

Readings and Devotions for Lent

Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches



Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Matthew 16:24-26

Editor's note:

These readings are designed for individuals or families to use during the season of Lent. Lent includes the 40 days before Easter, not counting Sundays, beginning March 5 in 2014. This booklet begins with the Transfiguration, bridging the seasons of Epiphany and Lent. We also consider the beginning of Jesus' ministry at His temptation, then themes of Christ's sacrifice, our imitation of His self-denial, and finally devotions tailored to the events of holy week.

Each devotional ends with an application and/or prayer, which is often on the following page, after the name of the author. There are three devotionals for each week, and six for holy week. For flexible calendar use, I have used a "week one, day one" method instead of dates. Weeks are counted from Monday to Saturday, the first week being a half-week, making seven weeks all together. Week two is the first full week, March 10-15 in 2014.

May the Lord conform us more to the image of our suffering, self-denying Savior, Jesus Christ.

Pastor Steve Hemmeke

Covenant Heritage Reformed Church - Newport News, Virginia

Introduction to Lent

Some might wonder if the season of Lent is really necessary – doesn't it tend to point us in dangerous directions theologically? Doesn't it encourage "Pharisaism" and works righteousness? Well, it *could*, if we allowed it to be shaped by something other than the clear teaching of Scripture. But in fact, there is a biblical rationale for the season as the Reformers recognized.

Most of the Reformers while dropping the multitude of holy days that had cluttered the church calendar in the later Middle Ages, retained Lent but they gave it a dramatically different focus. Instead of focusing on fasting and deprivation, or upon efforts aimed at self-atonement, they made it an occasion to focus upon the sufferings and death of Jesus. Lent was not a time for piling up meritorious works through acts of penance, rather, the Reformers saw it as a time to deepen our understanding and awe of God's love and mercy as displayed in the cross of Jesus. Many argue (quite plausibly it seems to me) that we should learn from the calendar God established for His people under the Old Covenant, which had only one day of fasting set apart each year (which was surrounded by numerous days of feasting). If this was the case prior to the coming of our Savior, they argue, why would we institute a season of 40 days of "fasting"? And, I would agree – *if* Lent was observed as a 40 day fast. But the question is, "Is this how Lent should be celebrated?"

I don't think so.

Traditionally, Christians have "given up" something for Lent and usually that "something" has been something they particularly enjoy. This might be a form of "fasting," but if it is, it's a very pale shadow of what "fasting" really means. Given it's limited focus, it seems to miss the point of true fasting and can too easily transform into something like a "Pharisaical" act (i.e. "God surely must be pleased with me since He sees me denying myself my usual afternoon grande chocolate-caramel-cinnamon mocha latte with extra foam, which I'm absolutely *dying* to have right now!").

This is – unintentionally, but still – a distortion of the whole purpose of fasting. We fast to remind ourselves of the seriousness of our sins. Our sins are a great offense to the gracious, loving God who made us. They are so grievous that we deserve no good thing from God – indeed, we deserve to starve to death. Fasting should have the same effect upon our attitude toward sin that spanking is designed to produce in our children – i.e. it should impress upon us that sin is painful, worthy of death, miserable, and something to be avoided. I'm not sure that giving up Godiva chocolate for forty days always has the same effect.

So, I'm not sure that these "lite fasts" mean a great deal – and we are probably better off without them. But that's a different matter than saying that Lent is evil or unprofitable.

Remember that the Christian calendar is designed to follow the life and work of Jesus. Christmas is the celebration of the incarnation, Epiphany commemorates the revelation of the Savior to the world (the visit of the Magi, the baptism, the miracle at Cana, etc., up through the transfiguration). Lent focuses upon the time after the transfiguration through Jesus' death on the cross.

After the transfiguration, we are told that Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem – focusing upon the work that he had been sent to do. Lent is the season that commemorates our Savior's path to Calvary.

Our observation of Lent should reflect this. It should be a time for special focus on the price Jesus paid for our salvation and a time for reviewing our own lives. Jesus calls us to a life of willing self-denial and sacrifice ("if anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me.").

Lent is to be a time of serious, purposeful repentance and joyful thanksgiving that the Lord has offered the one full and perfect sacrifice for our sins. Now, we may have the confidence that if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness – so that we might walk in newness of life.

Lent is a time for corporate self-examination – where we remember what our sins deserve and what they cost our Savior. It is a time when we focus upon the hatefulness of sin and pray that the Lord increase our own hatred of all unrighteousness. It is a time of "improving our baptisms" – praying afresh for strength to walk with joy in the ways of righteousness.

To say that such a season is unnecessary is akin to saying Winter is unnecessary. It's like protesting the fact that some days are cloudy rather than clear or demanding a continual Springtime or an endless Summer.

When we are thinking clearly, we know all the seasons play their part. And so it is in the Christian calendar. Lent is the "winter-time" of preparation before the "spring-time" of the resurrection.

Just as death leads to life, so the cross leads to glory. Lent helps us learn this lesson. It deepens our joy and love for the Savior who has given us eternal life by His willingness to die in our place. And reminds us that when we follow Him, losing our lives for His sake, we will end in joy and blessedness with Him.

So here's the goal of Lent: to see afresh the deep, deep love of Jesus, and by the Spirit to be transformed into His image so that we can follow Him and live to the glory of the Father.

Pastor Steve Wilkins

Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church - Monroe, Louisiana

Week One, Day One of Two

Luke 9:28-36

“Now about eight days after these sayings he took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white. And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and those who were with him were heavy with sleep, but when they became fully awake they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. And as the men were parting from him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah” —not knowing what he said. As he was saying these things, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is my Son, my Chosen One; listen to him!” And when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen.”

The Transfiguration links the seasons of Epiphany and Lent. It is here at the end of Epiphany, for it is a further unveiling of Jesus. That which the angels announced and Mary pondered in her heart, what was foreseen in the Magi’s worship and gifts is now, if only for a moment, revealed in fullness to Peter, James, and John.

But, why now, what’s the connection with Lent? As the Transfiguration prepared Jesus and the disciples for the Journey to Jerusalem and the final unveiling of Christ in the resurrection it is used to prepare us for Lent and Easter. As we read of the persecution, trial and crucifixion, as we contemplate what it means to take up our own crosses, we are always to have the glory of Jesus in mind.

The Transfiguration reveals this glory by showing us a Son who had the Father’s blessing and commendation. Like the disciples we are often “heavy with sleep.”

Thankfully we have the same Lord, one who invites us to pray and wakes us to see His glory. May our readings of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, his faithfulness in temptation, his endurance of persecution, his giving of the supper, his bearing the cross, his yielding the spirit, and his bursting from the grave waken us to the great love of God. Being awake let us do more than “give up something for Lent.” Let us take up something. Let that something be that to which Jesus invited the disciples. Let us begin and continue the journey as Jesus did his.

Let us pray.

Pastor Todd Davis

Christ Church - Searcy, Arkansas

Lenten Application

1. Discuss things that distract us from prayer and what we can do to minimize them.
2. Along with the Lord's Prayer commit to memorizing the set prayers in your congregation's liturgy. Take about how these prayers could be used in times of family and private prayer.

Prayer

O God, who before the passion of your only-begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy

mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

-The Book of Common Prayer

Week One, Day Two of Two

Mark 1:12-13

“Immediately the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness. And He was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan, and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to Him.”

When certain numbers pop up repeatedly in the text of the Bible, like the number three, or the number twelve, you know that there must be some design behind the recurrence. It is not a coincidence, for example, that there are twelve tribes and twelve apostles. The number forty is one of those numbers we see time after time in the Scriptures, and it always comes in the context of preparation and testing. There was rain forty days and forty nights in the days of Noah. Moses spent forty days at the top of Mt. Sinai. Israel wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Elijah, when he was running from Jezebel, was given bread and water by the angel of the Lord, and then didn't eat again all during his forty day journey to Mt. Horeb. Jonah proclaimed the destruction of Nineveh in forty days. As we read in Mark's gospel, Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by Satan. You can probably come up with a few more significant occurrences of the number forty from the Bible.

We find ourselves now in the season of Lent, which is a forty-day period of preparation, (excluding Sundays) corresponding to the forty-day temptation and preparation of Jesus in the wilderness. Just as Lent calls us to remember Jesus' time in the wilderness, Jesus was himself reenacting Israel's time in the wilderness. On many levels throughout his ministry, Jesus lived out Israel's story. Jesus goes through his own "Red Sea" in his baptism. Then he spends forty days in the wilderness, before re-entering the land to begin his conquest. Mark tells us that Jesus was driven out by the Spirit into the wilderness, just as the Spirit led Israel by fire and cloud. The difference between Israel and Jesus is that while Israel complained and succumbed to temptation in their wilderness, Jesus defeated Satan in his wilderness.

Our mission these forty days is not to wander in idleness as Israel did, but to wage war against Satan, just as Jesus did. Let us "pick a fight" with our sins. Determine that in the strength of the Holy Spirit and by the grace of God that these forty days we will make serious headway in the struggle against all those things that wear us down, waste our time, pollute our hearts and damage our relationships with Jesus and His people. Take account of those things that are hurting our families and our church, and get to work rebuking Satan, shining the light of the gospel in all the dark corners and submitting everything to the Lordship of Jesus.

At the end of each period of forty days or years in the Bible, there is always the presentation of something new. There is a refreshing or a revival or resurrection. There is a new creation. When Jesus returns from the temptation in the wilderness, he gathers the twelve new elders of Israel, creating a new nation around himself that will conquer the new land of promise. For us, at the end of our forty days of growth through this season of Lent, we will find ourselves rejoicing in the feast of the resurrection, and hopefully we will have found a renewed sense of purpose and mission so that our joy in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus can be full.

*Pastor Duane Garner Christ Church
- Cary, North Carolina*

Lenten Application

Are there sins we need to confess to each other and to God? What sorts of things are we going to do in the next forty days to begin submitting these areas of our lives to Jesus? Sing the following hymn.

A Lenten Hymn

*Sing to the Tune of page 159 in the Cantus Christi
Or Hymn #7 in the Trinity Hymnal*

Lord, who throughout these forty days
for us didst fast and pray,
teach us with thee to mourn our sins,
and close by thee to stay.
As thou with Satan didst contend
and didst the victory win,
O give us strength in thee to fight,
in thee to conquer sin.
As thou didst hunger bear and thirst,
so teach us, gracious Lord,
to die to self, and chiefly live
by thy most holy word.
And through these days of penitence,
and through thy Passiontide,
yea, evermore, in life and death,
Jesus! with us abide.
Abide with us, that so, this life
of suffering over-past,
an Easter of unending joy
we may attain at last!

Words: Claudia F. Hernaman, 1873; Meter: CM

365 or 40 days of Lent? *Week Two, Day One*

Ecclesiastes 3:1-5

“To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing.”

When we look back in history we can see that the churches that exclude lent from the liturgical calendar do not replace it with a continual atmosphere of joy. For example, the Puritans abolished lent, but also removed Christmas and the joy associated with the celebration of Christ's incarnation. They removed from their lives other celebrations involving singing, dancing or recreation. This was not only a puritan trend. In the seventeenth century also the Catholic Church in Madrid closed theaters, as well as the Protestants in London or the Orthodox in Russia.

In many churches rejecting Lent comes together with discarding the joy of Christmas. This explains why it is not about removing periods during the year, which interfere with the experience of joy. Removing the period of Lent didn't bring the continuous joy of Easter, but resulted in continuous full-year Lent. Churches that believe Lent in the liturgical year to be one of the greatest heresies, really fast all year round. This is because they say it's wrong to drink alcohol, go to pubs, listen to rock music or dance any time. We recognize Lent in the same sense and for the same reason we confess our sins at the beginning of each Sunday service. This is the time of sadness because of our sins and wickedness. But this sorrow and lamentation should not suppress our joy at the goodness of our God. After the confession of sins we receive the assurance of forgiveness.

There is a proper time for both the sadness and the joy. The time before Easter is the time to discover the essence of the resurrection and the blessings of the New Life. The spirit of Lent is a part of the life of the church. Figuratively speaking, if we do not wear purple and ash for 40 days we may wear them 365 days a year.

An interesting note in conclusion: the church fathers did not recommend we fast on Sunday (except for confession of sins), because the Lord's Day is a day of joy.

Pastor Pawel Bartosik

Evangelical Reformed Church - Gdansk, Poland (CREC)

Lenten Application

Does your life include times of confession and sadness for your sin, as well as joy at your new life in Christ? How do you handle such times of sadness as a family?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank you for gift of lent and "a house of mourning". Thank you for the time of sadness and time of joy which teach us the truths about passing from death to life, moving from darkness to light. We ask you for wisdom in recognizing - when is the appropriate time for sadness, ash and silence, and when is the time for joy. Please teach us to rejoice with those who rejoice; to mourn with those who mourn. In Jesus name, Amen.

Week Two, Day Two

Mark 1:12-13

The Spirit immediately drove him [Jesus] out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

This story is, among other things, about Jesus succeeding where Adam failed. On one hand, Adam damaged creation by falling to temptation, thereby opening the door to death and suffering. On the other hand, Jesus, the "last Adam," fixes the old creation and makes a new creation through his righteousness. We see this righteousness demonstrated in part by his victory over temptation in the wilderness.

The similarities between Adam and Jesus help us to understand how they are connected in their roles. The contrasts between Adam and Jesus help us to understand how Jesus is superior to Adam and is a remedy to the problems inherited from Adam.

So, while Adam was placed in the Garden of Eden by God, Jesus was driven into the wilderness by the Spirit. Although Adam was comforted with the food of paradise, including the tree of life; Jesus fasted for forty days and was hungry. Although Adam enjoyed perfect fellowship with his wife and was at peace with the animals of the garden; Jesus was isolated in the wilderness, anticipated being rejected by his betrothed (the Old Testament church), and was surrounded by threatening beasts. Adam was tempted by Satan in the form of a serpent and Jesus was tempted by Satan face-to-face. Adam was dissatisfied with the perfection of Eden. He succumbed to temptation in the hope of gaining more. Jesus was satisfied with God's provision - even in the wilderness. He rejected temptation and remained faithful, knowing that this path would cause Him to lose more before He would gain everything.

Adam's fall in the garden of paradise brought sin and death. Jesus' righteousness in the wilderness brought life and blessing.

Pastor David Givler

Christ Covenant Church, San Antonio, Texas

Lenten Application

We suffer because we are born under the curse provoked by Adam and because we sin. Sometimes we think our suffering is an excuse to sin more. However, we would do well to follow Jesus' example. He suffered, even though He did *not* sin. Even so, He found in suffering opportunities to demonstrate love and devotion to His Father. If Jesus suffered in innocence and we suffer in our guilt, should we not see our times of suffering as opportunities to love God and to show our gratitude to Him? Are we called to follow Jesus and to be like Him? Can our faithfulness bless others? Can our faithfulness bring life to others?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we confess that we often take our suffering as an excuse to rebel against You. We know suffering actually shows that You are patient with us and that You refine us. Thank You for Jesus and His example of perfect obedience even in the midst of undeserved suffering. Make us more like Jesus in our obedience, in our love of You, and in our abilities to share eternal life with others. In Jesus' name, AMEN.

The Transfiguration

Week Two, Day Three

Luke 9:35

“This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!” (read Luke 9:18-38)

Luke’s concern in his gospel is to focus upon how the Church is going to be built. The foundation will be laid by the sacrificial suffering of Jesus (9:20-22) and on the foundation of His Son, God will build up His Church through the suffering service of Jesus’ disciples (9:23-27). The victory will come *through* tribulation and suffering not apart from it.

This is evident in Luke’s account of the transfiguration. He tells us that when Jesus was transfigured, Moses and Elijah appeared with Him and spoke with Him (vv. 30-31). Our translations say that they “spoke of His decease” but literally the text reads “they spoke of *His exodus* which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” They are discussing the final deliverance that would be accomplished for the people of God through the work of Savior in giving up His life for His people.

By His death, Jesus would be revealed as the greater Moses who brings about the full and final deliverance of His people. As Moses led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, Jesus will lead God’s people out of the slavery to sin and death into their promised inheritance – the new creation which will be filled with life and glory.

Peter wants to build a house for Jesus (v. 33) and though he didn’t understand what he was saying, Jesus would grant his request. He won’t be allowed to erect another tabernacle on the mountain but he and the other disciples are going to be called to build a far more glorious building – a living building made up of God’s people, filled with God’s Spirit – the Church.

God commands the disciples to hear Jesus, His beloved Son (v. 35). The Church is going to be built not only on the Law and Prophets, but primarily upon the words of Jesus. He is fulfillment of all that was revealed in the Law and the Prophets (Luke 24:27). With His coming, the times of Law and Prophets have come to an end. What remains now is the time of the Son. In Him the Law and Prophets live on but in a transfigured way. All the glory promised by both the Law and Prophets will be brought to pass through Him. But Peter and the disciples do not yet realize that the glory of the new world cannot come apart from the suffering and death that Jesus had told them about. The glory they’ve seen will not be seen by the world if Jesus doesn’t fulfill His mission of suffering and dying. And their role will be to follow Him along the same path. The message of the gospel is a message of both cross and crown, of both suffering and transfiguration. The glory promised can only come through suffering. This was the way it was for Jesus and it will be no different for us.

Pastor Steve Wilkins

Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church - Monroe, Louisiana

Lenten Application

What are some good things that come through suffering? What good is suffering for us? What good does our suffering do for others? Do you see why Peter said, “don’t think that suffering is a strange thing”? Discuss Peter’s counsel regarding how we should respond to suffering (1 Peter 4:12-19).

Prayer

Almighty God, be pleased to keep Thy people and this household continually in thy true religion; that we who trust in Thy heavenly grace may evermore be defended by Thy mighty power, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Week Three, Day One

Romans 9:3 "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh."

We've all been sick at some time or other, and perhaps even seriously ill. Maybe you even faced life-threatening illness. Such serious times make us thankful for the medical advances that we enjoy today, perhaps even take for granted. While some advances in medicine have brought difficult ethical questions, without question we're thankful to the Lord for the knowledge and skills he's given to men. Just consider the ability we have to transplant so many organs – bone marrow, corneas, hearts, kidneys, livers, lungs, pancreases, skin and probably many more of which I'm not aware. Transplants have saved many lives and relieved the chronic suffering of many more for which we give thanks to God.

Perhaps you have made the decision to give some of your organs to others when you die, and you carry an "organ donor" ID with you. That's a generous decision, but it doesn't incur any risk; after all, surgery won't hurt you and you won't need your heart or liver anymore. But what if a sibling was seriously ill, or your child was dying, and only a kidney transplant could (humanly speaking) bring healing? You'd freely give your kidney or lung. But now there's risk. What if you get an infection from the surgery? What if your remaining kidney later fails? You would still do it, because you love that person and want to see him well and living a full life. And what if your child needed a heart? That's a gift no parent can give. But how many parents have said, meaning every word of it, "I would die for her if I could." Would we doubt such words?

Some cynical folks have said that Paul's words in our text were easy to write, because he knew it couldn't really happen. It was just a bit of exaggeration to make his point at no risk to himself. No, Paul could not die for others, and he certainly could not be "accursed" (*anathema*) for them.

But Paul's words are those of a man who had the heart of the One who did die to bring life to those already dead. Paul had so died to himself that he had the heart of Christ, so he thought like his Savior and he spoke like his Savior. Paul's words are indeed extravagant, rich, beyond his ability to accomplish – "I love them so much, and I hurt so much for them, that I'd take God's curse for them if I could" – but every word was true and sincere, because Paul was following in Christ's footsteps. "It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

Paul here expressed the heart of Jesus.

Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift, the gift of our great Shepherd who was accursed for us (*cf.* 2 Cor 9:1; John 10:11). Thanks be to God for the life-giving surgery accomplished for you on his cross.

*Pastor Mike Pasarilla
Christ Presbyterian Church, Knoxville, Tennessee*

Lenten Application

Discuss with your family how together you might develop the heart of your Savior. You cannot lay down your life for them, but can you seek to impart those other graces which have been given to you in imitation of Christ, such as joy, peace and love? Perhaps you may give of your time and energy to sit and visit with the needy, or with the ill in a hospital or rest home. Help your children to practice giving of themselves for others in imitation of Christ.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, so work in us by your Spirit that our hearts might beat with the same love you have for us which you demonstrated in Christ's sacrifice. Grant that we might yearn for the souls of others to be healed, even as you have healed us, indeed raised us to life, through the giving of your Son for us. We ask this in his name, Amen.

Week Three, Day Two

Matthew 16:24-26

“Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”

God called Adam had to deny himself in the Garden. Refrain from eating that fruit. God made it easy, as there was plenty of other goodness around to delight in! But Adam and Eve could not stay away. They would not deny themselves the fruit God denied them. Mankind has followed suit ever since, seeking to gain the whole world, in selfishness, pride, lust, and power.

Where Adam fell short in the Garden of Eden, Jesus did not fail. He endured the temptations we also face, but He never gave in to sin. He did what Israel was supposed to do: remain in faithful covenant relationship with God and bear that bright light to the nations around them. He followed the self-denial of His Father, who first gave up His own beloved Son to be crucified by His rebellious people. He humbled Himself. The Westminster Shorter Catechism reminds us that the humiliation of Christ consisted in “His being born, and that in a low condition, made under the law, undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God, and the cursed death of the cross; in being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time.” God calls us to shed Adam’s image and way of self-indulgence. To instead take up Jesus’ cross.

Lent is a time to remember God’s call of self-denial. To put it bluntly, paraphrasing Jesus, If you are not denying yourself you will lose your life. Why? Because you can’t take up a cross and follow Him, when your hands are already full and satisfied. Now, if you confess your sin and open your mouth wide, then God will fill it. But we cannot grab for ourselves and claim to be following Christ. That’s a bad deal for us. In the end we will lose it all. But if we seek first His Kingdom and righteousness, then all these things will be added unto you.

Some remind themselves of the call to self-denial with external denials – giving something up for Lent. We kneel at one part of the worship service to remember that all of life must involve confession and humility. We raise hands at one part of the worship service to remember that we pray without ceasing, always keeping our hands holy before God. So we might deny ourselves something for a season as a reminder that all our life is to be one of following Jesus and not our own desires. Jesus does say, “*When you fast...*”, assuming that we will. But He also says to be careful with it. You are only reminding yourself of the battle you are fighting the *rest* of the time. If the symbolic (or liturgical) act becomes our piety, with no real overflow into the rest of our life, we have little left but hypocrisy. Let us instead humble ourselves, taking the lower place among others and serving them. Let us give others time, energy or money that we would rather have for ourselves. Let us follow Jesus.

Pastor Steve Hemmeke

Covenant Heritage Reformed Church – Newport News, Virginia

Lenten Application

One recent convert relates that as she joined the church it was important for her to know what other believers gave up to be there. What sins did they have to confess and forsake to become disciples of Christ Jesus? How would you answer her? What sins or temptations are **you** turning away from to follow Jesus right now?

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You for the ministry of Your Son Jesus Christ. Help us to follow in His footsteps. Show us the cross we must pick up to follow Him. Show us where we must lay down our own desires to be more faithful disciples.

Week Three, Day Three

Hebrews 10:11-14

“And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool. ¹⁴ For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.”

The Bible is a book—a story about redemption. At the center of that story—from Genesis to Revelation—is the person and work of Jesus Christ; the God-man; the mediator between God and man. While we celebrate the resurrection of Christ every Lord’s Day, the Church calendar also places some special emphasis on Easter Sunday. We have entered the Lenten Season, which is designed to prepare us for Easter.

The book of Hebrews refers us back to the Old Testament book of Leviticus, chapters 1-7, which provides us with a picture of the person and work of Jesus Christ. The New Testament points us back to the Old Testament, just as the Old Testament points us forward to the New.

Jesus said:

“These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.” ⁴⁵ And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (Luke 24:44-45).

The Apostle Paul instructs us, saying: “The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Gal. 3:24).

The book of Leviticus becomes delightful to us when we come to see that it is far more than a book of Jewish ritual. It reveals the Lord Jesus Christ in His person and work. It is very gracious of God to teach us by way of pictures. It is a way for us, in our limited way, to begin to comprehend the Lord and His work. Through these images, God enables us to consider one aspect of the Person or work of the Lord Jesus at a time.

When all the parts of the picture are put together our hearts are filled with wonder, worship, and praise. The five Levitical offerings presented are: 1) the burnt offering; 2) the meal offering; the peace or thank offering; 4) the sin offering; 5) the guilt offering. In these five offerings we have a beautiful presentation of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, the true “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

All these offerings taken together give us a full view of Christ and His great sacrificial work on the cross. They are like five mirrors arranged around the Lord and the cross so that each one reflects a special view of His Person and work.

Pastor Randy Booth

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church - Nacogdoches, TX

Lenten Application

Sacrifice is giving yourself for the sake of another, and it is a demonstration of love. Discuss how the sacrifice of Jesus was an act of love toward you and then, following the example of Jesus, suggest a concrete way that you can sacrifice for someone else to demonstrate your love for them.

Prayer

O Lord God, receive us only on the basis of that once-and-for-all, perfect sacrifice which was sufficient to atone for all our sin. Forgive our sins for Jesus' sake, because of His blood and righteousness. Give us a sense of our sin; help us to see how heinous it is in Your sight and what it deserves. By Your grace cause us to continually turn from sin, hating and forsaking it because it is displeasing to You. We rejoice today in our great High Priest and sacrifice. Take our lives, and let them be consecrated to You. Use the book of Leviticus to point us to Christ and His work. Amen.

Week Four, Day One

Hebrews 5:7-10 *"In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. ⁸ Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. ⁹ And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, ¹⁰ being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek."*

Why would Jesus, who was sinless, need to be "made perfect?" Was there something *imperfect* about him whose food was to do his Father's will (John 4:34). He said, "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38). So why did Jesus need to "learn obedience?"

For us as sinners, learning obedience often means a change in our wills from being rebellious to being submissive, whether to our parents, our superiors, or even to God. But for Jesus, learning obedience was never from a position of disobedience. Rather, Jesus experienced what it was to always obey in every circumstance throughout his life, even when obeying his Father meant suffering. Consider the deprivation he suffered because he did not deviate from his Father's will ("the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head,"). Jesus lacked the support and understanding of his family, another source of suffering. And he was often hated by men who would have killed him (even early in his ministry, *e.g.* Mark 3:6; Luke 4:29) because he always did his Father's will.

Jesus learned obedience through many lessons of lesser suffering; he was indeed "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isa 53:3). And with every trial of obedience Jesus was confirming his loyalty to the Father against all temptations, including the great lesson of loving obedience at Gethsemane and Golgotha.

Jesus prayed often, and there may have been various occasions when he did so "with loud cries and tears" to his Father "who was able to save him from death." But we certainly hear in those words the echoes of Gethsemane. Jesus' human nature was a real human nature, though united mysteriously with deity. The very real horrors that he faced made him cry out: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me." Could he not have appealed to his Father, who would have immediately sent more than twelve legions of angels to save him (Mat 26:53)? But Jesus was learning obedience even on the threshold of his blood being shed, the very reason why he had come to that hour (John 17:1). He had "learned obedience" in the smaller things that he might be obedient in the greatest of trials, the hardest of lessons: "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). He was doing so in order to be our great High Priest who would offer himself, the sacrifice without spot or blemish – the perfect sacrifice who had obeyed his Father in all things for us even to the uttermost: he "became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8).

Thus "being made perfect" means Jesus *completed* all that was necessary to be our great High Priest; he *reached the goal* of offering himself for us, and "he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him." He was "crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death" (Heb 2:9) and lives forevermore. "He holds his priesthood permanently ... he always lives to make intercession for (us)" (Heb 7:24 *f.*)

Pastor Mike Pasarilla
Christ Presbyterian Church - Knoxville, Tennessee

Lenten Application

Discuss with your family how Jesus' learning obedience through his suffering sets a pattern for us today: How might this change our perspective on our trials? Can our trials serve as lessons from our heavenly Father, preparing and equipping us for further service? Discuss how Jesus can sympathize with us when we face trials of obedience.

Prayer

Father, help us to reverently and humbly walk in Christ's footsteps. Work in us by the Spirit to learn the lessons of obedience in which you school us as disciples of Jesus, so that in whatever opportunities you give, we will choose to do your will and bring honor and glory to you. Make us grateful for him who gave his life in our stead, our High Priest who completed all that was necessary to save us to the uttermost. We ask this for his name's sake, Amen.

Week Four, Day Two

James 4:7

Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you."

Reading the biographies of early Christian leaders like Antony, Paul of Thebes, and Hilarion reminded me of the costly warfare in which we Christians are engaged. These men knew that Satan was out to destroy them, to undermine virtue, and to corrupt and taint and distort whatever vestiges of righteousness he could find. And not only did these men know they were at war – they knew whose side they were on. Years and years they wrestled and strove and fought. Why? To overcome sin and in so doing to overcome all the wiles of the devil.

We fight in this same war. The devil would like to take us down. He would like to destroy us. He would like to see us corrupted and complacent. Do you see it? When you are tempted to ignore your wife – that's the battle. When you are tempted to be bitter toward your husband – that's the battle. When you are tempted to yell at the kids – that's the battle. When you are tempted to disrespect your parents – that's the battle. When you are tempted to despise your siblings – that's the battle. A war is raging and many of us are playing with the tinker toys in the corner. A war is raging and many of us are keeping uncommon close company with the enemy. A war is raging and many of us are consumed with whether we are happy rather than whether we are holy, equipped for the fight.

So listen – Lent is a call to get our eyes off our navels and get to war - to get rid of our selfishness, our greed, our bitterness, our lust, our idolatry. It is a call to heed James' exhortation, "*Submit to God, resist the devil.*" But James doesn't merely exhort us – He reminds us of God's promise. As you submit to God and resist the devil, the devil will flee from you, from little old you. You can, by the power of God's Spirit, put the devil to flight. So reminded of James' exhortation and his promise – a promise that our Lord Jesus clung to during His wilderness testing – let us fight the good fight of faith.

*Pastor Stuart W. Bryan
Trinity Church - Coeur d'Alene, Idaho*

Lenten Application

Read an event from the life of Antony, Paul of Thebes, or Hilarion and discuss how they understood that they were at war with the devil.

Prayer

Almighty Father, we praise and thank you for our Lord Jesus Christ. We praise you that He fought the good fight and resisted the devil. When Satan tempted Him, He entrusted Himself to You and Your Word, relying on Your Word to overcome the devil's deceptions. Give us strength to imitate Jesus and to rely upon your Word; strengthen us with your promises and grant us grace to fight the good fight. Amen.

Week Four, Day Three

Mark 15:37 *"And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed His last."*

There are times when I wish that fatherhood classes would have included some training as a referee. When my kids are playing imagination games together, I find myself going for the whistle around my neck.

Of course, sometimes it works out great. When my four year old declared "Ok, now I am the slimy turtle monster disguised in the skin of the dead seal that I found at the beach." My 7 year old yelled, "You'll never catch me," and took off running with the giggling turtle monster in a seal suit in hot pursuit.

Problems arise, however, when there is more than one game being imagined. When my girls were playing with their newly acquired 'farm animal hospital,' my son arrived on the scene. Having shed both the seal skin and the slimy turtle act, he watched just long enough to see the pig go in for his medicine. Giggling with delight, he declared, "I'm your giant pet dog who is too wild." And he jumped into the miniature hospital and squished all of the animals in the waiting room, along with the nurse, and the waiting room itself.

While playing with others, it matters what story you are telling about your self in your own head. When we see Jesus, breathing his last on the cross, we see the end of the first chapter and the beginning of the second chapter of the story we are in. God breathed into the lungs of Adam to create humanity, but we sinned, so our life breath became death. Jesus, as the second Adam, emptied the lungs of sinful humanity so that he could breath into us new and living breath.

Getting on with God is a matter of telling the same story about your life that God is telling with your life. And that means starting at the same place. God says your life begins with the last breath of Jesus. When he breathed his last, he breathed our last breath in the old Adam as well. Now we live eternal life, breathing resurrection breath by faith today and on into eternity.

*Pastor Jason Farley
Trinity Covenant Church - Santa Cruz, California*

Lenten Application

Breathe out all of your air and see how long you can keep from breathing back in. Think of ways that conflict arises within your family because each person has a different story, different goals, or different expectations in their mind. Tell each person how you see their gifts as a blessing in the God's story of their life.

Week Five, Day One

Leviticus 19:11–18

'You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. ¹² And you shall not swear by My name falsely, nor shall you profane the name of your God: I am the LORD. ¹³ 'You shall not cheat your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages of him who is hired shall not remain with you all night until morning. ¹⁴ You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but shall fear your God: I am the LORD. ¹⁵ 'You shall do no injustice in judgment. You shall not be partial to the poor, nor honor the person of the mighty. In righteousness you shall judge your neighbor. ¹⁶ You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people; nor shall you take a stand against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD. ¹⁷ 'You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.'

This section of Leviticus is introduced in chapter 19:1-2, where the Lord tells Moses to tell the people, *"You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy."* God is very concerned that His people are to be holy, and that means... set apart, pure, clean, and righteous. Our text is a fleshing out of this command. It explains what it means for us to *"be holy."* This reaches beyond some vague, ethereal understanding. It stretches into the real and personal and gritty relationships we have with one another.

Thus, our text objects to a long list of real sins that sully the congregation: It forbids stealing, lying, swearing, cheating, robbing, failure to pay wages, cruelty, injustice against either the wealthy or the poor, gossip, false witness, hatred, vengeance, and grudges. And why does the text object? Because our God is holy. But not only that, our God is love. How do we know this? The antidote to the poison of sin is given in verse 18... instead of all *those things*, *"you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."* This love is also defined in very practical terms through the text... reverence (vs.14), impartiality in judgment (vs.15), confronting a brother (vs.17), and as I already said, loving your neighbor as yourself (vs.18). How do we love ourselves? We are good at this, and it is natural for us. If you think about it, it is in very practical and small ways. We care about the minutest details. We change our socks and make our beds. We will remove a shoe, just to get the smallest pebble out. We feed ourselves and are concerned about our appearances. You get the idea.

If we will be holy, we must learn to put ourselves in our neighbor's shoes. We must empathize and humble ourselves to look outside of ourselves to *their* benefit and *their* best interest. When we do that, we start to become holy, like our God, because that is *exactly* what He did for us.

He humbled Himself, and became one of us, to suffer and to die on our behalf.

Pastor Dirk DeWinkle

Christ Church of Livingston County - Howell, Michigan

Lenten Application

Take a moment and consider some of the practical (and even small/mundane) ways in which you sin in community, whether that is against your spouse, your siblings, your parents, people at church, school, work, or your neighbors. Talk about what love would look like instead of that. Confess your sin, repent, and make it right with your brother.

Prayer

Our Father in Heaven, we thank You and praise You for revealing Yourself in Your holiness to us. We thank You for calling us out of the world to be Your special people, set apart to do Your will. We now confess to You the many and the mundane ways in which we have sinned in community and not loved our neighbors nor humbled ourselves before You. We ask You to give us mercy and wash us with the blood of Christ. Make us holy as You are holy. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Christ: Our Faithful High Priest

Week Five, Day Two

Hebrews 4:15-16 *“For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”*

Some people may wonder: "How can Almighty God, Who is perfect and holy understand me?" Maybe we sometimes have the picture of an unapproachable Creator, a God Who is far from life and reality, One Who is remote and infinitely removed by His divine perfections from all our difficulties and temptations.

Well, the Lord Jesus Christ, the One in Whom "dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Colossians 2:9) knows our frame, that we are but dust. By His incarnation He became one of us.

He has been through all the temptations that may try us, and the storms of life that may trouble us . Because He has been through these, He understands us. He can fully sympathize with our pains, our infirmities, and every sinful desire that afflicts the human soul.

Two chapters earlier, in Hebrews 2:16-18 we read, “For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham. Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.”

What we could not do for ourselves, our Great High Priest has done for us. Through our Lord Jesus Christ we have One Who knows our weaknesses; One Who shows us, by His example, the way to resist temptation; One Who sacrificed Himself on our behalf in order to pay our debt of sin; and One Who continues His priestly work by interceding for us.

Surely at this time of year we reflect on our sins and failings; surely we know that we need to repent and amend our ways. But knowing what Jesus Christ has done for us and continues to do, such knowledge should give us great hope and confidence. We should know this: if Christ is for us, who or what can be against us? Give thanks to Christ for the victory!

*Pastor Brian Penney
Christ Covenant Church - Copiague, New York*

Lenten Application

Sing praise to our Lord Jesus Christ using the hymn below...you can learn the melody here:

<http://newkirkpsalmshymns.weebly.com/jesus-christ-has-put-away.html>

Prayer

Almighty God, Who sees that we have no strength in ourselves to help ourselves; Keep us, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the way of Your commandments; defend us from all our enemies; and crush Satan under our feet; through Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest. Amen

Week Five, Day Three

Matthew 8:18-20

“Now when Jesus saw great multitudes about him, he gave commandment to depart unto the other side. And a certain scribe came, and said unto him, Master, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest. And Jesus saith unto him, The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.”

Jesus is speaking about the cost of discipleship. In our modern world, especially here in the United States, we do not have to think about that very much. Our faith costs us little. In fact, if we speak about the minimal costs at all, say tithing or regular attendance at church and Sabbath resting on the Lord's Day, the modern man finds all sorts of room for discomfort and disagreement. This really amounts to justifying one's behavior because of the cost of discipleship.

Jesus's answer to the man was essentially saying, “Will you really serve me then? Do you know what you are saying? What if I am taken prisoner? Would you serve me then? What if all my disciples flee away? Would you serve me then? What if I am driven into the wilderness? Would you follow me there? What if they kill me? Would you die with me, too?”

And this really is the cost of discipleship. When you follow Jesus, you must go into the wilderness and be tempted, you must be despised by the wisdom of this present age, you must gain enemies, you must walk that slow and dreadful walk to the cross and you must die.

Will you follow Jesus then, whithersoever he goest?

Pastor Virgil Hurt

Providence Church - Lynchburg, Virginia

Lenten Application

What are some of the costs of discipleship that you have suffered? These may include the loss of opportunities in employment, ridicule, or abandonment of friends. In what ways have you compromised your discipleship by refusing to take up your cross and following Him wherever He goes?

Prayer:

Holy Father, forgive us when we shrink from following Jesus when the cost is too high. He did not shun to die for us and we pray that Your Holy Spirit would give us the boldness and power to live and die for Him. Amen.

Week Six, Day One

Mark 10:17-22 "And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions."

Who was this rich, young ruler? We don't know his name. We only know that he seemingly had everything, but actually had nothing. His life was one continual success story. He had riches and leadership skills; he was physically fit and young; he had confidence and eagerness. If he were living in our time, he would likely be an Eagle Scout and an athlete. I suspect he was also handsome and well dressed. Moreover, he goes to the right source with the right question:

"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

For the first time in his life, he fails. Totally. Jesus said to him, "You lack one thing." I suspect he was ready to whip a wad of cash or do whatever was needed to correct the problem. The one thing lacking was not charity toward the poor. If Jesus had said, "Donate to Salvation Army," or "Go spend a few weekends working at a homeless shelter," he would have complied. Nor was it energy and drive toward the task. If Jesus had said, "I want you to put in sixty plus hours a week into ministry," he would have pulled out his day planner and started prioritizing ministry tasks.

Jesus said, in effect, "All or nothing. Empty your wallet, savings account, stock options, and piggy bank. Give it all up."

At some point in time in the years that followed, this young man did give it all up. He lost his youth, power, and money. But did he find the eternal life he sought for? Not unless he reconsidered and heeded the words of Jesus. On another occasion, Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). We see in this story where the rich young ruler's real treasure was.

Jesus was one tough teacher. The assignment He gave this man wasn't easy. But there are two rich, young rulers in this story. Both are concerned about eternal life. One failed; one succeeded. One gave up nothing and ultimately lost everything. The other gave up everything and gained eternal life, not for Himself, but for all who believe on Him. Jesus did truly give up everything: He emptied Himself of the glory that was His as the Son of God (Philippians 2:5-8) and He gave all that He had to the poor. Paul writes, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich."

What Jesus asked the rich young ruler to do, He Himself did. Jesus calls upon us to give up everything for Him. After all, that is what He has done for us.

Pastor Ben House

Grace Covenant Church, Texarkana, Arkansas

Lenten Application

Name some things that would be hard to give up, if we had to. Now name something that would have been hard to give up five years ago, but does not mean much to you now (like an article of clothing that was new then or a toy that you played with then). Jesus does not tell all of us to give up personal possessions, but He calls us to count the cost of discipleship. Discuss what “the cost of discipleship” might mean for us.

Prayer

Almighty God, we thank You that Jesus, although He was rich, for our sakes, became poor. He gave everything for us. Give us hearts of thankfulness for the gift of God’s grace. Free us of the wrong kind love of things that don’t last. Let us live so as to store up treasures in heaven. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Week Six, Day Two

Psalm 22:23-25

“Ye that fear the LORD, praise him; all ye the seed of Jacob, glorify him; and fear him, all ye the seed of Israel. For he hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither hath he hid his face from him; but when he cried unto him, he heard. My praise shall be of thee in the great congregation: I will pay my vows before them that fear him.”

Take a few moments and read Psalm 22 aloud in its entirety. We are very familiar with the themes of this Psalm, especially in Holy Week and on Good Friday. Our Lord suffered greatly and there was some sense of separation in the Godhead on the cross. But we need to read the entire Psalm so that we see that Jesus was not abandoned. The Father heard His cries and came to His rescue.

In the Lenten and Easter seasons, we must grasp the importance of this truth. We remember the real suffering of our Lord for sinners and it is good for us to examine ourselves, purging sins and seeking the grace and mercy of Jesus. But we must be like Jesus and look beyond the cross to the resurrection. Our Lenten Season and Holy Week should be like a Passion Play. We are really only re-enactors, not true participants. We know the end of the story and the end of this story is not suffering, sorrow, and death. It is healing, joy and resurrection.

Feel free to examine yourself but only long enough to see that Jesus did all the work of your redemption from sin in His suffering, death, resurrection, ascension and rule. Then, like Jesus, face the facts of your own sorrow and suffering, for the great joy that is on the other side of these trials. In Jesus, there is always hope after despair, joy after suffering, life after death.

Pastor Virgil Hurt

Providence Church - Lynchburg, Virginia

Lenten Application

Recall some of the trials you have experienced as individuals or as a family and recount how the Lord rescued you from such times. Be specific in discussing how the Lord restored you to hope, joy and life.

Prayer

Our Father in Heaven, we thank You for hearing our cries in times of despair, suffering, sickness and even death. We ask that You would continue to hear us and rescue us in our times of need. Restore us to life and grant us joy as we look to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. Amen.

Week Six, Day Three

Zechariah 9:9-10

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, Lowly and riding on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey. ¹⁰I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim And the horse from Jerusalem; The battle bow shall be cut off. He shall speak peace to the nations; His dominion shall be ‘from sea to sea, And from the River to the ends of the earth.’”

Have you ever heard it said that Jesus came as Savior in His first advent but shall come as King at His second? If you have heard that or taught that, you may have a hard time getting your mind around the celebration of Palm Sunday, the day we remember Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. After all, why call it the Triumphal Entry if Jesus really didn’t enter as a King?

This division between Jesus as Savior and as King often conceals a distorted concept of kingship that reflects the world’s definition of kingship rather than God’s. For Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, his entry into Jerusalem to suffer and to die for His people, His entry into Jerusalem to serve is the preeminent definition of what it means to be a king. What does it mean to be a king? It means to be humble and lowly, to be a servant, to give your life for the benefit of your people.

And it was precisely this type of King that our Lord Jesus was and is. He came to give his life a ransom for many. He came not to be served but to serve. He came as the prototype for all the kings of the earth – this is what it is to be a ruler.

To our fallen nature this type of kingship seems utterly foreign and ultimately useless. Such kingship, we imagine, is wholly ineffective. No king who comes to serve rather than to be served will be respected and honored; no king who acts in this way will really be successful – will really accomplish things. Rather it is those like Alexander the Great who push and prod and grapple for their own glory that are ultimately great and accomplish great deeds.

But the text before us today gives the lie to such thinking. For it reminds us of the promise that God has made to this humble King. How effective shall Christ’s Kingship be? *His dominion shall be ‘from sea to sea, And from the River to the ends of the earth.’*

*Pastor Stuart W. Bryan
Trinity Church - Coeur d’Alene, Idaho*

Lenten Application

Discuss as a family someone in your circle of acquaintance who models true servant leadership and so helps us see what it means to be godly kings and queens.

Prayer

We have often acted like pagan kings and queens – demanding our own way, manipulating others for our own ends, failing to rejoice in Your kingship. So too our community. We have used times of public service as opportunities to advance our own agenda and cause. We have sought our own glory and not the glory of those around us. We rejoice that in Christ you have displayed the pattern of true Kingship and that our King gave His life for us, to rescue us from our sin and rebellion and folly. Grant us grace to grow more like Him and to rule as righteous kings and queens.

Palm Sunday

Matthew 21: 8-9

“Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”

The Triumphal Entry is one of the few events in Jesus’ life that is mentioned in all four gospels. This should call our attention to the significance placed on this event.

The Father sent His Son into the world that He might embrace the pain and sufferings of humanity. On the cross He took our sorrow to become *The Man of Sorrows*. Palm Sunday is another example of Christ coming for us. He comes as the One who cleanses the corruption of the temple, and who ultimately offers His own temple-body as a sacrifice.

In this text, Jesus comes to Jerusalem as the Paschal Lamb who will give His life to deliver His people. As He enters Jerusalem the response of the people is symbolically rich. Matthew 21 states that the crowd spread their garments on the road. In the Bible, garments represent people. When Jesus sits on their garments and rides over them, they are saying that Jesus is enthroned over them.

Jesus is re-enacting the Jehu narrative when Jehu was anointed as King and destroyed the temple of Baal. In II Kings 9, we read that when Jehu was anointed King, that in haste every man of them took his garment and put it under him on the bare steps, and they blew the trumpet and proclaimed, “Jehu is king.” Jesus arranged His entrance because He was symbolically declaring His kingship. He is the greater Jehu who rode over his followers’ garments into Samaria to destroy the temple of Baal (II Kings 9:11-13; 10:18-28). The antithesis is clear: we either lay down our garments and bless the Son of David or we are trampled by the Coming King.

The King who destroys the temple of Baal and is exalted above all does not come bearing a sword into the Holy City. The time of judgment is not now; now is the time of suffering. Now is the time to act as King, and Kings give their lives for their people, and Jesus is coming to Jerusalem to give His life. Now Jesus comes in peace, to be reconciled with His enemies; but on that final day He will judge His enemies.

Pastor Uri Brito

Providence Church - Pensacola, Florida

Lenten Application

The response of the crowd was initially one of joyful submission. How often do we display this joyful submission? How is this reflected day to day, and especially when Jesus comes again and again for us when we gather as a body each Lord's Day? Do we sit passively in worship, unaware of the glory and riches of God's service to us? Or do we display a profound sense of joy as we submit in heart, mind, soul, and strength to the One who rides over us?

Prayer

O God, Giver of all good gifts, we thank you for Jesus who gave Himself for us. We pray that our lives will be as the garments of Palm Sunday, laid down so that Christ might rule over us. Teach us to see the way to the cross as the way to the crown of glory that awaits us, through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Monday-Wednesday in the Temple

I encourage you to read together as much of Matthew 21-25 in these three days as you can. For now, read Matthew 21:33-46.

This parable sums up Jesus' ministry, and (in the bigger picture) God's relationship with Israel. God had saved, instructed and prophesied to Israel for centuries, but for the most part Israel had refused to serve the Lord. That history is a sobering warning for us, as 1 Corinthians 10 says. They had all the covenant benefits God had offered: baptized into Moses in the Exodus, circumcision, the Word of God, the history of God dealing with them, feasts, the temple. But they wandered into idolatry and lust. So when God sent His prophets, Israel rejected them.

When God sent His Son Jesus, Israel would not listen to Him or believe He was from God. God's people are designed to bear fruit. We have been saved by grace through faith, and we were created to do good works and walk in faithfulness. In Leviticus God provided priests to diagnose diseases and sins, and to carry out ceremonies of atonement for them (e.g. Lev 14:33- 53).

Following this pattern, God sent His prophets to inspect the soundness and quality of His house, His people – to look for fruit. They showed a plague on the house every time they came, fruitlessness or an unwillingness to give some fruit to God. And the prophets would describe it and call for Israel to repent.

Jesus came as our prophet, *par excellence*, carrying out this role especially between Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday. He came as the priest to the house (to the temple), pointed out the den of thieves it had become, and began to cleanse it. He then laid down His own life to atone for these sins. But He did not stop sending prophets to His people. He sent the Spirit to equip more. Peter preached at Pentecost, Peter and John did miracles and testified to the Sanhedrin. So did Paul. God was long-suffering with Israel's rejection.

But there came a symbolic end point. In Rome's destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 A.D., God removed Israel's lampstand 40 years after Jesus' ministry. God returned to His house and found it still plagued with corruption and unbelief in His Messiah Jesus. So He tore down the house. The three days between Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday are filled with similar solemn warnings for us, straight from the lips of Jesus. Do not dawdle in your repentance and cleansing as Israel did, lest the Lord find you sleeping as well.

Pastor Steve Hemmeke

Covenant Heritage Reformed Church, Newport News, Virginia

Lenten application

God does not come to His people to accuse and condemn. But He does come to correct and purify and cleanse. Is there anything in your life now that disappoints and offends Jesus, that grieves His Spirit? Form a battle plan (men), prepare to be without blemish and beautifully adorned for your wedding day (women), to cleanse your soul of impurity.

Prayer

O God of providence and purity, cleanse our hearts of the remnants of sin. Help us to shed this body of death. Thanks and glory be to You for providing the victory through Jesus Christ! In His conviction, comfort, faithfulness, cross, resurrection, ascension and reign, You have given us all we need to fight the good fight. Grant us the success You have promised, through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Maundy Thursday

John 13:3–4, 34–35 “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God, and was going back to God, rose from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself about . . . ‘A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.’”

Have you ever needed someone’s help? Like me, maybe you got the flu in these past months and were bound to the bed for a few days. When you’re sick others serve you. A family member brings water, medicine, food or takes our temperature. When this happens, can you easily accept this service from others? Do you easily give it or begrudge having to help?

The theme of Maundy Thursday is Jesus’s new commandment (*mandatum novum*, related to “Maundy”), to “love one another” (John 13:34). John 13 gives a unique example of simply, lowly service as love. Unlike the other Gospels, John gives us more teachings of Jesus at the Last Supper. The glorious collection of truths in John 13-17 begin with this teaching on love. “A new commandment I give to you.” And this teaching begins with an action.

All of the rich words of John 13-17 unfold as He unfolds a towel to wash the disciples’ feet. This was the lowest servant’s work and that’s why they did not want Him to do this. It could not be required of a Hebrew slave, only Gentile slaves. The dirt on their sandals was not just like the dirt that we sweep up on the kitchen floor. It was the foul remnants of a defiled world, which was ritually unclean, not to mention the fact the sewers often ran in the streets those days.

Jesus’s reason is striking: “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God, and was going back to God -- rose from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself about.” As the earthly ministry and mission of Jesus was about to reach its climax, as He was fully aware and this crested in His thoughts - What did He do? He arose to do the lowliest service to scrub off the filth of uncleanness.

Why? Jesus unexpectedly provides an action as a parable for His mission. He served them to make vivid His teaching that we are to love one another. “Whoever loves much, does much,” said Thomas a’ Kempis. The next day, Good Friday, Jesus would love them in an unimaginable way. He would do the work, not of a domestic slave, but of a domestic animal, a sacrificial animal. He would take upon Himself, not the filth of feet, but the blackest wickedness of all the world.

If through Christ’s crossly and costly work, you have His love in you, What simple actions would show your love to others in your family, church or community? Can you share three actions that would show your love for others?

*Pastor Gregg Strawbridge
All Saints Church – Lancaster, Pennsylvania*

Prayer

Almighty Father, we remember the commandment of our Lord to love one another. We acknowledge how continually we fail to love You and to love our brethren. We confess this before you and acknowledge our sins. Now empower us through the love of Christ to love one another that the world may believe in Him whom You have sent, Your Son Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with You, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Good Friday (1 of 2)

John 19:30 *"When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, 'It is finished.'"*

Though Jesus' words sound like the voice of defeat, they are the happiest words that have ever been uttered. At the cross, God worked the greatest good out of the greatest evil that had ever occurred in the history of the world. We celebrate it and we do so because we know that when Jesus said "It is finished," He was announcing the completion of His glorious work that would secure joy to all the earth. What looked like a defeat was in fact the most glorious victory.

And this is the way God works in His Kingdom. Joy comes from sorrow. Life springs from death. Darkness ends in light. Good emerges from evil. But it doesn't happen immediately or instantly.

When the third day dawns, the disciples will understand that what looked like the end was really the beginning. They will begin to realize that when Jesus said, "It is finished" that was the greatest proclamation of victory the earth has ever heard. Now the old world dominated by sin and death is finished. And a new world has come.

Now the will of the Father has been accomplished.

Now, sin has been paid for.

Now, life has been obtained.

Now, Satan has been given a death blow.

Now, the world has been set right again.

Now, man has been restored to dominion over the creation in Christ Jesus.

Now, the power of the grave has been broken and death has lost its sting.

Now the end of history has been secured. Now we know that we are not moving from darkness to darkness but from darkness to light unapproachable and full of glory.

Now there is no condemnation for all who are in Christ Jesus.

Now, we can know for certain that if we abide in Him, we will live with Him.

Now, there is no reason to despair, no reason to live in fear, no reason for doubts.

Now the kingdom has been established and will come until the glory of God fills the earth like the waters cover the sea.

Now salvation is a sure and certain reality. Weeping may endure for a night but joy shall come in the morning.

Jesus tells us now that the full payment has been made and life and joy have been purchased for the world. It is done. It is settled. It is fixed and sure – because *it is finished*.

Pastor Steve Wilkins

Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church - Monroe, Louisiana

Good Friday Application

We know that God works all things together for good (Rom. 8:28) because He worked the worst sin ever committed (Jesus' condemnation) into the greatest blessing for the world (salvation).

How has God worked good out of sorrow, tragedy, or evil for your family? Where else in the Bible do we see this at work? How should we face each day in light of this reality?

Prayer

Almighty God, we beseech thee graciously to behold thy holy Church, for which our Lord Jesus Christ was contented to be betrayed, and given up into the hands of wicked men, and to suffer death upon the cross; receive our supplications for all the members of thy holy family, that everyone in his calling and ministry, may truly and faithfully serve thee with great joy and gladness, through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Good Friday (2 of 2)

Matthew 27:45-50

“Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And some of the bystanders, hearing it, said, “This man is calling Elijah.” And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.”

Matthew’s Gospel has been building to this moment, and now that we are presented with the account of Jesus’ death, what would Matthew have us to see, and hear, and understand? Let’s highlight a few themes.

In v. 45, Matthew reports of the three-hour darkness that falls over the land. While we rightly hear echoes of Genesis 1:2, and the original condition of the creation, even more we ought to hear the account of the ninth plague upon Egypt, as described in Exodus 10. That judgment of darkness lasted three days, and the darkness was specific to Egypt. Matthew states that darkness was over all *the land*, indicating that it was specific to Israel. Israel has become Egypt (even as Herod’s slaughter of the innocents back in chapter 2 first indicates), and now comes under a judgment of darkness. Also, the Passover is imminent, and the first Passover took place in conjunction with the tenth plague upon Egypt, the death of the firstborn. Jesus is a firstborn son who dies because of the judgment being poured out upon Israel-become-Egypt. The plagues on Egypt were a form of decreation, and the judgment of darkness now upon Israel indicates the same thing. Still more, Jesus is the Passover Lamb, and because of His blood displayed upon the cross, safe passage through death becomes a reality.

In v. 50, Matthew artfully, and briefly, describes Jesus’ death: *and yielded up his spirit*. Once again, Matthew seems to be pointing us back to Genesis 1:2, but he would also have us to see a reversal of what we read in Genesis 2:7: *then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature*.

The breath of life.

The spirit of life.

What the first Adam was given by God when he was created, the Second Adam willingly gives up in order to redeem fallen humanity.

Pastor Joe Thacker

St. Mark Reformed Church - Nashville, Tennessee

Good Friday Application

The Scriptures, and even the NT writers describe salvation in the language of the Passover and Exodus. Do we see our own salvation in these terms? Do we see Jesus as our Passover Lamb, and that because of His blood we are freed from the fear of death, and the bondage of sin?

Also, notice that Jesus doesn't simply fade away or die with a whimper on the cross. He cries out with a loud voice (2x) and decides when to yield up His spirit. Even in His death, Jesus displays His power, a power of conscious sacrifice and love. Surely a picture of a Savior such as this is a great encouragement to our faith.

Prayer

God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing. O Savior of the world, who by Your cross and precious blood has redeemed us: Save us, and help us, we humbly beseech You, O Lord. Amen.

- *The Book of Common Worship*

Holy Saturday

Matthew 27:51-53

“And behold, the curtain of the temple was split in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened. And many bodies of the holy ones who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many. When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, ‘Truly this was the Son of God!’”

Verses 52-53 are easily some of the most puzzling in all of Scripture. While some debate their factuality, there is no reason to doubt the veracity of Matthew’s report. The land was shaken at Jesus’ death, and will be shaken again at his resurrection (Matt. 28:2). Rocks were split like the temple veil, and tombs were opened. *Many* bodies of the holy ones (saints) were raised, and then went into the holy city where they were seen by *many*. Who were the saints? What happened to them later? These are details we would like to know, but they remain a mystery.

Nevertheless, for all that could be said, Matthew wants us to compare this episode with an earlier one in his gospel.

In Matthew 8, after Jesus calmed the storm, we read in v. 28: “And when he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men met him, **coming out of the tombs....**” What’s the implication? What might Matthew have us to conclude? Before Jesus’ death, the only thing to come out of tombs are demons, but now, with the death and resurrection of Jesus, saints, holy ones come out of tombs. Death can no longer contain them.

Recall the scene in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* when Aslan explains to Lucy how he can be alive again. She asks, “But what does it all mean?” “It means,” said Aslan, “that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of Time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards.”

Indeed, and as Matthew would have us to see, because of the death of Jesus, because He willingly yielded up His spirit (27:50), the tombs that once produced demons, now produce saints. “Death is swallowed up in victory.” Matthew is giving us a picture of death conquered; of the grave vanquished; and a foretaste of the greater resurrection yet to come, when all of the holy ones will be raised to enter into the holy city at last.

Pastor Joe Thacker

St. Mark Reformed Church - Nashville, Tennessee

Lenten Application

How is it helpful to our faith to know that Jesus has conquered death? How does this truth address our fears, even a fear of death? In Paul's instruction about the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, particularly vv. 54-58, how does the resurrection embolden us in our work for the Lord?

Prayer

Thou Brightness of God's glory and Express Image of His person, whom death could not conquer nor the tomb imprison: As You have shared our mortal frailty in the flesh, help us to share Your immortal triumph in the spirit. Let no shadow of the grave frighten us and no fear of darkness turn our hearts from You. Reveal Yourself to us this day and all our days, as the first and the last, the Living One, our immortal Savior and Lord. Amen.

- *The Book of Common Worship*