



CALVARY MEMORIAL CHURCH  
Lenten Devotional 2024

Feasting  
in the  
Wilderness



# Feasting in the Wilderness

Lent is commonly described as a season of preparation, but preparation for what? The answer: a feast! Like a morning jog before the Thanksgiving meal, Lent serves as a time of leanness and preparation so that we can better enjoy the Easter feast to come.

Although Lent is meant to be a time of hunger and abstaining for our physical bodies, the opposite is true about our spiritual life. In pulling back from the endless satiation of modernity (full of screens, snacks, and dopamine), Lent can create space for God to meet us in our newfound emptiness.

Furthermore, we see this pattern throughout Scripture; God is eager to meet his people in the “deserts” of their lives. God shows up, and brings the feast of his presence, in the lowest moments of the stories of his people. He often provides just enough provision for the day; manna in the desert, water from the brook, a song in prison chains, while at the very same time giving those in need a profound experience of himself.

Ted Wueste writes in [Trusting God in the Wilderness](#), “God doesn’t leave us to fend for ourselves. We may feel alone but we aren’t. He is leading us somewhere. . . . The journey is about deepening our dependence on him. Why? Because dependence *is* the Promised Land. Hear that clearly. A life of dependence is the truest, most real hope in our lives. Our hope is in him, not some location outside of difficulty.”

As you prepare to read, reflect on God’s “just enough” provision, his nearness in times of grief, and his surprising blessings that arrive when life is at its hardest.

Blessings on your Lenten journey,  
Pastor John Lambuth

*A special thanks to Christy Spader, Becky Mikell, Janet Buis, Adam Tichenor, Leah McDonald, and Matt Au for their hard work in editing and assembling this devotional!*

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# Exodus 5:1

## A Feast in the Wilderness

The book of Exodus opens to a vision of Pharaoh oppressing the children of Israel. In response to the peoples' cries, the Lord sends Moses as a deliverer. After a bit of foot dragging, and a bit of help from his older brother, Moses finally stands before Pharaoh and delivers the Lord's message. "The Lord says: 'Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.'"

The request is striking. It's not, "Let my people go because you are treating them poorly." Nor is it, "Let my people go so they can have a better life in a better land." Instead, the Lord wants a feast in the wilderness. How do we understand this?

We might interpret this (rather crassly) as a bit of divine subterfuge. As though the Lord said, on the sly, to Moses: "Tell Pharaoh I want you to go into the desert to worship me, and then once you're there, we'll make a run for it." But not so. The Lord really did want a feast in the wilderness. And it turns out that God's feast in the wilderness was also our feast in the wilderness.

The Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 10:3-4 that the children of Israel ate bread from heaven (Exodus 16) and they drank water from the rock (Exodus 17). Paul tells us that Israel's wilderness fare was a type and sign of Christ. Jesus makes the same connection in John 6. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven... Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life" (6:51, 54).

Wilderness wandering is tough. Wandering without food and drink is deadly. But the story of Israel is a reminder that God has invited his children to his own wilderness feast. And most importantly, the story of Israel is a reminder that when God feeds us in the wilderness, he feeds us with himself. He himself is the food and drink of our wilderness feast. "The cup of blessings that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16).

**Father,**

**Thank you for inviting me to your wilderness feast. Thank you for providing the all abundant and nourishing food of your Son. May I feast on him in the wilderness of this life.**

**Amen.**

## Genesis 3 Naked and Clothed

We often see this passage and think of the Serpent and Eve, or we think about how God interacts with Adam and Eve after they disobeyed Him for their personal growth, which are points to spend time thinking about. But in the current season of my life, I find myself questioning relationships, trying to figure out how much to trust someone or who to trust. I can't seem to turn my eyes from the various relational dynamics in this passage.

Take Eve and Adam. Man and Woman joined in the union of marriage before God. They have kept each other accountable, up to this point, to follow God's commands. Yet their relationship is strained as they give ear to the Serpent. They try their best to clothe themselves but are unable to hide what they did. So they confess to God "I was naked; so I hid." Just like trust, once it has been exposed and tampered with, we often have a hard time revealing ourselves to those who we know love us. We cover up our mistakes, we ignore what happened in order to forget, or we hide from those we have wronged or have wronged us.

Even after Adam and Eve confess and attempt to shift blame from one another, and from each other to the Serpent, God doesn't just cast Judgment and leave it there. God meets them where they are, beginning with their newfound need for clothes. Just as God provided for them, God continues to provide His people with a way to love Him, worship Him, and have eternal life with Him.

This is the truth we live by. That we as believers, no matter what we have done, or how many times we have failed God. He has given us a mediator, Jesus Christ, to sit at his right hand and justify us before the Father, while his Holy Spirit continues to guide and sanctify us until he calls us home.

God,  
You have loved me because that is who you are. I have not been the best at loving You nor those in my life. Thank You for showing me mercy and fixing the relationships I have broken. Continue to shower me with Your love that I might extend it to all relationships in my life.

Amen.

# Genesis 16

## 'El Ro'i

Paralleling Adam and Eve's sin in Genesis 3, Abram and Sarai doubt God's provision and goodness, taking matters into their own hands by bringing Hagar into their relationship to provide an heir. Sin against God almost always involves sin against others, and this sin creates pain, anger, and discord between Sarai, Hagar, and Abram. Their sin leads to the mistreatment of Hagar and eventually she runs from her pain and abuse into the wilderness. Not until the (somewhat mysterious) angel of the LORD appears, do things begin to be set right.

The angel of the LORD finds Hagar in the wilderness and gives her: a command, a promise, a glimpse into God's heart, and a preview of her unborn son's life. In return, Hagar sees the LORD and identifies Him as a "God of seeing" and praises Him for being the one "who looks after" her. Hagar obeys the angel of the LORD and returns to Abram who in turn publicly claims Ishmael as his son upon his birth.

When I initially chose this passage, I thought I would write on how I often feel unseen. But as with all scripture, once I dug into it, my mind was transformed. I realized that this story is not about me, or Sarai and Abram's sin, or even Hagar. This beautiful chapter is about our God and His mercy, care and provision.

I will be honest with you I have been going through difficult times these last few months. I have been struggling to see God's love for me and the goodness He brings to this world. But this passage beautifully points me to the true God who finds me in the wilderness. He listens to me and sees my pain. I simply need to listen and praise Him. I need to remind myself daily that God finds me in the wilderness and loves me, regardless of my anger, pain and sadness. He wants me to share my pain with him. He waits patiently, sees me and gently turns me back on a path to him.

**Father,**  
**Even when I am on the run, you find me and see me. My wilderness is no**  
**match for you. Please help me to remember your pure love for me.**  
**Amen.**



# Genesis 22

## Abraham Sacrificing Isaac

The story of Abraham being called to sacrifice Isaac is often troubling for many readers. Isaac is born after decades of his parents waiting and, for a moment, it seems like life with God is inconsistent at best. Like Abraham, previous experiences with God tell us he is a good God. He even asks God “Will not the judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 18:25). Yet it seems like the moment the promise has been fulfilled, a tear splatters upon the impact of hitting reality.

No matter what we believe about what was going on inside Abraham’s head, Hebrews 11:19 tells us Abraham “considered that God was even able to raise [Isaac] from the dead.” Isaac is spared from death, and God provides a lamb to be sacrificed not just in the moment, but a couple thousand years later. God provides another lamb, another long-awaited son born through miraculous means. A son who carries their instrument of execution upon their back as they follow their father obediently to their death.

Andrew Peterson writes:

*“and the man of all sorrows, he never forgot  
What sorrow is carried by the hearts that he bought  
So when the questions dissolve into the silence of God  
The aching may remain, but the breaking does not”*

Writing on this sacrifice, Paul writes “he who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:31). Although it may seem like we’re marching our dreams to their death, we can remain trusting in the character of God as Abraham had already experienced. The aching may remain, but our breaking hearts will not. Not only does God fulfill his promises to us, he doesn’t march them to their deaths, and as Paul says, “he will graciously give us all things”, including his own Son.

**Father,**

**The end of all things is near. Therefore teach us to pray so that we  
may cling to what we know your character to be like. Teach us to love  
like you have loved us, graciously giving us all things.**

**Amen.**

## Genesis 32 Jacob Wrestles

Jacob is a character in the Biblical narrative, and this is the critical moment in his life. Jacob has long since left the days of home where his trickery and underhanded actions have resulted in benefitting him, but he has met his match in the trickery of his uncle Laban. Jacob has been worn down by Laban's deception for 20 years, and his greatest fear is approaching in this time of trouble. His fear drives him to offer everything he has to appease Esau.

Into this mess is exactly the place God desires to meet Jacob. Jacob has expended everything he has, his walls have been broken down, and God steps into his life in the strangest of methods. While most of us would hope that God would walk in and make everything okay, God chooses instead to take the curious step of wrestling with Jacob. Jacob's spirit is overridden with fear, and he is physically, spiritually, and emotionally exhausted when God asks him his name. God asks him, "Who are you?" He is Jacob. Supplanter. Trickster. He has to face those brutal facts. Jacob answers not just his given name, but his identity. When Jacob stares at himself full in the face, God changes Jacob's name, and by it, his identity. No longer is Jacob the supplanter, he is Israel the wrestler.

God doesn't honor Jacob by changing his circumstances. He honors Jacob by calling that new identity out of Him.

Encountering God in these moments is no easy task. It is nothing less than the death of our old identity, and in this we receive glory: we wrestle with God. We hold on to Him and never let go. In these desperate moments of utter despair, wrestle on. Hold on to God. Question Him, grapple with Him, hold on for life - because it is. Let Him call this new identity out of you and become the wrestler that He desires for us to be.

**Father,**

**Encountering you in this wilderness feels like death. But, I will hold on to You. I will cling to you and beg of you a new name. I don't know why You have chosen this way, and my faith is tested to its foundation. Even now, I can't be sure that you are even good. But I will continue to wrestle You, and I will beg of you a blessing. Bless me, Father.**

**Amen.**

## Job 1:42 Stressed but Rejoicing

How would you respond to God if He allowed you to lose everything—your children, your wealth and possessions, your health, your friends, your reputation? Would you blame Him or praise Him?

Many find the book of Job confusing, but some things are clear. He suffered greatly but not because he was evil. God called him “a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil” (1:8). Yet he ended up in the worst situation possible short of death. How could this be, and how did he respond?

Yes, he wished he’d never been born, he wondered what God was up to, he complained that he couldn’t speak to God face to face about his suffering. But he also expressed confident faith in the Lord. “I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God” (19:25-26). And at the very beginning of his ordeal he said, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (1:21).

God allowed Satan to heap suffering upon suffering on Job, for His own mysterious purpose. How did He respond to Job’s continuing faith? “The Lord restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends. And the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before” (42:10). This is an example of the sovereign mercy and kindness of God. Water from the rock, mourning turned to dancing, suffering transformed to rejoicing.

Perhaps you have experienced this in some measure. When my wife, Lois, went to Heaven I of course experienced great sorrow, and I still do. But knowing she no longer struggles with the pain of cancer I rejoice. She is safely home! And that reassurance gives me strength for my daily life now.

I haven’t suffered as much as Job did, but I know and serve the same God, and the joy that God gave Job at the end is mine also. It can also be yours.

**Lord,  
Help me to see beyond the trials and challenges I am facing and to see  
the joys that You bring me each day or will bring me in the future. I am  
Yours, and You are mine!  
Amen.**

## Exodus 16 God Truly Cares

Fresh manna by day, plenty of quail by night, what a chef! I know God and I will talk culinary one day, exchange some recipes perhaps! I suppose I'll be the one taking notes..

Eating is essential for our survival, and doing so with pleasure, enjoyment, and celebration is one of the best things in life. No wonder the children of Israel grumbled when they felt hungry in the desert, not knowing Yahweh was about to perform another unforgettable miracle in the wilderness.

In verse 4, God says to Moses: "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not."

So many times in my life God calls me to trust in Him, so I can experience those "Only God" moments. In fact, it's precisely because of the Lord graciously meeting me in the wilderness that I know He truly cares for me and always provides.

Can you relate? Being hungry, rather physically or spiritually, is not hidden from God's sight. He can see it right through our real condition. And He asks: "Will you trust in me or not?"

For 40 years the Israelites ate the manna and quail from heaven. Today we have the bread of life revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Seeking Him and being in fellowship with Him is choosing to feast even in our present wilderness.

**Dear God,**

**We praise you for supplying all of our daily needs. As we fully surrender into your care, we want to thank you for not dealing with us according to our grumbings, but always according to your love and mercies towards us.**

**Amen.**

## Exodus 17 Water From the Rock

In Exodus 17, during the first year of the children of Israel's exodus journey, we are told of how all of Israel murmured and complained against Moses and God when they reached Rephidim (meaning a "place of rest"), where no water was found to quench their thirst. The congregation grumbled against Moses and threatened to kill him. Their action against God's servant, also, showed contempt towards God, himself, as they questioned irreverently, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" Moved by their circumstances, fear, and unbelief, the entire congregation ignored God's previous acts of mercy and deliverance. They questioned God's promises, steadfast love, and faithfulness. And they impugned God's sovereignty, character, and goodwill towards them.

Yet, God demonstrated his forbearance, faithfulness, and steadfast love by providing for their thirst. In the presence of the elders of Israel, as God commanded, Moses struck the rock upon which God stood. Water came forth, and the people drank. Just as manna from heaven is a picture of Christ Jesus, the Bread of Life (John 6:35), the rock that God commanded Moses to strike is a picture of Christ Jesus, our spiritual Rock who was wounded for our transgressions (Isaiah 53:5), and from whom we receive, drink, and spring forth rivers of living water - the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 10:1-4, John 4:10, and John 7:37-39). Our Rock, Christ Jesus, gives us "living water", and we shall never thirst. And in the Holy Spirit who indwells all believers, God will never leave us nor forsake us.

As Christians we are not immune from hardships and sufferings. Amid trials, however, some may find themselves asking, "Is God trustworthy? Can we trust God to meet our needs, to protect us, and to comfort us? Scripture affirms that "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all." (Psalm 34:19). And Scripture affirms further, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble (and time of need)." (Psalm 46:1). In all our circumstances, God is with us. God is trustworthy. Trust in him.

**Heavenly Father,**

**Thank you for your loving kindness and for your faithfulness. Thank you for being a very present help in times of trouble. Thank you for being trustworthy, and I place my trust in you to provide for my every need. Therefore, I will not fear, for you are my strong tower, my salvation, and my provider, and you are my confidence. In the name**

**of Jesus,  
Amen.**

## Exodus 32 & 33 A Tent Builder

Biblically speaking, coming to Jesus entails repentance, the experience of forgiveness, and joyful communion with the One that loves us. But what do we do with ourselves after failing God in a big way when we are believers already? The enemy whispers into our ears, “there is no category for your sin here. You better be off.” This sounds truthful, God hates evil deeds. And yet, God wants us to come to Him!

When Israel sinned against God by crafting a golden calf, Moses arose in righteous anger. He melted the idol in the fire, grinded it to powder, scattered it on the water, and we read that he “made the Israelites drink it” (Exodus 32:20). Following this, he ascended the mountain again to ask God to forgive His people. Moses knew that unless God Himself went before them to the promised land he was not interested in leading Israel.

It is after this awful event that we learn about the tent of meeting that Moses built outside the camp. There, all Israel saw that when Moses was missing, he was talking to God face-to-face as one talks with a friend. This incident moved Moses to ask God: let me see Your glory!

I resonate with this as I recall my walk with Jesus. It has been during desperate times, when the consequence of my sin unravels, that I am in need of God, whom I have come to know intimately. The Gospel came to life and became precious when I experienced God’s grace. The tent of meeting, known as my quiet time with Jesus, has become a precious experience, the place and time where I come as I am into His presence to be embraced with forgiveness, restoration, and love. In the wilderness, build a tent to meet with God and encounter His glory.

**Dear Father,**

**Thank you for meeting us in the midst of our chaos and broken lives. Thank you for your unending love and mercy toward me: a sinner. Help me to see my need of communion with you today. Let me experience the same face-to-face fellowship that Moses experienced, because in Jesus I know I can enter your very presence. Lord, I agree with Moses, so I refuse to go on in the journey of life unless Your presence leads me. You are my gift in this life and the life to come, in Your name I pray.**

**Amen.**

## Numbers 21:4-9 The Bronze Serpent

God is gracious to help his people to choose a better way when he sees they need it. Consider the Israelites non-stop reviling of God and Moses as they took the long way around Edom in the wilderness. God sent fiery serpents to clarify the perspective of his whining chosen people. Only in their extremity were the Israelites persuaded to choose right.

As a Lutheran kid, it was not customary for me to give anything up for Lent. Only later in life did I start to see Lent as an opportunity to sow to the Spirit instead of the flesh. For Lent this year, I briefly considered curtailing some vices like overindulging in screens and drive throughs. Ultimately, however, I channeled my inner Scarlett O'Hara, telling myself, "I'll think about that tomorrow." But tomorrow never came.

Graciously, God gave me a nudge. Like the serpents for the Israelites, a bit of affliction is all it took for me to change my perspective and choose a better path. Toward the end of January, I slipped on the ice, hurting my right knee badly enough that surgery was required. From the ER visit onward, I would be on crutches for about three months with my right leg in an immobilizing splint. Driving is off the table and stairs are a real challenge. Our only TV is in the basement family room, down thirteen awkward stairs. Without the ability to drive, drive throughs are off the menu. The great benefits are, I'm eating healthier and less and losing weight. Better still, I'm spending more time in the Word, daily. All this is drawing me closer to God.

This year, God helped me choose what to give up for Lent. And as is always the case, he graciously provided space for me to meet Him in the desert in my newfound emptiness. He continues to provide just enough provision for me to get through each day.

**Father,**

**Thank you for your abundant love for us. Thank you that you always want the best for us and, when necessary, help us to choose it when we are resistant. Thank you that when you allow affliction in our lives, you simultaneously provide a way of escape.**

**God, grow all of us closer to Yourself as we sow to the Spirit this Lenten season.**

**Amen.**

## Judges 7 Gideon

Judges 7 is an interesting passage to sit with at the start of the Lent. We think of Lent as a time of giving up something that's a bit of a challenge for us to surrender, in order to depend on God to strengthen us. In Judges 7 we don't necessarily see anyone abstaining from anything, rather we see God quite drastically whittling down the Israelite army from 32,000 men to just 300. The text says that the Lord wants Israel to clearly understand (again) that God delivers His people.

I think the beautiful part of this narrative is found in noticing God's care for Gideon. In Judges 6 we see God call Gideon to lead Israel out against the Midianites. Gideon doubts God, confesses multiple insecurities, and asks for many signs to help calm his fears. The angel of the Lord reminds him of God's faithfulness and presence with him, provides said signs, declares Gideon a "mighty man of valor", and clothes him with the Spirit of the Lord. God calls Gideon, gives him oodles of encouragement and then... intentionally decreases his army by 22,000 men.

Given the many doubts that Gideon expresses in Judges 6, you would think that fear is starting to take hold of him again. God tells him to go out against the Midianite camp because He has given it into Israel's hand. And then in Judges 7:10-11 we see God's kind consideration of Gideon, "But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant. And you shall hear what they say, and afterwards your hands shall be strengthened..." In these verses we see God remembering Gideon's struggles. God knows Gideon and He knows what he is prone to. He offers the suggestion to go, with a companion, to overhear the enemy confirm the Lord's victory through Gideon. What kindness the Lord extends to Gideon as He lavishly confirms that He is with him, knows him, and will deliver him.

Lord,

Teach us to yield our lives unto You. Whether we offer up eating sweets during this Lenten season or we are in a place where we feel that you have stripped us of all good things...by your Spirit would you establish us in your kindness to us through your desire to be with us, to know us, and to deliver us.

Amen.



# Ruth 1

## Ruth and Naomi

Naomi was the poster child for a life under stress. Famine leads to a relocation for her family. Her husband dies. Her son dies. Her other son dies. It's not hard to imagine why she feels so bitter.

And yet Ruth wants to stay with her. Why? It sounds like Naomi is a very bitter woman, and who wants to be around someone like that? Naomi tries to convince Ruth to stay in Moab, but Ruth will not be persuaded. Her loyalty is a beautiful picture, and it is also the means to Naomi's (undeserved) redemption.

God was caring for Naomi in a way that was not clear to her. It involved great suffering. It also involved unimaginable good in God's own time, not just for her but for all of us. For from Ruth and Boaz came the line of David, leading to the Messiah, the One who would make all things new, and restore what was lost due to the curse.

Naomi could not see the back side of the tapestry. She was part of something so much larger than she could imagine. Like Naomi, we often cannot see God's bigger picture. But we can approach our lives with hope, knowing that He is working out His master plan.

Romans 15:4 says, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

**Father,**  
**Help us trust You in our hard times. Thank you for the picture of Naomi and Ruth and how you worked Your plan in ways they could not understand.**  
**Amen.**

# 1 Kings 19:9-18

## Elijah and the Still Small Voice

When this passage begins, we find Elijah afraid and in hiding. As he tells the Lord in verse 10, he has fled for his life as the Israelites have “put the prophets to death with the sword...and now they are trying to kill him too.”

What a terrifying place to be! And yet, God’s response struck me – rather than giving him direction on where to hide or how to respond to the Israelites, He answers Elijah’s fears with His very presence. The Lord is our Emmanuel, God with us, and this is a beautiful example of Him calling Elijah to stand “in the presence of the Lord” (v.11). And not only that, but for Elijah to have eyes to see Him and ears to hear Him. God did not appear through shattered rocks or earthquake or fire, as Elijah seemed to anticipate He would, but in the gentle whisper.

Though the Lord ultimately gives Elijah direction on where to go next, His first direction is to seek the Lord. This is a challenge and exhortation to me, as well. Am I seeking God and His very presence first? In not only the big and scary moments, like where Elijah found himself, but also the daily decisions. May we take time in this Lenten season, this wilderness, to bask in the presence of the Lord.

Father and Lord, Emmanuel, God with us,  
I pray you would give me eyes to see you and ears to hear you today. Would my first and best thought be to seek Your presence and to be content there. In decisions big and small today, please give me guidance and direct me in Your way.  
Amen.

## Nehemiah 8 Ezra Reads the Law

The Word of God is authoritative in our lives. It has continuously nurtured and instructed my spiritual life. But what if we don't understand it, will it have the same effect? Its God-breathed words certainly won't penetrate our souls. And our practice won't align with our position. However, the Lord has rightfully called and equipped members of His Body to "translate and give the meaning so that the people could [can] understand." God has used godly men and women of all ages and in various periods of my life to instruct me from His Word. The equipped saints include pastors, missionaries, lay leaders, and teachers—all ordinary people doing extraordinary things for His Kingdom! And they, too, were once equipped and instructed in His Word by previous saints.

The Lord has especially gifted pastors to be our teachers and spiritual guides. They are called to explain His Word so that we can rightfully apply it to our lives. If not for my pastors giving me understanding of His Word, I certainly never would have taken missions trips, served in local shelters, or obeyed His callings in my life! I'm deeply encouraged by all our Calvary pastoral staff, but especially those God has called to instruct us from His Word so that we, like the people in Nehemiah 8, may not grieve but "eat and drink...send portions...and have a great celebration, because they [we] have understood the words that were explained to them [us]."

Father,

We thank you for your powerful Word. But, we give thanks today for those shepherds you have called to instruct us from your Word. May we humbly listen and apply the understanding given to us so that your powerful name may reach Oak Park and beyond!

Amen.

## Psalm 23

### The Unplanned Valley

I was seven years old, standing in front of the church, holding a greeting card with the words of Psalm 23 printed inside. My first childhood encounter with death was when my great-grandma died. Psalm 23 was her favorite. So my mom stood me up in front of the church at the memorial service to recite it. Since then Psalm 23 has followed me throughout my life.

In the last few months, I have been slowly learning to listen to the voice of God. As Jesus says “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10: 27). Recently, I was hiking at Honeyrock camp, when I came across a path I had never walked before. As I stood there, wracked with indecision on which direction to go, wind came and began to move some trees a little ways down. I walked down this unexplored trail, almost turning back several times to take my planned route. At last I was led to one of the summer rental cabins on the property. I decided to take the road back, pausing to examine the sign at the front. The cabin was named Green Pastures. I laughed.

This walk turned into a metaphor for my life. I never go where I plan to, God always leads me down some other path, and it is always better than my plan. When I look back on my life, I can't help but wonder why I don't trust. God has worked every hardship for my good. My Shepherd causes my cup to overflow. He anoints my head. He leads me through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. My Shepherd, my Lord, my God, His plan is infinitely better than my finite mind could ever comprehend.

Jesus, our Shepherd,  
We long to know your voice. We long to follow, but we are afraid, oh Lord. We are limited and weak. We are wracked with anxiety and stress. Remind us, oh Lord, of just how good You are. Remind us that You have already walked us through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and You will do so again. Draw us close with Your staff, and guide our steps that we may live in Your House forever.

Amen.

## Psalm 30 Weeping May Tarry

Joy comes. Those 2 simple words ought to give us a thrill of hope – a promise that great comfort will break through the weeping that tarries in this life. Sometimes the moments when we are most in need of believing that joy will come are the moments when it is hardest to believe. In Psalm 30, the declaration of coming joy is not a denial of reality. The psalmist speaks of foes, wounds, dismay, crying, pleading, the pit of death, and mourning. The language is a bit extreme – whatever has happened, it has been deeply felt. We resonate with the psalmist’s words because we have all been there – we have all experienced the brokenness and pain of this world.

The psalmist then beautifully describes how to hold on to hope: “O Lord, be my helper!” This is the way – crying out to God. Fixing our eyes on the circumstances doesn’t help us – there is no salvation or help to be found from the brokenness itself. We must instead look to the true source of joy. Shifting our gaze upward is the only way to see that joy and gladness is coming. It is an astounding truth that when we ask God to draw near, He does. He did for the psalmist (who ends the psalm in thankfulness and praise) and He does for us.

We are confident that God will draw near because we believe that Joy Himself has already come in the person of Jesus. In a lavish, narrative-defining display of God’s faithfulness, Joy Himself came – and therefore, surely, Joy Himself will come again. He can’t not come. The Savior’s love compels Him to draw near to us to bring healing, restoration, comfort, and gladness. There is no need for dismay or despair – joy is promised.

**Like Jesus, may we hold fast to the hope of the joy that is set before us no matter how starkly that hope contrasts with our circumstances. Help us to cry out to you for help, then rest in the truth that joy comes.**

**Amen.**

## Psalm 31 Sitting in the Light

Like many Chicagoans this time of year I am desperate for light. A large portion of my waking hours are spent strategically planning ways to be outside as much as possible. There are many scientific reasons to back up my desire to be outside, but honestly, I am motivated simply because I feel better the more time I spend soaking in light.

Similarly, David starts Psalm 31 deep in the gloom of his own gray days. He needs refuge, he needs saving from his enemies, and his situation sounds downright bleak. David spends much of his time crying out for help and explaining the extent of his dire circumstances. As he is asking God for help, his confidence in God's ability to help him shines through. So much so that by the end of the Psalm, David has moved from despair and desperation to joyful praise of God. Even though David has not yet been rescued and he had not yet seen the response to his prayers, his time spent in God's presence leads him to rejoice. The greatest joy is not found in his deliverance, but in basking in the presence of God.

In the darkest of seasons, in the most barren desert, in affliction and persecution, we can still feast on the presence of God which will lead us into joyful worship of him.

Father,  
Thank you for the gift of your presence in the wildernesses that we walk through. Give us each day the space to soak in the gift of you. Lead us to worship as we bask in your presence.  
Amen.

## Psalm 46

### God Will Help Her When Morning Dawns

In the Spring of 2022 I scattered sunflower seeds in a sunny, weed-filled part of our yard. All summer we marveled as they inched higher and higher, surpassing us in height. That summer there were several ferocious storms with high winds. Neighbors' fences fell, tree branches snapped, yet the sunflowers miraculously stood tall.

**“Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way...”**

In late summer I experienced a miscarriage. Our family mourned. We lamented a loss of life that was so deeply personal to my physical body.

**“though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling...”**

The day after we found out we went to the lake. We listened to the waves crash into the rocks and remembered the greatness of the God we served. I searched for Him in the following days and weeks as my body and heart tried to heal.

**“God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved...”**

In my searching God brought my thoughts to the sunflowers. They thrived all summer despite many strong storms. Why hadn't they fallen? It was inexplicable. But that's how God works at times, isn't it?

**“The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”**

The sunflowers reminded me of the strength we have in the Lord. Though “nations rage” and “kingdoms totter”, God is our fortress. We will not be moved.

**“The LORD of hosts is with us...”**

I could go on and on about the comfort God brought to me through sunflowers that fall-like getting to watch all of the animals feast on their blooms or how their fallen seeds produced baby sunflowers the following year. That next August as the sunflowers bloomed we welcomed our son Elias (meaning Jehovah is God) into the world.

If the season you are in feels like the earth is giving way, I hope you can take heart in the sunflowers. Through great storms God holds you fast.

God,

Though the earth gives way, nations rage, and kingdoms totter, we will be still and trust that you are God. We will remember that you are our fortress.

Amen.

## Psalm 63 My Flesh Faints for You

Psalm 63 opens with David's confident declaration: "O God, you are my God." From there, the psalm is dense with the descriptions of what it looks like to long for God—a longing that is deeply physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. The opening verses tell us he seeks, his soul thirsts, his flesh faints. As the psalm continues, David looks upon God, praises, blesses, and lifts up his hands. He is satisfied, remembering and meditating, singing for joy and clinging to God, rejoicing in God.

But note the introduction: this is a song of David in the wilderness of Judah. This is either during the years when Saul was seeking to kill him, or when his son Absalom had taken power and David was yet again fleeing for his life. The yearning for God and the remembrance of God is not in the midst of safety or comfort. When David says "I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory," it is written from the desolation of the wilderness, not from the safety of the temple of God.

This psalm is written for and from the dry places; those places where we are weary in every form: whether that is physical decay and death, our emotional and relational wounds, our mental darkness or apathy, and our spiritual valleys and temptations. To revisit this psalm in recognition of the wilderness is to see both desperate longing and desperate hope. With David, we find that the soul that thirsts will be satisfied. The flesh that faints will find God's right hand upholding it.

David knows the world is not as it should be, and like David, we are able to tell God the full extent of what we long for, what we fear, and what we desire. With David, we remember the Lord, we remember His steadfast love, and we find that perhaps, in the long and dark shadows of our own wilderness, we have been under the shadow of His wings all along.

**Father,**

**We earnestly seek you, longing for your presence and power in our lives. May today we remember your steadfast love, and while we cling to you, may we remember that you are yet holding us.**

**Amen.**



## Psalm 71 Be to Me a Rock of Refuge

Over the years I had created a comfortable place for myself, building walls I thought would provide a prosperous and joyful life. I crafted and mended these walls with great attention and precision for years. Some of these walls were made out of self-preservation, keeping up appearances, a desire to be seen in the “right places”, and working a little harder and longer to get ahead, to name a few.

Over a year and a half, God methodically took those walls down one brick at a time. The crazy thing is, I saw each wall coming down, but I couldn't stop it from coming down. Each time a wall started to crack, I fought harder to hold onto what I had built, and to fix what was being taken down. But it was no use, God's plan was unfolding and after a year and a half, I was left without walls, exposed, naked, and desperate. I was desperate to be protected, heard, and rescued. In verse 20 the psalmist says, “though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again; from the depths of the earth you will again bring me up.”

I imagine the psalmist in slow motion. Rising from a dusty, dark place, brushing off the dirt from his clothes. The morning sun hits his face as he stands tall, knowing God has brought him up from the depths into new life again. As I reflect through this season of trouble, bitterness, and despair, I relate to the psalmist, crying out and asking God to come near, to listen to me, to be my rock and my fortress. When we cry out to God, we find that we are reminded of who he is, reminded of the refuge he offers even in the darkest night. “I will always have hope and praise him more and more” (verse 4) because he was and is with me and will bring me up again.

Dear Jesus,

As we face many different troubles and difficulties may we find you there with us. We praise you for being a kind and compassionate Savior who restores us and brings us back to you. Thank you for loving and caring for us deeply.

Amen.

## Psalm 131

### I Have Calmed and Quieted My Soul

When faced with an unexpected turn of events or even crisis, how do you respond? Is it like one of a warrior-ruler “I can do this, I can turn this around, I can conquer this!” I tend to jump into the warrior-ruler’s response as an attempt to control the world around me, which is prideful and arrogant. Or do you respond by going into hiding, thinking things like, “No, this is too big, I need to lay down and ignore this.” Both ways of responding are part of our nervous system, we were created in this way so we could survive dangerous situations. But I find that these responses kick in even when we aren’t being chased by a lion. Everyday situations give us opportunities for responses like this. I have responded both ways many times in my life!

Psalm 131 offers another way of living, a middle way. This was the first scripture my Young Life leader had me memorize. I thought it was a strange choice, talking about weaning especially! But as we talked through the psalm, and as it got deeper into my soul, I realized it was the perfect psalm for me to have in my heart. The proper response to crises is not ambitious pride and faith in yourself, nor is it paralyzing hopelessness. The proper posture in all of life as a Christian is willful trust like a weaned child. Mother and child have gotten through the hard part of weaning, the crying and the stress, and now are in a new, mature phase of their relationship. Charles Spurgeon said, “to the weaned child his mother is his comfort though she has denied him comfort. It is a blessed mark of growth out of spiritual infancy when we can forgo the joys which once appeared to be essential, and can find our solace in him who denies them to us.”

Lord,

I give you everyone and everything I am holding onto. Help me not to try to run my own life or the lives of others. I know you are with me and will take care of me and those I love. You are the ultimate source of safety and peace and I am your child. My hope is in you alone.

Amen.

## Isaiah 11:1-10 Root of Jesse

God established a covenant with David declaring, “And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.” (2 Samuel 7:16) However, after David’s death and his son Solomon’s death, the Kingdom of Israel was split in two. Both the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah devolved into sin, faithlessness, sexual immorality, and idolatry, including infant sacrifice – all of which incurred God’s wrath and judgment.

In executing his judgment, God used the Assyrian Empire to conquer the Northern Kingdom of Israel and to exile into captivity its rulers and inhabitants, and in the same way, the Babylonian Empire to conquer and exile the Southern Kingdom. God’s desire for Israel was that it would be like an olive tree and the cedars of Lebanon, majestic and immovable, firmly rooted, highly fragrant, and greatly esteemed by all people (Hosea 14:5-6). But because of continuous sin, unfaithfulness, and idolatry, God judged Israel and, like a diseased and dead tree, gave it over to destruction. What remained, then, of Israel’s former glory, was merely a stump, which Isaiah refers to as the “stump of Jesse”.

Yet, in the heat of God’s displeasure with Israel, he remembered his covenant with David that his throne would be established forever. And God showed mercy and provided hope through a promised Messiah, a Savior. Almost 700 years before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah prophesied that there would come forth “a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit”, and that the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him (Isaiah 11:1-2). In affirming that Jesus is the “root of Jesse” and the hope of all people, the apostle Paul quotes Isaiah – “The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles, in him will the Gentiles hope.” (Romans 15:12). Jesus is God’s promised Messiah and the fulfillment of God’s covenant with David. And Jesus is our Lord, hope, and salvation.

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for your mercy, which triumphs over judgment. Thank you, Jesus, for being the promised Messiah, and our Lord and Savior. In you we have everlasting life. In you, we have unshakeable hope and confidence as we fully trust in you. By the power of the Holy Spirit, help us to walk and live each day in a manner that truly honors you and is well-pleasing to our Heavenly Father In your precious name we pray,

Amen.

## Isaiah 42:1-4

### A Bruised Reed He Will Not Break

“He will not break a bruised reed, and he will not put out a smoldering wick; he will faithfully bring justice.”

Isaiah 42:3 CSB

As I read this verse, the imagery of the burning wick captured my attention. The fading flame holds the hope of being reignited. Until the wick is fully snuffed out, there is always hope. And as we sit in anticipation for Easter Sunday we can be confident that our hope is not foundationless. Rather our hope is rooted in Christ - the one who conquered death and fuels our faith. So, let us be rest assured that when we feel like “a smoldering wick” we can still cling to hope; we can still cling to Jesus.

This little light of mine  
Oh how it used to shine.  
Once a beacon of light

That provided comfort, joy and sight  
Is but a fading flame, hanging on for its dear life.

This little light of mine,  
Has dwindled into a wisp of smoke.  
Weary, heavy laden, and in need of an easy yoke.  
In need of hope.

Hope that this broken world will one day be made whole.  
Hope that the anchor I threw before this tempest will  
save my troubled soul.  
Hope that He who bore my sin on the third day truly  
rose.

Lord, send your gentle whisper  
Upon this fading ember.  
Tenderly stoke this little light and your promises remember;  
“A bruised reed you will not break”  
And this smoldering wick will once again be set ablaze.

## Jeremiah 29 Letter to the Exiles

As I reread Jeremiah 29, I am reminded of the painfully simple yet profoundly difficult reality of the Gospel: Death leads to life. There is no way around it, our God himself has called us to it, and our Savior himself has walked it before us. As one of our great hymns declares:

*“When through the deep waters I call you to go,  
The river of sorrow shall not overflow.  
For I will be with you your trouble to bless,  
And sanctify to you, your deepest distress.*

*“When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie,  
My Grace all sufficient shall be your supply.  
The flame shall not hurt you, I only design,  
Your dross to consume, and your gold to refine.”*

How Firm a Foundation, John Rippon and George Keith

And this is the message of Jeremiah 29. The exile is coming, the Lord has willed it, and any who claim it isn't are false. And the exile will last 70 long years, but fear not: “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11).

What a profound mystery it is that no trial comes apart from the kind and merciful will of our Lord. And not only that, but that our trials are for our good.

And this is the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Son of Man was lifted up to die on a cross, the Father sent him to it, and anyone who claims otherwise is false. And the Son of Man was buried for three long days, but... “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said.” (Matthew 28:5-6)

What a profound mercy it is to know that our Savior suffered too. And not only that, but to know that though we suffer with him, we will rise with him to life abundant and eternal!

**O Lord,  
Give me faith to trust your promises of blessing and life even amidst the  
darkest of seasons. Remembering always your love and care, as revealed  
through the compassion of my faithful savior Jesus Christ.**

**Amen.**

## Ezekiel 37 Valley of Dry Bones

This passage struck me upon first reading it because I felt as if I was walking through my own valley or season of dryness. Maybe upon reading this passage you also felt the same. After a long season of holidays and travel, heading into the new year feeling less than new. This passage is striking because of its haunting images. Like the valley of the shadow of death described in Psalm 23, no life is found in this valley; it is so dead that not even the marrow inside the bones is present. The marrow, which produces blood, is completely dried up and therefore all of its life is dried up; "The life of every creature is its blood: its blood is its life." (Leviticus 17:14).

As Ezekiel walks around this valley, he comments that it is very dry and there are very many bones. The Lord God asks if the bones can live. And Ezekiel's response is that the Lord knows. Somewhat evading answer and somewhat deferring to the power of God. God then invites Ezekiel to prophesy over the bones, bringing him into the miraculous resurrection of the long dead bones. Once the Lord covers the bones with flesh, muscle, and tendons through Ezekiel, the impossible happens. They rattle together until they are covered in flesh, laying before Ezekiel.

The Lord is not done with these bones; they lacked breath and therefore they were not alive. And again, the Lord has Ezekiel prophesy over the bones and call the breath on these corpses. They come to life and stand as a great host before Ezekiel. These new bodies are God's people, and he has called them back to life and back to the land he has made for them. Ezekiel prophesies this also over them. The Lord has called the people out of graves so that he could fulfill his promises to them and that they will know that he is God. There are many graves in this life. Grief fills the human experience, but this is not the end. God has called us into life with him that is so abundant that not even graves can hold us from being in his embrace. As the valley of the shadow of death closes in your life, remember whose rod and staff are beside you and remember the God who keeps his promises.

**Father,  
Even in the deepest of valleys and amidst the driest of bones, You are the  
giver of life. Help us to trust you are faithful and nothing can separate us  
from the embrace of your love.**

**Amen.**

## Ezekiel 47:1-9

### A River Ever Deepening

In contrast to the hardships of Ezekiel's prophetic ministry and the devastation he saw in his own life as he was taken into exile in Babylon, his writings end with visions of hope and future renewal. In chapter 37, Ezekiel looks upon the skeletal remains of Israel and her mission, and watches in awe as the Lord creates an army out of the dry bones of exile. Then in chapter 40, Ezekiel sees a mysterious and glorious future temple, literally the temple of Ezekiel's dreams(!), built from the rubble of exile and failure.

The new temple has one particularly strange feature; water is oozing from its side. In the Midwest this would be an ominous sign of a burst pipe, but this is not just any water, this is the nascent beginning of a "river of life" flowing from the perfect temple of God. The water symbolizes the small beginnings of hope for the world, when all around was wilderness and destruction.

As Ezekiel and his guide follow the trickle, the trickle keeps getting deeper, and Ezekiel's guide keeps asking him to cross over the stream. The first crossing is ankle deep, then knee deep, then waist deep, and then, far into their journey, Ezekiel stops, because the water is too deep, "deep enough to swim in". The guide looks at Ezekiel and asks, "are you paying attention?"

Like Ezekiel, Jesus leads us on our Christian journey towards the deeper waters of faith. He first shows us how to "get our feet wet", and then asks us to go deeper, and deeper, and deeper, until we may feel like we are up to our necks. But the beauty of entering a river this deep is that it leaves us only one option; to cast ourselves into the water, and into the sweep of the current of God's grace. Listen to Charles Spurgeon's words on this passage, in reference to George Mueller:

*"How blessedly our friend Mr. Mueller of Bristol swims! What a master swimmer he is! He has had his feet off the bottom many years and as he swims he draws along behind him some 2,000 orphan children, whom, by God's grace, he is saving from the floods of sin and bringing, we trust, safe to shore."*

**Father,**  
**Help us to be thankful for small beginnings.**  
**Give us faith to enter in where you are calling us.**  
**Teach us that your power begins where ours ends.**  
**Show us our next step of faith, as we walk with your Son.**  
**Amen.**

## Habakkuk 3 Habakkuk's Prayer

I often fall into the trap of trying to predict God. I don't often notice it. It creeps into the expectations I don't realize I am building until the moment they are not met. The expectations that ask, "If God were good, He would want to bring redemption in this life, wouldn't He?" The predictions that assume that He would want to bring reconciliation to estranged families, healing from weary bones or bodies wrought with sickness, provide for those who hunger, etc.

Sometimes He does redeem these things in this life and sometimes He doesn't. And it's in the moments when He doesn't, when He doesn't work in a way I predict, that my faith wavers a little and I begin to question His worthiness of my praise. Without realizing it, I begin to wonder if He is really holding all things together for good. However, in Habakkuk's prayer we are confronted with the convicting reminder that God is not confined to work in the same way that our feeble human minds would expect.

In fact, Habakkuk, in 3:1-16, lists the many ways that God works in ways beyond our human comprehension, in ways that even the whole of creation cannot comprehend. We see Habakkuk wrestle through His reverent fear of the Lord until it brings him to a place of confidence in God's character.

In verse 16, after his wrestling, he submits to the will of the Father by committing to wait quietly for the day of the Lord's redemption. Here, he places his hope purely on the faithful character of God. Then, in 3:17-19, Habakkuk gives us one of the most challenging exhortations found in Scripture. We see him declare that even if his circumstances do not change, even if redemption never happens in this life, still he will praise the Lord and find his joy in God, because he trusts in the promise of the Lord to one day make him tread on high places and the promise to be his strength until that day.

**Father,**

**May we, this Lenten season, quietly wait for the redemption of the Lord in the midst of our wrestling through the reality of our broken world. Recognizing that the redemption of the Lord is founded in his character, not our circumstances. May we find joy in the strength of the Lord sustaining us until the future redemption of all things in the new creation.**

**Amen.**



## Luke 1:46-55 The Magnificat

What a joy and a privilege it is to know and to love and to have a friend in Jesus. How amazing and comforting it is to be able to call God our Father and to be able to run to Him whenever we are lonely, worried, or afraid.

These past few years have been full of physical loss and emotional distress yet they have also been blessed with new life, peace that passes all understanding, and an everlasting hope. When life was at its hardest and everything seemed to be going wrong, God was always there letting me know that He was with me. It may have been the smallest sign and so very hard to find during the most difficult times yet it was always there, God showing up in the littlest things, through a song, a bible verse, or even in His beautiful creation.

Though there have been many stressful changes and transitions out of destructive and hurtful relationships, God has brought new people and opportunities into my life where others in the past have fallen short. I chose the Magnificat because, like Mary, I can't help but feel grateful and praise God for His presence and provision in my life in whatever season I have been in. He was and is always by our side celebrating with us, empathizing in our pain and despair and helping us grow in love.

I feel humbled and honored in knowing that God created each and every one of us for a purpose and we deserve to surround ourselves with healthy, positive relationships that will give us the support we need in order to be fully usable by Him. God loves us and wants to be a part of our lives. Through the happiest moments and in the darkest times, He is always with us; we just need to look for Him and be open to His abundant mercies and grace.

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for being so good to us. We are so grateful for your guidance, never-ending provision, and comfort during our darkest moments in life. Thank you for loving us and being with us through it all. Holy is your wonderful name and worthy are you to receive all glory, honor, and praise forever and ever.

Amen.

## Luke 4:1-12 Jesus in the Wilderness

Jesus was vulnerable in the desert. He was hot, sweaty, and hungry out there. Sometimes I tend to think that because Jesus is God, getting through the desert was easy for him, and that the temptation he faced to eat or to end his suffering wasn't even real. But that is far from true. Hebrews 4 tells us that Jesus is "able to sympathize with our weaknesses" and that he has "been tempted as we are." He experienced his suffering as fully as we would have. His suffering and feelings of vulnerability were just as real as ours. A great comfort is here for us, knowing that we have a God who feels how we feel and who empathizes with us. He understands us when we are vulnerable because he has been there.

After surgery on my shoulder, I couldn't do much of anything for myself. I was vulnerable. My family had to condescend from their place of full body ability down to serve and help me. Because of my vulnerability, I had to learn to depend not on myself but on the people around me. Similarly Jesus, as our example, was vulnerable in the desert, but he got through it because he depended on the Father for his strength.

Often, when we are in seasons of weakness and vulnerability it is really hard to remember to depend on the Father like Jesus did. However, during Jesus's temptation, he tells us the key: Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 8:3 which says "man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." The key is feeding off of God's word in the desert, so we can remember to cast ourselves on the God who meets us where we are.

When you're in the desert, God does not stay far from us. Jesus meets us in our vulnerability. Jesus comes down to our level when we are weak. Jesus reminds us that he has faced, and is facing the suffering with us. Jesus meets us in his presence and his word when we are lost. In the desert, we learn to depend on Jesus and cast our strength aside.

**Thank you Jesus for meeting us in the desert! Teach us to depend on the Father and feed off of the word when we are vulnerable.**

**Amen.**

## Matthew 11:1-6 Comforted in Doubt

When we are introduced to John the Baptist in the Gospel of Matthew he is preaching in the wilderness. And what was his message? “Repent, because the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.” In other words, John was calling everyone to change their minds, align their lives with the Lord’s teachings, and recognize that the Kingdom of Heaven was breaking into the world. And John embodied this message in such a way that he landed himself in prison.

Apparently Herod did not like being called out for his sexual misconduct.

While in prison, John heard about the ministry of his cousin, Jesus. This led him to do some thinking, and he began to doubt. So John sent a message to Jesus, asking if Jesus was the Messiah, if He was the one he was preparing the way for.

Even though John had preached repentance, he still had some ways of thinking that weren’t aligned with Christ and His Kingdom. Perhaps his present imprisonment and circumstances prevented him from perceiving the Kingdom rightly. Or perhaps he had unmet expectations because of preconceived beliefs about who Christ was and what He came to do. Whatever the case, John was doubting.

If you are a believer and have doubts, you are in good company. John the Baptist doubted. Furthermore, saints throughout the ages have doubted. I know I have. Charles Spurgeon, commenting on Psalm 69:14, said, “Some of us who have preached the Word for years... have nevertheless been subjects of the most fearful and violent doubts as to the truth of the very gospel we have preached.”

We all will experience doubts, but where do we go with them? John’s doubt teaches us to go to the Lord directly. And Jesus’ response teaches us to go to Him boldly.

When Jesus heard about John’s doubt, He responded with compassion. He reassured John that He is the Messiah, and comforted him by performing the words of Isaiah 35: “the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped...” The Lord reminded John that he was still working, even if He was doing it in a way that was unexpected. Like John, we are invited to bring our doubts to the Lord. He will not chastise us but will comfort us.

**Father,  
Teach us to trust you with our doubts, knowing that you delight to help us.  
Amen.**

## John 4:1-30 The Woman of Samaria

The Samaritan woman goes to the well “at the sixth hour”, which is noon, when typically all the women of the city go early to avoid the heat of the day. Why? Out of shame for her sin, she is hiding from her neighbors, trying to avoid their scorn and disapproval. I can relate to this woman, perhaps you can too. We all feel the urge to hide away when we fail, when we see our weakness or imperfection. We don’t want others to see us like that, because we fear how they will respond. Shame is the fear of being known, and being rejected for who we are. When we hide in shame, we can feel separated from others, that coming out of hiding will require a huge effort to overcome that barrier.

How beautiful then is the love Jesus shows to this woman? When he arrived in Samaria he does not begin by preaching in the synagogue. He did not set conditions for this woman to come to Him for forgiveness. He sought her out immediately, arriving exactly where and when He knew she would be. Alone, in her hiding, He came to her on her terms. Then, He speaks to her gently. He reveals to her that He knows everything she has ever done, all of her shameful secrets. But there is no condemnation, no judgment in His voice. He knows her, and He loves her.

The love and forgiveness of Jesus breaks the power of shame. Now this woman runs to her neighbors whom she had just been avoiding. She does not shy away from her past, but talks of it freely, because it was through her darkest moments that God’s love reached her. Jesus offers that same love to us, pursuing us in our darkest places so he can shine his light on us. He breaks the power of shame in our lives so we can be restored to relationship, not just with him, but with our neighbors as well.

**Praise to you Jesus, the Good Shepherd, for your great love for your flock. When we wander off you are not slow to follow. For our sake you pursue us, and you delight in finding us, and leading us back to the flock.  
Amen.**

## Mark 6:30-31 Space to Rest

*And the men of Israel had been hard-pressed that day, so Saul had laid an oath on the people, saying, "Cursed be the man who eats food until it is evening, and I am avenged on my enemies." **So none of the people had tasted food** (1 Sam 14:24).*

This scene is taken from the Old Testament. King Saul exhausts the energy of his soldiers, hoping to gain victory over his enemies. For his own benefit, he pushes his people past their limits; he burns them out. In contrast to King Saul, we see a different level of consideration in the person of Jesus. After his disciples returned from a good amount of service, our Lord says this:

*The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, "**Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.**" For many were coming and going, and they had no opportunity even to eat (Mark 6:30-31).*

Notice the attunement of Jesus. He recognizes the toil of labor on his disciples, the heavy burden of serving others for the sake of the gospel. But before assigning them another mission, another task to be checked off the list, he creates space so they can rest. He prioritizes their recovery.

Consider this a word of encouragement. Jesus gives us permission to rest. He's aware of our family responsibilities, work life, and service to others, and he allows us to create space for recovery. He delights in seeing us become whole. So, whether you're married with children, working long hours on your job, or enduring a heavy course load in college, Jesus, our Lord and Savior, sympathizes with our times of exhaustion, and he's pleased when we find rest in him.

Father,

Thank you for the gift of your Son. Help us take time to recover from all the burdens of life and responsibility. Give us grace when we overwork ourselves, and bring us to a place of peace and surrender. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

## Luke 5:15-16 Communing in Desolation

In these verses, we see Jesus do something he does often throughout the gospels: retreat from the noisiness and business of his public ministry to be alone with the Father. Throughout the gospels, Jesus is constantly withdrawing to be alone and pray. I was familiar with this practice of Jesus, but in preparing for this Lenten season and revisiting many of these passages, I was struck anew by how frequently he withdrew to specifically “desolate” places. “Desolate” means “in a state of bleak and dismal emptiness” or “depressingly empty or bare”. This word runs throughout many of these instances. These are not lush, beautiful, scenic places in nature to which Jesus is retreating. These places are empty, bare, stripped down, bleak.

This detail matters - it seems that Jesus specifically chose these places as opposed to more comfortable places so that He could focus solely on the Father, and in the desolation recognize more of his need for the Father’s provision in his daily life. For Christ, the desolate place often became His sacred space with the Father.

I often struggle to bring my desolation to the Father. If I do manage to be vulnerable with Jesus and let Him into my deeper struggles, rarely do I think of this time with Him as sacred, or treat this time as a priority like Jesus does in the gospels. It is not my first inclination to sit in my desolation and spend time with God, although it is in those moments that I need Him most for healing, renewal, and provision. This Lenten season, by His grace alone, may we be able to push further into our desolation to have no other choice but to rely further on the Lord. Only in Christ through the Holy Spirit, may our minds be continually renewed, so that in our most desolate moments we can discern more of God’s will for our lives, and rest in His love and grace for us.

Father,  
May we seek you first, and may you meet us in our desolate places so  
that we may experience more fully your love and grace for us.  
Amen.

## Luke 12:32 In the Father's Delight

"What do you really want?" I was faced with this question as I walked a familiar route of tree-lined streets in prayer. I had been vaguely asking the Lord to watch over a friend, but He gently stopped me, asking me to voice my desires. I slowly began to name in earnest detail how I wanted God to provide for me and for those I loved. I was surprised to find that He answered me.

If we're honest, God's faithfulness can often catch us off guard. Could it be that God considers our needs, that He would care for our desires? And at the heart of these doubts, this question: Does God really love me?

We've heard that "God so loved the world," but what does that mean? God doesn't just spread his blanket of love over the world for whatever nameless creature might get caught in it. He knows you specifically and personally tucks you into His divine love. God truly delights in His children and desires to bring us up into His very own delight—one that is sourced in the beauty of human hearts united to His own through Christ. The Father's joy is in union with His children and in giving Himself to them.

"Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Christ says this in a longer speech about anxiety and the Lord's provision, leading His followers to consider His delight for the lily and the raven. He is not compelled to provide for them nor does He do so stringently, but He desires to give them food and raiment in beauty and abundance. And how little and fleeting are they compared to His people?

God loves to give us good things. It's simple, but it's easily forgotten. We might see God as stingy or distant, processing our prayers with no true desire to see us enjoy relationship with Him and His creation. Yet, He is our heavenly Father, and we are told not to fear, for it is the delight of the Father to give us the best possible gift that can be given—the Kingdom. Life with God everlasting. And so, we can seek the Father in faith, knowing we are His delight.

**Father,**

**Remind us of your abundant love, lead us by Your desires, and draw us into the feast of Your delights, both now and through eternity. Amen.**

**Amen.**

## Matthew 26

### Jesus in the Garden

The account of Jesus in the Garden has forever been a favorite of mine. I see the parallels within this passage as a gift from God so that we may see Christ's emotional humanity. From Eden to Gethsemane, God is here.

Leading up to verse 36 we see the abundant theme of pouring. The precious and pricey perfume poured on Jesus's head, the rich wine being poured for each disciple at the Last Supper, the heavy silver coins poured into the hands of the chief priests, and finally the pouring of Christ— His blood and His sweat, spilling onto the ground in desperate prayer to God the Father.

The name Gethsemane is translated from Hebrew and means "oil press". The garden of olive trees where Christ went to pray further illustrates pouring; He prepared to be pressed to death, like costly olive oil. Costly, fragrant, rich, nutritious, and healing.

This is a poignant illustration of both Christ's deity and humanity coexisting. Through this whirlpool emerges our Savior, who sits in our grief and delivers us from it. Jesus's heart was overflowing with sorrow in His Gethsemane prayer. His human heart was retching and groaning with the width and weight of the suffering of the world. God the Father held his Son's anguish, knowing that the spilling of His blood would cover the sins of all; forgiving both those who anointed Him with perfume and those who betrayed him for coins.

Now, imagine that you are in the garden with Jesus. Tell Him about your sorrow, about your sin, and about the overwhelming plight it is to be a human in a fallen world. He understands. Pour out your heart to Him and let Him coexist in that space as he comes with His rich and nutritious healing.

**Lord Jesus,  
Gather up my sorrow and hold me close, that I may delight in your heart of overflowing mercy. Thank you for taking my sin to the cross and freeing me forever.  
Amen.**



## Acts 8:26-40 Being Ready for God's Engineering

In this passage, the apostle Phillip meets an African (Ethiopian) government official who happened to be in Israel. They meet on a road between two places much in today's news, Jerusalem and Gaza. The text signifies this was a providential meeting in an unusual place, namely the wilderness. Phillip was able to share the gospel to an inquisitive recipient who was subsequently baptized. Notice, Phillip was prepared to engage with this gentleman without any foreknowledge of the meeting. All believers are exhorted "to be prepared to share the hope that resides within them with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15).

Sadly, a report from Barna in May 2018 states, "Most Christians are at best reluctant to have a spiritual conversation." Even in days past there was unwillingness, even opposition to sharing one's faith. A lady once criticized D.L. Moody for his methods of evangelism in attempting to turn people to the Lord. Moody replied, "I agree with you. I don't like the way I do it either. Tell me, how do you do it?" The lady answered, "I don't do it." Moody responded, "I like my way of doing it better than your way of not doing it."

As He did with Phillip, God brings providential meetings into our lives with neighbors, friends, coworkers, or strangers, often at unusual times. Let us prepare even in the simplest way to share our faith and/or leave them with a tract or gospel booklet. Like any discipline, engaging with folks about Jesus and what He means to us involves learning and practice. The encouragement and accountability of a friend or friends is a huge help. Together we can know the joy Phillip would have experienced along with the psalmist in "telling of his salvation from day to day" (Psalm 96:2).

**Father,**

**Please help me recognize the providential meetings in my life  
and help me share in the simplest ways something of the joy of  
my salvation and to not in any way be ashamed of the wonderful  
gospel message.**

**Amen.**

## 2 Corinthians 1 Paul's Comfort

This is one of my favorite passages because it speaks of three truths I've experienced in my life.

First, I'm grateful for the grace and peace I've received from God through his Holy Spirit. Though my sufferings don't compare with those of the apostle Paul, I am encouraged and strengthened whenever I read God's Word during times of suffering.

To paint an image, I've been like a drooping plant that's received the living water, and been revived with the hope I've needed to flourish.

Second, I am grateful for how he's provided friends to comfort me (or I them) as we've gone through similar trials. This reassures me that God sees us and knows just how to help us provide comfort to one another, with the comfort we've received from him.

Third, I'm grateful for the times that I've been left in awe at the example my friends have set in the midst of their suffering. At those times I've said to myself, "I hope my faith will be that strong when I face hardships."

Even though I may never fully understand the cycle of shared suffering and comfort, I do know that the more I rely on God (and see others do the same) my faith grows during times of challenge and hardship.

Lord,

I pray that you will help us (both individually and corporately) rely on you for comfort, and to be used to comfort others. Help us to trust you in our trials, believing that you will strengthen us in same way that you did the Apostle Paul. Help us to give thanks and praise to you for being who you say you are; the God of comfort!

Amen.

## Philippians 4:12b-13 Paul's Contentment

A 50-year-old husband has a major stroke;  
A young wife develops Alzheimer's;  
A life partner dies...

There are situations and crises that upend our world. The life road map you thought you were on takes a sudden turn. Your plans for retirement, travel and a peaceful and loving time with your partner are replaced by the unknown.

How do we reshape our dreams for the "winter season" of our lives?  
How can we find contentment and joy in our present circumstance?

My dear husband has been suffering with dementia. His short-term memory is basically gone. He isn't able to make new memories and his old ones are fading. Our partnership of 56 years has become caregiver and patient. All the things we did as a team ... ministry, traveling, sharing thoughts and dreams, worries and heart aches; these are things of our past.

I can be depressed and lonely, angry and selfish, all of which has seeped into my mind at times. You don't reach the age of 76 without those feelings rearing their ugly heads in many unwanted situations or seasons in our lives. Those are human responses that we all have struggled with.

God has brought me through many deserts in my life... I have never been left in one.

Every morning when I wake up I have a decision to make; will I be content in this new season of life? And can I find Joy?

It's a decision of mind and heart... It's a purposeful decision... It's a decision that comes from a heart that knows God has always had this plan for my life.

I CHOOSE To be content... I CHOOSE to have Joy!

**Father,**  
**You knew from the beginning of time what each day of my life would look like. Each season was part of your perfect plan. Thank you for blessing me with joy and contentment which can only come through you.**

**Amen.**

## Acts 16:25-40

### Paul in Prison Singing Hymns

Paul and Silas had every opportunity to make a break for it, but they did not. The other prisoners had every opportunity to make a break for it, but they did not. The 'keeper of the prison', the jailer, panicked as he knew his life would be at stake due to the prisoner's escape. He was ready to kill himself, but he did not.

The 'keeper of the prison', as well as the other prisoners heard the prayers and singing of Paul and Silas as the passage says "they were listening to them". The 'keeper of the prison' asked "What must I do to be saved?"

How do we handle situations when circumstances go bad? Just as the 'keeper of the prison' was watching Paul and Silas during their trial, the world watches us when we face difficulties. Eyes are on us!

After spending nine summers as a GED teacher in a New York State Prison, the inmates in my class were dealing with so many difficult situations created by their many mistakes in life. My task during the summer was to prepare the inmates for the fall exam. Part of the exam was a five-paragraph essay. I carefully chose the topics of the essays as it quite often helped me to understand what brought them to prison. These essays helped me to minister to them, speak to them about God's love, hope, and to choose joy in their difficult circumstances. I specifically remember parting words at the end of the summer with more than one prisoner, "I will see you in Heaven".

Just as God's love and power, through Paul and Silas, released the chains of the 'keeper of the prison' (as well as his family), so we too can be used by Our Father in Heaven as we show others His love and care.

We all have been in chains and in our own prison of pride and strongholds in life. Only when we trust in Our Savior, draw near to Him, and sing His love and praises, we are free from those chains!

**Father,**

**Open our hearts to You and help us to pray for each other, to pray for family and friends not walking with you. We pray that their chains will be thrown off and they will know the freedom we have in You and Your deep love for each of us. Strengthen us to trust in You and rejoice when we are challenged with the adversities of life.**

**Amen.**

## Hebrews 13:11-15

### We Seek a City that is to Come

In this Lenten season we focus on the love of Jesus, a love so strong that He willingly suffered mockery, rejection, and an agonizing death to rescue us. The writer to the Hebrews said that Jesus endured this “for the joy set before Him”—the joy of sanctifying us as a people who would be His bride and God’s very own children.

And just as Jesus called the twelve apostles to follow Him, He calls us to follow Him. He is honest with us, just as He was honest with them. In this world, we will experience tribulation. Tribulation at some point has or will touch us in our relationships, job, finances, health, and church. That pain is real and can seem like it will never end.

But Jesus also gives us the comfort He gave His disciples. He tells us He has overcome the world and prepared a place for us. With eyes of faith we can look ahead to the city He has prepared. It is a royal city brimming with life, saturated with peace, and ruled by love. The One we have worshiped here on earth without ever seeing Him, we will see face to face. He Himself will wipe away all our tears.

And the One who suffered for us as the Lamb of God will reign forever as Kings of Kings and Lord of Lords. For it is the pleasure of the Father to give Him and to give us His Kingdom. And we will reign with Jesus forever and ever over the new heaven and earth He will create.

Here on earth we have no lasting city. But we seek that city to come. He who has promised us that city is trustworthy. So for the joy set before us, we endure our earthly tribulations. Yes, they are painful. Yes, they are heavy. But we do not bear them alone. Our hope securely rests in our Savior and His love for us. We look forward to seeing Him face to face and being with Him forever.

**Father,**  
**We entrust this present life and its troubles to You, knowing that You**  
**are our burden bearer and that there are better things to come.**  
**Amen.**



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