15

Satan’s third temptation for Jesus was for significance. He took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory and made Jesus a stunning offer: “All these I will give you, if you fall down and worship me.” There is something very shady and shifty about this incredible offer. The Word is crystal clear that none of this world belongs to Satan. The universe and its fullness belong to Jesus. He holds it all in the palm of His hand. Heaven is His throne and earth His footstool. Why was Satan offering Jesus something He already possessed? Was the enemy that desperate? Yes. But, Satan did have something to offer—significance without sacrifice. Significance and greatness come in many forms, including counterfeit forms. We are easily lulled and enticed by seeking to make our life count for something, to memorialize ourselves. However, Jesus taught the origins and roots of true greatness: “But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.” (Mark 10:43-44) The Son of God, the King of all creation, demonstrated this by making Himself a slave, being obedient to the Father even unto death on the cross.

Jesus also responded immediately to the third temptation, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.” Jesus knew that significance without sacrifice and servanthood is satanic. Significance not tempered by a love of the Father and a humility before others lists inexorably toward evil. This evil comes about because the Father has defined significance to include servanthood and sacrifice. They are endemic to greatness. By His divine command and fiat, servanthood and sacrifice are inseparable. We might as well attempt to create water using only hydrogen or oxygen. When we attempt to achieve significance without servanthood and sacrifice, we place ourselves in opposition to our Heavenly Father, and so choose a self-made, sinful path that leads us exactly in the opposite direction from our heart’s deepest desire.

Because we are created in the image of God, each of us desires significance and wishes to be recognized for who we are and leave a legacy. Our hearts are crafted to seek immortality. The Father made us that way, to want to be someone greater than average, to become significant. This is His heart for each of His sons and daughters. But His heart for us is a true significance, not a counterfeit imposter. It is a significance which does not shortcut servanthood, which does not create a way around the cross. Martin Luther King Jr. preached, “Anyone can be great because anyone can serve.”

However, even sacrifice and servanthood can become counterfeit—if they are not founded in and practiced for the glory of God. As the Word teaches, we must first worship and serve the Father. Authentic, sustainable sacrifice begins with intimacy with our Heavenly Father. Servanthood is grounded in worshipping in Spirit and truth, bending our knee and bowing down before Him. Sacrifice that does not begin at the feet of the Father and the base of the cross quickly becomes an end in itself, a false idol, and sinful bondage. Only by submitting ourselves to the will of our Father, allowing Him to fill our heart with grace and regenerate our soul with love, can we realize the significance He intends and for which we were made.

### Questions for reflection:

- In what ways have you sought significance? How have you been tempted to find it outside of the Father?
- Do you have any counterfeit significance? What would it take to give it to God?
- What would authentic worship look like in your life?

**Prayer:** My Father in Heaven, lead me not into temptation and deliver me from the evil conceit that I can find significance outside of my life in you, without worshipping and serving you only. Father, I am tired from sacrifice and servanthood because I have not first sought you. Forgive me. Help me to bow down and lay my burdens at your feet and at the base of the cross. Set me free so I may worship you in the Holy Spirit and your truth. Amen.

## March 26: “Deliver us”

### Jonah 2

The amazing promise of the Gospel is that as long as we have breath in our body, or even a thought surfing through our soul, we can cry out to our Heavenly Father, “Save me,” and He will. Multiple times in God’s Word He promises, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Even though Jonah languished in the belly of a beast, deep in the heart of the sea, ensconced in darkness, with his life fainting away, he knew that if he only cried out to the LORD that He would hear him in His holy temple and deliver him.

When we do not know the Father’s character, we harbor the secret terror that we can manipulate His grace and love so we may someday cry out to Him, “Save us,” and He will whisper back, “No.” We do not find this God in Scripture. Indeed, he exists only as a humanistic fantasy. I say a humanistic fantasy because such a god is only a human being writ large, painted on a greater canvas, with more powerful human passions and emotions. This god is created in the image of humanity rather than humanity created in the image of God.

It is also humanistic fantasy to think that we can manipulate God’s heart for us. We cannot make Him love us more or less. The Father is dismayed by our sin, but He is not discouraged or dissuaded. And He does not dismiss us in the dark abyss. When we cry out, the Father always delivers His sons and daughters. “He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry. As soon as he hears it, he answers you,” proclaims the prophet. (Isaiah 30:19)

Indeed the Father’s sovereignty is so great and His love for us so perfect that He will use the sinful circumstances of our life to cause us to cry out to Him. In God’s economy nothing is wasted, especially our brokenness. This is the great meaning of the cross from which the Prince of Glory cried out, “My God, my God, why have forsaken me.” His cry of abandonment meant that we would never have to.

Darkness may come with the night, but the morning is already breaking. The Church Father Gregory Nazianzen wrote, “Yesterday I was crucified with Him; today I am glorified with Him; yesterday I died with Him; today I am quickened with Him; yesterday I was buried with Him; today I rise with Him.”

It is never too late to cry out to our Father, “Deliver me!” Indeed, He is waiting, pleading for our cry to release His resurrection in our life at the dawn. A man I know, well into his seventies, if not eighties, had a severe heart attack—one which should have taken his life. At one time he had been a faithful church member, a preacher, in fact. He walked away from the Church in his twenties and vowed never to come back. From his hospital bed, with tubes stretching in every direction and monitors reporting on every function, he asked, “Will God still hear my prayer? I am afraid this heart attack means he has given up on me.” Nothing could be further from reality. From the belly of the beast, deep in the heart of the sea, Jonah prayed, “When my life was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to you.” Everyone who cries out “Father, Deliver me!” will be.

#### **Questions for reflection:**

- When was the last time you cried out to God? What happened?
- Do you see the Heavenly Father more as reflection of our humanity rather than God?
- What is stopping you from crying out to God?

**Prayer:** Lord God, I call out to you in distress. I know you will answer me. Out of suffering and struggle, I call to you. For I have been cast into a deep darkness, overwhelmed by a flood of concerns. I feel driven away from you. Help me to know that I will again look upon your face. With a voice of thanksgiving I cry out to you. I sacrifice my pride upon your altar, for I know that salvation belongs only to the Lord! Amen.

## March 27: “Deliver us from evil”

John 16:25-33

Jesus commands us to ask our Father to deliver us from evil. The word “deliver” here means “to draw in or to draw to one’s self.” When we cry out “Father, deliver us!” what we are really saying is, “Draw us to you, God! Hold us in the palm of your hand.” It is here and only here, in the presence of the Father, that we can be rescued from evil.

A few years ago, we visited a zoo. This zoo had a huge crocodile, nearly 20 feet long and quite toothy, mean, and angry looking. I watched a little boy, 2 or 3 years old, walk right up to the glass and look the beast square in the eye—something that made me quite nervous to do. A young child, of course, has no understanding that he is protected behind the thick glass. What gave him the courage to stare down this prehistoric, man-eating reptile was his father standing only a few inches behind him, his hand gently on his shoulder. When we cry out, “Father, deliver us!” we are asking Him to stand with us, not so we can run and hide from evil, escape it entirely, but so that we can stand our ground and stare it down. Children of light make a point of shining in the darkness not hiding in safety under the bushel basket. When we embrace our Heavenly Father and ask Him to draw us to Him, we inevitably place ourselves closer to danger but further from harm.

God promised the prophet Isaiah that although evil will enter our lives, breathing threats and murder, it will not have the final word. “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God.” (Isaiah 43:1-3)

The magnificent meaning of the empty tomb is that evil is bested and beaten. Jesus promised the disciples, “In this world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” For evil to harm us in this world, do anything more than effect temporary tribulation and trouble, we must actively participate with evil. For evil to overwhelm, we must dance with the devil. For evil to consume, we must allow it a habitat in our heart. Choosing to stand with our Heavenly Father, rather than away and apart, is not simply a matter of personal preference or of grasping hold of some distant sort of ethereal peace to save our soul. It is literally life and death set before us and our Father commands and pleads for our good, “Choose life!”

In the end there is only a single fatal choice and that is to refuse the Father’s plea; to cry out, “Deliver me to evil. Dismiss, dispatch, discard me from your presence.” This only occurs when our conscience is so seared and His image in us so malformed that the very presence of our Father causes more tribulation and trial than His absence. We love the black of night more than the light of day. Take heart. Jesus can overcome even this. Cry out, “Deliver me from evil,” and fade not to that terrible darkness.

### Questions for reflection:

- Is there any evil in your life or circumstances which you fear facing?
- When was the last time you cried to God, “Deliver me!” What happened?
- How have you seen Jesus overcome the evil world in your life?

**Prayer:** My Heavenly Father, deliver me from evil! Draw me to yourself and help me dwell securely in your love and presence. I know that I have entertained evil. I confess that I have dwelt in a deep darkness and courted death. Deliver me, Lord, so that evil will not overwhelm and consume me. Deliver me from evil so that I may stand with you in the light. Amen .



## March 29: “Yours”

### Psalm 2

We enter this week into the last line of the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus’ teaching prayer ends with a doxology, a majestic praise to our Heavenly Father, “For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.”

Praise to God begins with the realization that this existence is not about us, but our Heavenly Father. This was the mindset of John the Baptist, who pointed to Jesus’ arrival in the world saying, “This joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease.” (John 3:29-30) The Father has honored us by creating us in His image, allowing the Word of God to take on human flesh, making us a dwelling place for His Holy Spirit, and blessing us above every other creature— showering us with inestimable riches. But we need to ask, “What is the Father’s purpose in granting us this surpassing grace, this inexpressible gift?” Only in following that purpose do we find the freedom our Father intends.

There is something within sinful human nature that gives a home to the tragic mistake of believing that freedom is found in severing ourselves from God and His purposes. We cannot be neutral here. To eschew the Father’s plans and purposes means to work against Him. Psalm 2 teaches that the kings, nations, and rulers plot in vain, working against God and His children saying, “Let us burst their bonds apart, and cast away their cords from us.” Our Heavenly Father simply laughs at that kind of thinking, mocking it as absolute foolishness. To protect His children, to renew His creation, build His Kingdom, and proclaim His glory, God will “break them with a rod of iron and dash them into pieces like a potter’s vessel.”

This is our Father’s world. When we mistakenly make anything within it ours, especially those things by which we are tempted to define ourselves, we break the most fundamental law of life and liberty. As we make ourselves increase at the expense of God’s presence, power, and purpose, our Heavenly Father, out of His great love and concern for us, slowly and by degrees breaks us. He chokes His blessings and places obstacles and stumbling blocks in our path. In our immaturity the Father’s discipline appears to be bondage or even judgment. However, this is His grace that He does not allow us to follow what appears to be a ready path but, in reality, is a road to perdition. Because we have ham-handedly seized the part of His world entrusted to us, working against the Father, this does not mean He works against us. As His children, He will increasingly bend the events and circumstances of our lives to compel us to submit to His Lordship, to reform and renew our will to proclaim with a loud voice of praise, “Yours is the kingdom!” Not only does this great praise of “Yours!” free us from our self-imposed bondage, from the divinely placed stumbling blocks and obstacles, breaking our willful pride, proclaiming “Yours!” also frees us from the responsibility and burden of ownership. No longer does our world find its rest on our narrow shoulders like Atlas. Instead, we are able to rest, blessed in the Father’s refuge. What we lose in untethered license we more than gain in undying liberty and complete joy.

#### Questions for reflection:

- What is the Father’s purpose in my life and the world that surrounds me?
- What purposes have I served and how have those purposes served my Father?
- What can I do today to choose undying liberty in the Father?

**Prayer:** My Heavenly Father, your name is holy. Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Forgive me when I have claimed my own kingship over your world rather than praised your kingship. Set me free from my illusions of ownership. Remove the stumbling blocks and obstacles as you lead me in paths of righteousness for your namesake. Amen.

## March 30: “The kingdom”

John 18:28-40

Before Jesus went to the cross, He stood before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who had the power to release him or set him free. This scene could not be richer with irony. A two-bit tyrant who worked under the command of a man who claimed the title of god for himself, was judging the true God who took the flesh of humanity on Himself. Pilate saw nothing in Jesus that He should be convicted and sent to the cross to die. Jesus died on the cross so that God would see nothing in humanity, that we might be convicted of our sin and die. The light of the world of Jesus, full of grace and truth, stood before Pilate, filled with lies and deceit, and Pilate queried, “What is truth?” When Jesus and Pilate met, by all earthly appearances, Jesus was a peasant, without even a place to lay His head. Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea, of some rank in Roman society. Yet, if not for this brief interaction with Jesus, the name Pontius Pilate would be lost to the sands of history. Jesus’ very name divides history into all that happened before and after Him. Indeed, Jesus died to redeem all history.

No doubt intrigued by this man standing before him, Pilate asked Jesus if He was a king. Jesus’ reply did not deny His kingship, but He said, “My kingdom is not of this world.” Jesus’ kingdom is nothing if not ironic and surprising. His kingdom emerges in ways, shapes, and places we can scarcely imagine. Indeed, if we are not looking for it, we have a tendency to miss it entirely. This is not because His Kingdom is an anemic or weak non-event. The kingdom’s emergence is the event—the driving goal of all that has been, is, and is to come. We miss the coming of the kingdom because, like Pilate, we have so trained our soul to look for lesser things that our dull, cow eyes lack the vision to see it. Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world but it will someday overwhelm this sinful world and overwrite our sinful imperfections and improprieties.

There is a simple test to see if something is of God’s kingdom or not. Did He build it? Is it the work of His hands? “Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain,” said Solomon, who was an instrument in the construction of a great house for the LORD. Of course, the Father puts to work His sons and daughters in the work of building His kingdom. Indeed, as His workmanship, this is our key task on earth. But it is not our work alone and, at the outset, it is not our work at all.

This is what Pontius Pilate, regent for a kingdom of man, could not understand: If this man Jesus was a king, why were His citizens not fighting for Him? Looking for another kingdom of man, Pilate missed the point entirely. In God’s kingdom, the King fights first for His citizens, not the other way around. “It is the LORD your God who fights for you, just as He promised,” said Joshua as they built a kingdom in the Promised Land.

Our Father first builds His kingdom in His sons and daughters, and then works through us, in us, and for us to bend His world to the shape of His Kingdom.

### Questions for reflection:

- What is the primary kingdom you see yourself building?
- How has your Heavenly Father fought for you today? This week? This year?
- Are there any ways that you have missed building the kingdom in your life?

**Prayer:** O Lord of Hosts, God of Israel, Heavenly Father, you are enthroned above humanity and the angels. You are God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Mighty God, everlasting Father, save us from our vain pretensions. Open our eyes to what you are building in our lives so we may see your kingdom clearly. Amen.

## March 31: “the power”

Luke 24:36-53

Our fallen life is one, long struggle against weakness. At times we are powerless to change our circumstances, help and assist those whom we love, stave off age and decay, refrain from doing the very thing which we hate and swore never to do again. The greatest human misery is a gradual descent into a static state, where each day is the same as that which came before, and there is no hope of the next day being any better or joy-filled. The poet Dante’s picture of the center of hell is a giant, frozen lake where the worst of sinners are frozen, powerless and isolated from the source of all life and light. When we are immature believers we tend to see the Father as limiting to our freedom of motion, but, in reality, the opposite is true. The further we get from the Father, the further our freedom deteriorates. The Father’s promise is power. After His resurrection Jesus told the disciples, “Behold I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49) What followed next, Luke teaches, was Jesus’ ascension into heaven where He sits even now on the throne of the cosmos as King and our human representative and head. The power Jesus mentioned is the Holy Spirit—God Himself—making His home in our spirit. The Word teaches He empowers us to know and enjoy the benefits of our relationship with Jesus Christ and become an ever-increasing instrument for our Heavenly Father.

How do we see this at work in our life? The Greek word for power is the word “dunamis,” from which we get our words dynamic, dynamo, and dynamite. We see the power of our Heavenly Father at work in us through great and forceful, even explosive change, not only in ourselves but in those we love and our world. Sin and separation from God pulls us downward to a frozen static state, a curving inward upon ourselves. Righteousness and intimacy with our Father drives us upward toward a dynamic life, ever-turning outward to love our neighbor as ourselves.

This power comes about only through the resurrection. Only by Jesus’ sinless life, victory over the grave, and ascension to the Father do we have any access to power. The power within Jesus to conquer sin and death and our shared humanity is the key. We need only do one thing to know this power over death. We must recognize we are dying and die to death. We must accept that as we pull away from the Father we are moving inexorably downward toward the frozen static state, that will end in bondage, gloom, and shadow.

In this death to dying there is life, because our Lord has been there first. The Word promises that if we are united with Jesus in a death like His, we will be united with Him in a resurrection like His. This resurrection in its fullness is, of course, a one-time event at the end of history. It also comes anew and afresh every morning as we experience the power of the Holy Spirit of God living within us and working throughout us and the world we know.

### Questions for reflection:

- Do you feel “frozen” or “stuck” in your life?
- Who do you believe is the Holy Spirit? How have you experienced Him in your life?
- What path do you believe you are on? What would “dying to death” look like today for you?

**Prayer:** Our Father in Heaven, your very name is holy. We know that we have chosen to live apart and far from you, believing that it will set us free. Loving God, instead we see our lives slowly spiraling down toward a stunting frozenness, a curving inward upon ourselves. Set us free, God, to know the dynamic power of the resurrection afresh and anew every morning, for the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours forever. Amen.

## April 1: “The glory”

Romans 8:16-39

There is an ancient proverb of disputed origins that reads “All glory is fleeting.” It is said that the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius charged a slave to whisper it into his ear as he rode through parades and processions. Of course, not all glory is fleeting, only earthly glory. The Father’s glory, heavenly glory, is strong and bold enough to join together two words: glory forever.

Paul teaches that every son or daughter of our heavenly Father is destined for glory, forever. We may be struggling in this fallen world. We may be groaning, languishing under the weight of our sinful selves, enduring the slings and arrows of misfortune, but we are bound for glory. Even as welcome news, it may come to some as a small comfort in this present age. This perspective severely underestimates the Father’s glory. This life too is telling of the glory of God.

Glory is simply an opinion, a judgment, an estimate of someone’s person or character. When Paul writes that the sufferings of our present age cannot compare with the coming glory, he is saying that the Father’s character, and our character by extension, is able to overcome whatever sinful destruction and decay we may face. The glory of God within us makes us more than conquerors of life, death, rulers, powers, things present and things to come. But we are more than conquerors only when we have been made right with the Father. We are not glorified through making ourselves right. We are made right to be glorified. Glorification always follows justification. Not the other way around. The Father spares the final revelation of His children’s character until He has made that character right. If our character is revealed before that time, it is only in the service of His grace so that we might be made increasingly right at His perfect timing.

This sounds too incredible, too marvelous to be true! However, we have a guarantee that the Father is committed beyond any measure to pouring His character into and making us glorious: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32)

Here is what should astound us. This prodigious, exquisite, scandalous sacrifice; this great and terrible gift of grace tells us all we need to know about the character of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is His glory. It is a glory that selects suffering. It is a glory that elects to abide. This is the glory that the Father shares with His children. It is anything but vainglory. It is anything but a celebration of the self. It is servanthood descending from on high. In the biblical economy, undying servanthood is indivisible and inextricable from eternal glory. We experience and access that glory when the Spirit lives in us and we serve Christ for the sake of the Father.

All earthly glory is fleeting because it ultimately glorifies lesser things, it celebrates creatures rather than the Creator. The only eternal glory is glory that flows from, towards, and for the Father.

### Questions for reflection:

- How would you define glory? Have you ever experienced fleeting glory?
- How have you experienced servanthood and suffering for the Father’s glory?
- What is preventing you from seeking to be made right with the Father?

**Prayer:** Our Father in Heaven, I know you are for me. I know that your will is eternally bent to help me know and experience the full knowledge of your glory. Please pour your glory into me so that my character may come to resemble the glory of the Creator more than the fallen nature of your creation. For this glory of yours is not fleeting but endures forever. Amen.

## April 2: “Forever” Revelation 21

Forever is a word we use sparingly. Forever simply writes a check that our frail human frame cannot cash. As much as I would like to say I will do something forever, even love someone forever, as a fallible, limited human being, I do not have the ability to follow through on that bold promise. In Christian marriage we do not ask husbands and wives to pledge to love each other forever, but until death parts.

Because I am a son or daughter of God, I am caught up in the Father’s great love and grace, so I am also made a full participant in the Father’s life forever. Life is not fragile as some would have us believe. Earthly life tends toward fragility, but eternal life is made of sterner stuff. At creation God flung His life into the far corners of the cosmos and that life marches on into the hereafter. The penalty for sin is death but even this death is not a deep plunge into nothingness. It is a slow descent away from that most salient characteristic of life, our connection to God and our creation in His image. It is a loss of what makes us human for we can separate our humanity from its maker without sacrificing its essence. The Bible teaches unequivocally that the line of life always moves ahead, never circling back, never ceasing into whatever forever testified to by the fruit of our earth-bound pursuits. Resurrection is the way-point for all humankind and the axis around which spins all of history. The Spirit promised through the prophet Daniel, “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” (Daniel 12:2) Life is too resilient, too strong, too precious, too simply be snuffed out. We are constantly creeping toward eternity. Life either lingers in shadow or shines in glory.

In the book of Revelation, we gain a picture of that glorious, everlasting life. It is foremost a life awash and basked in the light of God. It is His perfect presence that enlightens, enlivens, and defines everything and holds all things together. There will be no more mourning or crying or pain. Death will be defanged, decay and deterioration will be dispatched as the old sinful and broken order passes away. All things will be in a constant state of renewal. There will be no thirst of desire as every need is perfectly met by the water of life flowing from the throne of God. Time will have no meaning because there will be nothing by which to mark it. There will be no rising or setting of the sun. There will be nothing for which to wait. No hurrying to complete a task. Because there will be an unlimited and everlasting amount, time will cease to have all value. There will be no regrets or debts or losses to make the days bitter. This is the shape and form of everlasting life with our Heavenly Father, as we return to the source of all things.

We see all this now through a glass darkly but we will someday witness it face to face. Now we know in part but some great day we shall know fully even as we are fully known. This is the love of God for us that never ends.

### **Questions for reflection:**

- What evidence do you see for everlasting life in this world?
- Does life seem fragile or tenacious to you?
- What aspect of eternal life seems the most promising?

**Prayer:** Eternal Father, you have given us a marvelous gift of life. We are tempted to see it as less than it is, something temporary and fragile. Lord God, you hold all things in the palm of your hand, and by your will and power all things are held together. The promise of eternal life with you is more than our finite spirits can grasp. We believe, Lord! Help our unbelief! For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

## April 3: “Amen”

### Revelation 22

The word “Amen” is much more than a two syllable phrase signaling completion. It is a small word communicating consent to a massive idea. Amen means “verily,” “truly,” or “let it be.” It is an affirmation that is a confirmation of the Father’s love and grace at work in us.

We are given the freedom to respond to the Father’s love and grace in two ways—either, “Let it be” or “Let me be.” We can receive the Father as He presents Himself to be and allow Him to graft us into the tree of life, or, we can claim our autonomy, our personal sovereignty, perfect sufficiency, and say to our Heavenly Father, “Let me be.”

There is no middle ground here. Either the Lord’s revelation of Himself is wholly trustworthy and true or it is not. We cannot receive the God we think exists. We cannot receive the God who meets our expectations, wishes, and desires. We cannot receive the God who we find inoffensive. That is a false God, an idol created in our image. It is as if we were looking down a deep well trying to discover the true God and seeing our own reflection in the pool of water, yet we determine we have uncovered God’s face.

The Father loves us completely and perfectly as we are. He sees our flawed and fallible character and does not cease from pouring out his grace. The Father’s character is without defect. In Him there is no flaw or failing. Jesus promised, “Your heavenly Father is perfect.” Any issue we have with the Father’s character or judgments is because of our own flawed character. To claim anything less than God is right and I am wrong is to say, “Let me be” rather than “Let it be.”

The Father desires us to love His perfect character and being as completely as He loves our flawed character and being. He longs for us to know Him even as we are fully known. The great difference, of course, is that our love does not change God but His love for us radically changes us. Our amen is an assent to His character, person, and plan. Our amen is the surrender of our sinful, self-interested ways and our embracing God as He reveals Himself to be: “The Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” We should not take anything away from God’s self-revelation because it becomes incomplete, neither can we add anything because there is nothing to be added.

All that remains is for us to receive and proclaim the Father as He has revealed Himself—to offer our amen. We are to proclaim His coming until He comes again. We are to testify to the faithfulness in the past, the presence of His kingdom in our present, and the coming of His kingdom in the future. Indeed, for the latter we should cry out with John, “Come, Lord Jesus!” To this Jesus offers His assent and amen, “Surely I am coming soon!”

Our Father in heaven is bringing His kingdom. His will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Our loving, faithful Father frees us from slavery to our daily bread and our debts. Do not fall to the temptation of the hopelessness of the times but plead for deliverance from this broken and sinful world. His kingdom, his power, his glory are coming soon and forever. Let it be. Amen.

#### Questions for reflection:

- Do you find yourself saying to God, “Let it be” or “Let me be”?
- What is God doing in your life to which you would like to offer your “Amen”?
- Have you prayed about your own life, “Come, Lord Jesus”? What would it take?

**Prayer:** Our Father in heaven, holy is your name. Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom and the power and glory forever. Amen.

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