



AN EXPLORATION OF HOW
CHRIST IS PRE-FIGURED
IN PEOPLE, STORIES, IMAGES AND
PROPHECIES
IN THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

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CHRIST FORESHADOWED

Hebrew Scriptures point to Christ

For my children

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INTRODUCTION

A centuries-long tradition of *lectio divina*, a form of reading scripture that focuses on prayer, meditation, and contemplation, focuses on Christ as the key to scripture's meaning. This book is in that long tradition, trying to apply this to contemporary realities. The short reflections for each Old Testament portion are things that have interested or been helpful to me. For the New Testament reading interspersed each week the goal is for the reader to engage in writing a reflection, ones' own *lectio divina*.

After Christ's resurrection, he gave an interesting class to his disciples. "Then Jesus quoted passages from the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining what all the Scriptures said about himself." (Luke 24:27) These meditations are a quest to see what might have been part of his explanations.

There are several ways of reading this book:

- 1) dip into it whenever you are curious about something, and see how a particular story may connect to Christ.
- 2) read it as a devotional, using both the New Testament scripture at the top and the prayer to make it personal.
- 3) read the scripture for each of the 365 entries and use this as a plan to go through the Old Testament.
- 4) Add weekly New Testament readings as well, as listed.

Each meditation is formed around a person, event, object, or story and begins with the relevant scripture references from the Old Testament, then a selection from the New Testament for meditation. This is followed by my thoughts, and ends with a brief prayer. Some reflections include contemporary issues, relevant history, or aesthetic responses to these stories. My own poems are left unmarked.

Daily journaling helps in listening to God is speaking to you. Listening to God and learning to engage in dialogue with Him is much of the purpose of *lectio divina*. A suggestion is to sit quietly in an undisturbed place and time, write down thoughts as they come, evaluate them on your own or with the help of others, and so develop discernment as to what is actually your own voice, or a voice of temptation, and what may be God speaking in your heart and mind. Reading scriptures with this practice enhances its value immeasurably, and so many of the stories are the example of people doing this kind of listening and then acting on it.

My hope: that this will give a way of not only knowing the Hebrew scriptures, but an opportunity to learn to love it. Hopefully it will set your New Testament reading in a context that makes that fresh and appealing as well.

Unless otherwise marked, I have used *The New Living Translation* as my source for quotations. With the exception of quotations, instead of referring to the Old Testament, I have chosen to use “Hebrew scriptures” to refer to this living document for Jewish and Christian believers rather than the Hebrew term “Tanakh” which is an acronym for the three sections: Torah (“Teaching” or Five Books of Moses), Nevi'im (“Prophets”) and Ketuvim (“Writings”). I have chosen to refer to Christ and Jesus, the familiar Greek names, rather than the Hebrew. Christ means “anointed one” and is “Messiah” in Hebrew. Jesus means “Salvation” and is Yeshua in Hebrew, or is anglicized as Joshua. “Lord”, referring to all the Godhead, is used in most of the prayers.

CHAPTER 1

The Kingdom Promised

Genesis

After the loss of the perfect home, men continued to make bad choices resulting in a devastating flood and dispersion of people to different nations. But God's plan for re-creating a perfect kingdom involved calling one man, Abraham, to follow Him. He promised many descendants, land, kings, and a blessing on all nations. The promise continued to his sons Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve tribes descending from Jacob's sons.



January 1
Creation — Genesis 1, Psalm 104

John 1:1-5 In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created. And his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.

Creation reflects Christ as the Word that gives life and light. John unites the man Christ and the maker of the splendors of the outdoors, complexity of our bodies, and the subtlety of our minds that can create art, technology, literature, community. The Hubble space telescope has so greatly expanded our understanding of the immensity and complexity of the universe that the contrast for God to become a small child is mind-bending.

Scripture uses nature as a source of metaphors for God. It compares Christ to something in each day of the creation: light, water, rock, vines, a morning star, lamb, lion and many others. Both passages are poetic, and I like the detail that in the creation account the environment is made on the first three days, and what moves within that environment is described in the corresponding order in the next three days.

We read that we were made “in his image”. The overarching story tells us we have defaced that image, and that Christ has come to restore it in us and in all of creation. Nevertheless, beauty remains pervasive, and our natural response is appreciative awe. Christ frequently used nature as imagery in his teachings, and drew attention to the beauty of specific flowers. The Psalm gives us a model of prayer as a celebration of nature. Part of my morning routine is to write down one beautiful thing I noticed the day before, and often I have to include more than one. While only a small act of worship, it awakens me to pay attention and be appreciative of creation throughout the day.

God, thank you today for how beautiful your world is! We worship you for your power and glory as the creator of such an astonishing world.

January 2
Making us — Genesis 2

Colossians 1:15-16 Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth.

Christ demonstrated God's love by preparing a home for us. Today we are aware of what a unique home our planet is, are more curious than ever about what makes a planet habitable, and are finding possible planets to explore. One issue is the distance from the sun so the temperature is right, plus enough protection from solar radiation. Another is the existence of liquid water and carbon. We do not yet understand all the factors, but we know that the combination is rare and special.

As the chapter begins, the first poem ends and announces God's rest on the seventh day. We are invited to remember creation each week at rest in our home, enjoying the gift of life. That everything that maintains our life is a gift is something this rhythm of rest teaches us.

The previous chapter spoke of the creation of mankind on day six, but the second story is more detailed and personal. God gave mankind everything needed: life, a place to live, beauty, fruit, water, limits, knowledge, work, companionship, marriage, language, and connection to the creatures of the world. The invitation to relationship sets up the whole subsequent story of God caring about us, carrying on conversations, leading us, quarreling with us, and passionately loving us.

There are mysterious but intriguing details: there was no rain, there are named rivers, exceptionally pure gold and onyx. What does this mean and why is it here? It is a reminder that these stories were told in times and places far away from us, but presumably placed Eden for those who heard the stories.

The forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil is juxtaposed with the mysterious tree of life. Here the symbolism of a tree is introduced, something that will eventually be the literal wooden cross that solves the problem of good and evil and gives life that does not end.

Lord, thank you that your cross provides a way to recreated life for us, a life where sin and death are overcome. Help us to enter the rest you have for us, and to appreciate all that you have made to sustain our lives.

January 3
Adam and Eve — Genesis 3

Matthew 13:37-39 Jesus replied, “The Son of Man is the farmer who plants the good seed. The field is the world, and the good seed represents the people of the Kingdom. The weeds are the people who belong to the evil one. The enemy who planted the weeds among the wheat is the devil. The harvest is the end of the world, and the harvesters are the angels.”

Christ is perfectly obedient and leads others to life, unlike disobedient Adam and Eve who led others to death. In his parable Christ said the devil introduced evil into the world just as this mysterious story says occurred through a talking snake. The promised of a descendant that will crush the serpent’s head is an explicit look ahead to Christ. Sacrifice is also introduced, something that will be elaborated and will culminate in the cross. Later Paul will explain: “Just as death came into the world through a man, Adam, now the resurrection from the dead has begun through another man, Christ. Everyone dies because all of us are related to Adam, the first man. But all who are related to Christ, the other man, will be given new life.” (I Corinthians 15: 21,22)

Angels stood with swords of light to keep mankind out, separating sin and holiness. As God showed mercy, angels no longer kept mankind away from Him, but welcomed us: angels were part of the tabernacle and temple, they spoke at the empty tomb, and they spoke at Christ’s ascension. In the parable, Christ spoke of the end time work of the angels in judgment and mercy, rejection and welcome.

Christ’s invitation is to come back, to live our daily lives in the preview of paradise. To do this requires recognizing the separation from him and asking for welcome. In addition to doing this for the first time, it is good to examine ourselves with God’s help on a daily basis. There are many helpful versions of this, but a simple one is to ask for God to be present and to review the day with Him, offering gratitude, noticing what went wrong and confessing it, receiving forgiveness and looking toward the day to come.

Thank you Holy Spirit for bringing to my attention today where I have fallen into disobedience. I humbly confess this and accept your forgiveness. We worship you for your grace of forgiving our sins and giving us new life.

January 4
Cain and Abel — Genesis 4

Luke 23:46,47 The Jesus shouted, “Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!” And with those words he breathed his last. When the Roman officer overseeing the execution saw what had happened, he worshipped God and said, “Surely this man was innocent.”

Abel was the first innocent victim recorded in the Bible, and so prefigured Christ. Death, murder, and an innocent victim are introduced into history, and have not ended. Abel’s blood cried out for vengeance, just as there is a need for justice today. But the blood of Christ is different, and provides gracious forgiveness. (Hebrews 12:24)

In this story Cain received a measured punishment, exile rather than death. This introduces God’s mercy, a theme that becomes far more important than judgement in the story of Christ. In the story of Cain and Abel God condemned the violence and yet simultaneously showed mercy for the murderer. The chapter goes on to a second murder by Lamech who seems to take the wrong lesson from God’s mercy to Cain, taking it as a license to murder without consequences.

Christ warned that it is not just murder we need to beware of, but that anger itself is spiritually dangerous. We need to ask ourselves: Do I erupt with verbal violence? Am I harsh? Do I discipline impulsively? What is my reputation regarding resolving conflict?

Lord, I ask that you will have mercy on those killed unjustly today, will comfort their friends and family, and will reach out in justice and mercy to those who killed them. I am grateful to you for your forgiving grace, even for offenders. Help me to be self-aware of my own violent tendencies.

January 5
Genealogies — Genesis 5

Luke 3:23, 37, 38 Jesus was known as the son of Joseph. ... Lamech was the son of Methuselah. Methuselah was the son of Enoch. Enoch was the son of Jared. Jared was the son of Mahalalel. Mahalalel was the son of Kenan. Kenan was the son of Enosh. Enosh was the son of Seth. Seth was the son of Adam. Adam was the son of God.

Scripture genealogy starts broadly with all nations, then narrows to Abraham’s descendants, and finally to the point of the ancestry: Christ. They make dull devotional reading, but serve an important purpose to link the scriptures together and show us how it is all one story.

There are mysteries: the long life-spans, and the disappearance of Enoch. But it is inspiring to think of being memorialized as he was by living in a close relationship with God throughout his life.

In all there are 18 chapters devoted to genealogy in the Hebrew scripture (Genesis 5, 10, 11, 25, 36, II Chronicles 1-9, Ezra 2, Nehemiah 7, 11, 12) ending with Christ's genealogies in the New Testament. (Matthew 1, Luke 3)

Why is this here?

Land records and family trees
Public health codes and liturgy manuals
Donor lists and instructions for craftsmen
Architectural descriptions and org charts

Amid the poetry, dramatic stories, and wisdom
Is all the ordinary, work-day information
It gives authenticity,
A touch of the materials of history.
I suppose it's too hard to preach from lists
So without reading all of scripture ourselves
We can easily lose the sense
Of how much God must approve of the mundane.

Thank you Lord for including seemingly extraneous and down-to-earth details in scripture. It forces us to realize that it is not a magic answer book, but it a book of stories, of the history of real people, and that the details increase authenticity. Help us to appreciate scripture for what it really is.

January 6

Noah — Genesis 6-7

Matthew 24:37-39 When the Son of Man returns, it will be like it was in Noah's day. In those days before the flood, the people were enjoying banquets and parties and weddings right up to the time Noah entered his boat. People didn't realize what was going to happen until the flood came and swept them all away. That is the way it will be when the Son of Man comes.

Noah is an archetype of an obedient, righteous person who is the means of salvation for those willing to listen to them. In this sense he is like Christ who in perfect obedience provides salvation for the whole world.

The ark Noah built has multiple imagery: the church, a place of safety and salvation, Christ who shelters us from judgment, and the wood of the ark

reminds us of the wood of the cross. The waters serve as imagery of the symbolic death of baptism and subsequent resurrection. (I Peter 4:20, 21)

While we do not know how many people died in the flood, it raises the issue of God's goodness in allowing people to be killed by natural disasters, war, disease, or interpersonal violence. In this case the tone is a sorrowful one of disappointment, repeating twice "I am sorry I ever made them." It "broke his heart." The flood, it is said, was designed to put an end to mankind's violence and depravity, and attempt to start over with one righteous family. A surgical intervention.

Today some Christians see natural disasters as a sign of God's judgment, though perhaps it is wiser to speak of His sovereignty in permitting such things and apply the exhortation to pray if we are suffering. (James 5:13) Christ urged caution about concluding that disasters equaled judgment (Luke 13:1-5), but called us to have a humble recognition that we are all guilty of sin.

Lord, none of us are above experiencing a disaster that affects us or our family or friends. We desire to be as obedient as possible in the midst of whatever comes, and look always for signs of help and protection. Keep us from arrogant judgments about the disasters others experience.

January 7

Rescue — Genesis 8-9

I Peter 3: 20, 21 God waited patiently while Noah was building his boat. Only eight people were saved from drowning in that terrible flood. And that water is a picture of baptism, which now saves you, not by removing dirt from your body, but as a response to God from a clean conscience. It is effective because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Peter made the connection for us between Noah's flood and the waters of baptism that Christ called us to experience as a sign of his taking us from death to life. It symbolizes God's loving rescue from destruction of those who turn to him.

The dove, a symbol of the Holy Spirit and of peace, reveals that judgment has passed. The rainbow reminds us of the glory of God. Thus we see the Trinity: Christ as ark; the dove as Spirit; and the rainbow as the Father on the throne. Noah's sacrifice points toward Christ's sacrifice. After the flood a covenant with and promise to Noah included all living creatures. The covenant with all of creation is repeated seven times, emphasizing that God has a covenant with all his creatures and motivating what today we are calling "creation care", recognizing the extent of humankind's failure to honor this. (Genesis 9:10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17)

After this remarkable start to a new world, once more sin is evident. We have the first instance of drunkenness, which continues as a scourge even today, and the first instance of a parent cursing his grandchild. Some interpreters say that since this was a human curse, not of God, it was simply an expression of bad temper and guilt on the part of Noah after his binge. That has not kept it from being used as an excuse for slavery, something Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called “a blasphemy” and an idea completely contrary to the Christian faith.

The blessing that Noah gave to Shem, however, is fulfilled in the call of Abraham, the creation of Israel, and the coming of Christ. While sad that “starting over” with one righteous family immediately failed, there is hope in looking forward to someone who can both preserve us and cleanse us from sin.

The promise of rescue and restoration from the “floods” and disasters of our lives often include small hopeful signs. Like the olive leaf in the dove’s beak, we also receive tiny signs that give us hope. Despite the hopeless situation we see, there are signs the change is coming. At a time when I was struggling with feeling like some answers to prayer were far too long delayed, I saw a beautiful rainbow in the sky and teared up since it awakened my hope as I remembered Noah’s story.

Lord, thank you for baptism, the cross, the hope of restoration no matter what we are struggling with, and for all the promises of blessing despite our sin. Help us to honor your covenant care for all your creatures and not destroy the natural world you have promised not to destroy.

January 8

The Nations — Genesis 10, 11:10-32, Psalm 9

Matthew 1:1 This is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, a descendant of David and of Abraham.

In these two chapters, the story of all nations narrows to the story of one person, Abraham, who becomes the founder of the particular nation from which Christ will come. Matthew began his geneology of Christ from that point, unlike Luke who went back to Noah and Adam. The unique “starting over” that Abraham represents is scriptures’ core story, but none of the nations are forgotten. Allies or enemies, respectful or disrespectful of God, they were all to be targets of blessing through Abraham.

It has been pointed out that if one carefully counts, there are 70 nations listed. This looks ahead to other symbolic groups of 70 that are part of redemption: 70 of Abraham’s family moving to Egypt (Genesis 46:27), 70 Israelite elders who

share a covenant meal with God (Exodus 24:1), and 70 (or 72) disciples Jesus sent to preach. (Luke 10:1)

We are also introduced to the Empire-builder Nimrod whose political structure falls apart in Genesis 11, precursor to the repeated failures of civilization, contrasting with the permanence of God's kingdom.

Human nature is to prefer our own family, our own group, our own nations. God's vision has always been universal, and just as Abraham was selected to be a blessing, we also are to have that universal vision. This list of nations reminds us that this is God's vision—He loves every person and every nation. The Psalm assures us that God will judge nations justly, repeating six times the message that God is in control of all. Nations who defy Him are subject to death. Christ comes asking us to go to all nations with a message of life: "Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 28:19)

In our age of many prejudices how important it is to examine ourselves, and to challenge ourselves to cross cultural boundaries and learn to have God's universal love. The many cultural boundaries I have crossed by being raised in Mexico among indigenous Mixtecos, work and life in Guatemala among *ladinos* and Maya, and the immensely rich multiculturalism of immigrant communities in San Diego has enriched my life. Curiosity, openness to learn, and respect can be built in by remembering God loves us and made us all.

Lord, take all prejudice out of my heart. Remove everything that is a vestige of thinking the world is divided into "us" and "them", and make me appreciative and responsive to all cultures, all peoples.

January 9
Babel — Genesis 11

Acts 2:1-4 On the day of Pentecost all the believers were meeting together in one place. Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.

Pentecost reverses Babel. At Babel languages were multiplied and caused separation. At Pentecost people heard the gospel in their own language and were unified. Perhaps one can say that the separation caused by Babel is the negative, and the unity brought by Pentecost is the restored image. The confusion (which is what Babel means) is overcome and brought into order by the Word (Christ), and harmonized through the miracle at Pentecost.

Today the work of Bible translation is a beautiful and practical way of transforming Babel into Pentecost, and preparing for a heavenly celebration of people from all languages. (Revelation 7:9) God clearly loves every culture with every language and all its beautiful variety, even incorporating multiple languages into scripture itself.

All of us need a calling, a vocation
Jesus called the disciples
And he's never stopped calling
Great leaders of the church
 Augustine, Jerome, Calvin, Tyndale, John Wycliffe, John Wesley,
 William Carey, Hudson Taylor, Billy Graham, Cameron Townsend,
 Ken Taylor, Eugene Peterson
All in a great chain to the present
Lovers of God's Word, they were translators.

We know now there are over 7000 language groups
And 1,800 do not have scriptures in their language.
Here is the goal: Projects underway in all languages by 2025.
I imagine there are a lot of people
Jesus is ready to call to this work.
"Drop what you're doing and follow me.
Transfer your skills to my program!"

See www.Wycliffe.org/about/why for the latest statistics

By growing up in Latin America the children of Bible translators, my husband and I became fascinated by the language and cultures of the people we grew up with. We are so aware that God treasures all people, no matter how different, and they deserve our respect as we share the love of Christ.

Thank you for the gift of language and the gift of translation of scripture into the languages of the world. Please raise up more laborers for the completion of that task. We praise you that people from every language, tribe and nation will worship together in heaven!

January 10
Call of Abram — Genesis 12

Hebrews 11:8 It was by faith that Abraham obeyed when God called him to leave home and go to another land that God would give him as his inheritance. He went without knowing where he was going.

Christ's incarnation is prefigured in Abram, who left his home and became a pilgrim in a new place. Abram's journey, symbolized by the tent in which he lived, parallels God's journey among the people of Israel in the "tent of God" otherwise known as the tabernacle. Christ also "tented" among his people

when the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us”. (John 1:14) The Greek word “dwelt” is what the translators of the Septuagint used for the tabernacle.

God promised that all the families on the earth would be blessed through him, a clear prophetic preview of Christ. Even when Abram and Sarai made poor choices to lie about their relationship in a foreign land, God protected them, knowing His plan would be ruined if Sarai became the wife of another.

As the “father of faith”, Abraham’ story raises questions for us. How could he be sure he was hearing from God? We have not only scripture stories of promise and fulfillment, we have centuries of people who say they heard from God and what He said happened. We even have plenty of living testimonies. Can we take up the challenge to learn to listen to God?

In a time when we overvalue our homes, we must remember that we, like Abraham, are on a pilgrimage, and not put our roots down too deeply in the world. Am I willing to listen to God and obey even if challenged to leave my comfort zone and reach across barriers? Can I let go of my home, my family, and my things if that is God’s call? What risks am I willing to take in faith?

Thank you that we live lives of pilgrimage, and that you are present with us on our journey. We praise you that your presence makes our ordinariness extraordinary. We are grateful that we do not make our journeys alone.

January 11

Abram and Lot — Genesis 13

Luke 9:58 But Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but I, the Son of Man, have no home of my own, not even a place to lay my head.”

Abram is like Christ in continuing to choose his pilgrim life, and Lot is like those who cannot accept Christ’s call, turning away, because they find the world more attractive. Because both men had prospered, the land could not support all of their livestock and they made the decision to separate, Abraham giving his nephew the first choice of where to go. In the next chapter we see that this results in Lot’s capture by warring kings, and Abram’s sacrificial work to rescue him and his family.

Lot chose the glamour of civilization over the humble pilgrimage in tents. In Genesis 4 we saw many “firsts”: agriculture, sheep-herding, public prayers, crime and punishment, exile, migration, a city, music, metalwork, a poem, a blood feud, polygamy. There were legendary heroes (Genesis 6), drunkenness (Genesis 9), an empire (Genesis 10), and dispersion throughout the world. (Genesis 11)

Lot was drawn to this exciting world not very interested in God, but the consequences were grim. Abram chose better. Today so much entices us to Lot-like choices. But Abram received a much deeper gift—the promise of the land as a permanent possession and abundant descendants. Not only his literal descendants are promised, but we are as well since “Abraham is the spiritual father of those who have faith.” (Romans 4:11)

Lord, help us to choose you and your life for us, never the comfortable life that leads to disobedience and compromise. We praise you for your promises to us and that you are amazingly faithful in bringing those promises into reality. Thank you that you have made us part of your family of faith.

January 12

Melchizedek — Genesis 14

Hebrews 7:1-3 This Melchizedek was king of the city of Salem and also a priest of God Most High. When Abraham was returning home after winning a great battle against many kings, Melchizedek met him and blessed him. Then Abraham took a tenth of all he had won in the battle and gave it to Melchizedek. His name means “king of justice.” He is also “king of peace” because Salem means “peace.” [“Shalom” in Hebrew] There is no record of his father or mother or any of his ancestors—no beginning or end to his life. He remains a priest forever, resembling the Son of God.

Christ is a prophet, mediator, priest, and king like Melchizedek. Hebrews 7 is an extended meditation on how Melchizedek and Christ compare to one another, emphasizing Christ’s priesthood, superior to the priesthood of the law. Melchizedek is a King of righteousness and peace, the same description Isaiah will give Messiah 1500 years later. Melchizedek ruled Jerusalem where Christ would teach, be killed, resurrect, and inaugurate his kingdom.

Melchizedek’s appearance previews the theme of coming King and Kingdom. Abraham had not yet been given the promise of kings as his descendants. (Genesis 17:6) However, he had interacted with kings, receiving protection from Pharaoh in Genesis 12, rescuing Lot from the marauding kings, and then honoring and sharing a communion meal with this king.

This introduction to war between different coalitions, the cost to civilians who become prisoners or refugees, the need to rescue and protect civilians, and the importance of not taking economic advantage of war are all introduced in this chapter and all familiar to us today. The contrast between these warring kings and the peaceful king Melchizedek emphasizes the contrast between our warring nations today and Christ’s peaceable kingdom.

In the Hebrew scriptures we see four identities that will apply to Christ—king, priest, warrior/liberator, and prophet. In this instance Abraham carries the identity of the liberating warrior to rescue his nephew. As a prophet Melchizedek recognizes Abraham as particularly blessed by God, plays a priestly role, and is called a king. Christ takes on all of these roles and it is encouraging to think about which one is most relevant to my needs today.

Christ, you are our king, priest, and liberator and we are grateful for your work as our mediator and the one who blesses us. We praise you that you are greater than any other king, and yet are as close to us as a friend.

January 13

The Covenant with Abraham — Genesis 15

Acts 3:25-26 “You are the children of those prophets, and you are included in the covenant God promised to your ancestors. For God said to Abraham, ‘Through your descendants all the families on earth will be blessed.’ When God raised up his servant, Jesus, he sent him first to you people of Israel, to bless you by turning each of you back from your sinful ways.”

Abram was promised many descendants when he did not even have one child, and he believed God and “the Lord declared him righteous because of his faith.” His greatest descendant, Christ, was the ultimate fulfillment of the promise of becoming ancestor of so many descendants, including us.

Very humanly, Abram asked, “How can I be sure?” God made the promise a binding contract, or covenant. In our time paper, lawyers, and notarized signatures would be the method; in that time, it involved a ceremony with sacrifices. The sacrifice reminds us of the cross, the darkness that unnaturally occurred from noon to three p.m. during the crucifixion. God appeared as a flaming torch going through the sacrifices, something we can compare to Christ as the light shining in the dark. Abram was warned of the oppression his descendants would experience, but was promised they would return after 400 years and would own the land.

God said to Abraham, "Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you will have!" (Genesis 15:5) He could see perhaps half of the 9,000 stars visible to the naked eye, and had no idea that eventually with a telescope we would be able to see 200,000. Today the Hubble Space telescope allows scientists to estimate there are 100-170 billion galaxies in the observable universe, and that we may eventually be able to see farther to see more. They estimate a total of a septillion stars (7 x 10 with 24 zeros!), a mind-boggling number. It is an astonishing promise for a man who had no children at all.

His faith challenges me. Am I willing to believe that God will fulfill things that seem difficult or unlikely to me? This can be a struggle, particularly when we see nothing concrete happening.

Lord, thank you that you fulfill the most unlikely of promises. Thank you for increasing our faith when it is lacking.

January 14
Hagar — Genesis 16

John 14:9 “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!”

Hagar encountered the angel of the Lord in the desert, and many see this figure as the pre-incarnate Christ. It is beautiful to realize that these experiences made her our sister in the faith. As an outsider, a woman, a servant, and a foreigner, how beautiful that He appeared to her, His first appearance in this way. Her role in Abram and Sarai’s story was a result of their lack of confidence in God, yet it was turned to good in her life anyway.

In Galatians 4:21-31, Paul uses the story of the relationship between Hagar and Sarah and their children as a comparison between those following the Law and those now in the freedom of grace. Having previously compared Abraham as a friend of God before the Law was given, as the father of faith, those in the freedom of the new covenant are the children of Sarah’s son Isaac. Hagar equates with the law and those under the law are like Ishmael.

Hagar encountered “the God who sees me” when she ran away from Abraham and Sarah. When sent away again because of problems between Isaac and Ishmael, she went through some of what Israel would later experience—being in the wilderness, fearing death for her son, lacking water and having it provided, encountering God in the desert, and having God with her as she raised her child.

Hagar is an ironic figure – an Egyptian woman rejected by the father of faith, used by a Christian author to symbolize the Jewish people, and maligned as the ancestress of today’s Arab opponents. It seems fair to also recognize her as a believer, one of many non-Jews who would come to faith in Abraham’s God. Her personal experience of faith is an encouragement to any of us who feel like outsiders, marginalized or minimized in some way. To God, she mattered.

Thank you, Lord, that you comfort us in our times in the desert, using difficulty and suffering for our good. For those unjustly treated and marginalized, I pray that you will meet them directly. We worship you as the God who sees us.

January 15
Circumcision — Genesis 17

Colossians 2:11 When you came to Christ, you were “circumcised,” but not by a physical procedure. It was a spiritual procedure—the cutting away of your sinful nature.

Circumcision was a mark of the covenant relationship between Abraham and God, and parallels cutting away sin in Christ. It also highlights how important the promise of descendants, and of a Descendant, was for God’s people.

Repeated exhortations to circumcise ones’ heart, (Deuteronomy 10:16, Deuteronomy 30:6, Jeremiah 4:4), and to allow the love of God to grow are followed by New Testament admonitions that highlight that inward reality matters more than outward sign (Romans 2:24-29 and Galatians 5:1-6). For Christians the sign of baptism is compared to circumcision: “When you came to Christ, you were ‘circumcised’, but not by a physical procedure. It was a spiritual procedure—the cutting away of your sinful nature. For you were buried with Christ when you were baptized. And with him you were raised to a new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead.” (Colossians 2:11,12)

God changed both Abraham and Sarah’s names to raise them to greater honor as the “father of nations” and as a “princess.” They were promised that kings would be among their descendants, clearly fulfilled throughout Israel’s history, but most fully with Christ the King. That God appeared to Abraham, talked, and left him, implies a visible form, but it was still a stretch of faith to accept the promise of many descendants. We have the greater gift of Christ incarnate, risen from the dead, but Abraham’s struggle to believe is also our struggle to believe.

Lord, thank you that you use outward symbolic gestures to speak to us about inward spiritual realities. Give us the grace to accept your work in removing all sin from our lives. Thank you that you understand how hard it is for us to stay in faith when we do not see instant results.

January 16
Sarah — Genesis 18

Luke 1:30-32 “Don’t be afraid, Mary,” the angel told her, “for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever, his Kingdom will never end!”

Sarah prefigures Mary, the mother of Christ, in receiving the promise of a child from angels. Scripture speaks of “the mystery of a tiny baby growing in its mother’s womb” as outstripping our understanding (Ecclesiastes 11:9), and because of Sarah’s advanced age, and because of Mary’s virginity, the mystery was even greater in these cases.

The arrival of the three angels to tell Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son has beautiful symbolism. Artists have used this story to illustrate that the three angels represented the Trinity, the tree under which they sat reminds us of the cross, and the shared meal parallels the Eucharist. The angels brought a message of judgment (Sodom and Gomorrah to be destroyed), and a message of hope (Isaac to be born). The hope, though they could not fully understand it, was also a message of mercy that Christ would come to save from judgment those who responded to him.

Mary did not react with skeptical laughter and disbelief to the angel’s announcement as did Sarah, but with curiosity about the impossibility of bearing a child as a virgin. The joy of receiving a miracle child was true for each of them. The promise seemed hilariously unlikely to Sarah, and surely most of us can identify with her cheerful skepticism. But God’s response to Sarah encourages us: “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” His response to Mary: “For nothing is impossible with God.”

Thank you for the great gift of children who reflect Christ’s character to me. Thank you that the gift of life is not one we can take for granted, but that we can receive children and grandchildren as the miracles they are.

January 17

Sodom and Gomorrah — Genesis 19

Luke 17:28-29 “And the world will be as it was in the days of Lot. People went about their daily business—eating and drinking, buying and selling, farming and building—until the morning Lot left Sodom. Then fire and burning sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all.”

Angels rescuing Lot from Sodom and Gomorrah parallel Christ rescuing people from future judgment. Christ compared the last judgment to the destruction of these towns, but also told the disciples when they were sent out to preach that those who rejected them and their message would experience a worse judgment than this. Christ made a comparison to himself, saying that because people were not responding to his message and his miracles, Sodom would be treated better in the Day of Judgment than their cities. (Matthew 11:23-24)

Christ also used the story of Sodom and Gomorrah in as an exhortation to be alert, aware, and ready to flee from danger. He told us to “Remember Lot’s

wife” who, by looking back with longing for her old life, died. He then said “Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life will preserve it.” (Luke 17:28-33)

Tragically, Lot’s daughters felt their chances to marry were minimal and so chose to get their father drunk and became pregnant by him. The descendants of the children of this incest, Moab and Ammon, became Israel’s enemies. Perhaps this could have been avoided if Abraham had obeyed the command to leave his relatives behind (Genesis 12:1), and not allowed Lot to accompany him. (Genesis 12:4)

In the midst of this disheartening story is the phrase, “God had listened to Abraham’s request and kept Lot safe.” His prayer of negotiation in the previous chapter had an effect, and it encourages us to ask for safety and rescue for those we care about.

Thank you, God that no final judgment will fall on those willing to turn to you because of the work and rescue of Christ. Thank you that you listen to our pleas for people surrounded by temptations.

January 18

Isaac vs. Ishmael — Genesis 20, 21

Galatians 4: 21-23 Tell me, you who want to live under the law, do you know what the law actually says? The Scriptures say that Abraham had two sons, one from his slave wife and one from his freeborn wife. The son of the slave wife was born in a human attempt to bring about the fulfillment of God’s promise. But the son of the freeborn wife was born as God’s own fulfillment of his promise.

As Paul wrote, Isaac was born as the fulfillment of God’s promise, and he goes on to compare those of us who believe in Christ to be children of the promise, just like Isaac. This imagery then sets up his illustration of Sarah as representing the heavenly Jerusalem (grace) and Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, as representing Mount Sinai (law).

Before Isaac’s birth, Abraham and Sarah repeated their lie about their relationship that allowed her to be taken into a king’s harem. But God was merciful in protecting her, remaining faithful to his own promise which their sinfulness could not undo. When Isaac was born, “it happened at the time God had said.”

To think sympathetically of Ishmael who was set to one side in favor of Isaac, we can see him as an outcast, a character type recurrent in the scriptures (e.g. Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, etc.) An important part of the theme is that the outcast encounters God. As Ishmael suffered the rejection from his father,

wandering aimlessly in the desert, water gone, mother crying, he was dying—an overwhelming accumulation of trauma.

God, it says, “heard the boy’s cries” and he promised that Ishmael would live and have many descendants. Here is a motif of Christ’s suffering, death and resurrection, and the water from the well Hagar saw recalls the Spirit. The story ends with a comment on Ishmael’s growth as a talented archer and the marriage his mother arranged. Later we are told he had twelve sons who became the leaders of twelve tribes, and he lived to 137 years of age. (Genesis 25:16,17). Some measure of reconciliation between Ishmael and Isaac is implied since they came together to bury Abraham. (Genesis 25:9).

Despite Abraham and Sarah’s times of unbelief that led to bad decisions, and painful human relationships, they received the promised child who was not only an ancestor of Christ, but who foreshadows His life. The joy of fulfillment once more gave laughter, now joyful laughter, not skeptical laughter, and that is what Isaac means. I, too, can identify with laughter prompted by a fulfilled dream. The more unlikely the outcome, the more joyful the response.

Lord, thank you that no matter where we fall in the story, and no matter how we fail, your grace reaches out to us. Thank you that you specialize in unlikely rescues, unlikely promises, and unlikely fulfillments.

January 19

Isaac’s Resurrection — Genesis 22

John 19:16-18 Then Pilate gave Jesus to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus and led him away. Carrying the cross by himself, Jesus went to the place called Skull Hill (in Hebrew, Golgotha). There they crucified him. There were two others crucified with him, one on either side, with Jesus between them.

Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac reflects God the Father’s sacrifice of his son, Christ. Twice God refers to Isaac as Abraham’s “beloved son”, a term that God will use for Christ at his baptism. This is also the first time the word “love” is used, as God acknowledges that Abraham loves Isaac so much as He calls him to make this sacrifice.

This is a difficult story: 1) why God would command human sacrifice, 2) why would Abraham consent, 3) and why would Isaac cooperate? In pagan cultures human sacrifice was common, so why not stand clearly against it? The story ends with God Himself taking that stand, and the substitution of a ram for Isaac makes a very clear analogy to the substitution of Christ for us.

Hebrews 11 tells us Abraham had faith in God’s promise, and a hope of resurrection. (Hebrews 11:17-19) Isaac, in his obedient walk up the hill, carrying

the wood for the sacrifice, makes a perfect parallel to Christ carrying his wooden cross without any resistance to the death and suffering coming to him. As the story begins, God calls Abraham to go to a mountain in the land of Moriah, the place the Jerusalem temple will be built, intensifying the symbolic importance of this story in light of Christ's sacrifice. That Isaac did not die in this story but lived on to old age reflects Christ's resurrection.

This story meant a great deal to me at a moment in my life where I felt I had to let go of something, and yet that letting go felt like sacrificing my child. The story helped me believe that if I let go, my sacrifice could come back to me in a resurrected form. Soren Kierkegaard used this story as an example of how we are called to a leap of faith. Annie Lamont credits her conversion to reading Kierkegaard's reflection. This difficult story has touched something deep within at least three souls, and surely so many more as well. In my case, I did receive the resurrection hoped for after many years, and I therefore feel a tender affection for the story and the characters in it.

Thank you, Lord, that no matter how confusing life can be, that we can take a risk, trust you, have faith. Help me to know if there is something in my life that you are calling me to sacrifice. I praise you that it is worth letting go of anything that you ask from us.

January 20

The Promised Land — Genesis 23

Hebrews 11:13-16 All these faithful ones died without receiving what God had promised them, but they saw it all from a distance and welcomed the promises of God. They agreed that they were no more than foreigners and nomads here on earth. And obviously people who talk like that are looking forward to a country they can call their own. If they had meant the country they came from, they would have found a way to go back. But they were looking for a better place, a heavenly homeland. That is why God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a heavenly city for them.

The land God promised to Abraham prefigures the Kingdom of God that Christ brings. Just as the promise was not fully realized for Abraham, we live in a time when the Kingdom is both “at hand” and is “not yet.”

Here Abraham purchased a burial plot. This, and a well he had dug and made a treaty with the king to own (Genesis 21:22-34), were all he personally possessed of the promised land. This makes it all the more remarkable that Abraham's descendants did own the land starting about 500 years after him, and held it for another 1500 years. It is even more remarkable that after a nearly 2000-year gap, his descendants are once more on the land.

In their time, the places the patriarchs made camp were probably oasis areas. It was a mix of forest and desert when Israel lived on the land, a “land of milk and honey”, but was later deforested. Today 7% of the country has been reforested in an impressive effort of creation care, and 20% of the country has been protected as nature reserves. A promise from 4000 years ago is viable today.

There is the “heavenly homeland” we look forward to, even if we are attached with affection to our earthy homelands. I want to be like Abraham who “welcomed God’s promises” even when only seeing them from a distance.

Lord, thank you for this amazing story of promise and fulfillment. Thank you that we are seeing these prophecies of return and flourishing of the land. We bless you that you have promised us a home and give us tokens in the present that assure us the complete fulfillment will come.

January 21

Rebekah — Genesis 24

Ephesians 5:23 For a husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of the church.

Rebekah reflects the church, the bride of Christ. In using analogies to read this story, Abraham is like the Father, Isaac the Son, and the servant sent for Rebekah is like the Holy Spirit. The servant drew her away from her world, and took her to the Son, completing imagery of the church as the bride of Christ.

Perhaps Abraham already had hope Rebekah could be a spouse for his son, having gotten word about her birth and that of her siblings. (Genesis 22:20-24) The beauty of the story is that God himself orchestrated the encounter, answering the servant’s prayer for guidance and for a sign of who God himself had selected. He repeatedly speaks of the quest for a wife in terms of God’s purpose and destiny: “let her be the one you have appointed”, “the one the Lord intended him to meet”, and he was grateful to be led “along the right path to find a wife.”

Once he found Rebekah, he spoke of it repeatedly as a “successful mission”. With this strong sense of destiny, Rebekah was willing to leave her family and go to a strange place. The happy ending: Isaac loved her very much and she was a great comfort to him.

This story comforts me as a parent, showing another parent who desired for his child to find an appropriate partner and have a happy wholesome marriage. It demonstrates that God himself cares about this and works to bring marriage

partners together with answered prayers and meaningful encounters. The idea that there is one that God intends for each child to marry helps me to pray with faith and hope.

Thank you for making me part of the bride of Christ, and we look forward to the heavenly wedding when all will be celebration! Help us submit to your purposes and trust you to control our lives, including in this very important area of marriage partnerships.

January 22

A New Generation — Genesis 25

Romans 4:16 So the promise is received by faith. It is given as a free gift. And we are all certain to receive it, whether or not we live according to the law of Moses, if we have faith like Abraham's. For Abraham is the father of all who believe.

Christ called us to a life of faith, making extravagant promises: “You can pray for anything, and if you have faith, you will receive it.” (Matthew 21:22) Scripture calls Abraham the father of faith, and in his day, he was unique in his intense life of faith.

As promised, before he died, Abraham had more children and so did become the father of many nations, (Genesis 17:4) and Arab nations today are identified as Ishmael's descendants. The Midianites will become Israel's enemies. (e.g. Numbers 25) Isaac, the principal heir, was to be the one through whom all nations on earth would be blessed.(Genesis 12:3) It is sobering that so many of Abraham's descendants did not follow him in his faith.

Isaac, the heir to Abraham's faith, already had significant spiritual experiences: not dying at Mount Moriah and the providential finding of his wife. He now had faith to pray for a child and was answered with twins 20 years into marriage. (Such long delays!) Rebekah had faith to ask God why the twins were struggling within her and to hear from God. One cannot help but wonder if the evident lack of faith in their sons created tensions in the marriage. Rebekah's solution was to later deceive her husband to make the prophecy she had received come true, whereas Isaac may have been more willing to let life unfold and pray in faith.

The twins themselves, Jacob and Esau, started out with very little evidence of faith. Jacob manipulated his brother and gained a financial advantage, and Esau did not care. Their subsequent stories tell how they slowly did come to faith in God.

As the story moves forward, the number of heroes of faith increases. Now, since Christ has come, there are millions, perhaps even billions, living out lives of faith in their unique contexts, true children of Abraham. Today we have the same struggles of passing faith to our children, not forcing it on them, but allowing them to learn from their own experiences. If they aren't interested, or reject the faith, or live troubled lives, we may be tempted to manipulate them like Rebekah. But we know it is better to pray, to take the long view, and ask God to call our children to himself.

Lord, give us more faith. Help us to learn that personal connection that sees that you are real, you listen to our pleas, and you fulfill your promises.

January 23
Isaac — Genesis 26

Matthew 5:9 God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.

Isaac foreshadowed Christ's role as he worked for peace, a role he has given to all of us. As we have seen, Isaac's life reflected Christ in many ways. He was a promised and long-awaited child whose birth miraculously overcame human limitations. He went through a death and resurrection experience on Mount Moriah. Now he received an appearance from God and a reiteration of the promises to Abraham regarding many descendants and ownership of the land.

He was also a fragile human who did not always live a life of faith. This is the third time we see the motif of the beautiful wife being desired by a king, and God interfering to protect the couple for whom He has an important destiny. Scripture does not hide the foibles of its heroes, and here Isaac repeats his parents' errors.

But in this chapter we also see his character as a peacemaker. Like his father, he became a rich man. Unlike his father, he did so through agriculture. His neighbors maliciously filled up the wells he inherited from his father, and he lost his agricultural land because the Philistines were jealous of him. He struggled to survive against his surrounding neighbors, and yet continued to be committed to peace. Isaac was on the land God had promised him, but conflict forced him to move six times. He accepted this opposition patiently, and continued to look for water, fully trusting the promise that he and his family belonged on this land promised to him and his father, and receiving yet another reiteration of the promise that caused him to worship God.

Eventually the very ruler who had ordered him to leave the country came to him and said, "We can plainly see that the Lord is with you...look how the Lord has blessed you!" They made a treaty and Isaac sent them home in peace, and

that very day Isaac's servants once more found water, made a new well, and he found rest in the land. Isaac exemplifies the beatitude as a "son of God" whose peacemaking, patience and meekness resulted in receiving God's blessing.

I need to ask myself: Am I patient and willing to "lose" when opposed or rejected? Am I willing to forgive and reconcile when others are willing to restore a broken relationship? Do I have the faith that God will set difficulties right? Am I a peacemaker?

Lord, thank you that we are called to be peacemakers even when it is difficult. Give us forgiving hearts even when we are wronged, and make us quick to reconcile.

January 24

Jacob vs. Esau — Genesis 27, 28

Romans 9:11-13 But before they were born, before they had done anything good or bad, she received a message from God. (This message shows that God chooses people according to his own purposes, he calls people, but not according to their good or bad works.) She was told, "Your older son will serve you younger son." In the words of the Scriptures, "I loved Jacob, but I rejected Esau."

Jacob, though called by God to bless all people, was deceitful, troubled, and skeptical. It took a personal encounter with Christ who changed him. When Christ appeared to him in a dream, Jacob did not yet have the faith of his parents or grandparents. Despite his lack of faith, He was promised him land, descendants, and the role of blessing all people.

Christ identified himself as the one who appeared to Jacob by telling Nathanael, "Before this is over, you're going to see heaven open and God's angels descending to the Son of Man and ascending again." (John 1:51) This had been Jacob's dream.

Jacob offered a conditional response, much like so many of us today— "I'll believe in this God if He does good things for me." When Jacob returned to this same place after many years God, once more met him there, changed his name to Israel, and at that point Jacob came to personal faith.

While I, too, had Christian parents and grandparents who shared their faith with me, personal experiences were needed to make the faith my own. I shared my faith with my children, but they also needed moments of personal encounter. We can be part of these grace-filled moments for others by being willing to listen to their stories even when their story is full of skepticism.

Lord, thank you that you have so often met people struggling to believe in you. Thank you for every sign, every encounter, every experience that personally confirms our own faith.

January 25
Rachel — Genesis 29

Luke 2:4-7 And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child. And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her firstborn son..

Rachel, who married Jacob, will later give birth to Joseph. Since Joseph clearly foreshadows Christ in character and experience, this makes her parallel to Christ's mother, Mary. Rachel died in childbirth with Benjamin and was buried at Bethlehem. (Genesis 35:19) Many years later Mary came to that same place to give birth to Christ.

When Rachel and Jacob met, he was at the lowest point in his life. His desceptive attempt to gain wealth and honor had backfired, and he was desperate, insecure, anxious, alone, uncertain of his future. In his refugee experience, he needed a new job, a new place to live, and new people in his life. His encounter with beautiful Rachel, being welcomed by her, falling in love with her, and being able to marry were a gift of grace. For Jacob and Rachel we see how comforting a loving marriage can be, but for her sister Leah we see the sadness of marriage without love.

A prophecy of "Rachel weeping for her children" looks ahead to Herod's slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem in his quest to eradicate the threat of a rival King. (Jeremiah 31:15, Matthew 2:18) One can imagine Rachel grieving over the suffering of her people throughout the centuries. During the Holocaust, a poet wrote a lament and called on Rachel:

What do I require of you?
I ask that you wake from their sleep
Our mother Rachel
And the saint of Berdichev
And that the three of you go together before God.
You will thunder and demand
Rachel will weep and plead
And Levi Yitzhak will argue his lawsuit. Proclaiming
—If, Lord of the Universe, you will not be Savior
Of Living Jews,
You will, God forbid, be the Savior of Corpses. — Simkhe Bunem Shavevitsh

Lord, help us to recognize what privileges a loving marriage and the gift children are to us. Give us empathy for the stranger who needs welcome, give us empathy for those who suffer.

January 26

The Family — Genesis 30

Matthew 6:7 “When you pray, don’t babble on and on as the Gentiles do. They think their prayers are answered merely by repeating their words again and again.

Does God answer prayer? Christ said he does, but not because we say the magic words. In Jacob’s family jealousy and hurt between two sisters who struggled for their husband’s attention and approval was centered around the birth of children. They added two servant girls as wives and the result was twelve boys and one girl, and a lot of sibling rivalry.

Both women seemed to believe in the efficacy of a mandrake root to become pregnant. The plant contains hallucinogens, can be shaped like a small person, and they have had ritual magic uses from ancient times to the present. It must have been a wake-up call for them that the one that did not have the mandrake root is the one who got pregnant.

Their father also depended on divination (verse 27), and obviously revered idols. (Genesis 31:34) Jacob’s techniques for increasing the kind of animals he wanted seems magical as well. Perhaps he thought he was being scientific, but in the next chapter God appeared to him and took credit for being the one to increase his flocks in an act of justice in his relationship with Laban. Abraham’s brother’s family seemed immersed in magical thinking, and Jacob fit right in.

It is interesting that the first three instances where something is described as God’s answer to prayer are pregnancies. The first is for Rebekah to have a child (Genesis 25:21), and in this chapter Leah (verse 17) and Rachel (verse 22) both receive children as a gift from God, as answers to their prayers.

Perhaps God was trying to teach them the contrast between magic and prayer in a living God. We, too, can fall into magical thinking, supposing if we just offer the right formula we will get what we want. Instead, learning to truly trust God can come from answers to prayer. It teaches us to believe that His will for us is good and we can ask in faith for good things.

Lord, thank you that you place us in families, that you give the gift of life, and that you hear our prayers for the gift of children. You are a God who promises to listen to us when we cry out to you. Thank you that you do work through very ordinary fallible people like each one of us.

January 27
Laban — Genesis 31

Mark 10:42-45 “You’ve observed how godless rulers throw their weight around, and when people get a little power, how quickly it goes to their heads. It’s not going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. That is what the Son of Man has done. He came to serve, not to be served—and then to give away his life in exchange for many who are held hostage.”

In addition to finding analogies to Christ in characters, we find characters who fail to carry the image of Christ such as Laban. He is an example of a leader corrupted by selfishness. In contrast, Christ’s concept of leadership is one of service, caring for others and liberating them. Laban is also an example of a poor father—his daughters obviously resented being sold as his property. In contrast, God is the image of the perfectly caring, compassionate and protective father.

Untrustworthy, disagreeable and unjust, he made agreements with Jacob and broke them. He agreed to the marriage with Rachel and then at the last minute substituted Leah, thus ensuring unhappiness for this less loved wife. He made exploitative agreements, and as Jacob plaintively said, “you changed my wages ten times,” and “if God had not been with me, you would have sent me away empty-handed.”

Jacob and family left at night, whereupon Laban chased him and arrived full of accusations, insisting that Jacob stole from him, arguing, “The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flock is my flock—everything you see is mine.” They solved their differences by agreeing to stay away from one another and setting up a boundary marker.

In contrast, Christ-like leadership gives generously, tells the truth, blesses, respects, and shows sacrificial love. How different from the claim that “everything you see is mine.” Perhaps we can (unfortunately) recognize these difficult family conflicts in our own experience or in that of those we care about. The tensions in families, the tensions over money, tensions that lead to not speaking to one another can be extremely painful. Christ’s caring love that is kind and patient anyway is our call.

Lord, help me to follow your example as a leader who is a servant, loving and caring for those entrusted to me. You are the perfect leader, the wise and loving guide, the mighty king! Help me to allow your Spirit to reduce tensions and quarrels rather than add to them.

January 28

Jacob Encounters God — Genesis 32

John 14:9 Jesus replied, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and yet you still don’t know who I am? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father! So why are you asking me to show him to you?”

As Jacob returned to his homeland and waited in fear to see his brother, he wrestled with an unknown figure who changed his name to Israel. That figure has been identified as a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ. Jacob, who did not find faith easy, said, “I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.”

Frightened of his brother, Jacob’s prayer reminds me of some of my own: “God, I am trying to please you and obey you, and I know I do not deserve anything, but I thank you for your provisions, and I need your protection. I have fears, but I am trying to trust your promises.” In many ways, very self-centered praying. Jacob sent gifts to Esau, hoping “perhaps he will be friendly to us” reminding me of my tendencies to try to manipulate others. Then came the wrestling match.

In Fredrick Buechner’s sermon on Jacob, he speaks of the wrestling match as a time when the stubborn wilfullness of Jacob’s life was broken, making a place for something new: “He merely touches the hollow of Jacob’s thigh, and in a moment Jacob is lying there crippled and helpless. The sense we have, which Jacob must have had, that the whole battle was from the beginning fated to end this way, that the stranger had simply held back until now, letting Jacob exert all his strength and almost win so that when he was defeated, he would know that he was truly defeated; so that he would know that not all the shrewdness, will, brute force that he could muster were enough to get this. Jacob will not release his grip, only now it is a grip not of violence but of need, like the grip of a drowning man.”¹

I ask myself if my self-will has been broken and if I have come face to face with the depths of my need for God. The answer appears to be that this is something that must happen more than once.

Lord, thank you that you are the God who encounters us even if our faith is fragile. We praise you for your love that pursues us and helps us let go of all the self-will which distorts our lives.

January 29
Esau — Genesis 33, 36

Matthew 18:21,22 Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!"

Esau showed the forgiveness that Christ calls us to offer those who offend us and is like Christ in offering this. When he and Jacob reconciled, Jacob said: "What a relief to see your friendly smile. It is like seeing the face of God!"

We recall him as the one who impulsively sold his birthright to his twin, Jacob, or as the victim of deception. Logically so, since these interpretations are in the New Testament and are legitimate analogies. His selling the birthright is used as a warning that there comes a time when it is too late to repent (Hebrews 12:16, 17).

Jacob fled and when the time came to return, he sent a message hoping for a friendly reaction from Esau. He became understandably anxious when he heard Esau was coming with 400 armed men. Jacob prayed, sent livestock as gifts, wrestled with the angel, and lined up his family in order of his preferences. But then "Esau ran to meet him and embraced him affectionately, and kissed him. Both of them were in tears." All the past bitterness was wiped away in forgiveness.

At first Esau's nation, Edom, was the more successful one while Jacob's descendants went into slavery. Genesis 36 gives us elaborate detail on Esau's descendants, showing his importance as founder of one of "many nations" as a grandson of Abraham. Eight kings ruled before there were kings in Israel (Genesis 36:11). Descendants of Esau's grandson Amalek became particularly cruel enemies and God pronounced a judgment on them which David carried out. (Genesis 36:12, Exodus 17) Kinship was not enough to get the Israelites permission to pass through Edom on their way out of the desert. Despite this, they were told, "Do not detest the Edomites or the Egyptians, because the Edomites are your relatives, and you lived as foreigners among the Egyptians." (Deuteronomy 23:7) The prophecy that the elder would serve the younger was finally fulfilled under King David who dominated Edom. (II Samuel 8:13-14)

Tensions in families separated by grudges and resentments can be so painful. Growth in both Jacob and Esau enabled them to let their bitter past together go, and they reconciled here, and later came together to bury their father. (Genesis 35:29) This story reminds us that forgiveness and reconciliation can happen even after years of estrangement. The tears of relief, gratitude, and joy remind us that they had loved one another.

Lord, thank you that we can always hope for forgiveness between people at odds with one another. Make us people who are always ready to repair broken relationships.

January 30

The Troubled Family — Genesis 34, 35

Acts 3:19 “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.”

Jacob’s family made huge mistakes, offended and harmed others, just as the church of Christ has managed to do through the centuries. Rather than being a blessing to others as promised, they killed others, something which is a painful part of Christian history as well. Jacob’s family was supposed to be an image of God to the world and failed; we are supposed to be an image of Christ to the world and our failures today and in the past are obvious.

Nor was Jacob’s family immune to tragedy. Living in Shechem, having bought some property, daughter Dinah wanted friends. Perhaps allowed to be too independent, she became a victim of date rape. Jacob considered allowing a marriage with her abuser, but two of her full brothers, also Leah’s children, decided revenge was best. They became like violent gang members, killing most all in the rival gang. At the end of his life Jacob said: “Simeon and Levi are two of a kind—men of violence. O my soul, stay away from them.” (Genesis 49:5)

Jacob urged his family to destroy idols, which they buried in Shechem. They moved to Bethel and worshipped God, marking the place where he had received kingdom promises: the land would belong to his descendants and there would be Kings among them. It was reiterated that his new name was Israel which means “one who struggles with God.”

A day’s travel south, Rachel tragically died in childbirth at Bethlehem. Another family tragedy was Reuben’s sexual relationship with his father’s wife Bildad. At the end of his life Jacob said, “You are as unruly as the waves of the sea, and you will be first no longer. For you slept with one of my wives: you dishonored me in my own bed.” (Genesis 49:4) Another day’s travel south brought him to his father in Hebron. He was there again when his father died, and together with Esau they buried Isaac.

Reading about things going wrong in Jacob’s family awakens compassion for any families who suffer these things today: rape, forced marriages, a child becoming violent, family involved in occult practices, death of a wife in childbirth, incest, death of parents... Whatever good would come in this family

seemed very far away. We can pray for change, blessing on our families, and choose to live in hope as Jacob seems to have done.

Lord, thank you for our families, and thank you that you place us in family groups with all the gifts and challenges that implies. Help us to protect our families, but even more importantly to trust your protection.

January 31
Dreams — Genesis 37

Hebrews 12:2 We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne.

Joseph's story of going from favored son, to rejection, to honor once more serves as a parable for Christ's life and work on our behalf. Joseph's extraordinary character is far above that of his quarreling, killing, womanizing family. Jacob had deeply wronged his brother and had to flee for his life. Joseph's brothers went much farther, responding to feeling jealous and offending by selling him as a slave. The price, 20 pieces of silver, reminds us of Judas' betrayal. Joseph's bloody coat foreshadows Christ's robe at the cross.

His story serves to challenge us who often have dreams and hopes that we think come from God, but which may be questioned or mocked by others. In Joseph's case, we know these dreams eventually came true, but I cannot help but speculate about his emotions. When his brothers put him in a well, potentially facing death, in that dark place his dreams surely felt meaningless, confusing, and difficult to interpret. Most of us doubtless experience times of shattered dreams and fear and anxiety and disappointment. We are not told how Joseph survived this, only given his inspiring example to know that he did.

The level of rejection I have experienced has been extremely painful, but truthfully, it has been minor compared to Joseph's experience. I have longed for transformation in alienated relationships, and I cannot help but wonder how much painful but hopeful longing Joseph experienced. His heart was obviously tender when it became clear his brothers were ready for reconciliation, but how often he must have recalled their rejection through the years and thought how hopeless reconciliation would be.

Lord, thank you for being with us in dark, disappointing times. Give us grace to recognize that it makes more sense to hope in you than to give up in despair.

February 1
Judah — Genesis 38

Matthew 20:28 For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Judah reflects Christ's willingness to suffer for others, something that occurred in the later part of his life. (Genesis 44:18-34) Judah's grandson became King David's ancestor and through him came Christ.

Judah started badly. He instigated selling Joseph into slavery, a particularly cruel and jealous reaction that parallels the betrayal of Christ. He abandoned his daughter-in-law Tamar who then seduced him incognito. He was outraged when she became pregnant and had a double-standard that he could have sex outside of marriage but she could not. He then recognized his sin, and out of this relationship tainted with incest came an ancestor of Christ—always mysterious, redemptive grace at work.

When Judah and his brothers had gone to Egypt, he had already begun to change. He fought to keep Benjamin out of prison, and acknowledged his mistreatment of Joseph. He offered himself as a replacement Benjamin. The old sin of selling Joseph was so far redeemed that Judah became an image of Christ, offering his life his brother.

When Leah gave birth to Judah, her suffering had taught her dependence on God, and she named him "praise." He was the fourth child, but in his father's final blessings (Genesis 49) we will see that since his three older brothers failed in significant ways, his father honored Judah with a promise of authority. This would be fulfilled in all the descendants of King David, including Christ.

This story of redemption encourages any of us who have failed that there is always hope. Grace is always available, and the end can always be greater than the middle of the story. There is no reason to live in depression about the past, but to look to the future with hope and joy.

Lord, thank you that we always have the option of repentance, change, and becoming like you. Thank you for the work of the Holy Spirit that speaks to us and prompts that change.

February 2
Joseph's suffering — Genesis 39, 40

Philippians 2:5–7 You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being.

Joseph foreshadows Christ's betrayal, death, resurrection, and glory. Both suffered, were imprisoned, and were raised to honor. Both compassionately forgave their brothers and were the means of saving them.

The Psalmist wrote: "Until the time came to fulfill his dreams, the Lord tested Joseph's character." (Psalm 105:19) Under difficult circumstances as a slave and in prison he worked hard and was promoted to leadership positions. In both cases it says his bosses had no more worries, and everything ran smoothly. He further remained honorable in the face of attempted seduction and accepted the set-back that resulted.

Joseph's excellence in terrible jobs challenges each one of us to do our very best even if our jobs are not what we would prefer. If we trust, we can be like Joseph where God gave him "success in everything he did", he "became quite a favorite", his employer was blessed. Even in prison "the Lord was with Joseph" and granted him "favor".

Joseph even endured the disappointment of not having his case taken to Pharaoh by the chief cup-bearer. For two more years he simply continued to do his job. But at God's providential moment, the door to freedom would open for him.

This is true faith. Accepting what is, doing our part, not complaining when being treated unfairly, and continuing to live in hope. It is the quality we see in Christ in his incarnation, the same attitude we are called to have.

Lord, make me patient in suffering, confident always that you are working out a great plan that will bring you glory. I praise you that there are always complex purposes at work in any kind of suffering!

February 3

Joseph raised to honor — Genesis 41

Philippians 2:10 Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names.

Joseph raised to honor parallels Christ in his resurrection and ascension. Joseph was made second in command, similar to Christ at God's right hand.

Joseph was taken to Pharaoh to interpret several disturbing dreams, something that only could have happened because of his kindness to the cup-bearer in prison. The coming economic crisis needed a wise person to manage it and Joseph suggested Pharaoh find the "wisest man in Egypt". Pharaoh concluded that Joseph was that man. He thus began his public role at 30 years of age, the same age as Christ, who was also the wisest man in the land.

In Stephen's masterful summary of history from Abraham to Solomon, he said that God gave Joseph "unusual wisdom." (Acts 7:10) Even Pharaoh recognized that he was "obviously filled with the Spirit of God." (verse 38) This is the first use of this important idea which eventually becomes available to every believer in the New Testament.

I want to be so obviously filled with the Spirit and unusual wisdom that it is obvious to unbelievers and genuinely useful in the work of building positive things in our community.

Lord, thank you that in you suffering can be transfigured into blessing. Thank you that you do give unusual wisdom, and that your Holy Spirit in us is the source of that.

February 4

Joseph's Reconciliation — Genesis 42-45

1 Peter 2:24 He personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By his wounds you are healed.

Joseph's brothers are like us, guilty, subject to death, fearful, in need of redemption and forgiveness. Joseph offered forgiveness, foreshadowing Christ's role for us. They were hungry and needed provision, and they were estranged and needed reconciliation.

At first Joseph was rough, accusing, and imprisoned them. He put them through a series of difficulties to test them. He had lived for many years with success at work and happiness with his wife and children, and claimed to have

forgotten his family when he named his first son. It must have been a shock when his brothers stood before him. The last time he had seen them they were planning to kill him and ended up selling him into slavery.

On a human level we can sympathize that their arrival forced him to face his past traumatic relationship with them. Step by step Joseph grieved, crying repeatedly, with the result that his trauma was healed and replaced with kindness and forgiveness. For the brothers, also, this allowed them to grieve and repent of their treatment of Joseph, to confess their guilt, and to try to make amends. When Joseph revealed himself to them, he went so far as to say it was God who sent him to Egypt, not them, and the good purpose of preserving their lives.

Few of us have experienced the level of Joseph's trauma, but whatever trauma we have experienced, the example of grieving and forgiving is a model. He had the power to avenge the past, but instead he wept, and slowly opened himself to a new relationship with his brothers and a new positive future together. May we all develop that same tender forgiving heart toward any who have harmed us.

Lord, thank you that you forgive our sins. May we, in turn, be people who quickly forgive the sins of others, welcome them into our lives, and offer kindness. Thank you that this is what you do for us.

February 5

Joseph's Resurrection — Genesis 46-47

John 11:25 Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying."

For Jacob, who had thought his son was dead for so many years, seeing Joseph was like a resurrection. Like Christ's resurrection, Joseph's work raised the family from near starvation to abundance, from an unsettled life to one rooted in a beautiful place, from dishonor to honor, and from being a small group to becoming a vast people.

There is a touching phrase when Jacob and Joseph are first reunited: "As soon as Joseph arrived, he embraced his father and wept on his shoulder for a long time." The grief from all the suffering of the lost years together, and the relief of seeing his father again, came flooding out. This was the fifth of seven times we are told that Joseph wept. The first time was when he overheard his brothers acknowledging their cruelty to him. The second when he saw the one brother not involved in harming him, his full-brother Benjamin. After Judah's offer to take Benjamin's place as a prisoner, Joseph revealed himself to them and his weeping was so intense it could be heard elsewhere in the palace.

His tears of joy flowed as his brothers recognized him and they reconciled with one another. Perhaps his healing was complete when he was once more reunited with his father and he wept away his grief and loss. For 17 years we hear of no more weeping until the moment his father died. After that, his brothers came humbly and fearfully to ask for his forgiveness and to offer to be his slaves. He wept again, but he also assured them that he not only forgave, he saw God's hand in all that had happened. He was able to speak kindly to them, a great contrast to his rough speech when they first reappeared in his life.

If we have suffered loss followed by restoration, perhaps we can identify with the intensity of Joseph's emotions. Joseph foreshadows Christ's tender, loving, and forgiving heart, and we are called to have the same heart. We need to be willing to cry when we need to without shame.

Lord, thank you that you are loving and tender toward us, and that you give us everything we need through the power of your resurrection. Thank you for the healing work of forgiveness in our lives.

February 6
Jacob's Blessings — Genesis 48-49

Ephesians 1:3 All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ.

Jacob's prophecies at the end of his life included adoption, promise of Messiah, and repeated promise of blessings. These are blessings the Father also gives us through his Son. In Jacob's first blessings he "adopted" Joseph's sons as his own into his family and away from Egypt. Thus Ephraim and Manasseh became tribes of Israel. Further, the younger son was made greater than the older, a theme of grace repeated from Jacob's own life.

Jacob gathered his sons and told them "I will tell you what is going to happen to you in the days to come." (Genesis 49:1) He passed over Reuben for having slept with one of his wives, over Simeon and Levi for having been murderous to avenge their sister, and he offered authority to the next in line, Judah. He said, "The scepter will not depart from Judah nor the ruler's staff from his descendants until the coming of the one to whom it belongs, the one whom all nations will obey," a prophecy fulfilled in King David and Christ.

For Joseph, however, the prophesy referred to a fountain, perhaps Jacob's well. In John 4 Jesus arrived at the well Jacob had dug approximately 2000 years earlier. Abram received the first promise of the land there, and when Jacob

arrived with family and flocks, he bought land and dug the well. Around 600 years later when Joshua entered the promised land, he chose to review history, renew the covenant, set up a memorial stone under an oak tree, and then bury Joseph's bones at that place. Shechem was in land given to the tribe of Ephraim, Joseph's son.

Jacob's blessing for Joseph prophesies Christ and contains significant parallels between the two.

Joseph

Joseph is a fruitful bough
By a well
God (and Jacob) as Shepherd
God as Rock (cf. Joshua's stone)
Blessings on him who was
separated from his brothers
Acknowledged as the firstborn

Jesus

The vine
Sitting by Jacob's well
The good shepherd
The rock
Separated in death and
restored to them in resurrection
Firstborn of many

For Joseph, "blessing" is repeated six times, and how often I pray that multiplied blessings will be given to family, friends, even enemies. For me, too!

Lord, thank you for the great spiritual blessings that you promise to us. Help us to treasure our adoption into your family, having Christ as our brother.

February 7

Joseph's Forgiveness — Genesis 50

Luke 23:34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive these people, because they don't know what they are doing."

Joseph had Christ's forgiving heart which erased what was done against him and saw God using his misfortune for a greater purpose. His first words when he revealed himself to his brothers was, "But don't be upset, and don't be angry with yourselves for selling me to this place. It was God who sent me here ahead of you to preserve your lives." (Genesis 45:5) After Jacob died the brothers supposed he had been kind to them only for the sake of their father, and they came to Joseph to offer to become his slaves. Joseph said, "Don't be afraid of me. Am I god, to judge and punish you? As far as I am concerned, God turned into good what you meant for evil." (Genesis 50:19-20)

Joseph's remarkable response teaches us to reinterpret events in our own lives. His brother's actions were cruel and horrifying. God did not cause them to allow their jealousy to become homicidal. Nor was it God who caused them to wait so many years to beg for forgiveness. But Joseph could see the good that God brought from the evil.

Abraham had been warned that his descendants would remain over 400 years in Egypt. (Genesis 15:13) After Joseph's death God seemed to be silent, similar to the 400 years before Christ. But Genesis ends with a declaration of faith on Joseph's part that God would surely take the people back to the land they had been promised. The New Testament celebrates his faith: "It was by faith that Joseph, when he was about to die, said confidently that the people of Israel would leave Egypt. He even commanded them to take his bones with them when they left." (Hebrews 11:22)

Joseph's example gives me several very practical way of letting God teach me how to think. If someone harms me in some way, I can look for how God turns evil to good. I can be quick to be forgiving and to speak kindly and reassuringly. If God has promised something, I can hold on to it with confident faith.

Lord, help us to be quick to forgive, to even have the grace to forgive the seemingly unforgivable. How gracious and loving and forgiving you have been to me. Please change my character to conform to that of Christ, and fill my heart with the kind of faith that Joseph had.

CHAPTER 2

The Kingdom Prepared

Exodus — Deuteronomy

After a 430-year gap, the descendants of Jacob, now called Israelites, are an oppressed people. But God liberates them through Moses and calls them to become a kingdom of priests. Structures for community life and worship are created via the law and the people experience the discipline of forty years of wilderness wanderings for not trusting God enough to courageously enter the land he promised to give them.



February 8
Moses — Exodus 1-2

Hebrews 3:3 But Jesus deserves far more glory than Moses, just as a person who builds a fine house deserves more praise than the house itself.

Here we are introduced to the towering figure of Moses. He foreshadows Christ in almost every aspect of His life.

Nativity: Moses' birth bears a direct parallel to that of Jesus. Their lives were in danger from tyrannical political leaders, and God sovereignly engineered an escape.

Temptation: Moses spent 40 years in the desert after leaving Pharaoh's court, paralleling Jesus' 40 days in the desert.

Passion: Moses underwent suffering, as Pharaoh refused to let Israel leave Egypt, which corresponds with Christ's suffering from the rulers of his time. The climactic moment of Passover is a direct analogy to Christ's death.

Resurrection: Moses led the people across the Red Sea, escaping from Pharaoh's army to freedom, and the New Testament tells us this is imagery of Christ leading his people to freedom from death.

Teaching: Moses presented the Law, a Covenant, to the people, which corresponds with Jesus giving us the teaching of the New Covenant.

Leading us through life: Moses led the people through the wilderness for 40 years and led them to the Promised Land, just as Christ leads us.

In his years in Midian, Moses could not know the full destiny God had for him, and he was faced with discouragement. Psalm 90 is identified as Moses' prayer and contains a reflection on our human struggles with time. It contains the line "How long will you delay?" Moses spent the first 80 years of his life as part of a time when God seemed silent, longing for change. Yet the final line is a great encouragement to us who also wait for God to intervene on our behalf: "He looked down on the people of Israel and knew it was time to act." (Exodus 2:25)

Lord, thank you for towering figures like Moses who give us an example of your providential care, preparing someone to serve you. His example of waiting, longing for change, is a comfort to us who also go through times of waiting.

February 9
Burning Bush — Exodus 3

Matthew 17:2-3 As the men watched, Jesus' appearance changed so that his face shone like the sun, and his clothing became dazzling white. Suddenly, Moses and Elijah appeared and began talking with Jesus.

The burning bush is the presence of Christ calling Moses, paralleling His call on our lives. Jesus was marked for ministry by the Spirit at his baptism, and Moses was marked for ministry by his encounter with the fiery bush. Moses' response to God's call, "Here I am!" is to be our response.

Christ quoted from this story where God said he was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and offered it as a proof of resurrection, concluding, "So he is the God of the living, not the dead." (Matthew 22:32) The angel of the Lord had appeared to Hagar in the wilderness and to Abraham when preparing to sacrifice Isaac. As he reappears throughout scripture, different than ordinary angels, people have identified him as the pre-incarnate Christ. He gave a beautiful call for Moses to take off his sandals as an acknowledgement that this is holy ground.

This took place near Mount Sinai, and part of God's reassurance to Moses was not only that He would be with him, but that he would return to worship at that very mountain. He promised that He would do miracles, and did so to liberate his people.

For us, an encounter with Christ and His Holy Spirit in a blaze of fire sets the trajectory of our own ministries. I can look back to these moments with gratitude, something that many refer to as being "filled with the Spirit", and that provide power we do not have to do what he is calling us to do.

Lord, may we treasure those moments when we are startled by the reality of your presence with us. Thank you that for us as well, when you see our misery, you hear our cries for deliverance, and you are aware of our suffering, you come to rescue us. Thank you for your power and your promise of miracles in our lives.

February 10
Zipporah — Exodus 4

Ephesians 2:14-17 For Christ himself has made peace between us Jews and you Gentiles by making us all one people. He has broken down the wall of hostility that used to separate us.

Zipporah and Jethro foreshadow Christ's message to all nations, not only the Jews. Moses, the lawgiver, and founder of the Hebrew nation, married a Gentile. When he escaped after murdering a man in Egypt, he met the seven daughters of Midianite priest Jethro, became part of the household, and married daughter Zipporah.

At this moment of crisis and encounter with God, Moses was given the capacity to do several miracles. His insecurity was very great and he asked for his

brother as a spokesperson. In this transition and calling, Zipporah agreed to accompany him with their children. But to add to all his stress, a serious marital disagreement arose.

In an inn on the way she was furious at having to circumcise her son. Why did Moses insist? “The Lord met him, and sought to kill him.” It reminds me of the Ignatian principle that if we are in disobedience to God, we feel the force of conviction to change as an oppressive thing. Her anger at Moses for forcing this ceremony against her will is humanly understandable, and yet it was essential he and his family clearly be Hebrews for the leadership role he was undertaking. We are not told precisely a what point Moses sent Zipporah back to her father. (Exodus 18:2) But at Mount Sinai Jethro brought her and the two sons to be part of God’s people. Fitting in perhaps did not always work well, since Moses’ siblings criticized him for his foreign wife. (Numbers 12:1)

There are other instances of marriage with Gentiles—Joseph with an Egyptian, Boaz with a Moabitess, Esther with the Persian King—and in each case it serves as a reminder that the Jewish people are called to bless all nations. After Christ came and told his disciples to go to all nations there is no question that all ethnic and cultural barriers are torn down. The inclusion of Zipporah at this moment of such importance to the rise of Moses as a heroic leader reminds us of this.

Lord, give us hearts that have no cultural barriers in them, but are loving and accepting of all people. We thank you for the unique gifts that come from each culture.

February 11

Moses’ Despair — Exodus 5-6

II Corinthians 12:9 “My gracious favor is all you need. My power works best in your weakness.” So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may work through me.

Moses’ moments of despair over the impossibility of liberating his people points to similar moments of despair in Christ’s passion. Moses was fragile, human, and uncertain, particularly as he began his difficult role. After Pharaoh reacted to his appeal, he plaintively asked, “Why did you send me?” Christ went through emotional pain in the garden to the point that he sweated great drops of blood. On the cross as he was dying, he expressed agony, saying “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

A leader in the Civil Rights movement once said that people suppose that they knew they would succeed. He said that was certainly not the case; they did their work only because they felt the cause was righteous. The resulting change in laws and opportunities for the African-American citizens of the

United States was not a foregone conclusion. We have a similar inability to fully empathize with Moses' position because we know how the story ends with success. He could only hope and pray it would end that way and try to keep doing the next right thing.

Today whole groups of people are in oppressed situations. Becoming part of social movements to change these situations is certainly part of a Christian's calling. The literal slavery of our own time, often called human trafficking, is certainly one of many causes. Our own lives may feel oppressed, or we may feel like a situation has us "enslaved" and we cry out for freedom. Part of the lesson of these chapters is that things may get worse before they get better, but we should not give up hope.

Lord, keep us faithful to you, able to always express honestly the heavy emotions we are feeling, our fears and our consciousness of our inabilities and our weaknesses. Keep us humble, but humbly expectant that you will act on our behalf. Keep us focused on the just causes we are working for, and keep us from despairing when it seems like the setbacks are very great.

February 12

Pharaoh's Stubbornness — Exodus 7-8

Romans 9:17 For the Scriptures say that God told Pharaoh, "I have appointed you for the very purpose of displaying my power in you and to spread my fame throughout the earth."

God challenged Pharaoh through Moses and Aaron to liberate his people. This liberation becomes a principal theme of the relationship we can have with God, and is used throughout scripture to foreshadow Christ's liberation from Satan's power through the cross.

The mysterious interplay between our free choices and God's sovereign knowledge and plans is highlighted in the interwoven story of Pharaoh's stubborn heart and God's foreknowledge, reinforcement and use of this. There is an alternating chain: God says he will cause the stubbornness (Exodus 7:3), Pharaoh is stubborn even after two appeals and a miraculous sign (Exodus 7:13). After plagues 1-5 it is repeated that Pharaoh is stubborn. (Exodus 7:22, 8:14, 8:19, 8:32, 9:7) After plague number 6 it says "the Lord made Pharaoh even more stubborn." (Exodus 9:12, 10:1, 11:10, 14:4,8) while simultaneously reinforcing that this was Pharaoh's choice. (Exodus 10:3, 13:5)

Pharaoh is an example of people who will not respond to Christ, no matter what signs and calls are offered. Here we are dealing with the mysteries of free will and God's purposes and plans, both of which are simultaneously true

in our own lives. The plagues correspond to escalating warnings. Because Pharaoh did not respond he lost everything, including his life.

The first four plagues might have help the Egyptians recognize the suffering the Hebrew slaves experienced. These are still today issues for those who are poor: contaminated water, vulnerability to animal and insect plagues.

God has not changed. He still acts on behalf of the oppressed who call on Him. He still listens to our appeals to soften the hearts of people who oppose us, people who criticize or reject us unfairly, and people who refuse to listen to the Holy Spirit. He is still engaged in contests for human hearts.

Lord, thank you that your power is far greater than that of any human ruler or institution no matter how powerful they seem to be. Thank you that we need not fear but can trust your ability to turn the tables in any situation.

February 13

10 Plagues — Exodus 9-11

John 3:16-18 For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it. There is no judgment awaiting those who trust him. But those who do not trust him have already been judged for not believing in the only Son of God.

The 10 plagues of judgment contain analogies to Christ taking our judgment on himself on the cross. Moses' intervention or the protection of the Israelites represents God's mercy, both of which were part of Christ's death on the cross. The plagues, something powerful and uncomfortable was necessary to liberate oppressed slaves, and natural disasters applied the pressure. Today the Jewish people remember each plague in the Passover celebration with gratitude.

With the fifth plague, there was a financial loss, minimal compared to the financial loss the slaves had experienced from several centuries of exploitation. The skin diseases showed the greater vulnerability of the poor to disease followed by more financial loss through the hail and locusts. Perhaps the darkness served as a warning that they should be afraid. Each time, as soon as the problem was resolved, Pharaoh rescinded his agreement for them to leave.

Killing the firstborn of Egypt was harsh, but killing of Hebrew newborns had been going on a long time and the society as a whole accepted it, or at least ordinary Egyptians may have thought, "there's nothing we can do." They finally suffered the same tragedy to which they'd been so indifferent as the policy of their nation.

Exercising power to overcome Egypt's gods was important as proof of God's reality. (Exodus 12:12, Exodus 18:11) This becomes an important theme as God continues to act on behalf of weaker Israel in the face of more powerful nations, including in the conquest of Canaan.

Whatever is oppressing us in our lives—guilt, addictions, illness, poverty, conflict, social upheaval, depression, disappointment, a sense of failure—the fundamental lesson is that liberation is possible. We have the potential to be free through God's miraculous power.

Lord, thank you that you deliver us, even in the midst of judgments we deserve, and that you give us freedom from oppression. We praise you for your liberating work in our lives.

February 14
Passover — Exodus 12

I Corinthians 5:7 Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us.

The Passover lamb prefigures Christ's death. The beauty of the story is in the triumph of the weak, oppressed, enslaved, stubborn people. Their freedom, celebrated each Passover by the Jews and completed in the celebration of First Fruits, parallels our freedom in Christ.

The people were told to put blood from the lamb on their doorposts so the angel of death would pass over and spare their child. This perfect prefiguring of Christ's death was celebrated on the same day through centuries, and became the very day of His crucifixion. The lamb was to be chosen four days before, the very day Christ entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

Other details look forward to Christ on the cross, such as the admonition to break no bones of the lamb. (Exodus 12:46) John makes the point that Pilate ordered the legs of the three men being crucified to be broken to hasten their deaths, and this was done to the other two. "But when they came to Jesus, they saw that he was dead already, so they did not break his legs." (John 19:33) The repeated admonition to have no yeast in the bread, not even in the house, has been seen as a symbol of purity and sinlessness in the body of Christ broken for us.

The Passover meal Jesus shared with His disciples has become our memorial bread and wine to remember His death. It bundles so many meanings: forgiveness of sin, freedom from slavery and oppression, God's sovereignty over life and death, over rulers, over his people, His commissioning and call of

prophetic leaders to bring freedom, His supernatural intervention on behalf of those who trust Him, and a promise of a coming Messiah.

A Messianic Jewish Seder is a wonderful way to understand how Christ celebrated Passover and identified with each symbol. The mystery of His identification with our brokenness, the protection we have through His suffering, and His presence and deliverance deepen our appreciation of His crucifixion and resurrection.

Many poems have been written for contemporary Passover celebrations, including a beautiful song by *Liberated Wailing Wall*.

Pharaoh had us all enslaved, laboring in his land,
The Lord God heard our cry and freed us by His hand.
And by the blood of the pure and spotless Lamb,
We're free, we are all set free.

Passover Lamb's blood upon the door,
Forming a cross to seal us from death's jaw.
And by the blood of the pure and spotless Lamb,
We're free, we are all set free.

Hallelujah, Hallelujah,
God of Abram,
Thank you for the Lamb.

*Lord, thank you for the Lamb of God who delivers us from all of our sins.
Thank you for accompanying us in suffering. We exalt you for your work of salvation.*

February 15
Ransom — Exodus 13

Mark 10:45 For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many.

The ransom of the firstborn foreshadows Christ's ransom of us. He compared his death to a ransom and Peter tells us the ransom was Christ's blood. (1 Peter 1:18.20) This chapter helps us understand what it means for Christ to ransom or redeem us. He liberates us from the slavery of evil, he purchased us with his blood, and He pays the full price.

The people had left Egypt but not yet crossed the Red Sea and were given two instructions that would serve as their "brand": celebration of Passover, and the purchase of firstborn sons. Both were intended to remind them of their liberation from Egypt, and both look forward to Christ's work of redemption.

In the context of liberation from Pharaoh's slavery, God had protected the firstborn from death and they belonged to him. As the people purchased them back, they were reminded that their freedom had come through God's miraculous work. When Christ came, he purchased us all. N.T. Wright makes the point that Christ chose Passover as the time for His death to tie it to this story of liberation, giving us the fundamental meaning of the cross. He further points out that Christ is not paying a debt to an angry God the Father as perhaps many have interpreted. The debt owed here is an acknowledgement that they owe God their lives. But because Christ is God, He chooses to pay for our lives with his own blood.²

I am struck that it is far too easy in our modern culture to feel that God owes us rather than that we owe Him everything. We unconsciously think that He owes us a good life, protection, or positive circumstances, and if we pay up appropriately with the right prayers, good actions, and participation in a church community, He will pay us back. This ransom serves as an important reminder that we owe our lives to Him. We are in no position to make demands.

Lord, help me to recognize that you purchased us, and that in this new relationship we owe you our very lives. Help me not to hold on to illusions about what I deserve from you, but to focus on what You deserve from me.

February 16
Exodus — Exodus 14

I Corinthians 10:1,2 I don't want you to forget, dear brothers and sisters, what happened to our ancestors in the wilderness long ago. God guided all of them by sending a cloud that moved along ahead of them, and he brought them all safely through the waters of the sea on dry ground. As followers of Moses, they were all baptized in the cloud and the sea.

Crossing the Red Sea reflects Christ's death and resurrection, and symbolizes baptism into his death and resurrection. This is the central story of redemption for the Jewish people, parallel to redemption in Christ. It predates the giving of the law, demonstrating that God's mercy is what opens the opportunity for an obedient and holy life.

We are told that "Jesus first rescued the nation of Israel from Egypt" (Jude 5) and he has been seen through history as a liberator ever since. The escape of slaves from the most powerful empire of the time is astonishing. Slaves in the United States used this imagery in praying for their own freedom, and Harriet Tubman who led so many to freedom on the underground railway she earned the nickname "Moses."

Marc Chagall painted and drew the Exodus in many ways, but one of the most compelling is an image of Christ on the cross with a halo around his head standing above his people who are being freed.

Lord, thank you for freedom—freedom from sin, from oppression. Thank you for your freeing work in our lives. It is exciting and fun to live in this liberated way and we really appreciate it!

February 17

A Celebration — Exodus 15

Colossians 3:16 Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts.

This song of celebration for deliverance points ahead to the songs of celebration of heaven in Revelation, and the songs of our worship. It ends with the affirmation of God's everlasting reign, the theme of God as King.

For Passover, the Jewish people today sing a song, *Dayenu*, which means, "it would have been enough". The first eight stanzas celebrate bringing the people out of Egypt, executing justice on the Egyptians, executing justice on their Gods, slaying their firstborn, giving them the Egyptian's health and wealth, splitting the sea, leading through on dry land, and drowning the oppressors. The last seven stanzas celebrate His care in the wilderness. Each one of these things "would have been enough."

But so quickly after their great song of celebration, the people turned against Moses when the water they encountered was bitter. God showed Moses a branch which he put in the water to make it sweet. He then made a promise of health based on listening and obedience, and exemption from the common diseases of the culture they had left. (Exodus 15:26) This branch points us to the cross which gives us living spiritual water and gives us health.

Remembering to celebrate our deliverance, trusting God to provide what we need to sustain our bodies, trying to live in wise obedience to what we know He desires, these are relevant lessons for us today.

Lord, please make me a person who celebrates, who sings joyfully to you in faith and gratitude. Help me have a grateful heart for each aspect of your provision that keeps me alive.

February 18
Manna — Exodus 16

John 6:32 Jesus said, "I assure you, Moses didn't give them bread from heaven. My Father did. And now he offers you the true bread from heaven. The true bread of God is the one who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

Manna prefigures Christ as the bread of life, the source of provision for our spiritual need. When the people in the desert needed food, God provided a way of gathering food. Christ compared himself to this bread from heaven, sustaining food even when in a place of scarcity. When people proposed that Christ give them manna, and He compared himself to that manna.

In the feeding of the 4,000 the disciples asked a question parallel to that of the complaint that the Israelites would starve in the desert: "How are we supposed to find enough food to feed them out here in the wilderness?" (Mark 8:4) Similarly in the feeding of the 5000: "We'd have to work for months to earn enough money to buy food for all these people!" (Mark 6:37) Christ, in both cases, multiplied bread, replicating the manna experience.

Christ made the point in his interaction over manna that the people living in the time of the desert all ended up dying despite the miraculous provision of this food. In contrast, He said that anyone who is able to eat him will live forever. This very beautiful promise brings us to the Eucharist. We know that at the last supper Christ gave the disciples physical bread as a sign of his coming death, but also as the life brought through resurrection.

The Eucharistic meal sustains us, can heal us, reaffirms our forgiveness. It is an important part of our spirituality to participate in this communal meal.

Lord, thank you for your provision of yourself for our spiritual needs, and your provision of daily bread for our physical needs. Thank you that you are completely dependable. We praise you that we meet you in the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

February 19
Water from the Rock — Exodus 17:1-7, Psalm 81, Psalm 95

John 4:13,14 Jesus replied, "People soon become thirsty again after drinking this water. But the water I give them takes away thirst altogether. It becomes a perpetual spring within them, giving them eternal life."

Water from the rock presents Christ as the Rock and the water as the Spirit. As Christ said, the water brings us eternal life. The miracle of water from the rock, and the complaints and unbelief of Israel that led to this recur throughout scripture as themes of testing and provision. Christ fulfilled this in a particular way at the well in Samaria (John 4) and at the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. (John 7) At that festival this event was commemorated as part of the journey in the wilderness wanderings.

Paul identifies this rock with Christ, writing: “All of them drank the same spiritual water. For they drank from the spiritual rock that traveled with them, and that rock was Christ.” (I Corinthians 10:4) Throughout scripture God is called a Rock in prayers which makes Christ’s parable of choosing to build our lives on rock rather than sand, a most vivid image.

This becomes an iconic moment for God’s people. Moses asked “Why are you testing the Lord?” and named the place Massah, “testing”. An additional name, “Meribah” is repeated twelve times through the Hebrew scripture. In reviewing the journey, Moses exhorted the people not to test God as they did at Massah (Deuteronomy 6:16), and Jesus quoted this when confronting Satan in the temptation.

We are also told that God was testing the people at Massah and they failed the test. (Deuteronomy 33:8) The theme that God tests our hearts, faith, emotions, thoughts, and purifies us is repeated at least 32 times in scripture. When life is hard, when we lack something basic (like water!) it is helpful to see it as a test of our faith. But the positive words for our relationship with God—blessing, joy, rescue, deliver, save, peace, love, protect, prosper, heal, provide—occur ten times more than testing. The goal is faith, repeated 500 times.

Despite complaints and lack of faith, God provided abundant water, but the lesson was not learned and did not prevent more faith failures. The lesson for us is not to follow this bad example, hardening our hearts and forgetting God’s miracles. (Psalm 95:8-11, Hebrew 3:7-4:7) May we recognize that Christ is with us and so pass all our spiritual tests!

Lord, thank you that you are a God of miracles and that the most unexpected, unlikely, and wonderful things can happen and have happened in our lives. We bless you for your most gracious gift of the Holy Spirit.

February 20

God Judges the Amalekites — Exodus 17: 8-16, Psalm 83

Matthew 5:43-45 “You have heard that the law of Moses says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those

who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven.”

God judges sin by taking life, and Christ warns us of the possibility that we can lose our lives if we do not ask for mercy. God says, "Write this down as a permanent record, and announce it to Joshua: I will blot out every trace of Amalek from under heaven," thus elevating Amalek to an archetype of those who oppose God. They were descendants of Abraham, yet had become enemies. It is Saul's decision to preserve the life of the Amalekite king that causes him to be replaced by David who, in fact, does pursue the Amalekites, though even then, some escape. This judgment is for Amalek's cruel treatment of a wandering people, striking down the weak stragglers. (Deuteronomy 25: 17-19)

The word "genocide" was coined after World War II, but we can see the concept here that nations should cease to exist, and in this case, God authorized it. I wrestle with this. A web search yields numerous sites documenting and critiquing violence in scriptures, and I feel empathy for the angry websites, particularly when Christians advocate violence. Stories in the Hebrew scriptures have justified violence through history, a contradiction of Christ's teachings of non-violence and love of enemies. It is particularly painful to discover that this story was used to justify war against Native Americans in what became the United States.

In Christ, we are called to love all, even enemies, even nations treating us with cruelty. Today the conflicts with terrorism are challenging our willingness to do that. Some Christians justify a split between the actions of nations and those of individuals, saying we are only called to operate with forgiveness on an individual level. But other Christians insist we must find a way to apply love of enemies on all levels, working for peace, and engaging in dialogue. Christ has introduced a challenge to our willingness to vilify other people and nations.

I need to beware of cruelty in myself: gossip, or what we often call "stabbing someone in the back", abusive anger, silent treatment rather than straightforward conflict resolution, or offering the unmistakable look or tone of contempt. If someone is cruel to me, I need to remember the admonition to forgive and bless, leaving the matter of discipline or vengeance to God.

Lord, keep us humble and aware that just because we believe in you, we do not have all the answers. Keep us aware that life is a gift, we have no right to suppose that we can do anything we want, particularly to others.

February 21
Jethro — Exodus 18

Luke 10:1,2 The Lord now chose seventy-two other disciples and sent them on ahead in pairs to all the towns and villages he planned to visit. These were his instructions to them: “The harvest is so great, but the workers are so few. Pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest, and ask him to send out more workers for his fields. [Note: Some manuscripts say 70 instead of 72.]

Jethro demonstrates similar organizational wisdom to that of Christ. On his visit to Moses and his daughter and grandchildren, he was pleased to see his son-in-law’s success. He responded, “I know now that the Lord is greater than all other Gods,” and sacrificed to God, joined by Israel’s leaders.

Jethro noticed Moses’ overwork in resolving conflicts, and offered advice to delegate. Leaders for groups of 10, 50, 100, and 1,000 could manage among themselves leaving less to report to Moses’ core team of Aaron and Joshua, leaders of the twelve tribes, and a group of 70 elders. (Exodus 24:9, Numbers 11) We see a similar structure in Christ’s choice of three intimate friends, twelve disciples and 70 sent to preach. Five-hundred came to see him after the resurrection, 3000 joined them on Pentecost, and they continued to grow as apostles and Paul planted more congregations.

The concept of circles of intimacy has been a great help to me in my own relationships. Who are my three closest friends? Who are in my circle of twelve? Who are the seventy? By noticing this I can stay balanced in connecting with people in my life. From that healthy core of people I know, there is a chance to reach out in prayer and service beyond that group without being overwhelmed.

Lord, help me not to allow myself to be overworked and stressed, but to wisely depend on others not only for social support, but to be part of meeting the needs of many others.

February 22
Mount Sinai—Exodus 19

Matthew 5:1-3 One day as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him, and he began to teach them. “God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.”

As the covenant is given, the call to love and worship God prefigures Christ’s call to a relationship of forgiveness and love. Obedience was to flow from gratitude for God’s liberating work, His rescue from their oppressive slavery. They were to become God’s kingdom of priests, just as Christ would call people

into the Kingdom of Heaven. The law foreshadows Christ's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, where he took what was given at Mount Sinai and went deeper.

The people arrived at Mount Sinai two months after leaving Egypt. Moses ascended Mount Sinai seven times, four of them in this chapter, obtaining the constitution of the new kingdom. These ascents have parallels in Christ as he announced His Kingdom, called for purification through baptism, was raised from the dead on the third day, and was seen in glory at the transfiguration.

At the giving of the law there was smoke, fire, the mountain trembling (Exodus 19:16-19) which sounds like the active volcano near my home. *The Message* uses volcano. Though the location of Mount Sinai is uncertain, for 1500 years our tradition has placed it in the Sinai Peninsula at a non-volcanic mountain. However, there are volcanoes in Midian where Moses lived after fleeing Egypt, and some Bible encyclopedias say this could be the route they took. When Moses saw the burning bush he was promised that he would return to that mountain to meet God. (Exodus 3:12) Whatever the reality, the people were filled with fear and awe at the glory of God.

This was a climactic moment for Israel, an archetypal "mountaintop experience" and perhaps we also have had such moments of intense spirituality. By believing in Christ I am part of His Kingdom, and just as these people encountered an awesome God I too can encounter Him, often through natural phenomena. However, it takes faith to believe these things in humdrum ordinary times, and not to give up.

Christ, thank you that you have given us the promise of your presence with us at all times. We worship you as holy and far above us, and at the same time willing to be close and present to us in your mercy.

February 23

Covenant — Exodus 20

Romans 10:4 For Christ has already accomplished the purpose for which the law was given. As a result, all who believe in him are made right with God.

Just as Christ rescues us from the slavery of sin, God reminded them that He rescued them from slavery in Egypt. Because they were his people, no other gods should be worshiped, no idols should be made, and His name was not to be misused, all of which applies to believers today. No false image of God could be tolerated, because it is distorted and empty compared to the true image of God in Christ. The inability to obey this law repeatedly became Israel's downfall, thus becoming an overarching theme for the rest of the Hebrew scripture.

If they disobeyed, the consequences would last four generations. If they obeyed, God would lavish his love on them for a thousand generations.

The primacy of the Ten Commandments is highlighted by the text, and Christians acknowledge the importance of obeying this moral law today. Unlike the rest of the instructions, God spoke these directly to all the people. The people responded fearfully, asking not to hear God's voice, but rather asking for Moses to serve as a mediator.

Sacrifice, or substitutionary atonement, is one important image for the meaning of Christ's death. The later part of this chapter describes a simple earth altar and the sacrifices to be made on them, a way of seeking forgiveness for any infringements of the law. Christ made the connection between sacrifice, covenant and himself, saying, "This is my blood, poured out for many, sealing the covenant between God and his people." (Mark 14:24)

A solution to failure to follow the Ten Commandments is built in to the chapter, for us and for the people: a sacrifice to forgive sins. This is the call of faith in Christ, to repent, confess our sins, allow Him to change us, and to then walk in new life. For many of us, we can point to a date and time when we first did this. In my case, I was eleven years old, and suddenly understood what I had been taught all my life and made a public commitment. From that time on, there have been repeated confessions, but always with the understanding that Christ covers all my sins.

Lord, thank you that you forgive our sins when we fail, and you enable us to fulfill these calls to holiness. You teach us to put nothing else above you. Change us, make us the people you want us to be.

February 24
Freedom and Refuge — Exodus 21

I Peter 2:16 For you are free, yet you are God's slaves, so don't use your freedom as an excuse to do evil.

Before examining connections to Christ, it is important to think how differently these laws about slavery would have seemed at the time, compared to how they seem to us now. We know the terrible history of exploitation and oppression of slavery and even that it was theologically justified. We also know the large number of people today in slavery situations who need to be liberated.

At the time, however, these must have seemed progressive laws to people who had come out of centuries of hopeless life-long slavery only two months previously. The idea that there could be limits, that there could be choices, and that women who were taken as wives must be treated as equals must have

been so much better than what they had known that they would nod their heads. Over time, the repudiation of slavery arose from those who knew that in Christ “we are neither slave nor free.”

Just as Genesis exposes problems with polygamy, it exposes problems with slavery. Abraham had an Egyptian slave wife, Hagar, who suffered. In turn his descendant Joseph suffered injustices as a slave to an Egyptian. And, of course, the Israelite descendants suffered under oppressive slavery in Egypt. The limits on slavery introduced in the law made it a form of bonded servitude rather than what became chattel slavery in our culture, the actual ownership of others as property. Our form of slavery was far more cruel.

Freeing slaves is later used as a metaphor for Christ’s work. A slave’s choice to stay with the master recalls New Testament passages of our choice to serve God, and Paul’s choice to call himself God’s slave. A slave girl taken as a wife must be treated as a full wife, and reminds us that we, as slaves to sin, are taken as the bride of Christ. A detail of the value of a slave who has died is that the repayment is 30 pieces of silver, the amount Judas received for betraying Christ, thus identifying him as a dying slave.

The provisions for accidents and injury not only created legal precedents we still observe, they serve as yet another metaphor for Christ’s work. We have injured others and violated boundaries and so deserve the death penalty, but He takes the penalty for us. Cities of refuge were places of those who had accidentally murdered another. Their imagery serves as analogous to Christ as a place of protection from the punishment that we deserve.

Neither Jews nor Christians accept slavery today through centuries of reinterpretation, reminding us that these are ancient texts, part of the culture of their day, and not always rigidly applicable now. Interestingly, Jewish commentators have used the compensation laws in verses 22-23 to decide that the fetus is not a human until birth, thus giving a different view on abortion than that of most Christians. A text like this should give us the grace to be humble about how to apply scripture in our world today, and give us a willingness to acknowledge and repent of ways scripture has been used to treat others with cruelty.

Lord, thank you that you set us free and you give us safety. Thank you that you forgive our violations of others, and offer us protection from the consequences of our sins. Help us let go of any self-righteous rigidity.

February 25
An obedient life — Exodus 22, 23

Matthew 5:19 So if you ignore the least commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God's laws and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Christ taught respect for the law, and these chapters set up boundaries: respect for property, women, God, the vulnerable, and truth. Each of these are viable parts of a moral law we accept.

The Ten Commandments are elaborated in more detail:

Do not murder	Exodus 21:12-36
Do not steal	Exodus 22:1-15
Do not commit adultery	Exodus 22:16-17
Do not covet	Exodus 22:21-27
Do not worship other gods	Exodus 22:16-20, 28-31; 23:13
Do not bear false witness	Exodus 23:1-9
Honor the Sabbath	Exodus 23:10-12
I, the Lord, rescued you	Exodus 23:14-19
Do not make idols	Exodus 23:20-32

Covetousness is the sin that can lead to oppressing foreigners and other vulnerable people. The exhortation is repeated twice here (Exodus 22:21, Exodus 23:9), and repeated six more times in the law with sixty more exhortations to be inclusive of foreigners among them. We are also warned against being swayed by a crowd to do evil, twisting justice against a poor person, or putting an innocent person to death, all of which were done to Christ.

Portions of the law that prefigure Christ remind us that there is forgiveness for failing to fulfill the moral law. Participation in three annual festivals was required and each festival is prophetic of Christ. The Festival of Unleavened Bread prefigured the crucifixion. Pentecost prefigured the giving of the Spirit and start of the church. Tabernacles prefigured the second coming.

The call to conquer Canaan, led by God's messenger, seemingly the pre-incarnate Christ himself, was the climactic command in the covenant contained in these four chapters. This raises difficult ethical and interpretive questions we will look at in the conquest narratives. But for Christians, our relationship to idolatry has changed. Paul was deeply troubled by the idols he saw, (Acts 17:16) but used them as a springboard to call people away from them to the true God. (Acts 17:29,30) He advocated witnessing to the true God as one associated with those worshipping idols. (I Corinthians 5:9-11) We can honor the call to abolish idolatry by being repentant of placing anything above God in our own

hearts. We can engage in vigorous prayer for others to do the same. We thereby honor Christ's call to teach all of the law.

Lord, your standards are high and we sometimes manage to obey them and sometimes do not. Thank you that you have built in repentance and forgiveness as part of the law. Thank you for the call to put you first—alert us to our failures to do so.

February 26
Ratifying the Covenant — Exodus 24

John 1:16, 17 We have all benefited from the rich blessings he brought to us—one gracious blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ.

Both the covenant with Israel and Christ's new covenant called people to obedience as a result of deliverance. The profound difference is that Christ has completed all the work that brings our redemption. In the old covenant his work occurs as images, foreshadowing, a prediction of a future reality.

Once the covenant was given, the people formally accepted it and agreed to obey these provisions.

Law

Covenant was given: 4 chapters of instructions

Moses wrote down the covenant

Moses set up 12 pillars for each tribe

Moses sacrificed peace offerings

Moses read the covenant he had written down

The people agreed to obey

Moses said: "This blood confirms the covenant the Lord has made with you in giving you these laws" (Exodus 24:8)

Ascent 5: Moses, three priests and 70 elders went up the mountain and "they saw the God of Israel" and they shared a meal.

Ascent 6: Moses and Joshua went up and Moses went further up for 40 days and nights

Christ

Christ taught the people

The gospel writers wrote his words

Christ called 12 disciples

Christ was crucified

Christ wrote his covenant in hearts

Believers receive the Spirit to enable them to obey

Christ said, "This cup is the new covenant between God and his people." (Luke 22:20)

Christ shared the Eucharist with his disciples.

Christ's 40 days of teaching after the resurrection

Perhaps the covenant meal was with the pre-incarnate Christ. It raises interesting questions, since elsewhere it says "no one may see me and live." (Exodus 33:20) The floor of brilliant blue lapis lazuli floor sounds similar to the crystal glass sea. (Revelation 4) This is a beautiful and mysterious story, one that speaks of an intimacy with God that one supposes could have kept Aaron, sons

and the seventy elders full of faith and obedience. Yet before forty days passed, they were worshipping an idol they had made. The disciples also, after seeing Christ's glory in miracles and the transfiguration, and haven eaten a covenant meal, then denied and abandoned him.

How can one go so quickly from such a "mountain-top" experience into disloyalty? We can do the same. We are so fragile, so unable to stay in faith on our own.

Lord, forgive us for so quickly forgetting meaningful spiritual experiences and dully turning back to sinful ways or just plain boredom. Help us to take the new covenant you have brought seriously.

February 28

The Ark of the Covenant — Exodus 25

Revelation 11:19 Then, in heaven, the Temple of God was opened and the Ark of his covenant could be seen inside the Temple. Lightning flashed, thunder crashed and roared; there was a great hailstorm, and the world was shaken by a mighty earthquake.

The Ark of the Covenant prefigures the Trinity: the presence of the crucified and resurrected Christ, the reigning Father, the invisible presence of the Spirit. The Ark in the Most Holy Place was the symbol of God's throne, or his footstool on earth. In the instructions Moses received, the Ark was the first and most important part of the Tabernacle. The Hebrew word for Ark, *arown*, means chest or coffin, fittingly symbolizing Christ's death. Two angels with outspread wings adorned the cover, thus pre-figuring the resurrection where angels announced the living Christ. They are described as sitting on either side of where Christ's body had lain, almost in perfect imagery of the Mercy Seat. (John 20:12)

The invisible but powerful (somewhat frightening) Spirit accompanied the Ark. It led the people in their wilderness wanderings, opened the waters at the Jordan, and mysteriously conquered Jericho. It remained many years at Shiloh north of Jerusalem until David brought it to the city. David was terrified when he was moving it to Jerusalem and people died when they touched it or looked into it. Solomon then placed it in the Temple and it disappeared at the time of the Captivity.

Combined with imagery of God's throne in Ezekiel and Revelation, the Ark became a medieval artistic motif. The Father on the throne held Christ crucified or dying, with a small dove of the Spirit linking them; it became a symbol of the Trinity known as the Gnadenstuhl, or Mercy Seat.³ This powerful image of the Father's compassionate engagement in Christ's suffering demonstrated his love and power in the face of our pain and suffering.

We are told to come boldly to God's mercy seat, now that Christ has opened the way into God's Holy place. (Hebrews 4:16) Recognizing that every aspect of the tabernacle was intended to be a holy place and visualize God's presence with His people, we can apply the symbols to our life of prayer today. The Ark represents a place of worship, awe at God's holiness, and communion with a living Christ.

Lord, thank you for your beautiful and powerful presence. Keep our eyes open to glimpses of you as the King on your throne.

March 1
Plans for the Tabernacle — Exodus 26

John 1:14 So the Word became human and lived here on earth among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father.

The Tabernacle is an image of Christ's presence. *The Tent of God* explains:

God also had a tent, built at His own command, according to the pattern He showed to Moses on the mountain. The startling fact that the first sanctuary built by God's people was a tent is obscured for us by the translation "tabernacle," though "tent of meeting" might be a better name. Obviously, while the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, the house of God had to be movable. But here, too, there is a deeper spiritual meaning. God's tent is a symbol of His amazing love and condescension, a sign that He wished to live among His people in a house like theirs. And, even more, it is a sign that God shared the wanderings of His wayward people, for He Himself tells us that He "walked among them in a tent." Even this does not exhaust its meaning. For God continued to "walk among" His people in a tent for nearly three hundred years after the people lived in houses. When David wished to build Him a house of cedar, God replied that He would walk in a tent until His people had peace from their enemies. Thus the tent of God becomes a symbol of the fact that the journey of God's people is not solitary, nor is it purposeless. God Himself accompanies us as we travel. Indeed, He directs our journey, He creates in our hearts the wish to return to Him, and the power to travel along this otherwise quite impassable road. All of this culminates in the incarnation, when God actually *becomes* man, and walks the dusty roads of Palestine. The Old Testament ends with the amazing event of God assuming not a tent of fine embroidered linen, but the tent of human nature. "And the Word became flesh, and camped among us, and we beheld his glory."⁴

Today, each believer is metaphorically described as God's temple because the Holy Spirit is in us. It is startling to think that we are therefore the "tent of God" moving through the world.

Lord, thank you that you are in us, that you live with us. May we see your light, your love and forgiveness, your sources of nourishment, and live in your presence. We worship you as you are present to us today.

March 2
The Menorah — Exodus 27

John 8:12 Jesus spoke to the people once more and said, “I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won’t have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.”

The tabernacle lamp prefigures Christ as light of the world, burning continually. In this chapter we are introduced to the altar which we are aware symbolizes crucifixion, and to the courtyard, symbolizing a sacred space for worship. Inside the Holy Place was the lamp, along with a table for bread, and an altar with incense.

The tabernacle light was lit around 1400 BC and was part of worship until the destruction of the first temple in 586 BC. Seventy years later it shown again when the Temple was rebuilt. Another interruption is the story behind Hanukkah. Jewish priests revolted in 167 BC against Antiochus IV Epiphanes who had massacred many Jews. For eight years he forbade Jewish religious practices and ordered Zeus worship, and sent an Athenian senator to dedicate the temple to Zeus who covered the altar with prohibited offerings.

The Talmud says that after the forces of Antiochus IV had been removed from the Temple, the Jews discovered that almost all the holy oil had been profaned. They found one sealed container, enough for the Temple lamp for one day, yet it burned eight days, enough time to make more oil. Because of that, today’s Menorahs have room for the eight days of the miracle and a ninth for a candle to light the others, in contrast to the Temple candlestick of seven branches. The historian Josephus says that the restoration of sacrifices lasted eight days and was called the “Festival of Lights,” and the leaders instituted this as an annual festival. So something reminiscent of the tabernacle lamp shines in homes annually to this day.

This was called the Festival of Dedication when Christ attended and declared, “I and the Father are one.” (John 10:22,30) The instruction was that the light should be “kept burning continually”, but in 70 AD the Temple was once more destroyed. Now it is us, the people of God who are called the Temple because the Holy Spirit is in us. (I Corinthians 6:16) We are exhorted to let the light of Christ shine into the world through us. (II Corinthians 4:6,7)

Lord, we celebrate that you are the light shining in the darkness. Make us that same kind of faithful light. We praise you for the beauty of this image of the menorah that reminds us that there is a faithful witness to the light of God traced through 3,400 plus years of history!

March 3
Plans for the Priesthood — Exodus 28-29

Hebrews 2:17 Therefore, it was necessary for him to be made in every respect like us, his brothers and sisters, so that he could be our merciful and faithful High Priest before God. Then he could offer a sacrifice that would take away the sins of the people.

Christ is our high priest, and the role pre-figured him. Garments described in these chapters reflect the color, style, and artistic motifs of the Tabernacle, and the High Priest has been described as a small tabernacle carrying God's presence. Clothing added "dignity to his work." (Exodus 28:2) The clothing was to be "glorious and beautiful", something that would "distinguish" him, out of fine linen, gold, blue, purple and scarlet thread.

Names of the twelve tribes were carved in onyx on the shoulders, representing carrying these names before the Lord. (Exodus 28:12) Priests were dressed analogously to the spiritual armor of God. (Ephesians 6:10-17) The breastplate, covered with twelve jewels for each of the twelve tribes are also in Revelation as the jeweled gates of the New Jerusalem and were also very beautiful. Once again they represented carrying the names before God. The priests also had a woven belt (like the belt of truth), and a turban with a gold plate attached (like a helmet of salvation) which said "set apart as holy to the Lord."

The sacrifices for their dedication served to set them apart as well. They were to serve in a place made "holy by my glorious presence." We are also called a "kingdom of priests", (Revelation 1:6, 5:10) and so can set ourselves into the picture as well: to be dressed beautifully as righteous people, to constantly carry with us the names of those for whom we pray, to be set apart. Our calling is to live at all times as people who are holy, aware of God's glorious presence. We have a role that makes us "distinguished."

Jesus, thank you that you are our perfect high priest, interceding for us, forgiving our sins, reconciling, redeeming, and purifying us. Give us the grace to become your priests in the world.

March 4
Incense Altar — Exodus 30

Revelation 5:8 And when he took the scroll, the four living beings and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp, and they held gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of God's people.

Christ taught and modeled prayer, and incense became a symbol for prayer. “Accept my prayer as incense offered to you.” (Psalm 141:1) The explanation for the incense altar is that “I will meet with you there.” (Exodus 30:6)

In the Holy Place there were three pieces of furniture, and between them they appealed to all the senses: the light from the candlestick made it possible to see the beautifully woven curtains; the bread and drink on the table appealed to touch and taste; and the incense to the sense of smell. It also could become a cloud of smoke by adding coals, and the result simulated the Cloud of God’s presence. The incense itself was particularly and only for the tabernacle, and had a special formula and special purity. Outside was the washbasin to be clean before entering this holy place. A census tax on all men provided funds for this place of worship, and is once more called a “ransom”, reminding us that God owns our lives.

In Revelation we are told that incense represented the prayers of God’s people. That is reiterated before the incense is mixed with fire from the altar and the result is thunder, lightning and a terrible earthquake. (Revelation 8:3-5) This image of prayer as “reversed thunder” was taken by the poet George Herbert to emphasize that God honors us as active partners in the world. Our prayers matter.

This is an encouragement to me when I have been asking for things for a long time and do not see change to not give up; it is even more encouraging when I look at things that I have asked for and wonder if my requests were part of bringing it into being. Experiencing some answers has taught me to see prayer as a meaningful task as well as a way of simply enjoying quietness.

*Lord, thank you so very much for the privilege of speaking openly with you.
Thank you that you have honored us with the opportunity to make a difference
through speaking with you.*

March 5 **Creativity — Exodus 31**

Ephesians 2:10 For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

The artists, Bezalel and Oholiab, are images of Christ as an artist making us. The tabernacle/temple/people of God imagery is consistent through scripture as Christ, builder of his church. Here artists are commissioned by God’s direct selection and instruction to Moses, showing their importance. These artists were given skills as designers and the ability to teach others their crafts.

The second half of the chapter gives instructions regarding the Sabbath. Israel was given two reasons to observe this: God's rest on the seventh day after creation (Exodus 20), and the liberation from slavery. (Deuteronomy 5) The point is made that employees are to rest as well. Jewish culture benefitted from sacred time devoted to reflection on God and his commands, becoming more reflective, analytical, and ethical as a result. We are told that we should enjoy and delight in the Sabbath (Isaiah 58:13), and that we should gather in "holy assembly." (Leviticus 23:3)

The Sabbath represents God's grace which allows us to deeply rest, confident in His purposes. (Hebrews 4:9) As Paul explained in reference to festivals and the Sabbath: "For these rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ himself is the reality." But choosing to honor a weekly day of rest gives us the space for reflection, developing our relationship with God.

Art is a way of living in the image of the creator, and Sabbath rest has a beautiful side-effect of enhancing our creativity. Today we know, that no matter how minimal our talent, engagement in art gives us a sense of accomplishment, enhances brain function, increases our empathy, and is a great way to reduce stress. Art is even a great way of improving our health. Music, visual art, dance, writing, theater, even cooking—we can all benefit from choosing to try things to the glory of the greatest Artist. As Gaudi said, "The creation continues incessantly through the media of man." His complex plans for a cathedral in Barcelona continue to be carried out by artists and master craftsmen today, still in process.

Lord, I exalt you for being the God of all that is beautiful. Your glory in creation, your gifts to artists and craftsmen, your world of sound and light, all conspire together to keep us in a continuous state of delight.

March 6
Aaron — Exodus 32

Luke 13:3 "...And you will perish, too, unless you repent of your sins and turn to God."

Christ is our High Priest, a perfect one, in contrast to imperfect Aaron. Aaron started out well, helpful to Moses in his negotiations with Pharaoh, using his rod to do miracles, helping to organize the people. Things deteriorated badly at Mt. Sinai. When the people complained about Moses' long absence, Aaron made the infamous golden calf for them to worship.

Moses returned and was furious, administering a judgment of drinking "gold-water." He organized the Levites into a harsh policing role, killing 3000, and there were more deaths from plague. "Have no other gods" and "Don't make

idols” were commands numbers one and two in the list of Ten Commandments to which they had agreed, and so quickly violated.

Moses had to plead for Aaron’s life to be spared. (Deuteronomy 9:20) Despite this failure, Aaron was chosen as high priest. His blatant sin was forgiven and he was clothed with dignity, given a special role as a leader of the people. In fact, while Aaron was making the golden calf, the beautiful garments he was to wear to mediate between God and the people were being described to Moses.

This theme, the failure of human priesthood, threads through scripture as the preparation for a perfect priest. Bad priests, false prophets, arrogant warriors, and incompetent kings serve as foils for someone much better to come.

What a dramatic demonstration of God’s grace to take a failed leader who led people into idolatry and make him the primary representative of His holiness. There was no cover-up since all the people who had to acknowledge him in his new role knew about the failure. Aaron did not have an image of righteousness, but rather the reality of being forgiven.

How encouraging for us who seek to love and serve others in priestly roles of listening and focusing people on God to know that our own failures are part of the story. Honest sharing of our own woundedness and God’s healing is good—we do not need to worry about maintaining an image of super spirituality. What a relief.

Lord, thank you that knowing our failures you put clothing on us that declares we are righteous. We bless you that you are our priest, and that through your work on our behalf, we have free access to you at any time.

March 7

Grace and Forgiveness — Exodus 33-34

Ephesians 2:8-9 God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

Moses’ mediation for the people before God parallels Christ’s mediation for us. The people failed so quickly. Moses received the covenant, the people and elders ratified it, he left again, and in a little over a month they broke their agreement, and many died as a result. This story highlights the grace that was so much a part of the law since God forgave them and continued his life with them.

God’s first response was to say he would not travel with the people. Moses called for repentance and the people responded with mourning. Moses’

intimacy with God continued, and he pleaded for God to accompany them, and he asked to see God. For the seventh time he went up with the mountain, now with a replacement stone tablet, and he saw God’s glory. God responded with grace, promising to accompany the people, and then for forty days reiterated aspects of the law.

Ceasing to worship God and turning to “no-gods,” to idols, brought death. Paul points out that this is mankind’s foundational mistake: “Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn’t worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols...” (Romans 1:21-23) The story foreshadows the solution: “God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins.” (Romans 3:24) In our lives we do the same, and the result is that we end up in sin and death, and the only way back is repentance.

Lord, thank you that we do not make ourselves holy, you make us holy through your ongoing grace in our lives. It is not our diligence or hard work that makes us good people, it is your forgiving grace and kindness. Help us to keep worshipping you and rejecting those things that try to substitute themselves for you.

March 8

Details of the Tabernacle — Exodus 35

Hebrews 8:5 They serve in a system of worship that is only a copy, a shadow of the real one in heaven. For when Moses was getting ready to build the Tabernacle, God gave him this warning: “Be sure that you make everything according to the pattern I have shown you here on the mountain.”

The structure, furnishings, materials, and rituals of the tabernacle connect to Christ. For example:

Item	Symbolic Meaning	References
Gold	God’s City	Revelation 21:18-21
Silver	Redemption	Exodus 30:13-15
Brass/Bronze	Judgement	Numbers 21:9
Blue	God’s throne	Exodus 24:10
Purple	Suffering (<i>cf.</i> use during Lent)	John 19:2
Scarlet	Purification	Leviticus 14:4
Fine Linen	Righteousness	Revelation 19:8
Goats/Rams Hair	Atonement	Genesis 15:9
Wood	The cross	Historical tradition
Oil	Holy Spirit	I Samuel 16:13

Christ's work correlates to places in the tabernacle: reconciling us to God at the altar, cleansing us at the large wash basin, inviting us into his presence in the holy place with bread/light/incense, and welcoming us into the sacred throne room of the most holy place. The four sides had structural wooden supports with crossbeams covered in gold, making five crosses on each side.

Curtains were particularly beautiful. Images of angels were woven into the sheets of fine linen in blue, purple and scarlet. (Exodus 26:1) When my children were small we found instructions for making a toy tabernacle. Our process paralleled the scripture story: a set of plans, collecting materials, constructing pieces, setting it up. As we enjoyed our project, I could not help but think of the scriptural comparison the real tabernacle was a model, a miniature of heaven.

Clearly, places of worship are intended to be beautiful, and the historical church has constructed many such spaces and filled them with remarkable works of art. Our homes can also be "places of worship" with beautiful things that remind us that God is with us. We know our character is also supposed to carry God's beauty, and so proper self-care can help us to carry that inside and out.

Lord, you have put an appreciation for beauty in our hearts. We wonder about this small tent and are curious about how it connects to heaven. We know it will be more beautiful than we can imagine!

March 9

Why Repetition? — Exodus 36

Luke 2:37 She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshipping God with fasting and prayer.

Images of worshipping Christ are in the tabernacle, and the importance of worship is highlighted by repetition. Seven chapters give plans for the tabernacle, and six chapters describe building it. The sheer quantity of material should alert us to the importance of this theme for the overall story of scripture: worship in a beautiful place honors God.

Exodus has five chapters of guidelines and thirty-five chapters about relationship to God, and that proportion parallels our spiritual experience. At the beginning of the book, the people were oppressed. A Deliverer was raised up who led them through the death and resurrection of the Red Sea just as we are liberated from sin through Christ's death and resurrection. (Exodus 1-14) As the people began their lives in freedom, they were shaky complainers as we tend to be. (Exodus 15-18) Once they arrived at Mount Sinai, they had an opportunity to become grounded in God's word and to develop in their relationship with him. (Exodus 19-24)

When Moses received instructions for ongoing spiritual life in the imagery of the tabernacle—repentance, cleansing, fellowship, worship—the people could have been patient, obeying what they knew. (Exodus 25-31) Instead, they became frightened and turned to idolatry. (Exodus 32) which required repentance and God’s mercy. (Exodus 33,34) Then they turned to crafting a beautiful tabernacle construction, and dedicated priests and the place (Exodus 35-40), starting to learn a life of worship.

In this chapter we see that they showed changed hearts with generosity for this place of worship. Metalworking craftsmen, carpenters, jewelers and weavers were needed. The weavers’ work on 6 feet by 42 feet pieces could have been done in the Egyptian style of two women working on a horizontal loom. Then the embroidery of blue, purple and scarlet cherubim would result in a bright, lively design representing the angels at worship. Living among gloriously rich, bold, colorful woven goods made on backstrap looms in Guatemala, I can imagine how glorious the result would have been.

The creativity reminds me that we have a part to give and play in making things beautiful for worship, and even more fundamentally, that we are to become beautiful places of worship.

Lord, we bless you that what you want with us is a relationship uninhibited by our need to make up things about who you are. Keep us humble enough to delight in your presence, even when you seem so far away or so invisible to us. Help us take our freedom to create and to be generous in worshipping you.

March 10

Bread of the Presence — Exodus 37

Luke 22:19 Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had thanked God for it, he broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, saying, “This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

Bread in the holy place is an image of Christ’s body, and in this chapter the table for the bread is made as well as the Ark, lampstand, and incense table. The detail of making containers—bowls, ladles, jars and pitchers—for liquid offerings makes the connection to our communion in the Lord’s Supper even more clear. Later it is made explicit that this would be wine. (Exodus 37:16, also made explicit in Numbers 15)

Luci Shaw's poem, *The Partaking*, connects this holy bread, Christ, and us.

Bread of the Presence was
in Moses' day
served on engraved gold plates
to you and your select few.
And in exclusive glory
one alone and lonely man
sprinkled, with fear,
the ceremonial drops that pleaded
failure for another year
to you, known then
as only high and holy—
heavens apart
from common men.

Often we taste the
granular body of wheat
(Think of the Grain that died!)
and swallow together
the grape's warm bitter blood
(Remember First Fruit!)
knowing ourselves a part of you
as you took part
of us, flowed
in our kind of veins
quicken cells like ours
into a human subdividing.

Now you are multiplied—
we are your fingers and your feet,
your tender heart—
we are your broken side.

Take now and crumble small and
cast us
on the world's waters—
your contemporary showbread.
Feed us
to more than five thousand men
and in our dark daily flood of living
pour yourself out again!

John 6:53-56 —Luci Shaw

Jesus, we praise you that in these old symbols and stories the great plan of redemption was already in view. We praise you for the mystery that you give us life and then teach us to be given to others in life-giving ways.

March 11

Building the Tabernacle — Exodus 38

I Corinthians 3:16 Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you?

John's Gospel shows how Christ is like the tabernacle (John 1:14), including each part of it, and the verse above reminds us that his life is to have a transforming effect on us. In this chapter the fabric enclosing the space is described, and simply by setting up this boundary as they camped, this became a holy place. Similarly, Christ incarnate in human flesh became the boundary in which God was present. The remarkable thing is that we are called to become like him in this way.

***Tabernacle
furnishing***

How it is like Christ

How it changes us

Altar	Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29)	They followed Jesus. (John 1:37)
Lavar	I have been baptizing with water so that he might be revealed to Israel. (John 1:31)	“No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.” (John 3:5)
Bread	“I am the bread of life.” (John 6:35)	“Anyone who eats the bread from heaven, however, will never die.” (John 6:50)
Candlestick	“I am the light of the world.” (John 8:12)	“If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.” (John 8:12)
Incense	“Glorify your Son so he can give glory back to you.” (John 17:1)	“I have given them the glory you gave me.” (John 17:22)
Veil	He bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:30) cf. He released his spirit. At that moment the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. (Matthew 27: 50,51)	I have been crucified with Christ. (Galatians 2:20, NIV)
Mercy Seat	“I am ascending to my Father.” (John 20:17)	“My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28)

A sacred process of becoming like Christ is represented for us in this place of worship. If we follow Christ, over time it changes who we are.

Lord, thank you that you call us to deep transformation through living with you. We appreciate that this is your work and that we are responding to you. We praise you for the intimacy that you offer to us.

March 12

Holy to the Lord — Exodus 39

Hebrews 4:14 So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe.

The High Priest wore a medallion on his turban engraved “Set apart as Holy to the Lord.” Similarly, Christ said: “...the Father set me apart and sent me into the world.” (John 10:36) The priests were clothed and anointed to fulfill their role, just as Christ, Messiah, “anointed one,” was commissioned to fulfill his priestly role by the Spirit. The clothing for carrying out this office is similar to that of Christ in Revelation 1.

We can apply each aspect of the priest’s garments not only to Christ’s priesthood, but also to our own priestly role in the world.

- The rich colors—gold, blue, purple, scarlet—remind us that the care of souls is a beautiful and honored task.
- Jewels on the breastplate and the stones engraved with the names of Israel remind us of constantly carrying those we care about into God’s presence. Their beauty and value is not forgotten.
- The bells on Aaron’s garment were a musical proclamation of worship.
- The woven pomegranates symbolized life. As a Christian symbol of the resurrection, including in paintings of Christ as a child holding the fruit, they celebrate the joy of eternal life.

The high priest is the main representative, but we recall that Israel was told they would become a “kingdom of priests”, intended to carry out a reconciling role for the world. The same call is on us in the New Testament: “You are royal priests, a holy nation, God’s very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.” (I Peter 2:9)

Lord, thank you that you have called us to holiness and to priesthood. Make us a copy of you. Help us carry your message through beautiful things, the sound of music, and a celebration of life.

March 13
The Cloud of God — Exodus 40

Acts 1:9-11 After saying this, he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him. As they strained to see him rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!”

The bright cloud of God prefigures Christ’s glory. When the tabernacle was dedicated, the cloud was a sign of God’s presence. God said, “I myself am present in the cloud over the atonement cover.” (Leviticus 16:2) Earlier Moses and 70 elders climbed the mountain for a meal in God’s presence. Then “the glory of the Lord settled down on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days. On the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from inside the cloud. To the Israelites at the foot of the mountain, the glory of the Lord appeared at the summit like a consuming fire.” (Exodus 24:16,17)

Christ’s ascension, the second coming, and the transfiguration connect His glory with clouds. The disciples saw Moses, Elijah, and Christ together. At that time “a bright cloud came over them, and a voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with him. Listen to him.’ The disciples were terrified and fell face down on the ground.” (Matthew 17:5,6)

Most of the chapter consists of the human interacting with divine instruction to set up the space to be ready to receive God’s glory. Once the glory has become part of the space, its movement then serves to guide them whether to go or to stay. For us, the analogy is that as the “temple” of God, we are to be filled with his glory. This first happened with the filling of the Holy Spirit first described in Acts 2 that gives the glory of God in the form of tongues of fire. From that time on, the Spirit within them guided them, just as He does for us today.

The first time I understood about being “filled with the Spirit” was in college, and the experiences of that time have remained with me for life. If this is unfamiliar, it is good to read Acts to see the examples, to ask for the Spirit to fill us as Christ encouraged us to do, (Luke 11:13) or to ask for prayer from another. This can be transformative.

Thank you, Lord, that you give us your glory in the form of the Holy Spirit within us, conforming us to your will, and giving us power beyond our own.

March 14

Broken Body — Leviticus 1-3

Matthew 26:26 As they were eating, Jesus took some bread and blessed it. Then he broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, saying, “Take this and eat it, for this is my body.”

Christ compared his broken body to the grain offerings which were part of many centuries of the sacrificial system. He compared his blood to the blood that was used as way a cleansing people to be able to enter into God’s presence in worship. In this chapter we read the details of how the animals were cut apart and how bodies were torn before they were consumed in fire. In the same way, the crucifixion was an excruciating tearing apart of the body.

From these chapters we see that there is not just one meaning to sacrifice, but that there are many nuances: a gift, the giving of a life to sustain us, a substitute for us as sinners, eating together in peace, the reconciled community, and others. The first three offerings show us different aspects of the crucifixion:

<i>Whole burnt offering</i>	Christ gave himself to us in the death on the cross.
<i>Grain offering</i>	Christ offered his body broken for us.
<i>Peace offering</i>	Christ created a communion meal that brings peace.

These chapters offer detailed instructions to priests regarding how to do their jobs, and so is a notoriously dull and off-putting part of scripture. It is repetitive, and it is fair to skim. But it also provides occasion for meditation on Christ’s body broken for us, and our frequent remembrance of this in the Eucharistic meal. We cannot meditate enough on the crucifixion and resurrection and its implication for our lives that are to be made like Christ, even in those things.

Lord, thank you that the mysterious effect of the cross is that you have covered our sins, served as a substitute, and invited us into a reconciled and restored relationship with you.

March 15

Crown of Thorns—Leviticus 4-6

Matthew 26:28 For this is my blood, which confirms the covenant between God and his people. It is poured out as a sacrifice to forgive the sins of many.

Christ made the comparison between his own blood and the sacrifices explained here. As sacrifice, Christ's blood is poured out and by being taken into the Most Holy Place, it opens the way for us to be reconciled to God.

Christ's back was scourged with a lead-tipped whip, which resulted in profuse bleeding. Also, since blood vessels are close to the surface, scalp wounds bleed profusely, and the crown of thorns would have resulted in great quantities of blood on his face and body. I was made aware of this by a friend who had two small cuts on her forehead as a result of an accident and blood gushed down her face and covered her blouse. She said this transformed her image of Christ in the crucifixion.

In these chapters there is an emphasis on how sin is covered and cleansed by sacrifice:

Absolution offering or sin offering — Unintentional sins are completely cleansed.
Compensation offering or guilt offering — Reconciliation with others.

Centuries of symbolic theater built an understanding of forgiveness of sin. At the right time, Christ came and fulfilled every aspect of this imagery, so we come to him in prayer and accept once more the completeness of his sacrifice. Anything we have done wrong can be transformed, and holding on to self-criticism is made pointless.

Lord, thank you that your forgiveness and removal of sins is comprehensive. There is no aspect of our failures that cannot be transformed, and we thank you for that. We are so happy you have welcomed us into communion with you.

March 16

The Third Day — Leviticus 7

Luke 24:45-46 Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. And he said, "Yes, it was written long ago that the Messiah would suffer and die and rise from the dead on the third day."

The connection Christ made to a scriptural prediction that he would rise on the third day is not explicit in a particular prophecy. However, it occurs symbolically in the sacrificial system, and symbolically in many stories. For example, it was on the third day after Passover that the Israelites were completely delivered from Pharaoh. (Exodus 14:5)

Sacrifices were not to be used after the third day—they were obsolete. While this brings to mind a practical avoidance of food poisoning in a time without refrigeration, it symbolically brings to mind the end of all sacrifices by Christ's resurrection on the third day. (Leviticus 7:17,18 repeated in Leviticus 19:6,7)

Forty years after Christ's death, the Temple was destroyed and the sacrificial system came to an end. Without a tabernacle or Temple these laws could not literally be carried out, and Judaism adapted to that reality, making these symbols of spiritual realities. From the New Testament we see that we are to offer our own bodies as a living sacrifice. (Romans 12:1) We are crucified with Christ and now live in his resurrection life. (Galatians 2:2)

On a practical level, what does it mean to me to live as one sacrificed and resurrected? In the New Testament we are warned that on-going suffering to be part of redemption is to be expected. Mourning with those who mourn. Caring for those who hurt. When we mourn and hurt, still hungering for righteousness.

Lord, thank you that because you raised from the dead and you live in me, I am filled with life and power that comes from you.

March 17

Image of the Priest — Leviticus 8-9

Hebrews 8:6 But now Jesus, our High Priest, has been given a ministry that is far superior to the old priesthood, for he is the one who mediates for us a far better covenant with God, based on better promises.

Aaron became the first high priest, and Hebrews tells us that though Christ has this same role, it is far higher and better since it involves going into heaven itself.

It is in John's gospel that we see Christ presented to us as a priest. There is no birth story, but the identity of Christ with God the creator is followed by the announcement that he is like a tabernacle among the people, the place where priests brought people into relationship with God. In John there are more stories and events centered in the Temple than in the other gospels, and in the passion narratives we have the most references to the fact that these events are occurring at Passover, the time of the sacrifice of the lamb.

In John Christ gave them the priestly role of offering forgiveness as bearers of God's presence: "Again he said, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.' Then he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'" (John 20:21-23)

In our taking up our roles as priests in the world, listening to the confessions of others and sharing the forgiveness of Christ is part of our ministry. The listener role needed in the world is infinite—we can be priests almost anytime and anywhere if we remember that.

Lord, thank you for your mediating work for us, for taking on all the roles of teaching, healing, praying, making holy, that are part of the priesthood. Thank you for giving us in turn the immense privilege of being your priests in our world.

March 18

Priests who Failed — Leviticus 10

Matthew 3:11 “I baptize with water those who repent of their sins and turn to God. But someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not worthy even to be his slave and carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

Disobedient priests contrast with Christ, the perfectly obedient priest. Aaron and his sons were formally ordained as priests in the planned ceremony, and on the eighth day, they began their work. When Moses and Aaron entered the tabernacle, God’s glorious presence appeared, and fire burned the offering. The people shouted with joy.

As we have seen, Aaron became high priest despite his failings, and his sons were made part of his team. Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, also failed and in this case, died for their failure. They deviated from instructions, using incense that older translations call “strange fire,” and were killed by fire.

Moses quoted God to Aaron: “I will show myself holy among those who are near me. I will be glorified among the people.” Aaron had no response. God’s holiness which He gives to others is a major scriptural theme. “Holy” occurs 639 times in scripture, 71 times in this book. “You must be holy, because I the Lord your God, am holy” is repeated three times. (Leviticus 11:45, 19:1, 21:26)

Into the Holy Place and a Most Holy Place, Leviticus introduces holy sacrifices, holy bread, holy offerings, a holy priesthood, and holy garments. They are made holy through anointing oil (representing the Spirit), and blood (representing Christ’s redemption). We are told that God makes places, things, and people holy. (Leviticus 21:23, 21:9, 16, 22:32) There are therefore in addition, holy days, holy years and holy gifts, including people, land, and animals.

This story warns us not to tamper with what is holy, but to humbly recognize God’s holiness in our world, and to seek to become holy ourselves through the work of Christ and the Spirit. Here God’s holiness was supposed to attach to these priests, but because of their careless attitude, the holiness destroyed them. This is an important lesson for any Christian leader who gains prominence and then becomes careless or compromised, and unfortunately, it is part of our world today.

Lord, thank you that you have given us your love, your grace, and yet you do not overlook religious fakery. Keep us real. We praise you for the gift of the Holy

Spirit. May we recognize that He acts in the world, and that it is wrong for us ever to perform and put on an act with a pretense of spiritual power.

March 19

Eating right — Leviticus 11

Matthew 15: 10,11 Then Jesus called to the crowds and said, “Listen to what I say and try to understand. You are not defiled by what you eat; you are defiled by what you say and do.”

Christ took the dietary system and transfigured it into the spiritual ways we defile ourselves in what we say and do. He explained that “evil words come from an evil heart and defile the person who says them.” (Matthew 15:18) With this instruction he transfigured rules about food into the call to holiness they always symbolized.

The same principle received emphasis for the apostle Peter in a vision of unclean animals which applied to breaking down the barrier with Gentiles. (Acts 10) Christ’s redemption of all superseded the past.

If you look at the food list you will see, that with the exception of pork and some shellfish, our culture tends to agree with what one does not eat. Refrigeration has made these things safer, but disease is still possible.

Good nutrition teaches us how to eat. Unfortunately, we can become legalistic or rebel against what we knew is best for good health. The principle “whatever you eat or drink, do all to the glory of God” (I Corinthians 10:31) makes sense. Rachel Stone wrote *Eat with Joy: Redeeming God’s Gift of Food*⁵ which beautifully addresses many of the complexes we currently have around food. We can learn to receive food as God’s good gift, bless others with it, and celebrate community life through food.

In our time there is so much information available on healthy lifestyles, including exercise, reducing stress and a good diet, that with God’s help we can do this!

Lord, help me to live my life in ways that honor you. May my habits regarding food, exercise, sleep, and stress management all be something I consciously ask for your help in carrying out. Give me the grace to correct anything that is not as it should be. Thank you that your love for me does not depend on living up to standards of excellence but is an impetus to honor you with my body.

March 20

Purification after Birth — Leviticus 12

Luke 2:27-32 So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying, "Lord, now I can die in peace! As you promised me, I have seen the Savior you have given to all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel."

Christ's parents fulfilled the post-birth requirements laid out in this chapter. After circumcision on the eighth day, the family went to the Temple on the fortieth day and took a purification offering. In this context we have the encounter of Jesus with two prophets who recognized him as Messiah, Simeon and Anna, both deeply spiritual people.

Simeon, a man wise and old,
Heard from God of Israel's release
And at the temple found a child to hold.

"Lord, now I can die in peace,
I've seen the Savior, your light to all.
Let Israel's glory now increase."

He blessed the parents and the child so small
"To some this child will be their greatest joy.
Others will reject him and will fall."

"Mary, don't let your pain destroy,
Though a sword will pierce your very soul
As you see what happens to your boy."

He heard from God and understood.
Like him I wish to hear God's voice
And be one who lives in His good.

Christ has come and we can now rejoice,
By God's grace, this is our holy choice.

Thank you for being a humble child in a family that sought to follow Your ways. You are my greatest joy. You are the one who fulfills all things, the one who delivers and glorifies people from all nations. Thank you that you are my light.

March 21

Leprosy Healed — Leviticus 13

Luke 5:12-13 In one of the villages, Jesus met a man with an advanced case of leprosy. When the man saw Jesus, he fell to the ground, face down in the dust, begging to be healed. "Lord," he said, "if you want to, you can make me well again." Jesus reached out and touched the man. "I want to," he said, "Be healed!" And instantly the leprosy disappeared.

Leprosy symbolizes sin, and Christ heals both the physical and spiritual disease. In His healing ministry He told lepers to go to the priest who served as a medical inspector. The first step was one-on-one interaction between the priest and the patient. The second step was a week of personal reflection and solitude for the healed person, much like a retreat. The final step was reintegration to the worship patterns of the community.

Healing leprosy is an accomplishment of our lifetime. For thousands of years this bacteria-caused disease was incurable. Even in 1950 when Mother Teresa began her work in India, leprosy was widespread, and she built leper cities. Multi-Drug-Therapy began in the early 1980s, and patients could be treated over a twelve-month period. Now there is a single dose treatment. In the past 20 years 15 million people have been cured.

For us, the instruction on how to be cured from the difficulties of spiritual, emotional, and physical illnesses can be practical. The wisdom of a counselor who can listen and advise, learning to enter into prayer in our solitude, and finding the loving support of a community are all integral to our healing. I can attest that each of these were important to alleviate my own depression, the depression of someone close to me, and now are part of how I advise those who ask me to serve as their counselor.

Thank you Lord for the gift of healing through modern science. We bless you for this amazing gift that our bodies can be repaired. We acknowledge that you have the power to heal and praise you for it.

March 22

The Healing Process—Leviticus 14

Matthew 8:4 Then Jesus said to him, “Don’t tell anyone about this. Instead, go to the priest and let him examine you. Take along the offering required in the law of Moses for those who have been healed of leprosy. This will be a public testimony that you have been cleansed.”

Christ affirmed the process outlined in this chapter to prove the cure. It is possible to see in these steps some possible analogies to the spiritual cure from sin that Christ provides us.

Details of the Leprosy Ritual

Steps of the ritual in Leviticus 14

1— A one-on-one process

Brought to the priest
Priest goes outside of the camp
Look for healing
Take two birds
— take cedarwood
— take scarlet
— take hyssop
Kill one bird in an earthen vessel
Over running water
Living bird dipped in blood
Cedar wood, scarlet and hyssop
Sprinkle seven times on the leper
Pronounce clean
Let living bird loose

Wash clothes
Shave all hair
Wash body in water

2— Personal process

Seven days outside tent
Shave hair on seventh day
Wash clothes
Wash body
On the eighth day take two lambs
Flour for meal offering
One log of oil

3— In Community

Presented at tabernacle door
One lamb as a trespass offering
Blood on the ear
Blood on thumb
Blood on toe
Oil sprinkled seven times
Oil on ear, thumb, toe, head
Make a sin offering of lamb (or bird)
Make a burnt offering (bird if poor)
Make atonement
He shall be clean

Possible equivalents to Christ

Brought to Christ through pastoral care
Christ/pastor enter into the isolation
Do a reality check on whether ill or well
Dual nature of Christ: divine and human
— Christ's cross
— take "sins as scarlet"
— vinegar given on cross
Sin removed by Christ crucified
In the presence of the Spirit
Purified by Christ's blood
Same symbolism as above
Effect of Christ's death perfectly applied
Forgiveness of our sins
We are raised to new life as
"new creatures in Christ"
Clothed with salvation
More purification
Baptism

Prayer, reflection, seeing old friends
More humbling
Purification
Washed with the Word
Sacrifice, dedication, praise
Eucharist, bread of life, God's word
The Holy Spirit

Brought into community
Public acknowledgment of sins forgiven
Consecrating our spiritual hearing
Consecrating our activities
Consecrating where we go
Perfect filling of the Spirit
Consecrated in the Spirit
Prayer for deliverance from temptation
Dedication to God's will; Worship
Under Christ's forgiveness
Walking in the Spirit

This is a drawn out spiritual process to make profound changes, and it perhaps serves as a lesson that we also must expect our spiritual purification and transformation to be a process. There are deep places in us that have been affected by the disease of sin, and it takes time and effort for the healing needed.

Lord, thank you for pastoral care, for the opportunity to pray on our own, and for the opportunity to pray in community. Thank you that all of these things contribute to our healing.

March 23
Washing — Leviticus 15

John 13: 8 “But if I don’t wash you, you won’t belong to me.”

Cleansing from contamination on a physical level parallels the cleansing Christ brings on a spiritual level. In this chapter “wash clothes” and “bathe” are each repeated eight times.

Hand-washing is nowhere in the Torah, and it had become ritualized in Pharisaic Judaism as an extension of the commands here. Jesus challenged this by saying “eating with unwashed hands could not defile you and make you unacceptable to God.” (Matthew 15:20) Nevertheless, there was something deeply right about the culture of cleanliness that the Law helped create.

Washing clothes and bathing, cleaning linens, cleaning the house, and even washing hands are necessary for good health. World Health Organization campaigns encourage hand-washing, finding that it eliminates many diseases, and has more impact than many more complex health interventions. Keeping our homes, our clothes, ourselves, our hair, our teeth, our dishes, and our possessions clean is an image of order that coordinates with the holiness to which we are called. John Wesley coined the phrase, “Cleanliness is indeed next to godliness.”

Brother Lawrence, the medieval monastic whose advice in *The Practice of the Presence of God*⁶ is so wise, had it right: “Lord of all pots and pans and things, make me a saint by getting meals and washing up the plates!”

On the eighth day, once cleansed, people brought an offering to show their purification. “Eighth day” is repeated nine times in the book and marks the same day the Resurrected Christ appeared to his disciples. Each reference completes a call to holiness, prefiguring resurrection. In addition to purification, priests began their work, children were marked as part of the community, healing was demonstrated, celebration was completed, and rest was complete.

For us also, the “eighth day,” Christ’s resurrection, inaugurates a new, pure life. When we fail, we return to it once more, asking for cleansing and a fresh start. How grateful I am that this is always available to us, all of the time.

Lord, help us to see the spirituality in washing dishes, doing laundry, taking care of ourselves, cleaning our houses. Help us to be like Brother Lawrence and do every small and trivial task, conscious of your presence, offering these things to you for your glory. Thank you that we can look forward to perfect purification thanks to your redemptive work.

March 24

Yom Kippur — Leviticus 16

II Corinthians 5:21 For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.

Details of the holy day Yom Kippur symbolizes Christ’s death and our resulting freedom from sin. On this day the High Priest entered the Most Holy Place. Hebrews explains: “But only the high priest goes into the Most Holy Place, and only once a year, and always with blood, which he offers to God to cover his own sins and the sins the people have committed in ignorance. By these regulations the Holy Spirit revealed that the Most Holy Place was not open to the people as long as the first room and the entire system it represents were still in use.” (Hebrews 9:7,8)

After temple sacrifices ceased and the ceremony could no longer be carried out, Yom Kippur became a day of prayer and fasting, actually preceded by ten days of repentance beginning with Rosh Hashanah. This is how most Jews observe this holiday in our time. Music for the service includes the *Kol Nidrei*. Max Bruch wrote a particularly beautiful cello/piano version. Beethoven used the theme in his Quartet in C Sharp Minor. Another song from this 10-day period is the *Avina Malkeinu*, a beautiful prayer.

I am struck by the humility of an annual corporate day of repentance, a time of recognizing that no matter how much we desire to follow God, we so often fall short. Our American style optimistic “God is on my side” Christianity perhaps needs some balance with the humble recognition that we are not always on His side, even when we vociferously suppose that is so. Our corporate life would doubtless benefit from more poverty of spirit. May it be so.

Our Father, Our King, be gracious and answer our prayers, for we have little to commend us. Deal kindly and gently with us and save our people. Hear our prayer. We have sinned before Thee. Have compassion upon us and upon our children. Help us bring an end to pestilence, war, and famine. Cause all hate and oppression to vanish from the earth. Inscribe us for blessing in the Book of Life. Let this New Year be a good year.

March 25
Life — Leviticus 17

Matthew 26:28 For this is my blood, which confirms the covenant between God and his people. It is poured out as a sacrifice to forgive the sins of many.

Christ, in instituting the new covenant, clearly links his own blood to the blood of sacrifices for forgiveness of sins. Blood is an important theme in scripture, occurring 277 times with 71 instances in the New Testament. Leviticus outstrips other books with 58 references.

Blood was not to be drunk from animals as a sign of respect for life. In contrast we must symbolically drink Christ's blood to receive his life. When Christ said this his disciples responded, "This is very hard to understand. How can anyone accept it?" (John 6:60) Christ acknowledged that they were offended, and it sounds strange to us as well. The metaphor of his death being the means of our life is made very clear by the metaphor of life in the blood. Sacrifices were not to be eaten on the third day (Leviticus 7:17,18; Leviticus 19:7,8) fitting symbolism of resurrection day.

Science tells us that blood carries necessary nutrients and oxygen to cells, removes waste, fight infections, carries messages about damaged tissue, transports hormones. It regulates body temperature, which, if too cold or too hot, causes death. With five liters of blood in adult bodies, the loss of two liters brings death. In by-pass or transplant surgery blood is temporarily diverted and does not flow to the heart which becomes dull and inert. Restoring blood, the muscle contracts, beats, and keeps us alive. Life really is in the blood.

The imagery in the Levitical sacrifices was that the blood served as a way of cleansing the people to make them able to stand fearlessly before a holy God. We have that same image in Christ's blood cleaning us up and allowing us a place before God, making us holy. A continuing return to this, daily even, changes who we are.

Lord, thank you that you are a God of life, cleansing and holiness. Thank you for the complexity of our bodies. Give us a reverence for life, and an appreciation of the mechanisms that keep us alive. Help us appreciate the vividness of comparing our spiritual life to the blood that keeps us alive today.

March 26
Sexual conduct — Leviticus 18

Matthew 5:8 God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God.

In this chapter we see that violated sexual boundaries can be redeemed in Christ. A litany of inappropriate sexual relations reminds us of Christ's ancestors and other heroes of the faith.

- Abraham married his half-sister Sarah, a forbidden relationship (18:9)
- The relationship between Judah and Tamar, his daughter-in-law, is defined as wrong but is part of the line of Christ. (18:15)
- Jacob is the classic example of the rivalry that comes from marrying two sisters. Wrong, but also in the line of Christ. (18:18)
- King David committed adultery with his friend's wife, Bathsheba, and yet their child was in Christ's line. (18:20)

Christ redeems every one of these boundary violations in his incarnation.

Other prominent violations include:

- Moses' parents crossing a line, since his mother was her husband's aunt. (Exodus 6:20, Leviticus 18:12)
- Lot had incestuous relations with his daughters, also forbidden. (Leviticus 18:17)

Our culture accepts these boundaries but is debating homosexuality. The relationship is forbidden here (Leviticus 18:22), mentioned four more times (Leviticus 20:13, Romans 1:26,27, I Corinthians 6:9, I Timothy 1:10), and occurs in two stories. (Genesis 19, Judges 19) Perhaps the lesson of boundary breaking in the line of Christ is that sexuality must be dealt with in charity.

A wise book on this regarding homosexuality in our time is:

*Love is an Orientation: Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community.*⁷

Characters with multiple wives loved God. However, Christ affirmed the ideal: "God's plan was seen from the beginning of creation, for 'He made them male and female.' This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are untied into one." (Mark 10:6-8)

Sexuality has enough pitfalls that it can be a troubled area in our lives, and so needs the wisdom, grace, and kindness that are in Christ. We have slowly learned to be less judgmental about divorce, or even adultery, while perhaps being unhappy about the problem, but caring about the people involved. It is an area where it is so easy to feel condemned or to be condemning of others, and therefore important to remember redemption.

Lord, thank you that you are in charge of our sexuality. Help us to honor you with our attitudes and practices, no matter what our marital state. Give us compassion for ourselves or others who are engaged in struggles with sexuality, and seek help with humility.

March 27

Love your Neighbor — Leviticus 19

Matthew 22:36-40 “Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?” Jesus replied, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: “Love your neighbor as yourself. The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.”

Christ’s call to love God and neighbor summarize the teaching of this chapter which contains the line “love your neighbor as yourself.” (19:18) Practical details on how to love your neighbor include: judging them fairly, not showing preference for rich or poor, not gossiping, not getting ahead at your neighbor’s expense, not nursing hatred in your heart, confronting wrong directly, and never seeking revenge.

Rabbi Simlai in the 3rd century compiled a list of 613 laws from the Torah. Maimonides in the 12th century codified a standard list. At least 134 of these rules are things that Christians still must do, such as loving and worshiping God. Another 56 are good principles that seem valid to us today in our social life. Another 303 are fulfilled by Jesus in his death and resurrection. The other 120 laws seem culturally conditioned to the time of Israel as a nation, though we can find analogies for our actions today. This chapter has examples of all of these categories.

Christ made it clear in the scripture above that the overarching principle for all of these requirements is love for God and love for neighbor. We Christians are not “off the hook” as far as needing to show that love, and the principles in the law can help guide us to see what the loving course of action might be.

Christ, thank you that you are the fulfillment of every aspect of the Law, and that you fulfill its call to love God and neighbor through your Holy Spirit in our lives. We praise you that we are not expected to be obedient without your help.

March 28

The death penalty — Leviticus 20

I Peter 3:18 Christ also suffered when he died for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners that he might bring us safely home to God. He suffered physical death, but he was raised to life in the Spirit.

The death penalty reflects Christ’s cross, and the judgment we are under for sin. The Ten Commandments are followed by further exposition of the details of the law, many of which are a form of restitution. For lying or bearing false

witness, the correction is to tell the truth. For stealing, it is to give back the stolen article plus two to five times its value. Other sins are liable to death—idolatry, dishonoring God, dishonoring parents, adultery, murder. The death penalty was carried out for blasphemy, (Numbers 24:10-23) and Sabbath-breaking. (Numbers 15:32-36)

Religious leaders used these precedents to accuse Christ (falsely) of blasphemy and Sabbath-breaking as the reason he deserved the death-penalty. In contrast, we are reminded of Christ's mercy on the woman brought to him when caught in adultery. (John 8) The leaders wanted him to condone the death penalty, but instead he challenged their right as sinful people to impose it.

As a result of Christ's example, the early church opposed the death penalty. In our time movements against this have made the compelling argument that we have too often erroneously condemned people to death, and numerous exonerations have rescued death row inmates. In desiring justice and mercy, may we err on the side of mercy.

Lord, thank you that because of your death, we are not subject to death for our sins, but can ask for your forgiveness. We praise you that you are a God of life, and we celebrate the life you have given us today.

March 29
Priesthood — Leviticus 21,22

Revelation 5:10 "And you have caused them to become a Kingdom of priests for our God. And they will reign on the earth."

The priesthood in Israel prefigured Christ's priestly role. The thread of Kingdom imagery and expectation is reinforced here and connects to the first question for Moses at Mount Sinai: are the people willing to become a kingdom of priests?

The chapters on priestly responsibility remind us that the people are all to take on this role and life of holiness, even if certain ones are selected for the tasks to be done. Included in the instructions are the things a priest needs: robes of righteousness, cleansing by the blood (of Christ), anointing of oil (the Holy Spirit), and consecration to a life of service.

Christ acknowledged his own priestly role. The prayer He taught begins "Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed by thy name" which he may have drawn from this: "Neither shall ye profane my holy name; but I will be hallowed among the children of Israel: I am the Lord which hallows you." (Leviticus 22:32 KJV)

The priests were to be people in whom heaven and earth met, and who could thereby connect people to heaven. We also have this same mysterious role, and as the nature of Christ grows in us through the work of the Spirit, hopefully all our interactions advance this connection between heaven and earth. A continuous return to holiness is required.

Lord, give us the holiness and the ministry of priests. May we truly be open to hearing the sacred secrets of others with great love. We praise you that you are the perfect listener and hear our prayers. We praise you for your holiness.

March 30

Celebrations — Leviticus 23

24:27 Then Jesus quoted passages from the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining what all the Scriptures said about himself.

A current part of Jewish culture, each of the annual celebrations reflect an important aspect of Christ's life:

Pesach—Passover: The details of the celebration beautifully describe sacrifice, liberation and victory over evil in the cross and resurrection.
(I Corinthians 5:6-8)

Feast of Unleavened Bread—Christ equated unleavened bread with pure teaching. (Matthew 16) A theme of purification thus surrounds Passover (crucifixion) and First Fruits (resurrection) for a symbolic seven days.

Sfirat Haomer—On the day after the Sabbath in Passover week, they lifted up newly harvested grain. This serves as a fitting image for resurrection as does the name Early First Fruits and the timing, Sunday after the passion. (I Corinthians 15:20-23)

Shavuot—Latter First Fruits: Pentecost, 50 days after the resurrection celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:1-5,12)

Rosh HaShanah—New Year comes in the 7th month, in September or October. Perhaps the time of the start of Jesus' ministry, that included a call to repentance. The sound of the trumpet reminds us of the return of Christ. (I Thessalonians 4:16-28)

Yom Kippur—Day of Atonement: The most holy day 10 days after Rosh HaShanah. The high priest entered the Holy of Holies to make atonement prefiguring both the crucifixion and final judgment. Today this is a day of fasting and repentance.

Sukkot—Feast of Tabernacles: Eight days of camping out recall the wilderness journey and celebrate the fall harvest in October. Some think that this may be the time of Christ's birth. Candlelight in the valley of Jerusalem sounds beautiful.

There are rich reflections on these feasts connecting them to Christ and the New Testament in Rabbi Barney Kasdan's book, *God's Appointed Times*.⁸ The corporate experience of these celebrations was, and continues to be integral to the religious experience of the faithful. For Christians, Christmas and Easter have become our central celebrations, but I have derived great pleasure and insight from the opportunity to be part of Messianic Jewish celebrations of these festivals and highly recommend seeking out such opportunities.

Thank you Lord for all of our celebrations that remind us of your birth, your death, your resurrection. Thank you that you made these symbolic community events to help us know you on a deeper level. We celebrate with you!

March 31

The Blasphemer — Leviticus 24

Matthew 26:65,66 Then the high priest tore his clothing to show his horror and said, "Blasphemy! Why do we need other witnesses? You have all heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?" "Guilty!" they shouted. "He deserves to die!"

In this chapter the determination is made that blasphemy is worthy of death, and the penalty is carried out. It is this precedent that was used as a means of condemning Christ to death. Christ was repeatedly accused of blasphemy: for forgiving sins, since the implication was that he was God (Matthew 9:3), and for claiming to be the Messiah as proven by his miracles. (John 10:24-38) He was condemned to death by claiming that he would be the Son of Man at God's right hand with the consequent outburst in the passage above.

Christ also referred back to this chapter (vs. 20) when he said: "You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. Give to those who ask, and don't turn away from those who want to borrow." (Matthew 5:38-42) His kingdom demand is for us to be willing to suffer rather than obtain justice.

Earlier in the chapter we see candlelight and bread, images that Christ applied to himself. The lamp in the tabernacle it to be alight at all times, and the bread is to be continually renewed and eaten by the priests. Christ's opponents could not see that He was the Messiah, the fulfillment of the images of light and bread, and therefore they were the ones guilty of blasphemy, accusing Him falsely. We are ever in danger of "not seeing Him" in our lives and, even as believers, dare we say it, thereby teeter into blasphemy.

Lord, keep us from falsely accusing you of not caring about us, falsely accusing others, and make us people of mercy who do not demand justice for ourselves.

April 1

Economics — Leviticus 25

Luke 6:20-21 Then Jesus turned to his disciples and said, “God blesses you who are poor, for the Kingdom of God is given to you. God blesses you who are hungry now, for you will be satisfied. God blesses you who weep now, for the time will come when you will laugh with joy.

The call to economic justice is part of the Kingdom of God where Christ reigns and everyone flourishes. Through tithes for those who have become poor all needs are met. The system included the year of Jubilee every Sabbath of Sabbaths (49 years) when slaves were freed, debts were forgiven, and land was returned to the original owners. Jesus’ first sermon drew on Isaiah’s Messianic prophecy of freeing the oppressed, and bringing the year of Jubilee. (Luke 4) He identified this as his work, and His radical economic vision included His own example of owning nothing.

The Sabbath was an important part of the system as a reminder that all we have comes from God, that we are to rest, relax and trust His provision. Every seven years a Sabbatical allowed Israelites additional rest and reflectivity. Ideally, everyone was to be middle-class, with their own property, freedom to do their own work, and generous when crisis affected someone in their community.

Today it is easy to give money to great causes, and share time and money with those living on the edge. Creative simple living enables us to share more generously, and so become more like Christ. Today we Christians better understand that sharing poverty is cross-bearing work that extends the Kingdom.

Lord, please bless every loving effort that is taking place in our world today to alleviate poverty, to bring opportunity, to create more economic justice. We thank you that you showed particular love for people who were poor in your ministry. We exalt you that you identified with people who are poor, becoming one of us.

April 2

Blessing or Cursing — Leviticus 26

Galatians 3:13 But Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing.

Christ brings blessing to us, particularly that of God's presence. In this set of promises the blessings include agricultural abundance, births, and peace.

In contrast, the curses are prophesied for not listening and obeying God and fulfilling his desire to bless the world through Israel by making them a "kingdom of priests." The six escalating curses in this chapter accurately describe Israel's history from the time of the divided Kingdom when idolatrous worship was institutionalized until the exile and return. It begins with terror and political instability, then drought, wild animals killing children, famine, cannibalism, destruction and exile and suffering in exile. Elijah, for example, proclaimed drought. Wild animals, famine and cannibalism occurred in the time of Elisha. These were signs, specific incidents to sound a warning and call people back to God.

Moses repeated the theme of falling under curses for turning from God. (Deuteronomy 28:29) In the promised land Joshua read the law including all the blessings and curses and the people recommitted themselves to obedience. (Joshua 8:34) After the return from exile the people resolved to accept God's curse if they failed to obey. (Nehemiah 10: 29)

God knew that if they failed, He would come and transfigure the story by taking the curses on Himself at the climactic moment, which the passage above says that He did on the cross. Because the final promise, the seventh step, is of repentance, return and blessing, something that occurred to some extent under Ezra and Nehemiah when they led people back to the land after the exile. More fundamentally, Christ did this and removed curses.

In Christ we are called to love, even our enemies, and we are exhorted to bless, not to curse, those who harm us. (Romans 12:14, I Corinthians 4:12, James 3:9) In the end: "No longer will there be a curse upon anything. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants will worship him." (Revelation 22:3) Those who live in the Kingdom now are not only part of blessing the world, suffering has a new meaning: it is part of obedience that is transforming the world, not the result of a curse.

Lord, thank you that you give blessing and remove curses.

April 3
Redemption — Leviticus 27

Matthew 27:9 This fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah that says, "They took the thirty pieces of silver—the price at which he was valued by the people of Israel."

Christ was dedicated to God, just as people, animals, and land could be dedicated. The result could be death, priesthood, or a redemption payment each of which foreshadows His life. The firstborn had to be redeemed. The values in silver were: 50 for a man, 30 for a woman, 20 for a boy, 10 for a girl, 5 for a baby boy, 3 for a baby girl, 15 for a man over 60, 10 for a woman over 60. Lawsuits today make similar calculations for loss of earnings due to death or injury.

Christ's redemption value at his betrayal was that of a woman or slave. (Exodus 22:32) He fulfilled a prophecy: "A person specially set apart by the Lord for destruction cannot be redeemed. Such a person must be put to death." (Leviticus 27:29) Paul told us that all we have belong to God: "for God bought you with a high price." (I Corinthians 6:20) Symbolically, any of us can dedicate our lives and our possessions to God at any point in our lives, and more than once.

Before reading Barney Kasdan's book⁹, I did not know that the ceremony of the redemption of firstborn sons is still observed among Jews, including in Messianic congregations where its connection to Christ as our redeemer is made explicit. Called *Pidyon Ha'ben*, it occurs a month after the birth, and money is given to someone from the priestly line. With godparents present and prayers made, it is a service of dedication of the child.

As far as commitment to the point of death, estimates go as high as 70 million martyrs in history following Christ. Even if we live a comfortable relatively easy life, the idea is that our commitment is to be as intense as that of one willing to die. This gives us a motivation to take any suffering in our life and ask that it be used to bring the Kingdom in some way, thus giving it a meaning and purpose it would otherwise not have.

Lord, accept the offering of ourselves, our lives, and all of our things. Use all of them how you think best. Your gifts are good, and we thank you for every item.

April 4

Organizing the people — Numbers 1-4

Ephesians 2:20 Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself.

Christ organized twelve followers. In this portion twelve tribes of Israel are assigned a location in the camp, given a marching sequence, and fighting men are counted.

Mundane details for organizing a large group has been replicated in church, government and business. Structure, formalism, hierarchy and physical plans

can become dull. Revival moments often return to Christ's simple personal community relationships.

The tabernacle, centrally located, had Levites close at hand to care for it. In addition to details of how to respectfully move sacred things, we are told that all Levites belonged to God and served as redemption for firstborn sons. The other tribes surrounded this center with one tribe on each side serving as leader for a march.

Tribal government worked for Israel for about 500 years, longer than our own social experiment with democracy in the United States. They then introduced a stronger executive position—the king—still under the Law, and still relying on tribal leaders.

Tribes marched under family flags and this group experience became an important part of Israel's identity at this time.. Perhaps the closest thing I have experienced to this was a march for immigration reform where participants were asked to bring flags from many countries. An immense crowd of families with children walked together. Flags flew festively and we were full of joyful hope. The energy of a joyful crowd can be a wonderful thing and provides another motivation for participating in weekly congregational worship.

Lord, keep us flexible. We thank you for social organization, but at the same time we do not want to be enslaved by any system that forgets that it is for the purpose of supporting the flourishing of individual people.

April 5

Purity in the Camp — Numbers 5,6

Philippians 1:10 For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return.

Purity in Israel required external acts, whereas Christ took it deeper, calling for inner purity as well. In contrast to exclusion, Christ included sinners in his circle and purified them. In these chapters, lepers and adulteresses are excluded, and touching the dead results in temporary exclusion. In contrast, we recall Christ's healing inclusion of lepers, his forgiving inclusion of adulteresses, and his willingness to touch the dead and resurrect them.

Stories in Numbers show how exclusion was overcome. When Miriam became a leper she was healed and included. (Numbers 12) After committing adultery with Moabite and Midianite women offenders, returned to the community. (Numbers 25) Those defiled by the dead could not celebrate Passover, but the solution was to celebrate later. (Numbers 9)

The way of resolving “he said/she said” situations in regard to sexual transgression seems magical. The assumption is that since God knew the truth, he would make the test come out correctly. This became a “trial by ordeal” that was eventually discouraged by the Catholic church in 1215 and slowly died out, only to be revived in the early witch trials in the United States, all clearly a regression to Christ’s call for grace and spiritual healing.

The Nazarite vow, a commitment to holiness, was externally noted by long hair and abstention from alcohol. John the Baptist demonstrated this ascetic approach to spirituality, sometimes called the “apophatic way”, whereas Christ engaged in society, often called the “cataphatic” way. Christ affirmed both: “For John the Baptist didn’t drink wine and he often fasted, and you say, ‘He’s demon possessed.’ And I, the Son of Man, feast and drink, and you say, ‘He’s a glutton and a drunkard, and a friend of the worst sort of sinners!’ But wisdom is shown to be right by what results from it.” (Matthew 11:18,19)

The chapter ends with a beautiful blessing we can pray:

May the Lord bless you and protect you. May the Lord smile on you and be gracious to you. May the Lord show you his favor and give you his peace.

April 6

Organizing a Worshipping Journey — Numbers 7-10

II Corinthians 9:6-7 Remember this—a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don’t give reluctantly or in response to pressure. “For God loves a person who gives cheerfully.”

The practical, financial side of maintaining a worship community, of keeping the lights on, of having a staff, a recruitment and retirement program, and managing schedule conflicts explained here contrasts with Christ’s lack of formality and preoccupation with funds. Chapter 7 is read during Hanukkah, a time of giving gifts, a portion each day. The twelve tribes bring the same thirty-five gifts, repeatedly itemized, reinforcing a spirit of giving. There is validity in both formal fundraising and financial simplicity.

God beautifully promised to journey with them in a cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. When it moved, it was the signal for the people to move, and the alert came in the form of trumpet calls. As they started their march as an organized people, they set out with flags waving. These images serve us as symbols for making our life journeys in community and under God’s guidance.

Numbers teaches us how much God loves community. Modern researchers have rediscovered that the connection to families and friends, living in proximity, and generally having strong social networks is fundamental to human happiness. Numbers demonstrates how this aspect of God's design for an ideal society was made practical. It challenges me to think about what practical things I am doing to build community among those I know.

Lord, thank you for the power of social organization, for what can be accomplished by doing things as a group. Keep us aware of the potential for difficult things to emerge in our groups that need to be dealt with, and thank you that you are present with us in our journeys in community.

April 7

Complaints about Food — Numbers 11

Philippians 4:11-12 Not that I was ever in need, for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little.

The people of God are called to live in contentment, and in this chapter they are discontent with their food, wanting to return to slavery to have tastier things like meat, fish, cucumbers, melons, leek, onions and garlic. Manna was boring.

Their complaints about hardships resulted in fire on the camp's outskirts which killed no one. The people cried out, Moses prayed, and the fire went out. The response to complaints about meat resulted in quail, but many died from food-poisoning, called here a plague. Remembering that there were ten judgments on Egypt, four identified as plagues, it seems like equal treatment that there are ten judgments on Israel for complaints and rebellion, five plagues and five other tragedies. (Exodus 32:35, Numbers 11:1, 11:33, 12:10, 14:37, 16:32, 35, 46, 21:6, 25:8)

In our time we are constantly being fed discontent by advertising or even by comparing ourselves to others on social media. It is an ever-present temptation to think that we deserve something better from God and to become like the Israelites—whiney, unrealistic about the past, discontent, anxious about the future. A healthy antidote whenever we notice this bad attitude is to sit down with a journal and make a list of things for which to be grateful. It can usually help put whatever difficulty we face into a better perspective.

Lord, teach us the humility to see what you are doing for us and enable us to be grateful no matter what our circumstances.

April 8

Complaints about Leadership — Numbers 12

I Timothy 5:17 Elders who do their work well should be respected and paid well, especially those who work hard at both preaching and teaching.

The people of God are called to respect their spiritual leaders. In this instance, Moses' siblings could not see why he had a special role and complained. God reinforced his support for Moses by Miriam's leprosy that was healed when she repented.

The text emphasizes that Moses was humble, more humble than any other person, and God defended him, saying He uniquely spoke face to face with him. "Why were you not afraid to criticize my servant Moses?"

It is human nature to criticize those with power and to be discontent with their decisions. We are called to have a truly respectful attitude, and to be supportive of our spiritual leaders, including with financial support. The tendency to not be happy and to gossip and complain are our temptations as well. That is not to say we should be blind to failings that discredit them and we are called to appeal to them respectfully. The precedent of two accusations against an elder open the way for necessary changes, always remembering this text to be sure of the legitimacy of the complaints.

I had been taught that respect meant not being negative, but was surprised to realize that the definition actually includes praise. As a result, my hope is to find what is good and can be complimented and affirmed in leaders, and to praise them to other people.

Lord, give me a heart that respects and honors the leaders that you have given to the church.

April 9

Scouting out the Land — Numbers 13

Acts 7:5 "But God gave him no inheritance here, not even one square foot of land. God did promise, however, that eventually the whole land would belong to Abraham and his descendants—even though he had no children yet."

The people of God are called to take action to fulfill the promises of God. The land had been promised to them through Abraham and the time had come to carry out this plan which was part of preparing for Christ's coming. Moses sent scouts to see what the land was like, wanting to be prepared to lead the people wisely.

They were not troubled by questions of the morality of taking the land, their difficulty was that the people in the land seemed bigger, more powerful and intimidating. Rather than allowing their sense of weakness to turn them toward asking for God's help, they simply promoted negativity. When faced with a challenge today, how tempting it is to behave in the same way.

Our arena of ministry has been compared to our promised lands, and that we also must have the boldness to accomplish our calling. The example of learning all that we can about the new location, new population, or new context makes sense. Like Joshua and Caleb we should not let what we learn discourage us, but maintain our faith that the dream is possible. Because of their faith, they did eventually enter the land, unlike their companions.

Lord, give us boldness to accomplish whatever you give us to do. Keep us from falling into fear or despair in the face of difficulties we can foresee.

April 10

Grumbling vs. Faith — Numbers 14

Luke 9:53-55, ...The people of the village refused to have anything to do with Jesus because he had resolved to go to Jerusalem. When James and John heard about it, they said to Jesus, "Lord, should we order down fire from heaven to burn them up?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them ...

Moses foreshadows Christ's mercy to those who deserve judgment. God expressed anger at the complaining, rebellious people, but He responded to Moses' appeals for mercy. God had liberated them, provided for them, given them leadership, and offered them a new land, when they did not appreciate these things, He demanded justice. Moses appealed for mercy.

When the time came to invade Canaan they wailed all night wishing they'd died. God threatened death but relented at Moses' plea. The tragedy that ensued did not mean God withdrew His promises or His presence. However, He imposed consequences—the immediate deaths of the ten discouraged spies, a year of wandering for each day of the 40 that scouts had entered the land, and death for everyone over 20 without entrance to the land. This is the central crisis of the book, the turn on which everything changes and a short journey becomes a long journey ending in the death of those who had experienced the liberation from Egypt.

Grumbling undermines faith, and these stories teach us to silence our complaints. Christ's promise challenges me: "Listen to me! You can pray for anything, and if you believe, you will have it." (Mark 11:24) Christ challenges us to expect good things rather than expecting things to go wrong. When tempted to complain, I think of the example of these people, and try to find something

positive to notice. I do not always succeed, of course, but the consciousness is there. God's exasperation at their inability to trust Him and appreciate what He had done, serves as a warning to me not to be exasperating.

Lord, keep us from grumbling, complaining, criticizing and generally being unpleasant. Thank you for your mercy! Keep us optimistic and hopeful and full of faith.

April 11
Offerings — Numbers 15

Ephesians 5:2 Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God.

Christ is the offering symbolized in all the beasts and foods in this chapter. Since people bring the offerings the animal substitutes for the giver just as Christ takes our place. For us, the offering He made was once for all, complete, and our response is gratitude.

The placement of this instruction is particularly interesting. The people had just failed so spectacularly that they were condemned to forty years of wandering. Those forty years are covered in seven chapters, three of which are instructional like this one. After this failure, there is still the reiteration of expectations for "when you finally settle in the land" and forgiveness for unintentional failures. In contrast, "those who brazenly violate the LORD's will, whether native-born Israelites or foreigners, have blasphemed the LORD, and they must be cut off from the community. Since they have treated the LORD's word with contempt and deliberately disobeyed his command, they must be completely cut off and suffer the punishment for their guilt." (verses 30,31)

Unfortunately, this is the category for the whole generation over 20 years of age, and the theme of death is repeated in these six chapters: for Sabbath-breaking, for rebellion, Miriam's death, a death-wish as the people once more complained about no water, and Aaron's death. Sometimes, even today, judgment is inevitable if there is blasphemy and unrepentance, and we can see our own version of wilderness wanderings.

At the end of the chapter men were told to wear tassels on their clothing to be reminded of God's commands and the need to obey them. Rabbi Kasdan points out that the woman who reached out to Christ for healing by touching the tassel of his garment reminds us He was the Word represented by this imagery.¹⁰ (Matthew 9:20-22)

Today we look to His death on the cross, the sacrifice for sins prefigured here, and we know we are thereby rescued from the consequences of our sins.

Lord, we thank you for the offering of your own life on our behalf and giving us life instead of death. We bring you our lives and our bodies as a “living sacrifice” to you in response. May we be generous to you and others with our lives and our possessions.

April 12

Korah’s Rebellion — Numbers 16

Matthew 10:28 “Don’t be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God, who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

The fall of Korah and the other rebels into *Sheol* alerts us to Christ’s teachings on hell. This story of judgment ends with the rebels being swallowed by the ground alive into the underworld and fire consuming another 250 people. All of these people were under a sentence of death because of their rebellion against going into the promised land. The rebellion stirred up against Moses was just another evidence of their disbelief.

Moses stood between the living and the dead and stopped the plague, foreshadowing Christ’s work in confronting death for us and giving us life.

Sheol in the Hebrew scripture denotes an underground place of the dead which is dreary and dark and where people live in captivity. In the Greek translation of scripture the similar underworld, Hades, was used. Gehenna is used as the place for the wicked and both that and Sheol are often translated as “hell”. There are thirteen references to hell in the Gospels, and Christ’s parables include a warning of being sent to a place of outer darkness. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* offers this explanation:

The best known biblical image for hell derives from a deep, narrow gorge southeast of Jerusalem called *geben hinnom*, “the Valley of Ben Hinnom,” in which idolatrous Israelites offered up child sacrifices to the gods Molech and Baal (2 Chronicles 28:3, 33:6; Jeremiah 7:31-32, 19:2-6 NIV). Josiah defiled the valley to make it unacceptable as a holy site (2 Kings 23:10), after which it was used as a garbage dump by the inhabitants of Jerusalem. As a result, the Valley of Ben Hinnom became known as the dump heap, the place of destruction by fire in Jewish tradition. The Greek word *gehenna*, “hell,” commonly used in the NT for the place of final punishment, is derived from the Hebrew name for this valley. ... But an additional aspect, that of fire and burning, is also associated with hell, and this field of imagery also has roots in the OT. As Isaiah 66:24 suggests, the Valley of Ben Hinnom would be a place of burning long after the practice of child sacrifice had ceased. ... The point of burning seems to be that it destroys something offensive to God’s holiness and that the smoke acts as a sign that the offensive thing is in fact being destroyed.¹¹

As a teen, the idea of hell so disturbed me that I decided to “quit” the faith. What brought me back was a recognition that my ideas of justice are not greater than those of God, and I can trust that there is utter fairness as the heart of reality. We do not want to be rebels consigned to any kind of mysterious judgment, but rather to be people who remain humble and responsive to God’s mercy.

Lord, you offer justice and mercy, and I trust your treatment of each person.

April 13

The Rod — Numbers 17

John 11:25 Jesus told her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying.”

The rod, as wood, reminds us of the cross, and its blooming reminds us of Christ’s resurrection. When people challenged Aaron’s leadership Moses took a wooden staff from each leader of the twelve tribes. Aaron’s staff bloomed and was preserved in the Ark. This life-giving affirmation of his leadership silenced the critics who said the miracle reminded them of the sentence of death they were under.

Aaron’s rod, or shepherd’s staff, was thrown to become a snake before Pharaoh. Moses used his staff to turn water to blood. Aaron pointed to rivers which filled with frogs. Aaron struck the dust and gnats swarmed.

The almond blossoms the rod produced are associated with life and light. The almond is one of the first trees to bloom after winter, and it was the model for a tree-like lamp in the temple.

Centuries later, Jeremiah had a vision of an almond tree which reminded him that God watched over His word to complete it.

For me the tree which reminds me of resurrection is the jacaranda. Everywhere I have lived, their lavish lavender flowers in the spring are a repeated reminder that no matter how difficult a situation, resurrection can come. Just as Aaron’s and Jeremiah’s almond branches strengthened them, the jacaranda blossoms strengthen me with their annual message of hope.

Lord, keep us humble, obedient, always aware that you are the one who gives life. We praise you for your resurrection power and your image in so many figures in the scriptures.

April 14

No Inheritance — Numbers 18

Matthew 8:20 But Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head."

Priests and Levites had no land corresponding to Christ's lack of property. Instead, they were supported by gifts from the people of God. Those receiving tithes were told to tithe their income as well. (Numbers 18:26) Christ had numerous women and others supporting his work. (Luke 8:3)

A call to ministry and willingness to be supported by the donations of other believers is a strong pattern in modern missions. During my childhood as the child of Wycliffe Bible Translators, I saw this lifestyle as completely normal, since all of my parents' colleagues lived with the same system. I also saw a pattern of generosity to those around them.

This way of living, so contrary to the values of our materialistic culture, is a beautiful way of following in the footsteps of these ancient Hebrews as well as of Jesus. If not called to do that, we are surely called to be generous to those who do have that calling.

During the period of our lives when we were living in this way, receiving donations to be able to do ministry, we had repeated remarkable instances of provision. In each case, the timely provision reminded us that our obedience was linked to God's promises to provide. If God is calling one to live from donations for ministry, it is nothing to be afraid of!

Lord, thank you both for the privilege of giving and receiving funds so that the work of the ministry can go forward. Help us all to live lives of generosity. We worship you as provider.

April 15

The Red Heifer — Numbers 19

Hebrews 13:11-13 Under the system of Jewish laws, the high priest brought the blood of animals into the Holy Place as a sacrifice for sin, but the bodies of the animals were burned outside the camp. So also Jesus suffered and died outside the city gates in order to make his people holy by shedding his own blood. So let us go out to him outside the camp and bear the disgrace he bore.

The red heifer ceremony is analogous to Christ's death. The animal is a biological anomaly, perhaps analogous to the unusual biology of Christ. Because the animal is without blemish, slaughtered outside the camp, blood sprinkled, and burned, we can see analogies to the crucifixion. Afterwards the

priest bathed in flowing water, an analogy to baptism in the flowing Jordan River.

Cedar, hyssop and wool dyed scarlet added to the fire, and the resulting ashes were mixed with water to make a holy water to purify things that became impure. The rest of the chapter explains how being around death contaminates and needs to be purified. As the generation under condemnation died away, death must have been a constant for them, perhaps an average of one hundred people a day.

The Mishnah explains there were only nine red heifers sacrificed in Israel. An attempt to breed red heifers is motivated by Maimonides' prediction that finding one will correspond with the Messiah's coming. The Temple Institute, located in the same plaza as the wailing wall, is making preparations for rebuilding the Temple, and as part of their efforts has twice thought they had a legitimate red heifer and then disqualified them.

Tradition is that the red heifer is suffering Israel, an image Chagall incorporated into many paintings. For us it is not only suffering Israel, but also the suffering Christ. The perfection and uniqueness of Christ is highlighted by this imagery of a rare breed. Just as the holy water purified people, we are purified from the contamination of death by His death.

Lord, thank you that there is great mystery in your death and suffering on our behalf, and that the unusual nature of this sacrifice reminds us of the uniqueness of yours. Thank you that you purify us.

April 16
Rock—Numbers 20

I Corinthians 10:4 All of them drank the same spiritual water. For they drank from the spiritual rock that traveled with them, and that rock was Christ.

Christ is identified as the rock which provided water in this story. Moses' and Aaron's disobedience of striking the rock rather than speaking to it resulted in their dying before entering the promised land.

They were to command the rock to give water instead of striking it as in Exodus 17. Instead, they struck it and said "must WE bring you water." God responded: "You did not trust me...you will not lead them into the land" and "the two of you rebelled." The rebellion so characteristic of the people they had been leading finally infected them.

The forty years of wandering had almost come to an end and they were starting to prepared to enter the promised land. To do so by the most practical route

would have been through Edom, but when Edom refused, they had to take a detour, given that God had forbidden them to fight these close relatives. (Deuteronomy 2:4-8)

Aaron died and was mourned by the people. Before Moses died, he acknowledged God as Rock in his final poem. (Deuteronomy 32) This theme continues through scripture and culminates with Christ's exhortation for us to build our lives on the Rock. (Matthew 7:24) In my own life this has been an image of stability when life is unstable and uncertain. The provision of something as basic as water reassures when we are needy.

Lord, thank you that you are our rock, our solid place when everything else in life is not solid.

April 17

The Bronze Serpent — Numbers 21

John 3:14,15 And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so I, the Son of Man, must be lifted up on a pole, so that everyone who believes in me will have eternal life.

Christ interpreted this story as an image of himself on the cross, the means of saving from certain death. The Israelites complained of being tired of manna. Result: punishment and death by poisonous snakes. Moses was told to make an image of what caused their death and for those bitten to look at it and be saved.

This represented the final dying out of the rebellious generation that had wandered the desert for forty years. The new generation had new attitudes. Most had never seen Egypt so could not have been part of the crowd complaining "Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die here in the wilderness?"

This new generation had the toughness that came from being raised in a difficult environment, and perhaps they had a great deal more enthusiasm for the idea of fighting to have a settled, more comfortable life, without any misplaced nostalgia for the Egyptian past. Even before the bronze snake incident, when some were attacked and captured, they boldly went and got their people back.

We are told later that it was just before their encounter with the Amorites that the entire previous generation had died. (Deuteronomy 2:14,15) When Amorite King Sihon refused them safe passage, they were energized to fight and win against him. His main city, Heshbon, was parallel with the north of the Dead Sea. When King Og of Bashan attacked them, they fought back and defeated

his people. His territory was more parallel to the Sea of Galilee. These early battles perhaps gave them confidence for the wars to come, but they also provided extensive territory on the east of the Jordan.

The chapter goes from death and complaining to victory in battle. This is the same direction we want our lives to go. We want to become sturdy, hardy people of faith who have confidence that with God's backing, we can win the spiritual battles ahead of us.

Lord, thank you that you are our teacher and help us understand the meaning of your death. Thank you that you are our savior from sin, that you give us new life and strength for battling the evils of this world.

April 18

Balaam — Numbers 22-23

Matthew 6: 24 “No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

Balaam's greed contrasts with Christ who lived contentedly as a poor man. Balaam is the archetype of the religious man corrupted by seeing the money he can get from ministry. Balaam responded to the King of Moab's promise to pay him well, despite God warning him against it. God told him he must bless, not curse. Given God's frustration and desire to wipe out Israel a few chapters earlier at the start of the forty years of wandering, this represents a new era and new time for Israel. Balaam had to speak words of mercy: God “sees nothing wrong with Israel.”

The talking donkey had more spiritual perception than his human owner, making for comedy. In the New Testament we're told that Balaam loved to earn money for doing wrong, but was stopped when the donkey rebuked him with a human voice. (II Peter 2:15,16) Today our emotions and drives for health, self-esteem, status, identity, adventure, and avoidance of our fears are manipulated to sell goods, turning us to consumer products to meet those needs. We know it is a trick, but we fall for it anyway, even among religious leaders. Balaam's sin is alive and well.

Moab was south of the land of Ammon they had conquered, bordering the Dead Sea. Balak, King of Moab, was alarmed and threatened, and called Balaam to fight back with a spiritual curse. Twice, despite all their offerings and efforts, Balaam blessed Israel, and this beautiful blessing that we can promise comes from this compromised prophet:

God is not a man, so he does not lie.
He is not human, so he does not change his mind.
Has he ever spoken and failed to act?
Has he ever promised and not carried it through?
Listen, I received a command to bless;
God has blessed, and I cannot reverse it! (Numbers 23:19, 20)

We can claim this promise of blessing for ourselves and those we know. We can also claim what is repeatedly said of this incident, that God turned a curse into a blessing. (Deuteronomy 23:5, Nehemiah 13:2) When there are those who truly wish to do us harm, this is remarkably comforting.

Lord, keep us untainted from greed and thinking we deserve to have things that you have not seen necessary to provide. Help us to make the choice for you instead of money and possessions. All other treasure is worth nothing compared to your Kingdom! Help us to remain open to hearing your promises and receiving your blessings.

April 19
A Star will Rise—Numbers 24

Matthew 2:2 “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.”

Just as Balaam, a non-Israelite prophet, was able to foresee the coming of the Messiah, so the Wise Men in Christ’s time came from afar, having seen there was a new king of the Jews. This third effort to curse Israel resulted in even greater prophetic blessing and the rage of King Balak who had hired Balaam to curse his enemies.

Despite his sin, Balaam saw the coming Kingdom and predicted: 1) a people set apart, 2) numerous, 3) blessed, 4) protected, 5) receiving wonders from God, 6) beautiful, 7) like fruitful trees, 8) provided for, 9) exalted, and 10) with a victorious ruler. The Messianic prophesy, “A star will rise from Jacob, a scepter will emerge from Israel” applies to David and Christ.

The theme of this mysterious future ruler who will come from Israel and rule all the nations is refined and developed over the centuries, so that by the time Christ came, the number of Messianic prophecies he fulfilled is overwhelming. For us this not only increases our faith that Christ is truly the one who was promised, it increases our confidence that everything promised in the New Testament for us who believe will come about. As we pray, we can claim scriptures to reinforce our faith and confidence that “it will happen.”

Lord, thank you that you had the purpose in mind all along of coming to mankind and you prepared so many signs so that we would recognize you. Increase our faith to see you at work in the world today.

April 20
Phinehas — Numbers 25

John 2:17 Then his disciples remembered this prophecy from the Scriptures: "Passion for God's house will consume me."

Phinehas' passionate zeal for holiness corresponds to Christ's zeal for God's holiness. But they are profoundly different: Phinehas used a spear to kill whereas Christ turned over tables and used a whip to drive out livestock. Phinehas is a unique figure, a policeman/priest in this story as well as at the end of Judges.

In Psalms we are given an evaluation of his action: "But Phinehas had the courage to intervene, and the plague was stopped. So he has been regarded as a righteous man ever since that time." (Psalm 106:30,31) The point is made that everyone who worshipped the idol died, and those who resisted temptation lived. (Deuteronomy 4:3,4)

Even though the new generation was proving themselves to be hardy warriors, they quickly fell for sexual temptations which led them to idolatry. Not only Moab, but people from Midian who were from yet further south in the Arabian peninsula, tempted them and engaged them in worship of their god. Balaam is credited with this strategy, despite having been forced to bless Israel. (Numbers 31:16)

I struggle to accept that idolatry and immorality deserve death. Accepting the legitimacy of death for idolatry explains most God-sanctioned violence in scripture. My sensibilities have been so trained by grace and mercy in Christ, that rejection of anyone is superseded by the desire to win others over to God's love. I can see that idolatry is a desecration of God's image, and since Christ is the true image of God, anti-idolatry history prepares the way for him. N.T. Wright effectively explains idolatry as the fundamental sin that caused Israel to fail in the calling to bless the world.¹² Through his crucifixion, Christ removed the distortion of worship and bearing God's image which idolatry represents. Idolatry leads to death, and in this instance the immediacy of death serves as a warning.

However, my anxiety about the story is not out of place. Among white supremacists a book counseled following in Phinehas' footsteps to avenge harm to Whites. The result: several home-grown terrorists had this book in their possession before committing their crimes. Given such a serious misuse of the

story, we need to understand what is the appropriate use of force in light of Christ's example and teaching. We need wisdom to control violent offenders without excessive violence, and find the correct ways of policing in our time.

Lord, thank you that you do not use a literal sword, but that your Word serves as a sword to judge, correct and transform. Keep us from the sin of idolatry in our time; help us reject anything that is set above you.

April 21

Preparing for Inheritance — Numbers 26-27

Ephesians 1:11 Furthermore, because of Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us from the beginning, and all things happen just as he decided long ago.

Inheriting land prefigures our final inheritance. Alec Moyter explains the meaning of the land so well: "As we seek to grasp this biblical development, it is not that a New Testament concept of 'a kingdom not of this world' replaces the Old Testament geographical land; nor is it a New Testament spiritualization of what is physical in the Old Testament. No, it is neither a replacement theology nor a spiritualizing theology; it is a cumulative theology, the final and perfect flowering, the actualizing in full reality of what had always been there."¹³

The second census described who would receive the land. This second census parallels that of Chapters 1 and two. This time it is the new generation of fighting age men, a total of 601,730 people compared to the earlier total of 603,550.

Women would inherit when there was no male heir is given. This is repeated four times, highlighting the importance of keeping the family line connected to land. (Numbers 27, 36, Joshua 17, I Chronicles 7) Joshua, who had served as Moses' primary assistant and the leader of the armed forces, was commissioned as the one to distribute Israel's inheritance.

As the passage in Ephesians tells us, we have received a great inheritance through Christ, and in other passages the Holy Spirit, His gifts, the promise of salvation, God's word, and eternal life in heaven are in our inheritance. We live with much greater dignity knowing how rich we are!

We praise you for the gifts of the Kingdom, for the gift of all the good things that you give us to serve others. We bless you that this rich inheritance is now in the present and that eventually we will receive the gift of life everlasting.

April 22

More sacrifices — Numbers 28-29

John 6:54-56 But anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise that person at the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him.

Christ's death gives life to us, just as the sacrificial system of worship acknowledged that God is the source of life. These chapters build on previous instructions regarding worship through sacrifices, and the number of normal annual offerings for the community was prescribed. Totals in a year would be a minimum of 1,044 lambs, 95 bulls, 31 rams and 24 goats, or 1,194 creatures in all. This served as food for the priests and their families.

The central feast as far as the number of sacrifices was Tabernacles. The week started with sacrifice of thirteen bulls, and went down one per day until seven were sacrificed on the seventh day, followed by one on the eighth. This feast represents our lives in God's presence in happiness and celebration.

The differing moods of the festivals come through here: from the drama of a week of sacrifices as people live outdoors for Sukkot, to an intimate family meal at Passover, to community gatherings on Pentecost and Rosh Hashanah, to fasting for the Day of Atonement/Yom Kippur. Going without food for a day as a sign of humility before God, is still done annually by the Jewish community. While offering animals, even feasting on them, was part of demonstrating commitment, fasting was a way of being humble. (cf. Leviticus 23: 32) Perhaps it is fair to say that doing without food temporarily is a way of offering oneself as a sacrifice.

While Jews and some Christians celebrate these events today, they do so without any sacrifices. For Jews, sacrifice ended when the temple was destroyed. For Christians, it ended when Christ died and rose again. But the symbolic sacrifices of prayer, worship, and even fasting are still available to us. They all, particularly fasting, can help align our desire and longings with God's will and give us the confidence that God's will is good.

Lord, thank you that sacrifices ended and instead we celebrate that your work on the cross completed all that was needed for the forgiveness of our sins. Thank you that we can eat our food with thanksgiving, and we can forego our food as a sign of humbly seeking you.

April 23
Vows — Numbers 30

Matthew 5:33-37 “You have also heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you make to the LORD.’ But I say, do not make any vows! Do not say, ‘By heaven!’ because heaven is God’s throne. ³⁵ And do not say, ‘By the earth!’ because the earth is his footstool. And do not say, ‘By Jerusalem!’ for Jerusalem is the city of the great King. Do not even say, ‘By my head!’ for you can’t turn one hair white or black. Just say a simple, ‘Yes, I will,’ or ‘No, I won’t.’ Anything beyond this is from the evil one.”

Christ quoted from this chapter when teaching that it is better to mean what you say rather than make promises those with authority over you can change. In the context, He said he was not nullifying the law, but he raised the bar: not just no murder, but manage anger well; not just no adultery, but no inner lust; a higher commitment to marriage; not seeking justice when offended, but responding with mercy; not just loving neighbors, but loving enemies as well.

We can thus interpret this to mean that we should not just do what we formally promise, but that our intentions, words and actions all align. This heart level obedience and sincerity is a struggle and it is only through the promptings of the Spirit and we even notice and we are falling into the worst aspects of our human nature or hypocrisy. Who of us have not fallen into “hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy” (Galatians 2:20,21) which we know are not aligned with God’s Spirit. Nor is the insincerity of not doing what we say.

Lord, make us straightforward people—honest, transparent, responsible—living our lives in the Spirit.

April 24
Vengeance on Midian — Numbers 31

I John 4:4,5 But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won a victory over those people, because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world. For every child of God defeats this evil world, and we achieve this victory through our faith.

Phinehas led 12,000 warriors into battle against idolatry. The analogy is to Christ’s conquest of evil.

Taking vengeance on Midian for idolatry is God’s command, but on a purely human level it looks like blaming and scapegoating those with whom you were complicit in wrongdoing. Painfully, after killing all the men, Moses insists they

kill woman and boys. Intellectually I accept this as a consequence of leading others into idolatry. Emotionally I find it difficult.

Making matters worse is that Midianites were children of Abraham by his concubine Keturah, so they were relatives. Moses' wife was a Midianite.

Despite this terrible experience of killing people with whom they had been partying not long before, this did not cure idolatry. In fact, the problem persisted for another 1000 years until permanently cured with the Babylonian captivity.

There are 29 verses on how the spoils were divided, making this a contrast to the upcoming wars with Canaan where they were forbidden to take spoils.

Paul applies this story and others in the desert wandering to us, and says they serve as warnings of what to avoid. He cites several things that lead to early deaths: craving evil things, idol worship, indulging in feasting/drinking/revelry, sexual immorality, grumbling, and testing God. (I Corinthians 10:1-11) Doctors today would probably agree with this list, particularly if we modernized "idol worship" to mean "excessive work" or other kinds of excess. It is estimated that alcohol causes 2.5 million deaths world-wide, and an estimate for the United States is that alcohol shortens lives by an average of 30 years, proving that these errors lead to death.

Our call is to confess our own sins and urge others to do the same. Together we can then seek life and grace and peace. Under the new covenant, we win the hearts of idolaters, we do not copy Phineas.

Lord, this is a painful story. It is hard for me to grasp how terrible idolatry is. It is difficult to acknowledge the slips into idolatry I have today, since it is usually much more subtle. But no matter how subtle or how blatant, please give me the grace to take it very seriously and root it out of my life like a warrior.

April 25

A Written Record — Numbers 32-33

Luke 1:3 Having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I also have decided to write a careful account for you, most honorable Theophilus.

The written record of Israel's journey reminds us that we are provided with written records of Christ's journeys and even those of Paul. Moses was instructed to keep a written record (Numbers 33:2), and in this chapter we have geographic details which fill in information from the previous stories.

The importance of written law is reinforced in instructions to the king who is to make an authorized copy and read it daily. “This regular reading will prevent him from becoming proud and acting as if he is above his fellow citizens.”

(Deuteronomy 17:20) Moses was told to write down the words of his song, and from that instruction the application was made that each man should have his own Torah scroll to read. It is said that women also were taught to read and write.

The emphasis on literacy in Jewish culture created love and skill in learning which enabled Jews to surge to the forefront as intellectuals in the modern era. Their contributions are astonishingly out of proportion to their numbers, affirming the promise that “all the nations of the world will see that you are a people claimed by the Lord, and they will stand in awe of you.” (Deuteronomy 28:10)

Synagogues have divided the Torah (the first five books) into a year-long set of Sabbath readings. In addition, a selection from the rest of the Hebrew scriptures is read, and on holidays additional readings are done such as Esther for Purim, Song of Songs on the Sabbath of Passover, Ruth for Shavuot, Lamentations for Tisha B'av, Jonah for Yom Kippur, Ecclesiastes for Sukkot.

Since the inventing of the printing press and the exhortations of the 16th century reformers, Christians have been urged to read scripture for themselves. This exercise, which we are engaged in here, challenges us, causes us to seek out more information, causes us to think deeply, and in many cases, such as my own, causes us to write yet more.

Lord, thank you for the pleasure of books, of reading, of writing. We gain so much from all of these things. We bless you that you chose to have your Words written and that we have the gift of meditating on these Words for ourselves.

April 26

A Well-Ordered Place — Numbers 34-36

I Timothy 2:1-2 I urge you, first of all, to pray for all people. Ask God to help them; intercede on their behalf, and give thanks for them. Pray this way for kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity.

Any peaceful, well-ordered kingdom in the world is in some measure a precursor of Christ's well-ordered Kingdom. The book began with organizing the moving people, and this section anticipates creating a settled life. There is an outline of the territory, leaders selected to distribute land, towns and surrounding pastures for the Levites, cities of refuge, and affirmation of inheritance rights for women.

Once again we see organizational patterns that became characteristic of nations and churches. Bishops governed in community over specific physical spaces. Within their domains were homes and provisions for monastic communities. Churches were envisioned as places of sanctuary. Roles for women were established within a patriarchal model.

Adventures will intrude, but Israel experienced many years of orderly and pleasant life by following these guidelines. The pleasure of ordinary times is captured in one of C.S. Lewis' Narnia stories: "He talked of whole centuries in which all Narnia was so happy that notable dances and feasts, or at most tournaments, were the only things that could be remembered, and every day and week had been better than the last. And as he went on, the picture of all those happy years, all the thousands of them, piled up in Jill's mind till it was rather like looking down from a high hill onto a rich, lovely plain full of woods and waters and cornfields, which spread away and away till it got thin and misty from distance."¹⁴ We are told to pray for kings and authorities that we might live happily in ordinary times.

Lord, help us to make our communities as healthy and happy as we can within the limits of our own times. May we faithfully pray for the opportunity to live quite and peaceful lives.

April 27

Farewell address — Deuteronomy 1

John 16:16 "In just a little while I will be gone, and won't see me anymore. Then, just a little while after that, you will see me again."

Moses' farewell address to Israel compares to Christ's farewell address to his disciples. (John 13-17) Moses' reviewed their life together and looked to the future, just as Christ reviewed his love for them and promised the presence of the Spirit. Both occurred in a moment of crisis and change. We saw that the crossing of the Red Sea represented baptism and thus death and resurrection. Anticipating the crossing into Jordan, there is the same baptismal imagery.

Moses reviewed the journey from Sinai, appointing leaders, scouting the land, the refusal to enter, and the disobedient and failed military campaign. The structure of the book includes three different speeches, and an epilogue regarding Moses' death. Seven times he reminds them of how they provoked God's anger. (Deuteronomy 1:34, 37, 3:26, 4:21, 9:7, 8, 18, 20) Ten times he warns them that if they worship idols and other gods rather than God, they will provoke God's anger and judgment. (Deuteronomy 4:25, 6:15, 7:4, 29:20, 27, 28, 31:17, 32:19, 21, 22)

Hearing God's word spoken continues as our tradition with today's preaching. The number of sermons I have heard in my life cannot be counted, but the ideas in this book come in so many cases from good teaching I have heard. I am grateful for creative, faithful teachers who speak to us and am highly motivated to listen.

Lord, thank you for Moses, a mighty hero of faith who taught a basic morality that we still see as essential today. May we truly honor these principles and the messenger who brought them to us. We bless you for your promises that you bless obedience and respect for it.

April 28

Holy War — Deuteronomy 2,3

Matthew 5:43-44 "You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!"

Israel's role as conquerors stands in contrast to Christ's call to love our enemies. Chapter 2 gives some limits to war. They must respect the nations of Edom, Moab and Ammon. All are Israel's relatives, and the point is made that God gave them their land, just as he is giving Israel land. In contrast, when a proposal of peacefully crossing land and paying for anything used was turned down by King Sihon, they conquered him. Similarly, they conquered King Og and all the resulting land was distributed to several tribes.

War is not only an historical reality, in our time sophisticated weaponry often results in 90% civilian casualties. The morality of war and seeking alternatives to it are important international conversations today. One moral ranking is to say that war for selfish ends is the worst, and yet that is the starting point of most modern wars.

Israel's "holy war" to carry out God's purposes is seen as a moral step up. It carries out both the purposes of removing idolatrous nations with truly cruel practices as well as fulfilling the promise of this land to Abraham's descendants. A further development was "just war", a theory of weighing options to determine if war had moral purposes that was formulated by Saint Augustine and further developed by Saint Thomas.

In our time, in the past 50 years, we have had many non-violence movements which have been remarkably effective, even more effective than violent conflicts in creating healthy societies. This strategy seems to be the best fit to Christ's call to love our enemies. Diplomatic dialogue has also averted many conflicts. Statistics on both non-violence and diplomacy are impressive.

Nevertheless, we are in a conflict-ridden world where the immorality of war is evident.

In the early church the Christians prided themselves on gaining converts by their peace-loving lives. So much so that Church Fathers thought the prophecies of “turning swords into plowshares” had been fulfilled. Christianity won political power and that created an opportunity to become warriors from the 4th century on. In a tragic regression, Christians defined their enemies as “Canaanites” and felt free to enslave and exterminate. That militarism is still with us. Often today Americans feel we are engaged in something righteous, a kind of modern “holy war” to protect vulnerable people. Often digging a little deeper reveals the selfishness and destructiveness that take it to an even lower ethical level. Our calling today is peace-making.

Lorde, help us to recognize that you brought a higher moral vision that we are not always living up to in our political life. Help us to seek your will in resolving conflicts wisely.

April 29

Obedience — Deuteronomy 4, 5

James 1:22-23 But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror.

God's people are called to obedience to the moral law. While we may not be subject to details of the law that have been fulfilled by Christ or are culturally bound, we still have a responsibility to fulfill the requirement to put God first, to love him, to love our neighbor, to observe the boundaries that are set up by the commandments.

Moses reminds them of the experience of gathering to receive the law. He reviewed the ten commandments which described a society based on worshipping a transcendent unseen being who also required justice, an innovation. When they have heard about these laws, other nations have exclaimed “How wise and prudent are the people of this great nation!” To this day we are grateful for what we call our “Judeo-Christian” heritage.

The hope of living “long and prosperous lives in the land you are about to enter and occupy” could only be fulfilled by this combination of worship and justice. It was easy to fail by worshipping idols, and to fail by allowing injustice, so the ideal was never fully realized.

Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of the ideals of a beloved community where justice and equality are realized. Justice, compassionate service, and generous

care have been a part of the story of the church, even when there have been massive political or leadership failures. One book that draws out ways that following Christ has worked well through the centuries is *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*.¹⁵ This book encourages us to see people who have been part of the beloved community, and so be inspired today to emulate them.

Lord, thank you that your law was a preview of the beloved community that you intend to fully bring about. Help us to be truly useful as part of this plan.

April 30

Children and Parents — Deuteronomy 6

Luke 18:15-17 One day some parents brought their little children to Jesus so he could touch and bless them. But when the disciples saw this, they scolded the parents for bothering him. Then Jesus called for the children and said to the disciples, "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children. I tell you the truth, anyone who doesn't receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it."

God called on parents to teach their children the laws of God and share the testimonies of his acts, just as Christ encouraged us to see children as valuable members of God's Kingdom. A beautiful promise to claim: "If you obey all the decrees and commands I am giving you today, all will be well with you and your children." (Deuteronomy 4:40)

The ten commandments Moses repeated includes the command to honor parents, something taught by Christ as well. Fulfilling the command includes a promise that life will go well, and disrespect for parents earns death. Moses tells parents to talk about God at home and on journeys, when lying down and when getting up.

Christ's key verse is here: "You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength." (verse 5) This is the core of what parents are urged to teach their children, verbally, by example, and in many different contexts.

In consulting modern child-rearing ideas, I was impressed that not only is encouraged to empathize and help a child identify why they are sad or angry and what might need to be done, there are a range of suggestions for helping encourage happiness. All of these things seem consonant with the Hebrew scripture principles for raising children:

- 1) Make expressions of gratitude a habit
- 2) Teach your children to forgive
- 3) Create the habit of slowing down and savoring life's pleasures
- 4) Teach optimism—dispute negative or pessimistic thoughts as temporary and not personal
- 5) Have routines that allow children to express their hopes for the future and excitement about coming events
- 6) Be trustworthy as parents and caregivers
- 7) Acknowledge, name and reward strengths children display
- 8) Spend time together
- 9) Teach enjoyable ways of spending free time and alone time
- 10) Share faith and encourage participation in religious life

If we are not doing this well with the children in our lives, we can learn to do better!

Lord, thank you for the call to honor others. Thank you that we can do this for our parents and that our children can do this for us. Thank you for the privilege of teaching our children about you.

May 1

People of Love — Deuteronomy 7

Matthew 22:37 Jesus replied, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.”

The love, humility, fear of God, worship, justice, and obedience called for repeatedly in this section are the same qualities that Christ calls his people to have.

A contrast is set up between the nations to be evicted, people God “will clear away”, and the kind of people God wants them to be in the land instead. Key words include holy, chosen, rescued, faithful, obedient, listeners, relying on God’s word, praising, being careful, not forgetting, and not being afraid. God in turn desires to love them with unfailing love, to bless and to protect them.

The call is to live from the heart, a word that Deuteronomy uses 33 times. Love is repeated 27 times in Deuteronomy. Out of the heart of love comes obedience. Deuteronomy uses the word “obey” 75 times, more than any other book in scripture, even coming close to the whole New Testament usage (111 times). The emphasis on obedience coming from love and from the heart is central in Christ’s teaching. We know it is not enough to act right; we need goodness and justice to transform us and flow out of our lives.

Lord, thank you to this call of love and to the beauty of obedience. Give us hearts that long to obey you and trust you and live in the great love we receive from you. We worship you for making us your treasure.

May 2

Humility — Deuteronomy 8

John 15:10 “When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father’s commandments and remain in his love.”

Christ and his death are the most perfect example of humility, and here God’s people are called to humility. This chapter links humility with testing, saying that their time in the wilderness had those purposes.

This exhortation is practical for us today: “He did this to humble you and test you for your own good. He did all this so you would never say to yourself, ‘I have achieved this wealth with my own strength and energy.’ Remember the LORD your God. He is the one who gives you power to be successful...” (verses 16-18) We are reminded of the New Testament repetitions that it is the humble who will be exalted.

Life repeatedly offers lessons in humility in reoccurring challenges. In my case these have included relational struggles, illnesses, financial insecurity, a sense of inadequacy in work or ministry, conflicts, concern for my family members and friends, and many more things. Each case is an opportunity to cry out and say, “I need help. I cannot cope with this on my own,” and in that place of dependence God has so often met me whether He intervened to solve a problem or not.

Hopefully, these hard things change me. I learn that I do not know it all, know that I am not able to do everything right, and realize that I rub some people the wrong way. Further, that I make a lot of relational mistakes even in my good relationships. All of these are lessons learned in the time of humbling, and hopefully I will never forget them.

Lord, help us to truly know that being humbled is good for us and that you have a good purpose in refining us, changing us, and generally making us learn some faith.

May 3

40 Days and Nights — Deuteronomy 9-10

Matthew 4:2 For forty days and forty nights he ate nothing and became very hungry.

As Moses reviewed the time at Sinai, he recalled the 40 days and nights he spent fasting, pleading for the people after the sin of idolatry with the golden calf. (Exodus 34:28, Deuteronomy 9:18, 25 Deuteronomy 10:10) Christ also spent a forty-day fast in the wilderness and was tempted by Satan. (Matthew 4:1-11)

Moses' had another forty days and nights of conversations with God on the mountain (Exodus 24:12-18, Exodus 34:1-4, 28) which parallel the forty days that the disciples experienced in the presence of Christ learning more about the kingdom of God. (Acts 1:3)

There is a long history of 30-day retreats as part of Ignatian spirituality, and those who have done them have found a deepening of their relationship with God. There are 40-day devotionals that have helped many people. In our time, many people advocate fasting for health reasons, even 40-day fasts. But scripture repeatedly returns to fasting as a way of having a humble heart before God. This passage and others teach us that the primary purpose of fasting is intercession for the urgent needs of others. Radical retreats, particularly with the help of a wise spiritual director deepen our relationship with God and others.

These reflections arise out of a lifestyle that has permitted me to live in retreat mode for several years. The hope is that ones' retreat is, like those of Moses and Christ and many others, something that ends up benefitting more than oneself.

Lord, we thank you that you want to live in communion with us and we have the option to be alone with you. Thank you that times of retreat, and times of fasting and intercession can allow us to draw closer to you.

May 4

Christ's Obedience — Deuteronomy 11

Philippians 2:8 He humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.

Moses called the people to obey, repeating it seven times in this chapter. Christ was the perfectly obedient one and framed his own crucifixion as an act of obedience. He repeatedly said he was here to do his Father's will. This chapter urges the people to obey by going in to possess the land, to love God with heart and soul, to teach God's love to their children, to receive God's blessings which will be proclaimed in the new land.

From the rest of scripture we know how partial their obedience turned out to be. But Christ's obedience was perfect, even to the point of death, and he calls us to obey him as a sign of our love for him. (John 14:21)

There is an emphasis throughout Deuteronomy that the obedience is to come from the heart and from love. Knowing a lot about God and knowing a lot about scripture is never enough. In fact, if mind and heart are not connected, all the knowledge becomes a temptation to feel superior to others. But with the heart involved, a tender awareness of ones' own weakness puts a pause on Pharisaical thoughts. Humble silence, listening to God, is a good way to have ones' heart touched.

Lord, my heart's desire is to be completely obedient and to quickly turn back if the Holy Spirit draws my attention to any fault or falling short. Please help me!

May 5

Worship — Deuteronomy 12

Matthew 14:33 Then the disciples worshiped him. "You really are the Son of God!" they exclaimed.

Christ reinforced some patterns of worship from the Hebrew scriptures and replaced others. In this section we are told that worship was to take place in a particular place that God would choose — sacrifices, feasting and tithing must take place there.

During the conquest the place was Gilgal. (Joshua 5:10) Once the conquest was completed the tabernacle moved to Shiloh (Joshua 18:1) and remained there during the time of the Judges. King Saul moved it to Nob near his home in Gibeah (I Samuel 18:1) where he then killed the priests. It then moved to Kiriath-jearim. (I Chronicles 13:6) All of these places are slightly north of Jerusalem. David moved the Ark to Jerusalem (I Chronicles 15:25) though the tabernacle remained in Gibeon (I Chronicles 16:39) until Solomon brought it to the new Temple. (I Kings 8:4) The establishment of Jerusalem as "the place" thus took about 350 years.

Christ came when the Temple was firmly established in Jerusalem and worshipped there. But he knew it would be destroyed and worship would be spread all over the earth. Worship does not have to be done in a particular place or time, but can be anywhere at any time. No longer were people obliged or even able to bring sacrifices to a particular place since His sacrifice completed that imagery.

Worship still involves feasting together before God. It still involves offerings and tithes and still required not worshipping other gods. While we may not be tempted to boil kids in their mothers' milk (a pagan fertility rite), there are other things worth avoiding. Love for God is our basis for worship.

Lord, thank you for how beautiful your law is in its call to love, its call to worship, its call to justice, its call to a healthy community, and its call to see you as our King. We bow before you as our King. Lord we do worship you and thank you that this can happen every day, everywhere.

May 6

Dangerous Voices — Deuteronomy 13,14

Matthew 7:15 “Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep but are really vicious wolves.”

The people of God are called to turn away from and repudiate the voices of those who call them to worship something other than God.

In our time our world is full of such voices, in the form of a constant barrage of information that tells us we need more things. Greed is a constant temptation, surrounded as we are by this cultural noise and a greedy person is compared to an idolater. (Ephesians 5:5) Other voices whip up political anger and fear, and yet other voices encourage us to just assuage our difficulties with some fun. We even have a cottage industry of lies presented as news, widely believed and circulated, even in the context of the fact-checking industry that has arisen to try to stop this. Christians have fallen heavily for many of these lies, showing the dangerous lack of discernment warned against here.

What is an antidote to all kinds of idolatry? Perhaps it is appreciation for the beautiful and good things God has made, appreciation of people, appreciation of experiences, and appreciation of nature. When my heart is full with appreciation there really is no room for either greed or other substitutes for God.

Lord, you have made it clear that worshipping things other than you results in a weak, unhappy life. Help us to keep our focus and not be distracted by wrong things.

May 7

Poverty — Deuteronomy 15

Luke 6:20 Then Jesus turned to his disciples and said, “God blesses you who are poor, for the Kingdom of God is yours.”

Images or metaphors for the meaning behind the death and resurrection of Christ for us occur in the provisions of the law. In this chapter we see three of them:

Release for debtors	Christ paid our debt
Release for slaves	Christ set us free
Sacrificing firstborn animals	Christ was our sacrifice

In addition, both Christ and the law call for open-handed generosity and compassion for those in poverty. Christ repeatedly called us to respect those who are poor, saying “Blessed are the poor,” showing respect for the widow who gave a few coins, using parables such as the foolish man who died after expecting to become rich, and calling a young man to sell all Christ he had to follow Christ. Most inspiring, He taught us to see Himself in any person for whom we had an opportunity to meet a need. (Matthew 25: 31-46)

Israel is told that if they follow the law this will result in “no poor among you.” (Deuteronomy 15:4) A few verses later we are reminded that this is never a goal that can be completed, because circumstances change for people and “There will always be some among you who are poor.” (15:11)

Christ quoted this when Mary of Bethany was reproached for not selling her expensive perfume and use the proceeds for the poor. He added, “...but I will not be with you much longer.” (John 12:8) He affirmed her generosity and love for him, a poor person, who would soon die.

Perhaps one thing I appreciate living in Guatemala is that encountering those who are poor does not involve needing to seek people out—we are surrounded by people with legitimate needs. It actually was not that hard to find those who are poor in an American city, and there are so many non-profits doing good work and needing volunteers.

Lord, thank you that your plan is that we give and receive in a life of love in community. Help us to be open to your nudges about where and when to give. We praise you that you are the most generous of all.

May 8
Going to Jerusalem — Deuteronomy 16

Luke 2:41 Every year Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival.

Christ attended the festivals that prefigured his work. We are told “Each year every man in Israel must celebrate these three festivals: The Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of harvest, and the Festival of Shelters. They must appear before the Lord your God at the place he chooses on each of these occasions, and they must bring a gift to the Lord.” (verse 16) In the gospels many incidents in Christ’s life occurred when he attended these festivals prophetic of His future work.

Some of the incidents in Christ's life were built around festivals:

- Passover Removed cattle, sheep and doves (John 2:13)
 Propheesied to rebuild the Temple in three days
 Many believed he was Messiah (John 3:23)
 Galileans believed because of miracles (John 4:45)
- Passover Fed the 5000 (John 6:4)
- Shelters Offered living water (John 7:2)
- Hanukkah Controversy with Pharisees (John 10:22)
- Passover Final supper with his disciples (John 13:1)

For Christians, the rhythm of the church year has changed. We celebrate Advent, leading up to Christmas and the coming of Christ; we then celebrate Lent, leading up to Holy Week; and we celebrate Eastertide, leading up to the Ascension. Yet it has also been rewarding for me to experience the Jewish traditions of celebration. In every case, we are taking ourselves into an observation of time that allows heaven and earth to touch once more.

Lord, thank you that you have transfigured worship by completing the things that ancient worship pointed toward.

May 9

An Obedient Life — Deuteronomy 17-18

Matthew 5:19 So if you ignore the least commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God's laws and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.

An obedient life is described here and in the teachings of Christ. In the scripture above He calls us to respect and obey what God had said in the law, and at the same time we can see how Christ himself fulfilled the law. A set of parallels between these chapters and Christ's teachings could be:

Judging hard cases	Christ the perfect judge
Guidelines for a king	Christ the perfect king
Gifts for priests and Levites	Care for those in the ministry
Call to Holy living	Blessed are the pure in heart
True and False prophets	Good and bad trees
Cities of refuge	Christ is our refuge from our sins
Concern for justice	Hunger and thirst for righteousness

Here we see a vision of society with just judges, rulers, spiritual leaders, and media figures that challenge any injustice (the prophets). We see people who care about holiness, justice, and forgiveness of sins.

Moses predicted that God would send a prophet, and Peter applied this to Christ. (Deuteronomy 18:15-18, Acts 3:22,23) This prophetic role fulfilled by Christ in His teaching deepened the requirements of the law to be from the heart, a deepening made possible by Christ in us. It is a very social vision and we need to recognize that we err if we feel like “my relationship with God” is all that it is about. We are called to be world-changers in the direction of justice.

Lord, thank you for this vision of a just society. It is something we long for and are willing to work at in our time, always recognizing that the ultimate success of the Kingdom of God comes from you.

May 10

Justice — Deuteronomy 19

II Peter 1:1 I am writing to you who share the same precious faith we have. This faith was given to you because of the justice and fairness of Jesus Christ, our God and Savior.

God’s people are called to create a society filled with justice, because that is His nature. The New Testament reinforces this by telling us that justice and fairness are in Christ’s character.

But what do we do when we fail? What is the answer when the beautiful community is harmed in some way? In this chapter we have the example of manslaughter. We instinctively know that there is a difference between a death that is an accident, and a death caused with intention. In both cases, though, there has been harm done. The solution of a refuge for those who killed unintentionally is repeated here and elsewhere.

This theme of mercy based on what was in someone’s heart helped develop a morality that is not too rigid to take human nature into account, but still balanced the scales, here protecting the one at fault from the natural desire for revenge.

Respect for property rights and respect for the need for accurate testimony to determine what truly happened and what the solution might be are also foundational social principles we still respect. In the case of Christ, they were legalistically trying to fulfill the need to have two witnesses, but had trouble finding any credible ones. (Matthew 26:59,60) He was thus a victim of the miscarriage of a just system.

The law was not unrealistically idealistic; it set precedents we still use in our own system of justice. Since justice is responsive to what is happening at any point in time, we have to work to keep a sound system in place. In our own system and in so many places in the world, justice fails and requires us to advocate for change based on the vision these wise texts provided.

Lord, thank you that you are just and fair, full of wisdom and mercy, able to resolve what is wrong. But thank you also that you can identify with anyone mistreated by the justice system, since you were so mistreated.

May 11

Rules of War — Deuteronomy 20

Matthew 26:50 “Put away your sword,” Jesus told him, “Those who use the sword will die by the sword.”

Christ chose to be a victim of violence and thereby transform it. Here war as a necessity is assumed and some moral boundaries are placed around it.

The rules for war include compassion for fear or for not having yet experienced life on the part of soldiers. It requires the people to offer peace before engaging in war. Then comes once again the requirement to destroy the Canaanites. For perhaps 2000 years the consensus of Rabbinic reflection was that these were no longer binding commands since these ethnic groups were no longer identifiable. A position of non-violence became the established view of Judaism, a logical necessity for a stateless people.

However, the creation of Israel as a state has once more opened all the questions regarding war. Modern Israel is almost evenly divided: should they appropriate former land or not? should they take critiques of other nations seriously? should they retain the status quo with the Palestinians? are peace talks worth engaging in? Israel is engaged in trying to apply scripture in today's world. Inherently states take on violent roles within and outside their borders.

These “rules of war” have made a positive contribution to formulating what might be just. Nevertheless, it is important to keep the focus that Christ chose to align Himself with those receiving violence, even though He clearly was an innocent person. He raises a standard for us that is more reflected in this statistic than in Israel's nationhood: 22% of organizations that have won the Nobel Peace Prize were founded by Jewish people, though only a miniscule part of the world population (0.2%).

Lord, thank you for your call to be peacemakers and to put our swords away. Help us to achieve this in our personal lives, and to work for this in the world.

May 12

Holy Living — Deuteronomy 21-22

*Matthew 5:21, 22 “You have heard that the law of Moses says...But I say...
(repeated in Matthew 5:27,28, 31,32, 33, 34, 38, 39, 43, 44)*

Moses taught profound spiritual and moral principles, but Christ came and took all of them to an even deeper and more demanding level.

Cleansing for murders	Reconcile, do not hold on to anger
Marriage and divorce	Divorce only for unfaithfulness
Rights of firstborn	Christ is the firstborn and we are his siblings
Rebellious son	We are all prodigal sons
Care for property	Do not make material things your priority
Do not mix things	Blessed are the pure in heart
Sexual purity	Do not look at a woman with lust
Rights of women	Compassion for the adulteress

We also see a prophecy of Christ’s body being taken down and buried the day of his death. (Deuteronomy 21:22,23)

Christ’s expectations of us are far more demanding than the law, but his provision for our ability to obey in this way is greater than the law. He lives in us, enabling us to live obedient lives.

Even in the midst of my failures, I look up to Him and to the ideals and ask for help: “Conform me to your ideal.”

Lord, we praise you that you are the perfectly obedient one. We thank you that you bore all the curses of sin for us and thereby set us completely free from them!

May 13

Holiness — Deuteronomy 23-24

James 1:21 So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls.

God’s people are called to a life of holiness. In this chapter we see that part of this included separating from nations descended from Lot. Even though Moabites were included in the prohibition, Ruth’s story shows grace to a particular woman from that country. Christ redeemed in a way explained in this passage and exemplified in the story of Ruth and Boaz. Woven in among the laws in these and the next several chapters, are seven essential to the story of Ruth.

The prohibition for Moabites to be part of God's assembly for ten generations (Deuteronomy 23:3) was later taken to mean that Moabites could never be part of the community of faith. (Nehemiah 13:1) In the story of Ruth the Moabitess, she not only became part of the people of God, her great-grandchild David became king, a picture of grace overcoming exclusion.

Secondly, though Ruth's story took place in the time of the judges when people did what they thought right, Boaz attempted to follow God's command of empathy for foreigners, orphans and widows, recalling the peoples' slavery in Egypt as a point of common ground to remember being vulnerable. He obeyed the injunction to leave grain in the fields. (Deuteronomy 24:17-22)

Christ taught us to overcome exclusion by his acceptance of "sinners and tax collectors." The holiness God requires of us means that we must be quicker to identify the sin in our own hearts, rather than looking for sin in others. Our call to a particular tenderness for the vulnerable and marginalized is reinforced here as well as in Christ's teaching.

Lord, make us humble people who realize that you have opened up any doors of exclusion and made your grace available to any person.

May 14

Preview of Ruth — Deuteronomy 25-26

Luke 1:68 "Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and redeemed his people."

The provision of an economic and social redeemer in the law, became an image of the redemption Christ brought us. In these chapters we are introduced to the customs that will be worked out in the story of Ruth and Boaz.

A brother or near relative should marry a widow to continue the family name and maintain property rights. (Deuteronomy 25:5-10) This set up Ruth's request to Boaz for him to be the redeemer. Taking off of a sandal was a sign of contempt in Deuteronomy for those unwilling to do this, but by the time of Ruth it was a stylized way of confirming land purchases. (Ruth 4:7,8) This image of Christ purchasing a right to us, redeeming us, became a foundational metaphor in the New Testament, as did that of his role as the bridegroom and husband.

Sometimes we think of Christ's redemption of us in very transactional economic terms. These laws and Ruth's story demonstrate that though the economic provision was critical, the love that established the relationship was even more critical.

Lord, thank you that the human stories of the implementation of your laws clothe them with a beauty and graciousness we might otherwise miss. Thank you that the fundamental intention is a loving, caring, and compassionate community. We are grateful that you are our redeemer.

May 15

Cursing — Deuteronomy 27

Galatians 3:13 Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the Law. When He was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing.

Moses promised blessing for obedience and suffering or curses for disobedience. Christ transfigured this by taking the curses of the law on our behalf. The terrible curses of these passages are part of our world today, but each one can be reversed through Christ's work on the cross. In His life and ministry, He healed sickness, provided abundant food and wine, and removed madness, all things we are called to do as his followers. In His Crucifixion He was defeated, an object of horror and mocking, but He turned this to blessing through His victorious resurrection and ascension.

I can see that there are consequences even today for the list of bad behavior in this chapter that results in curses: making idols, dishonoring parents, stealing land, mistreating the blind, sexual sins, secret murder, killing for hire, and ignoring the Law. I am most struck by a very common sin mentioned here: mistreating the vulnerable—foreigners, orphans and widows.

Perhaps most common of all is the error of dishonoring our parents, and failing to acknowledge our deep debts to them, including for the very gift of life. This can lead to distortions of personality of which any psychologist is aware. It is a spiritual calling to forgive their offenses and honor them with our hearts. We are promised blessings for this.

Lord, make us humble people, quick to repent of anything in our lives or the lives of our ancestors that would not honor you. Take away the effects of these things by your mercy.

May 16

Blessing — Deuteronomy 28-30

Matthew 5:3 “God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.”

God's people are called to live a wholesome life within the blessings of God. The abundance of material and social blessings promised here is also available

to us. Christ introduces his blessings by saying that the first step is to be humble people. Deuteronomy 30 is a beautiful solution if we have failed. We are called to reflect, return, wholeheartedly obey, to choose life and to choose to love the Lord. The result: blessings.

Proverbs tells us that hating wisdom (8:36) and despising the commandments leads to death. (19:16) But there are many things Proverbs tell us lead to prolonging our lives: wisdom (9:11), fear of God (10:27), controlling our tongues (13:3), a relaxed attitude (14:30), and humility. (22:4) How remarkable that we really can “choose life!”

If we are suffering it is good to engage in self-examination and repent of anything we are aware is hindering our life with God. Then we are free to claim, on the basis of Christ’s righteousness, all the blessings of God.

Lord, we see great suffering in the world, some deserved, some unjust, and we know you suffer with us and can use even the very worst things for some ultimate good. Help us to choose life.

May 17

Transition — Deuteronomy 31-32

Acts 1:8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

After such a compelling and transformative leader like Moses, it is intimidating for his assistant Joshua to have to take his place. Similarly, Christ’s disciples felt underprepared to take on leadership. He promised them extra power by the Holy Spirit coming on them to enable them to undertake the difficult task of spreading His good news in the world. For Joshua’s difficult task of conquering the land, he went with Moses and God appeared to them in a pillar of cloud at the tabernacle.

Three times Joshua is given the exhortation to “be strong and courageous”, something that will be repeated four more times in Joshua 1. Clearly these were things he needed in this difficult transition. Weakness and fear would make sense when taking over an unruly group that would have to become unified warriors, and particularly when having lived in the shadow of such a great man for all his life.

Moses’ song celebrated that “he will avenge the blood of his children; he will take revenge against his enemies. He will repay those who hate him and cleanse his people’s land.” (Deuteronomy 32:43) Paul transfigured the meaning of this in the New Testament by selecting the previous phrase “Rejoice with his

people, you Gentiles” and putting it in the context of how Christ “came so that the Gentiles might also give glory to God for his mercies to them.” (Romans 15:7-10) What a remarkable transfiguration of the message of judgment on the Canaanites into the gospel of peace for all people in Romans.

Joshua’s challenge to lead a military victory has become a challenge to us to lead spiritual victories. In my own life the exhortation to be strong and courageous is a necessary antidote to temptations to fear and anxiety as I try to carry out that calling.

Lord, Joshua and the disciples both had big jobs, far too big to accomplish in their own wisdom or strength. But you helped them, and you have promised to help me when I am overwhelmed and do not see how I can do something.

May 18

Song of Moses — Deuteronomy 33-34

Luke 24:50, 51 Then Jesus led them to Bethany, and lifting his hands to heaven, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up to heaven.

Moses’ departure from the people foreshadows Christ’s departure in the ascension. It was a moment when both of them offer blessings.

In his final song and final blessing, Moses reminded them that God was their king. He then gave a blessing to each tribe full of visual images. Marc Chagall used this imagery and that in Jacob’s blessings (Genesis 49) to create a set of twelve beautiful stained glass windows. The *Jerusalem Windows* are a spectacular visual of this chapter.

Moses climbed the mountain and died, still strong at 120, and his people mourned him. His epitaph is beautiful: “There has never been another prophet like Moses, who the Lord knew face to face.” (Deuteronomy 34:10)

As we end with the life of Moses we are once more struck with what a monumental figure he was, and what an effect he has had on world history. This initially timid leader became one of those we cannot ignore, even today. We are not called to be Moses, but we are called to allow the Holy Spirit to fill us and enable us to completely fulfill our calling and have the impact that we are to have. May his example of faithfully carrying out a monumental and difficult task encourage us to do the same.

Thank you, Lord, that just as you had an amazing purpose for Moses, you have an amazing purpose for each of us. Help us to be obedient and pay attention to what you are calling us to do.

CHAPTER 3, Part 1

The Kingdom Foreshadowed: Begun

Joshua — Ruth

Under Joshua's leadership the people enter their land, conquer, and yet conquer incompletely. Consequently, they continue to be vulnerable to the influence of idolatry from their new neighbors. They fall into oppression and the result is a period of alternating peace and conflict. At the end is a story of a foreign woman, Ruth, who marries into the tribe of Judah. Her child becomes the ancestor of a coming King who will fulfill promises made to Abraham.



May 19
Joshua — Joshua 1

Acts 13:19 Then he destroyed seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to Israel as an inheritance.

The time has come for Joshua to lead the people to take over the land promised centuries before to Abraham. Jesus and Joshua's names both mean "salvation", and it has been traditional to see the promised land as emblematic of our entrance into the Kingdom of God now as well as looking toward the new heavens and new earth.

Both led the process of "possessing the land", something that is repeated three times. That the land was God's gift was repeated five times. Israel serves as a microcosm of God's Kingdom, preparing for Christ to come and extend it to all.

The exhortation to "be strong and courageous", repeated four times, and the additional charge to "not be afraid or discouraged" met Joshua's challenging new role. He remembered how intimidating the opponents were, recalled that the ten discouraging companions had died, and that of his generation, only he and Caleb were left after the forty years of wandering.

We also need strength, courage, and not to let fear or discouragement take hold of us in the challenges of our lives. We need to be able to let go of memories that would hold us back, and focus our energies on this present moment. Joshua is a model of courage in the face of an overwhelming situation, and we can emulate him in this.

For many of us who were taught to memorize scripture as children, there is a comforting and familiar verse: "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success." (Joshua 1:8 KJV) An encouragement to stay engaged, even with difficult parts of scripture.

Lord, make us bold to follow you into the spiritual battles that result in the spread of your Kingdom. Make us people who trust you, who listen to your Spirit, who hear your word.

May 20
Entering the land — Joshua 2-5

Hebrews 4:8-11 This new place of rest was not the land of Canaan, where Joshua led them. If it had been, God would not have spoken later about another day of rest. So there is a special rest still waiting for the people of God. For all who enter into God's rest will find rest from their labors, just as God rested after creating the world. Let us do our best to enter that place of rest.

The still insecure people of God needed a series of encouragements to prepare them to take the land, and Christ himself appeared to Joshua as the culminative encouragement.

The first encouragement was the report of the spies that the people were terrified of them. Rahab who hid the spies showed her faith that they would win as they came into the land and appealed for her life.

Second, they were reminded that the Ark of the Covenant meant that God was present with them in their journey. Third, they saw a miracle of waters piling up and leaving a dry river bed. Crossing the Jordan in this way looked back to crossing the Red Sea and looked forward to the baptism of Christ in that same place, all three events inaugurating a new kingdom.

Fourth, they placed twelve memorial stones in the Jordan and another twelve as an altar on the land to mark this moment, something to serve as a way of teaching their children. It was this extraordinary experience that made the people revere Joshua as their leader.

Fifth, they recommitted to the covenant, and circumcised the uncircumcised. Sixth, they then celebrated Passover. Both of these ceremonies reminded them of God's mighty work on their behalf in the past, in Abraham and the promise of land to his descendants, and Moses' liberating them from Egypt.

Seventh, Joshua encountered the commander of the Lord's army, and was told to take off his sandals because he was in a holy place. This vision, taking place after the Passover, symbolically parallels Christ's resurrection appearances. The new kingdom would be created with spiritual force and God himself in control.

Each of these seven encouragements has an application for us in our challenges: 1) we are on the winning side and even spiritual enemies are in terror (James 2:19), 2) God is with us, 3) our baptism, 4) the apostles as foundation stones (Revelation 21:14), 5) we are made holy, 6) rescued from sin, and 7) reassured that Christ leads us. All these things build our faith that victory is coming.

Lord, thank you that we are called to baptism, and to be part of bringing your Kingdom into this world. Thank you for every spiritual experience and symbol that reassures us that victory is ours.

May 21
Rahab — Joshua 6

Luke 7:47 “I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love.”

Rahab’s scarlet thread has been seen as representing the blood of Christ. In the New Testament we are told her friendly welcome to the spies showed faith, whereas others refused to obey God. (Hebrews 11:31) Her actions showed faith, and James draws a lesson for us. (James 2:25) Her reward is that she became an ancestress of Christ, redeemed from death.

Rahab’s status as transformed prostitute recalls women in Jesus’ ministry: the woman caught in adultery, the Samaritan, the woman who anointed his feet. The disciples disapproved of his talking to the Samaritan, and the Pharisees were horrified Jesus would let her touch him. (Luke 7:36-50) Mary Magdalene had seven demons, but became a new person and is honored in scripture as the first to speak to the risen Christ. The love He showed for marginalized women parallels the kindness and love of Salmon, the Israelite who married Rahab and integrated her into the community.

Because Rahab was so redeemed, she became an archetype of the forgiven people of God. Dante, author of *The Divine Comedy*, described her as a luminous figure in Paradise.

This first encounter with the Canaanite world started out far more like a demonstration than a military engagement, with Israel walking silently around the city for six days. On the seventh day the walls collapsed and they destroyed everyone, young and old, animals, and they burned the town. Only Rahab and her family were saved.

I cannot forget the refrain: “completely destroyed.” “Destroy” is repeated at least 24 times in the first half of Joshua, along with burned cities, and “men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep, donkeys—everything.” Wrestling with the ethical implications of this is important. An excellent book that analyzes the problem of war in the Hebrew scriptures, particularly the holy wars of this book, is *Fight: A Christian Case for Non-Violence* by Preston Sprinkle.¹⁶ It is an ancient book, telling an ancient story, and the Israelites were neither the first nor last to conquer in God’s name.

Lord, thank you that you redeem us. War, with its terrible destruction, is a horror to us today, and we struggle with the horror of this period in scripture. May we be like Rahab who sought rescue from coming destruction and received special grace.

May 22

Destruction — Joshua 7-9

Colossians 2:15 In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross.

Joshua's triumphs foreshadow Christ's spiritual conquests. Christ's opposition came from the demonic forces he overcame as he liberated those who suffered. On a human level his opponents were Pharisees and religious leaders. He was poor, provincial and politically powerless, yet his sarcastic diatribes "spoke truth to power", confronting hypocrisy, and ultimately they killed Him for it.

If we compare Joshua's conquest to the life of Christ we see correlation and contrasts which we can apply to ourselves as well:

Command against taking things	Christ modeled non-materialism
Achan's secret greed led to death	Judas' secret greed led to death
Defeat led to repentance	Peter's failure led to repentance
Ai was defeated and burned	Christ did not send fire from heaven
The old covenant was renewed	Christ gave a new covenant
Gibeon deceived them	Christ could read men's hearts

The largest contrast was, of course, that prayer and prophetic speech were Christ's way of fighting, versus the literal physical battles of Joshua. While Christendom has had a history of using Joshua's methods, the people and periods we most admire followed in the way of Christ. The extension of the Kingdom through prayer and speech are to be our way. We should not be afraid to speak "truth to power", call out hypocrisy, cruelty, foolishness, lies, and manipulation in our political and religious leaders. I am thinking, for the ordinary person, that we live in an age when on-line responses are relatively easy and can make a difference. We need to take seriously the call to be fighters for good, using peacemaking skills, but never afraid to tell the truth.

Lord, I admit these are hard passages for me, particularly in light of justifications offered for modern wars. Help us to hold up your call to peacemaking as our high value. Thank you that yours is a peaceable Kingdom which wins by submitting to the violence and opposition of others.

May 23

Conquest — Joshua 10-12

I John 5:4 For every child of God defeats this evil world, and we achieve this victory through our faith.

Christ's victory over evil was won at the cross, and He gives us victory. Four times these chapters tell us that victory came from God as they won the land.

Living in a century when millions of people have died in our wars, it changes the picture to realize that the 31 kings who were conquered ran cities and surrounding villages, much like feudal lords, and the populations would have been relatively small. Israel, formerly so timid, now took a determined position against more powerful enemies and was successful. They accepted the conquest as God's project and saw every victory as a sign of His favor.

Repetitions of Joshua's story abound in history. In early Christianity peacemaking was the norm, but starting in the 4th century Christian rulers began to compel conversion by means of the sword. Not only the Crusades, but the New World conquests were seen as holy wars. Jesus' call to be inclusive, "Compel them to come in" (Luke 14:23 KJV) was used to justify conversion at the point of the sword.¹⁷

Handel was not as squeamish as I am about conquest. Best known for his oratorio *Messiah*, he also wrote numerous oratorios on violent scripture stories, including *Joshua*. It contains a popular and often performed piece "See the conquering hero comes" later translated into English as the Easter Hymn, "Thine be the Glory, Risen, Conquering King." It is important to remember that the way Christ conquered was through His own suffering and death, and that this the call for us today.

The rest of the Hebrew scriptures continue to be an alternation between victories and defeats. For us, the victories are spiritual ones and the New Testament gives us many encouraging promises such as the one above.

Lord, we have not learned clearly how you go about your process of spiritual transformation, so often regressing to the tools of domination or exploitation. Forgive us for not taking seriously enough that you chose to be the victim of violence on the cross and that is the way you won the victory.

May 24
Caleb — Joshua 13-15

Matthew 4:25 Large crowds followed him wherever he went—people from Galilee, the Ten Towns, Jerusalem, from all over Judea, and from east of the Jordan River.

Caleb prefigures Christ's Judean identity. Caleb, one of the twelve spies who went into Canaan, was full of enthusiasm to take possession of the land. For the next 40 years in the desert he saw his friends die, all but Joshua, fulfilling the prediction that only these two adults of their generation would enter the

land. The chapters begin with reference to Joshua's age and all that remains to be conquered. Caleb was 85 years old when he came to ask permission to conquer Hebron. Both he and Joshua had seen first-hand the race of giants that so frightened their fellow scouts, but Caleb asked for the opportunity to conquer these challenging people and did so.

Abraham had lived in Hebron where he received the promise of the land. He bought a cave to bury Sarah, and was buried there by his sons. Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Leah were also buried there. (Genesis 49:31) Caleb links Abraham and David, not in Christ's ancestral line, but as a claimant of the promise of the land. Christ lived and died in Judea, a descendant of Judah. Today the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron is Israel's second most holy site and the highest point in Israel. A divided city, it is the center of West Bank trade, the largest of Palestinian cities, with a small but determined population of Jewish settlers, and consequently a site of struggle.

Caleb inspired leadership in others. He gave his daughter in marriage to the brave conqueror of another impressive giant's city about eleven miles southwest. It is touching to realize that this daughter had lower status as daughter of a concubine. (I Chronicles 2: 48,49) Nevertheless, she had the boldness to ask and receive two water sources from her father. The story is repeated in Judges 1, emphasizing this unusual woman, Acsah, and inspiring us to be bold. She must have been an encourager for her husband Othniel who became the first judge upon whom God's Spirit came, who overthrew their oppressors and brought forty years' peace. (Judges 3:9-11)

Once again, Caleb and his descendants inspire us to be courageous and unafraid, bold and victorious, confident that God gives victory.

Lord, thank you for these heroes, even somewhat obscure ones, who inspire us to realize that there is nothing we cannot accomplish if we are trusting in you and working with you to fulfill your will. Thank you that you are a God of victory in our lives today, that your strength is made perfect in our weakness.

May 25

Distribution of the Land — Joshua 16-21

Matthew 13: 44 "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field—and to get the treasure too!"

The land Joshua distributed to the people was the formation of the kingdom in His time and foreshadowed Christ's gift of the kingdom to us. In the second half of Joshua the word "inheritance" reoccurs 47 times (King James version), and

the emphasis in these chapters is the practical side of the fulfillment of that long-ago promise of land to the patriarchs. “Not a single one of all the good promises the Lord had given to the family of Israel was left unfulfilled; everything he had spoken came true.” (Joshua 21:45)

From the lack of battles, and the refrain in Judges 1 that they “failed to drive out” the people we can see that they perhaps moved into their territory and lived alongside others. The prediction that they would succumb to idolatry would lead to domination by other nations did happen. Ultimately ten tribes lost the inheritance altogether and two tribes lost it temporarily but were able to return.

In a remarkable modern parallel, today’s Jews entered the land nineteen centuries after being evicted, reclaiming their inheritance and displacing others. The political consequences are still problematic, and I struggle with the ironies of a post-holocaust nation displacing others into camps, while admiring Israel’s accomplishments. We are exhorted to pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

Lord, thank you that you fulfilled your prophecies and restored Israel to the land. We praise you for this demonstration of your power. We pray for peace for that land.

May 26

The Covenant Renewed — Joshua 22-24

Luke 22:20 After supper he took another cup of wine and said, “This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood, which is poured out as a sacrifice for you.”

Joshua instituted a covenant with the people before he died, just as Christ made a new covenant before his death. Joshua warned them what would happen if they failed to keep their promise to serve God.

Joshua reviewed Israel’s history, and the people declared they would not follow foreign gods, but would obey God. Joshua rolled a large stone beneath the oak tree, near the tabernacle at Shechem, which served as a memorial. He buried Joseph which looked back to Jacob’s prophecy and forward to when Christ would sit there with the woman at Jacob’s well.

Preparatory to this, Phinehas served as a mediator and averted civil war. He verified that the Trans Jordan tribes were not worshipping idols, but honoring God with a memorial. Joshua, the warrior, and Eleazar, the high priest, both died, ending an era.

Despite this renewal of the covenant, they quickly failed. In the next chapter, Judges 1, we are told of all the Canaanites among whom they lived that they did not defeat and were not trying to defeat. Soon they were diligently intermarrying. (Judges 3:6) God's messenger, perhaps Christ himself, came to tell them they had broken their side of the covenant, and God would allow them to be defeated. The people in the land "will be thorns in your sides, and their gods will be a constant temptation to you." (Judges 2:3)

Joshua said "Deep in your hearts you know that every promise of the LORD your God has come true. Not a single one has failed!" (23:14) Yet despite God's faithfulness, they so soon were unfaithful in return. Past victories do not mean that we always stay strong in the face of the next challenge. Life is difficult, and there is always another struggle, always another challenge to faith, always another time of hoping for more victories.

Lord, forgive our weakness and our wandering ways. We do not have the persistence to live holy lives. We need your grace.

May 27

Judges — Judges 1-3

Luke 4:18, 19 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come."

Judges foreshadows Christ as the victor over evil. Warfare in Judges are the uprisings of weaker people against stronger nations that oppress them, demanding slave labor. The oppression results from having "failed to drive out" those already there, and adopting their neighbors' idolatry. Repentance results in leaders who bring freedom for the people.

The generation rescued from Egypt later rebelled and died in the desert, and the subsequent generation partially conquered the land. But the next generation did not remember the past and assimilated to the culture of their neighbors, just as had been warned.

In the text, the total time of oppression is 74 years, and the total time of peace is 296 years. Many heroes are only names for us: Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon. We learn more about Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, Abimilech/Jotham, and Samson. The leaders functioned like warlords or tribal chiefs, and acted as guerrilla fighters against better-organized, better armed warriors. God's call gave them authority recognized by their peers, and the darker side of their characters is not hidden. The last part of the book shows a descent into chaos, including in the name of religion, a complete

deterioration of society that has to turn around with the prophetic work of Samuel.

The first hero, Ehud, defeated the king in a special forces agent action. When I read the Bible for myself as a young teen, I found this story distasteful, rather shocking that the Bible would mention someone not only going to the bathroom, but the bowels emptying because of the knife plunged into him. Not to mention that the king was fat. Why was this in a book designed to help us grow spiritually? I now accept that this is an earthy book, and over-delicacy is a symptom of Greek idealism, not Hebrew or Christian thinking that accepts the unity of body and spirit. Ehud made me ask questions.

The ugliness in the book stands in contrast to what Israel was intended to be. God's call for a kingdom of priests was to create a space where heaven and earth were in concert, preparing for the full expression through Christ. The repeated failure, the repeated offensive turn toward revering idols rather than God could have meant the end of the story. But in God's faithfulness to His own plan and promises, He fought for them, and mercifully restored his presence with them.

God's faithfulness to fight on our behalf even when we have failed Him remains a steady encouragement as we see the peoples' repeated failures and compare them to our own.

Lord, help us to turn quickly to you when we realize we are being oppressed and trust you to free us. We worship you for your victory over all evil things, and we thank you that You are the one who brings victory, not us.

May 28

Deborah — Judges 4,5

Luke 22:69 "From here on the Son of Man takes his place at God's right hand, the place of power."

Deborah and Christ spoke prophetically. Deborah and Barak's song prophesied Christ's triumph in his ascension. Lines regarding the earth shaking at God's presence, heavens dropping, rain, and Sinai moving, dominion over the mighty, and leading captivity captive were picked up in Psalms. (68) The latter phrase is applied to Christ's ascension, (Ephesians 4:8) as is the theme of dominion. (Ephesians 1:20-22)

Jael is celebrated for pounding a tent peg into Sisera's head: "Most blessed of all women is Jael, most blessed of all homemaking women." The phrase is taken up regarding Mary, Christ's mother.

Abigail Adams identified with Jael. She applied the story metaphorically as a call to die to self when she did not want her husband to leave again to carry out his work abroad. This kind of allegorizing seems antique, but as one of the few female warriors of scripture, Jael reflects Christ as warrior. Since Abigail Adams was living as a woman alone with her children in the Revolutionary War perhaps she wondered if she might have to apply this literally.

Handel wrote an oratorio on Deborah. His choice of characters with dramatic conflicts and triumphant military finales reflects his 18th century context of dramatic battle. Triumphant music celebrates Jael's killing of Sisera. He also wrote oratorios for Samson, Jephthah, Saul, Solomon, Athaliah, and Esther. .

The idea that God “gave them victory” is repeated three times in these chapters, and 19 more times in the book. The idea that God acts to bring victory, not me, is reassuring whenever I feel weak and overwhelmed. As I look back on life I can see victories in many areas: ministry, finances, relationships, health, wisdom for different situations. Even with all these positive memories, when the next challenge comes around, I feel just as tempted to fearfulness in the face of life's next challenge and have to fight the temptation.

Lord, thank you that we still experience moments of spiritual triumph when we can see that a battle has been won. Keep us full of faith and determination in the middle of those battles. Keep an appropriate kind of “warrior spirit” in us as we face the struggles of life. We praise you that you are the one who brings these victories, not us.

May 29

Gideon — Judges 6-7

Hebrews 11:32-34 It would take too long to recount the stories of the faith of Gideon.... By faith these people overthrew kingdoms, ruled with justice, and received what God had promised them. They shut the mouths of lions, quenched the flames of fire, and escaped death by the edge of the sword. Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle and put whole armies to flight.

Gideon foreshadows Christ as leader of a small group of followers who dramatically turn the tables on more powerful people. Gideon and Christ let crowds go, and selected a small committed band of followers for battle against their enemies who had stolen all their food and left them starving. With a small band, Gideon routed the enemy, and with twelve followers, Christ turned the world upside down.

A favorite image from this story is setting out a fleece. Christians use this example to ask for a tangible sign of God's leading. Another favorite lesson is that one does not need strength in numbers, but rather strength of commitment and determination. The final lesson is that God wins the battle, and all we have to do is let our lights shine. Gideon was fearful, did not want the responsibility, but won his battle and place in history.

The time of the Judges somewhat reminds me of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings novels. Small nations, some good, some mixed, some downright evil, are in the midst of a massive competition between freedom and domination. The 40 or 80 year periods of peace remind me of the Hobbit residents of the Shire who take their small, happy lives for granted. But when the larger struggle intruded, they become unlikely heroes—weak, fearful and reluctant—but ultimately they won, using their smallness and weakness.

Lord, help us take seriously our call to be part of a small band of committed followers. Make us heroes of the faith, able to really listen to you and hear what our task might be today.

May 30

Gideon's Sons — Judges 8-9

Matthew 13:34,35 Jesus always used stories and illustrations like these when speaking to the crowds. In fact, he never spoke to them without using such parables. This fulfilled the prophecy that said, "I will speak to you in parables. I will explain mysteries hidden since the creation of the world."

Jotham, the youngest son of Gideon, survived the slaughter of his 70 brothers, similar to Christ's survival of slaughter of the innocents. When he spoke up against his brother using a parable, he prefigured the extent to which Christ would also have to speak out against his brothers in parables.

After Gideon's success he had become oppressive and idolatrous. One of his sons, Abimelech, murdered most of his brothers and became a tyrant and oppressor. Jotham pointed out his brother Abimelech's injustice by means of a parable. Trees sought a king, asking olive, fig, or vine to rule them, each of which refused. When they asked the bramble, it accepted, the analogy being acceptance of kingship by an unworthy man. Jotham prophesied that Abimelech would destroy his people by fire, and would be destroyed in turn.

A thousand people from Shechem who had supported Abimelech's kingship died by fire. He was wounded by a millstone thrown down by a woman, and asked his armor bearer to kill him. The moral: "Thus God punished Abimelech for the evil he had done against his father by murdering his seventy brothers. God

also punished the men of Shechem for all their evil. So the curse of Jotham son of Gideon came true.”

Speaking up against injustice may seem like a very small act, particularly if the immediate result seems ineffective. We do it, though, not because we know it will have the right impact, but because we know it is right.

Lord, make us bold and creative to tell the truth about things that are wrong in our world. And make us humble enough to come to you for mercy when we have blown it once again and know we really do not deserve another chance. Thank you that you give more chances, thanks to the work of Christ.

May 31

Jephthah — Judges 10-12

Matthew 5:37 Just say a simple, ‘Yes, I will,’ or ‘No, I won’t.’ Anything beyond this is from the evil one.

Jephthah stands in contrast to Christ. Jephthah treated the vulnerable irresponsibly and made a foolish vow that showed general disregard for others. He suffered when it was his own daughter. In contrast, Christ accepted the poor, ill, children, and women with compassion.

Jephthah, rejected by his brothers because he was a prostitute’s son, gained a rebel following. When community leaders asked him to fight the Ammonites, he sent an appeal to the opposing King. He asked for respect of 300 years’ possession of the land.

When he won the resulting war, he carried out his vow to sacrifice whoever met him upon his return which was, unfortunately, his daughter, celebrating with tambourine and dance. Perhaps the result was perpetual virginity, not death, but a sad result of foolish words. As Christ exhorted us, we should simply say what we mean and mean what we say. Making promises we cannot keep gets us in trouble.

When disrespected by fellow Israelites, he retaliated by killing 42,000 people.

Jephthah

Son of a prostitute
Led rebels while in the wilderness
Leaders promised power
Demanded reassurance of his position
Made and fulfilled a foolish vow
Took vengeance on his own for disrespect
Ruled only six years

Jesus

Son of a virgin
Defeated temptation in the wilderness
Leaders oppose his authority
Operated out of interior authority
Advocated making no vows
Allowed his own to kill him
Is an eternal King

Before and after Jephthah we have ordinary leaders who did not have great battles but kept the peace—Jair for 23 years, Tola for 22, Ibzan for 7, Elon for 10, and Abdon for 8. How good to be reminded that a good ruler often does not have to make a big splash, but is gladly remembered for letting ordinary life go on.

Lord, give us wisdom and keep us from making foolish commitments.

June 1
Samson — Judges 13-16

John 5:19-22 Jesus replied, “I assure you, the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and tells him everything he is doing, and the Son will do far greater things than healing this man. You will be astonished at what he does. He will even raise from the dead anyone he wants to, just as the Father does.”

Samson’s birth and death parallel Christ. Samson was the opposite of Christ in so many respects—stubborn, impatient, impulsive, sensual, and manipulated by women. But his birth was prophesied to his parents by an angel, and his decision to sacrifice himself by pulling the pagan temple down by the pillars and killing the enemies of Israel has some parallel to Christ’s self-sacrifice.

The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* makes the point that in Samson’s story we have two motifs at once: 1) the exploits of a successful hero, a strong man akin to Hercules, and 2) the tragedy of personal weakness and failure to live up to his calling. Through his twenty years as champion, the people were only partially freed from the Philistines.

Most touching in the story was Samson’s acknowledgment of need when he was thirsty and God provided water, and at his life’s end when asked for strength to defeat his enemies. These moments of humility contrast with his arrogant forgetfulness that his strength was a gift.

Outward success and inner weakness and subsequent failure is something we have seen in political and religious leaders in our day. Our movie action heroes often have Samson’s same strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps all these stories speak to us because we are aware of our own ambiguous qualities as a mixture of heroism and failure, prone to anger, violence or lust, even as we aspire to champion the good.

Lord, teach us to not depend on our own strengths and talents, but to constantly acknowledge that all we have comes from you.

June 2

False religion — Judges 17-18

John 4:24 For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.

God called for spiritual worship in both Old and New Testaments. Idolatrous religion and ritual had starting points, and this story is a case study. Micah, the one starting the new religion, admitted to stealing his mother's money. Getting it back, she used part of the funds to make an idol.

Micah set up a shrine, and commissioned his son as priest. When a Levite needed work, Micah hired him. His motive was to manipulate the supernatural world to receive blessing rather than the curse his mother had pronounced on the unknown thief.

The priest prophesied success for Israelites traveling through who were so pleased they asked him to become tribal priest and to steal the religious artifacts. Despite Micah's protests, they stole his manufactured religion. Sadly, "Micah's carved image was worshiped by the tribe of Dan as long as the Tabernacle of God remained in Shiloh." (Judges 18:31)

The end of Judges shows culture collapsing culture in fake religion, sexuality, and violence. The refrain "Israel had no king" is preparation for kingly rule, but we will see that kings also fail.

This deconstruction of starting a religion warns us to notice our own cultural patterns and critique them. We, too, fall into trying to manipulate God by following the right formulas. We want power over God and to get things from God, with the result that we are no longer in a relationship of true worship.

Lord, help me not to "make things up" that I think are good religion, or to fall into the traps of other made-up things.

June 3

Levite and his concubine — Judges 19

John 21:15 "Dear woman, why are you crying?" Jesus asked her.

The Levite's mistreatment of a woman contrasts with Christ's respectful kindness to women. Christ treated women with kindness and encouragement. In contrast, the Levite abused his concubine, treating her as a possession, not offering marriage, and offered to others as a sexual object. Her death became a conflict between men and not about her, and her dead body was mutilated.

Dr. Keller uses this story to contrast a terrible husband who does not care for his wife, but who sacrifices her for his own benefit with the true husband Christ who loves his bride and gives himself for her in self-sacrificing love.

This ideal is not always reached, and in our society, it is estimated that one in three women and one in four men have been victims of violence from a partner in their lifetime. During one year, the estimate is the more than 10 million experience abuse. While efforts to counter these realities are vigorous, we still have a long way to go. In our country, serious effort to protect women from abuse did not begin until the mid-1800s, and the first services for abused women were not started until 1974. Add rape and child abuse to the picture and the social problems we need to address are enormous.

We can help. We can raise awareness. We can volunteer. We can donate. We can be part of making sure counseling and safe houses are available.

Lord, thank you that you can transform abusive and violence toward a partner who should receive love. Have grace and mercy both victims and abusers.

June 4

Repentance — Judges 20-21

II Corinthians 7:10 For the kind of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away from sin and results in salvation. There's no regret for that kind of sorrow. But worldly sorrow, which lacks repentance, results in spiritual death.

There is one bright place in the dark story where we see Christ. In the midst of chaos of these chapters, the people go to the Ark of the Covenant where they weep and repent and appeal for mercy.

While Israel's story is full of failure to live up to being a kingdom of priests, this is full of particularly bitter failures:

- the Levite has no qualms about cutting up his concubine's body to arouse a political response, a kind of propaganda
- the men of Gibeah had normalized their sexual perversity
- their fellow tribesmen defended this sinful behavior rather than judge it
- the result was civil war
- those carrying out the judgment were imperfect and suffered extreme casualties
- given all that goes wrong, we can at least ask if they were receiving true guidance from God
- the engaged in genocide
- aghast at the outcome they forced women to marry these men without their consent, and then authorized capture of other women

It is ugly, disturbing, and a classic text for asking “where is the spiritual benefit?” The sad truth is that we have parallel tragedies in our own day—sexual perversion, propaganda, civil war, genocide, violence in God’s name, exploitation of women. Commentators find this a difficult passage, and it is understandable it is not a favorite story and rarely chosen for preaching or study. However, an evaluation is given in Hosea: “Was it not right that the wicked men of Gibeah were attacked?” (Hosea 10:9)

In light of the failures, it seems God abandoned His people. But He is still there in the Ark of the Covenant, and He will still intervene, sending prophets, kings, and priests. He will even send messengers that descend from this sordid story: Jeremiah the prophet, and Paul the apostle.

This is an ethically messy story where one really wonders about the decision-making. Given the situation it is hard to see a black and white solution, and this “shade of gray” solution is a challenge. Perhaps it is worthwhile as a discussion of ethical dilemmas: what might have been a better solution?

Lord, make us wise in addressing injustice, not to give up, but to insist that justice be done. Give us grace when we do it wrong, and thank you that you are always ready to receive us at your Mercy Seat.

June 5
Ruth — Ruth 1

Luke 1:46-48 “Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed.”

Ruth foreshadows Mary as an ancestress of Christ. She is one of four women in Matthew’s genealogy of Christ, one of two we are sure were not Jewish, reinforcing that Christ is inclusive, the savior of the whole world.

In Ruth we see a woman humble enough to tolerate being an outsider, to do menial work, and even to make a counter-cultural marriage proposal. In the end we see her reversal of fortune, being raised to honor, even the great honor as the ancestress of an unbroken line of kings from David to Christ. A search through scripture reveals the gifts of humility, many of which she experienced: exaltation, honor, grace, earthly property, greatness in the Kingdom, rescue, seeing God at work, being cared for, supported, and victory.

Ruth serves us well as an example of loyal love. Her declaration of loyalty to Naomi and her God has entered our marriage services as an ideal of committed relationship. Here is relational evangelism at its finest, even though Naomi was herself struggling with her own faith. Ruth is an example of a widow who

finds new people to love, does not stay stuck in her past life, but moves into a new period of fruitful life. She serves as a great example for any of us who have suffered the death of someone we care about, an example that love fills in our losses.

Lord, make us faithful family members like Ruth who offer a love that can heal depression and loss and discouragement. Make us like Naomi who even at her lowest point had something about her that led Ruth to God.

June 6
Boaz — Ruth 2

Ephesians 5:25-27 For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word. He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault.

Boaz' romance with Ruth not only reminds many of their own romances, but reflects Christ's romance with his bride, the church. His kindness as he takes an interest in "that girl over there" and his initiative in welcoming her, affirming her, feeding her, and providing for her are tender signs of love that eventually lead to their engagement and marriage. He welcomes this foreigner into the community and she is changed by this love.

I have so many single women friends who struggle with questions like, "Does God have an appropriate spouse for me?" "Where could I meet him?" "Why am I having to wait?" "Will I ever get married?" "Should I try on-line dating?" "Why aren't there more great single men at church?" These can be very painful questions. Young widows like Ruth have the same questions.

Part of what is beautiful in Ruth's story is that her love and loyalty to Naomi led her to actions that created an unexpected encounter with an eligible man. Can we, like Ruth, make a life of love for God and for those we know be our priority, trusting that in the process an appropriate marriage can come about? As I have lived alongside so many single people, my confidence and faith have grown for this area of life, and I confidently pray for God's very best for them.

Lord, trusting you with the romantic aspects of our lives and those of others can be so difficult. We do not see how this, which is so important to us, can possibly work out well sometimes and it becomes hard to trust your love and care for us. Give us grace.

June 7
Redemption — Ruth 3

Luke 1:68 Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited his people and redeemed them.

Boaz reflects Christ as redeemer, rescuing from poverty, exclusion, loneliness, and unfruitfulness. As was explained in Deuteronomy, he chose to fulfill the laws regarding caring for the widows of ones' relatives. In the midst of the chaotic period of the Judges, he was an example of an honorable man, obedient to the law.

Seeking marriage, Ruth set aside any clothes from mourning her widowhood, she dressed beautifully, and approached Boaz privately in the context of a harvest party. She let him know, just as her mother-in-law had instructed, that she was available for marriage.

Taking the fact that Ruth was a Gentile coming to Boaz, a redeeming Christ-figure, her humble approach was a request to be part of the family of faith. She asked something we also ask: "Spread the corner of your covering over me, for you are my family redeemer." (Ruth 3:9)

For the single women of today, I have wondered what our cultural equivalent to sneaking up to sleep at the feet of a man after the harvest party could possibly be. Perhaps the most obvious is being willing to invite men to events, joining fun activities where there are men, participating on mission trips and Bible studies where there are singles, and not being too timid to get to know people by asking good questions. In each case, it makes sense to copy Ruth and be well-groomed and attractively dressed!

I am impressed by a model of what makes for a lasting marriage. Created by the Gottman Institute, and based on years of seeing what works and what does not, they present it as a house on their website. A friendship where we really know the partner is the core. Other elements include sharing fondness and admiration, turning towards the partner, maintaining a positive perspective, managing conflict well, making life dreams come true, creating shared meaning, trust and commitment. Well worth pondering. For Christians, shared faith and sense of being brought together adds even more depth to marriage.

Lord, thank you that this is a story of our redemption, of your great love that rescues us from a difficult life and gives us a life of security, joy and worship. And thank you that it models it "being okay" for women to take initiative toward men in that delicate process of finding a spouse.

June 8
Legacy — Ruth 4

Matthew 1:5 Boaz was the father of Obed (whose mother was Ruth).

The legacy of Ruth and Boaz' life was the coming of Christ, the same legacy we desire to come through us. Boaz redeemed Ruth and married her. The result of their marriage was a child, the ancestor of King David and his descendant Christ. Here we have a key point of this gentle romance and its importance in scripture.

Ruth's story, and the birth of her son who is an ancestor to Christ, took place in Bethlehem where Christ was born. Together Ruth, Boaz and Obed become an image of the Holy Family.

The fact that Naomi is identified as Obed's grandmother even though there is no blood relationship is an encouragement. In our day of widespread infertility it is a gift to be able to offer foster care or to adopt children and to truly claim them as their own despite the lack of blood relationship.

Trusting God for children and grandchildren can be a challenge if there are delays in pregnancy. Trusting God as we care for children as they grow can be an even bigger challenge. And trusting Him if a child falls into difficulties can be the biggest challenge of all. Each of these things is a blessing from God for which we can pray in faith and hope and joy.

Lord, thank you for children. Thank you for the gift of life and the opportunity to treasure them. Make our families images of the Holy Family, seeing you in our children.

CHAPTER 3, Part 2

The Kingdom Foreshadowed: Flourishing

I & II Samuel, I Kings 1-10, I Chronicles, II Chronicles 1-9

The last prophet to lead the people, Samuel, was a strong leader in the tradition of Moses. However, the people wanted a king and the first choice, Saul, turned out badly. The second, David, was not only more obedient to God, he became the recipient of the promises of an eternal throne, looking forward to a Kingdom much larger and longer-lasting than his. David's son Solomon created a beautiful Temple that was the center of worship and expanded the kingdom into even greater glory.



June 9

Hannah — I Samuel 1-2

Luke 2:27-31 That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying, "Lord, now I can die in peace! As you promised me, I have seen the Savior you have given to all people."

Hannah foreshadows Christ's mother Mary. Both women had children when it seemed unlikely that they could. Both dedicated their sons at God's house. Both sons remained there serving God.

Hannah's sincere and persistent prayer for a child can serve as an encouragement not to give up on things we are requesting from God. When God answered she said, "I prayed for this child, and God gave me what I asked for, and now I have dedicated him to God. He's dedicated to God for life," a beautiful example of an appropriate prayer for every Christian parent. Both Hannah and Mary took their sons to the Temple where they served others.

Like Mary, Hannah was a poet, and similarities stand out, comparing their poems line by line. In her poem Hannah offers a prophecy of Christ's resurrection: "God brings death and God brings life, brings down to the grave and raises up." (I Samuel 2:6) Both women show fierceness, affirming God's approval of strong women.

Mary's song, the Magnificat, and has become a treasured part of Christian worship with musical settings by Vivaldi, Bach, Bruckner, Rachmaninoff, John Rutter, Arvo Pärt, Thomas Tallis, John Michael Talbot, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and many others. This inspiring affirmation of faith thus spans not only the thousand years from Hannah to Mary, but two thousand more to our day.

Lord, thank you for the totally undeserved and gracious gift of fulfillment of our longings, of our desires to see prayers answered, even of requests for children. We worship you as Hannah and Mary did, recognizing you as a God of knowledge, holiness, and intervention on behalf of the weak.

June 10

Eli — I Samuel 3-4

Matthew 26:3,4 At that same time the leading priests and elders were meeting at the residence of Caiaphas, the high priest, plotting how to capture Jesus secretly and kill him.

Eli, the high priest of his day, is a tragic figure in whom the human failures of priests are highlighted, in contrast to the perfect priest we have in Christ. Christ warned the priests of his time that they were operating in opposition to God, and similarly Eli received a similar warning from Samuel. In neither case did they listen, and in both cases judgment fell.

Eli's sons Hophni and Phinehas (note: not the same Phinehas from Numbers, Joshua and Judges), were scoundrels who took the best meat for their food, sometimes even snatching it before the sacrifice, and grew fat. Eli reproached them, but they would not listen. A prophet warned Eli that all of his family would die, his two sons on the same day. God gave a similar warning to small Samuel.

The sons carried the Ark to the battleground and it was captured. As prophesied, the two sons were killed. Eli, 98 years old, blind, and fat, fell backwards and broke his neck.

Unfortunately, self-indulgent spiritual leaders have plagued Christian history, and are present with us today. Greed, abuse of their position, inability to discipline harmful behavior in those they are leading all are painfully familiar. Our aim is to be like Samuel: "the Lord was with him and everything Samuel said was wise and helpful."

Lord, thank you that you are our perfect High Priest, without sin, able to reconcile us completely. We worship you for your perfection. Help us to live without compromises that dishonor you.

June 11

The Ark of the Covenant — I Samuel 5-6

Hebrews 9:5 Above the Ark were the cherubim of divine glory, whose wings stretched out over the Ark's cover, the place of atonement. But we cannot explain these things in detail now.

The Ark of the Covenant represents Christ's presence with His people. Several times the Ark is referred to as the throne of God. (I Samuel 4:4, II Samuel 6:2, Jeremiah 3:16) As the passage above indicates, there is not an explicit New Testament explanation.

When the people moved, it followed the lead team of Judah and two tribes. Entering the land, the Ark went first and waited mid-river as it went dry until all the people had crossed. Located at first in Gilgal, it was then moved to Bethel (Judges 2:1, 20:27), then to Shiloh. (I Samuel 1:3, 3:3) Talmudic tradition says it remained in Shiloh for 369 years until this story of its capture.

Philistines became afraid of this sign of God's presence. Their idol fell before it twice, and illness broke out wherever it was taken. They sent it back. When the people of Bethshemesh casually looked into it, 70 people died, so they sent it to Kiriath-jearim, fifteen miles from Jerusalem.

There it remained. During David's time it may have moved among Levitical families. (I Samuel 7:1,2, II Samuel 6:3,11, I Chronicles 13:13, 15:24,25) David formally moved it into a tent in Jerusalem (I Chronicles 15) Solomon moved it into the newly built Temple. (II Chronicles 5) Once the first Temple was destroyed (II Chronicles 36:18,19) we hear no more of it.

We have previously noted the death and resurrection imagery the Ark carries so well. By extension, we also become "the Ark" because we carry the presence of God. The question is, do we become a source of healing and dangerous to evil, causing spiritual forces to be overcome?

A simple wooden box
Became more than a box
By adorning it with golden angels
Placing treasures inside—
Anointed with power
It was dangerous.

I am a simple wooden box
Made more than that
By being adorned with glory
With centuries of wisdom inside—
Anointed with power
Life flows out.

Lord, help us to have a healthy reverence for the power of your presence with us.

June 12
Samuel — I Samuel 7

John 10: 27 "My sheep recognize my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish."

Samuel prefigures Christ in many ways: a miraculous child, his mother's song of celebration like Mary's, his dedication at the Temple by his parents, staying/living in the Temple, liberating people from the power of evil, a role as teacher and traveling preacher, praying for the people, opposition to unfaithful religious and political leaders, anointing others with the Holy Spirit, offering instruction regarding the Kingdom, calling for obedience and putting God first, and showing he was alive after death.

Similar comments are made regarding the childhoods of Samuel and Christ. “Meanwhile young Samuel grew taller, he also continued to gain favor with the Lord and with the people” (I Samuel 2:26) compares to “So Jesus grew both in height and in wisdom, and he was loved by God and by all who knew him.” (Luke 2:26)

Both waited patiently for public ministry. Tradition is that Samuel was a teenager when the Ark was captured. He continued in ministry for twenty years before calling the people to action when in his 30s. Similarly, Jesus lived humbly under the authority of others until the start of his ministry when he was “about thirty years old.” (Luke 3:23) Samson never succeeded in liberating the people from the Philistines, but God miraculously did so under Samuel.

In the Temple assisting Eli, Samuel learned to hear God’s voice. As a child, this was my favorite Bible story. It seemed remarkable that God would speak to us, and I longed to hear something deeper than my own mind.

Thank you for Samuel’s example of obedient service. Help us to live with that same obedience, always listening. Give us ears to hear.

June 13

Samuel Anoints a King — I Samuel 8-9

John 1:22,23 “Then who are you! Tell us, so we can give an answer to those who sent us. What do you have to say about yourself!” John [the Baptist] replied in the words of Isaiah: “I am a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare a straight pathway for the Lord’s coming!’”

In anointing a King, Samuel bears a resemblance to John the Baptist who announced Christ as Messiah. Transition from prophetic leadership to kingship was painful for Samuel. God told him, “Do as they say for it is me they are rejecting not you. They don’t want me to be their king any longer.” (I Samuel 8:7) Before this, God was King and earthly leaders were assistants. Now they wanted to be like other nations, and God allowed it.

The man selected, Saul, seemed wonderful and godly, but soon started to make serious mistakes that God took the throne from his descendants and then from him.

Samuel’s dialogue with God gave him predictive capacity for upcoming events, as did Christ’s. When Saul was to become king Samuel gave him three signs to encourage him this was God’s call, which parallel things Christ told his disciples.

Samuel

Saul donkeys would be found
 Men with meat, bread, wine
 would give him bread
 The Spirit of God would come on him
 making him a new man

Christ

Disciples told where to find a donkey
 A man would share his home
 for their Passover supper
 Disciples should wait for the Spirit
 at Pentecost

For us, now that Christ has come, being anointed with the Holy Spirit is something that is available to all of us. We merely must ask, and requesting prayer from a person who demonstrates spiritual power is a good way. I have had several experiences of particularly “feeling” the Spirit like a kind of electricity, but the real proof that God is at work is the impact on our character and our influence on others. Saul’s failure serves as a cautionary tale that the gift can be withdrawn.

Lord, thank you that you do speak to us, and you lead us to bless others by sharing those words. Thank you that you do anoint us with your Spirit to enable us to do your work.

June 14

Saul Crowned as King — I Samuel 10-12

I Corinthians 4:20 For the Kingdom of God is not just a lot of talk; it is living by God’s power.

After Samuel anointed Saul, he was publically identified and acknowledged as king, the Spirit of God came on him, and he was “changed into a different person,” “God changed his heart,” he received the scroll of the king’s duties and he had as companions “a band of men whose hearts God has touched.” These experiences foreshadow Christ’s baptism and calling disciples.

Some of Saul’s people were under threat of becoming servants to the king of Ammon and blinded in one eye. Saul responded with righteous anger, cut up an ox, and sent pieces by messenger throughout Israel. A force of 330,000 gathered, the campaign was successful, and he was formally crowned.

In a touching postscript many years later, when Saul was killed in battle and his body and that of his sons hung on a wall, the grateful people he had rescued traveled all night to get the bodies, burned them, and respectfully buried their bones. (I Chronicles 10)

In Christ’s ministry enemies took the form of demonic forces from whom He had to deliver the people who had become oppressed. Christ promised that we could engage in similar miraculous work, (Mark 16:17) which we do through our prayers.

Lord, we are grateful for your work in freeing us from oppression. Help us to pray with faith whenever we see barriers for people to receive your grace.

June 15
Saul as King — I Samuel 13-15

John 11: 53 So from that time on the Jewish leaders began to plot Jesus' death.

Saul reflects those who turn away from God and actively work against him. His own disobedience created his spiritual depression and jealousy that led to opposing David. He thus becomes an image of Christ's opponents: Herod in his infancy, Pilate/Herod/Pharisees in his crucifixion. Herod pursued Christ and Saul pursued David, both fearing they could be replaced as King.

Each chapter shows poor decision-making: taking on the priestly role, telling his troops they could not eat, and sparing the Amalekites. Saul's story presents interpretive challenges: how do we understand the history of Israel and Amalek? How do we understand "an evil spirit sent from God"?

Saul was commanded to exterminate the Amalekites, (I Samuel 15) and lost his kingdom for not carrying this out. (I Samuel 15:28) Descended from Esau's grandson. (Genesis 36:12) Amalekites attacked as Israel journeyed toward Mount Sinai and ruthlessly killed the feeble, faint, and weary. (Exodus 17, Deuteronomy 25:17-18) For this offense God determined to destroy them as a people, which happened after Saul's time. (I Chronicles 4:43) We have seen that humans were told more than once to carry out God's death sentence for idolatry; here the death sentence was for cruelty.

God's Spirit left Saul when David was anointed. In its place came depression, a tormenting spirit of conviction. One way of understanding this comes from Saint Ignatius. He wrote that when we are in sin, any depression and anxiety we feel is from God trying to bring us to repentance; when we are living in obedience, depression and anxiety come from the enemy trying to defeat us. In Saul's case, his depression became characteristic of the rest of his life.

Cruelty should call out strong opposition in us. A good example comes from the work of the International Justice Mission that boldly takes on injustice through publically exposing the problem and bringing legal actions to bear. That works well as a way of dealing with "modern Amalekites." In regard to spiritual depression, we do not have to live with this—repentance and recovery are freely available.

Lord, thank you that you give us strength to fight against people who are cruel and unjust and that this is part of our work in the world today. Thank you that you free us from depression if we are truly willing to repent and ask for your Spirit to fill us once again. Thank you that we can live in peace.

June 16

David anointed — I Samuel 16

Luke 1:69-70 He has sent us a mighty Savior from the royal line of his servant David, just as he promised through his holy prophets long ago.

David, anointed to be king, is an image of Christ, the anointed one, Messiah. Selected by God through Samuel above all his older brothers, and above all from the tribe of Judah, he had a heart for God that prepared him for his role. David is another example of God's gracious choice of younger sons over the cultural norm of older sons: Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Judah, Solomon. Similarly, Christ's background was one of obscurity. David was a shepherd, a humble role, and Christ took the identity of a shepherd.

Anointed with oil, the "Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him from that day on." Similarly, when Christ returned from the temptation, "filled with the Holy Spirit's power" he announced that Isaiah's prophecy of the Spirit upon the Messiah was fulfilled in him.

The young shepherd whose poetry we still use in our prayers was selected from obscurity and became the great Shepherd King. Spurgeon wrote a beautiful meditation on how so many who prefigured Christ had this humble profession:

It is very beautiful to trace the shepherds through the Old Testament, and to see Christ as Abel, the witnessing shepherd, pouring out that blood, which crieth from the ground; as Abraham, the separating shepherd, leading out his flock into the strange country where they dwelt alone; as Isaac, the quiet shepherd, digging wells for his flock, and feeding them in peace in the midst of the enemies; as Jacob, the shepherd who is surety for the sheep, who earns them all by long toils and weariness, separates them, and walks in the midst of them to Canaan, preserving them by his own lone midnight prayers. There, too, we see our Lord as Joseph, the shepherd who is head over Egypt for the sake of Israel, of whom his dying father said, "From thence is the Shepherd, the stone of Israel." Head over all things for his church, the King who governs all the world for the sake of his elect, the great Shepherd of the sheep, who for their sakes has all power committed unto his hands. Then follows Moses, the chosen shepherd, who led his people through the wilderness up to the Promised Land, feeding them with manna and giving them drink from the smitten rock, -what a wide theme for resection here! And then there is David, the type of Jesus, as reigning in the covenanted inheritance over his own people, as a glorious king in the midst of them all. All these together enable us to see the varied glories of "that great Shepherd of the sheep." — Spurgeon

Lord, thank you that you are the Shepherd King, and that you have invited us to be a part of your Kingdom. May your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.

June 17

David Rescues God's People — I Samuel 17-18

Colossians 2:15 In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross.

David came forward to confront the giant Goliath when no one else from the people was willing or able to do that, paralleling Christ's unique confrontation with evil. The result in both cases was freedom for oppressed people.

David's services as a musician had not made him stand out to Saul, and he had been going back and forth between the court and tending sheep. But David's extra bravery and success made Saul wonder if he was from a notable warrior family. The real secret was his anointing with the Holy Spirit.

After killing Goliath, David and Prince Jonathan became friends, and he stayed permanently at the palace. Saul gave him a military command, and he was popular with soldiers, officers, and the public. The public acclaim, however, turned Saul against him, made him jealous and afraid of being usurped. Twice Saul threw spears at him and he demoted David to a lesser rank. But David continued to be successful "for the Lord was with him."

Princess Michal fell in love with him and Saul allowed the marriage, secretly hoping the bride price of dead Philistines would kill David. David's success filled Saul with fear.

For us, too, it is the anointing of God's Spirit that makes possible a level of success that may intimidate people who are not doing the right thing. If we become part of challenging them, it is God's Spirit in us that will make us successful, not our own cleverness or ability. But the fundamental lesson of the story is that, analogous to David's defeat of Goliath, Christ fights for us, liberating us from whatever is oppressing us.

Lord, we praise you that you are a victorious warrior, having removed all the power arrayed against your good world. Thank you that you in turn make us victorious warriors, part of bringing your true peace.

June 18
Jonathan — I Samuel 19-20

John 15:14 You are my friends if you obey me.

Jonathan foreshadows Christ as the perfect friend. He overcame the jealousy and failures of his father Saul, and maintained a loving, close relationship with David who he knew God had called to replace him. When Jonathan made a pact with David, the text says he “loved him as his own soul,” and gave him the royal robe, sword, bow and belt he was wearing. This makes Jonathan a picture of Christ who is the King’s son, takes us to his heart and “loves us as his own soul,” makes a new covenant with us, and clothes us with his own righteousness.

Jonathan was a brave and daring warrior without jealousy, a warm and loyal friend, and a peacemaker. He interceded for his friend David with his father Saul and succeeded in making peace. He also served as a protector by speaking well of David. When Saul once more pursued David, Jonathan stood up for him to the point of endangering his own life. When Jonathan died in battle, having forgiven his father and engaged in the fight beside him, David’s mourning included this praise: “Your friendship was a miracle-wonder, love far exceeding anything I’ve known or ever hope to know.” His character and actions are like Christ and serve as an example for us.

I ask myself if I know how to be a good friend. Do my friends know they are loved? Can they depend on me? Do I stand up for them when that is needed? Do I value them as they should be valued?

Lord, give us the grace to truly be your friends, and out of that love to pour out friendship to others. We worship you for the depths of your love for us.

June 19
David Flees from Saul — I Samuel 21, Psalm 56

Matthew 5:3 God blesses those who realize their need for him [the poor in spirit], for the Kingdom of Heaven is given to them.

David on the run from Saul became poor and a wanderer, just as Christ chose poverty and homelessness. Unfortunately, Saul’s jealousy could not be contained, and David fled. In this difficult time, he could have thought, “I will never be king.” Or “Since Saul is trying to kill me, I have a right to kill him.” Or “What am I doing wasting my life, running around in the wilderness?” Or “This life hardly seems appropriate for a future king.” Nevertheless, his actions and prayers in the Psalms show a heart of confidence in God.

Having lived in the palace, married a princess, and been a popular commander, he lost it all: his home, his fame, his popularity, his princess. He instantly became a poor man. He was so poor he had to beg for bread for himself and the young man with him from the priests, and took the special tabernacle bread.

He went to the Philistine King but quickly felt unsafe there and feigned madness to get away. The Psalm he wrote after this (Psalm 56) shows his heart when in these difficult and stressful situation of loss: “When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.” “I trust in God, so why should I be afraid?” “You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book.” “God is on my side.” His example challenges me to think about how I respond to loss in my life.

Lord, give me a humble heart that is able to trust you no matter what the circumstances. Help me see the bigger picture of your glory and your purposes.

June 20

Suffering — I Samuel 22, Psalm 52

Matthew 5:3, 6 God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ... God blesses those who are hungry and thirsty for justice, for they will receive it in full.

David’s own suffering, the sufferings of those who chose to join him, and the unjust murder of the priests who had helped him, reminds us of Christ’s suffering and his compassion for the suffering of others. In David’s time of weakness, we see an attractive faith and character which contrasts with his errors once he became strong

Doeg, who saw the priests help David, told Saul, with the result that 85 priests were killed along with their families. Abiathar fled to David and joined the malcontents who had already gathered around him. David’s Psalm (52) accuses Doeg: “You call yourself a hero, do you?” “Why boast about this crime of yours?” “You love to say things that hurt others.” “But God will strike you down.”

In this story Doeg serves as an image of the many people throughout history who have massacred others. I felt David’s cry for justice at the perpetrators of massacres in Guatemala. For many years I prayed that some kind of justice would be done. When a series of trials resulted in sentences for perpetrators of serious human rights violations, it felt like an answer to this prayer.

We praise you, God, for your character of justice. We praise you that when our sense of right and wrong is violated, it is even more of a deep violation to you, and that you have the power to change things.

June 21

Betrayal — I Samuel 23, Psalm 63, Psalm 54

Matthew 5: 5 God blesses those who are gentle and lowly, for the whole earth will belong to them.

The betrayals David experienced parallel the betrayals Christ experienced. Even though David protected the people of Keilah from the Philistines, they planned to betray him to Saul. Once more David fled to the wilderness.

David's response to being in the wilderness (Psalm 63) turned the dryness of the landscape into a prayer of longing for God: "I earnestly search for you. My soul thirsts for you; my whole body longs for you in this parched and weary land where there is no water." While in the Judean wilderness, Jonathan came to him and affirmed, "You are going to be the next King of Israel," and they renewed their covenant of friendship.

Another betrayal by the men of Ziph exposed his hiding place to Saul. David went even further into the wilderness. His response to the betrayal, (Psalm 54) was to plea for help: "rescue me," "defend me," "may my enemies' plans for ever be turned against them."

Christ offered forgiveness of those who had betrayed him and put him to death. He said, "Father, forgive these people, because they don't know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34) We are to do the same. At the same time, it is notable that in the midst of his suffering he is full of joy. Psalm 63 is predominantly praise. Gratitude no matter the circumstances is something David teaches us.

Some of my favorite childhood books were the Narnia series by C.S. Lewis. He created a number of compelling young kinds, one of which bears a resemblance to David. Prince Caspian, though the rightful heir to the throne, lived in the woods with his companions, pursued by a Saul-like usurper. The fictional figure's nobility, growing leadership, courage, and confidence in his call beautifully parallel David at this time of his life.

Lord, thank you for this treasure of prayer, these examples of trust that we also can experience today. Help us remember that trouble comes to an end and give us hearts that stay committed. We thank you for accompanying us in our troubles.

June 22

Mercy — I Samuel 24, Psalm 57

Matthew 5:7 God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

David's mercy to Saul prefigures Christ's call to show mercy. David was in a cave and Saul came in, but rather than killing him, David cut a piece of his robe. When Saul left, David shouted to him, bowed to him, and pled his case. David said, "I will never harm you" and asked that God would judge between them. Saul responded, saying, "You are a better man than I am!" "Who else would let his enemy get away?" And most tellingly, "I realize you are surely going to be king."

David hid in a cave in chapter 22, and here once again. David writes of this (Psalm 57): "I will hide beneath the shadow of your wings until this violent storm is past." He expressed his faith in "God who will fulfill his purpose for me." His heart of worship is repeated twice in saying: "Be exalted, O God, above the highest heavens! May your glory shine over all the earth."

I know I am called to mercy toward anyone who wrongs me. I am never to stand in judgment, but to do what David did and ask God to do the judging. Christ's call in his Sermon in the Mount is to "judge not that you be not judged", something David learned through the Holy Spirit.

Lord, your ways are righteous, your ability to intervene in our circumstances an amazing thing. We praise you that when we obey and thank you in the midst of any situation, you not only give us joy, you transform us and others and the world around us.

June 23

Abigail — I Samuel 25

Matthew 5:9 God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.

Christ is the source of wisdom and peacemaking that Abigail demonstrates. The story shows her in the role of a wise mediator in a conflict, the same role Christ takes in our conflicts, and in our conflict with God.

A contrast is set up between wisdom and foolishness comparing Abigail and Nabal. We are told that his name means "fool." Unlike the good shepherd, wealthy, with 3000 sheep and 1000 goats, he did not see himself as their protector and appreciate what David and his men had done. Instead, he was selfishly committed to preserving his own wealth. The image of the poor shepherd is used to depict unfaithful ministers, and it is often the case that the sign of this unfaithfulness is a self-centered preoccupation with wealth. When David perceived that lack of appreciation, he became angry. Instead of forgiving, he was determined to show he was right, and destroy his enemy.

Abigail, knowing her husband was in the wrong, wisely decided to offer amends. Humbly, appealing for forgiveness, she focused on David's call from God to ask him to forgive. She took responsibility for something she did not do, and David was grateful for the wake-up call. When Nabal heard, the shock resulted in his death. David rewarded Abigail for her wisdom with an offer of marriage.

Christ calls us to be peacemakers in conflicted situations. Abigail's story puts flesh and blood on how that looks in a very difficult situation. My own conflicts have taught me that to be like Abigail, quick to say "I'm sorry", works best.

Lord, we thank you that we are called to peacemaking. Make us willing to see conflict as an opportunity for learning and growth. Help us not to justify ourselves, but ask forgiveness quickly.

June 24

David Spares Saul — I Samuel 26

Matthew 5:5 God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth.

David's rejection by the nation foreshadows Christ's rejection. We are all called to humility and meekness, and it challenges our competitiveness. Because David believed God had anointed him as king and it was God's responsibility to fulfill his plan and promises, he could relax and let things go wrong.

Once more the men of Ziph betrayed him. David could have killed Saul when he slipped into his camp and found him asleep. But because of his respect for God's anointed, David acted on the call to love our enemies.

Saul was humbled. "I have sinned. Come back home, my son, and I will no longer try to harm you, for you valued my life today. I have been a fool and very, very wrong." He predicted "you will do heroic deeds and be a great conqueror." But David's lament is, "You have driven me from my home, so I can no longer live among the Lord's people to worship as I should." "Must I die on foreign soil?"

David's example shows he did not interpret having enemies as evidence he was displeasing God, he just stayed out of their way. Christ's call to love and bless our enemies can happen even when needed boundaries protect us from harm. Enemies are not a problem.

Lord, give us your love that hardly notices when others do things wrong, but that always hopes, expects the best and never gives up. May we be people who have a hard time remembering that someone is an enemy because we are so busy blessing them.

June 25

David Undercover — I Samuel 27, 29, 30

Matthew 5:9 God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.

David was rejected and went into exile, living among the Philistines, just as Christ was put in the hands of his enemies. David left Israel to avoid Saul, just as Christ withdrew from those wanting to kill him (for example, after he had preached in Nazareth in Luke 4). It did work: Saul stopped hunting David for the last year and four months of his life.

Years before, David had killed Goliath, killed many Philistines to gain a dowry for getting his wife Micah, and when first fleeing Saul, went on his own to Gath and pretended to be a madman to save his life. Now, returning with a group of 600 warriors, he was welcomed by the Philistine king. Saul quit his pursuit, having successfully evicted his rival from the community of faith in Israel.

The context created a situation of moral compromise. He kept the confidence of the King of Philistia by lying to him, and by massacring villages completely so they could not expose his lies. Fortunately, he did not gain the confidence of the King's officers who thereby prevented him from having to go into battle against his own people. The outcome of the battle however, was the death of his nemesis Saul, and the death of his well-loved friend Jonathan.

Christ was killed by His enemies. He willingly went toward where they were in Jerusalem, knowing this would be the outcome. Rather than inflict harm, His strategy was to receive harm and transfigure it which He decidedly did in the resurrection. This model of allowing ourselves to "be wronged" goes against our competitive culture, but Christ's challenge is there for us.

Lord, teach us to be faithful in resolving the conflicts in our lives. Give us the grace to bend to others, and yet give us the grace to withdraw if necessary. Most of all, help us be people who do not compromise in ways that do not honor you.

June 26

The Death of Saul — I Samuel 28, 31, I Chronicles 10

John 19:28-30 Jesus knew that everything was now finished, and to fulfill the Scriptures he said, "I am thirsty." A jar of sour wine was sitting there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put it on a hyssop branch, and held it up to his lips. When Jesus had tasted it, he said, "It is finished!" Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Christ's death and Saul's death stand in contrast. Christ knew his death was prophesied, knew when he would die, and his death was full of purpose. In contrast, Saul had lived disobediently, dreaded death, and his death was full of tragedy. The respect with which Christ's body was buried contrasts with the disrespect shown to Saul's body.

When Saul consulted a witch, asking her to call up dead Samuel, he engaged in necromancy, something the Law condemned. (Deuteronomy 18:10-11) Saul had obeyed the Law in removing such practitioners of magic, but was desperate because "God is departed from me, and answers me no more, neither by prophets, nor by dreams..." (I Samuel 28:15) Samuel said God had become his enemy, removed his kingdom, and that he would die.

Wounded by the enemy, Saul pled with his armor bearer to kill him, was refused, and so fell on his own sword. The armor bearer followed in a poignant suicide. I Chronicles 10 gives us the horrifying post-script. The Philistines came and found his body, cut off his head, proclaimed his death to their idols and the people, placed his armor in Dagon's temple, and placed his and Jonathan's bodies on the wall. The commentator says he should not have sought a medium instead of the Lord, and so died for his unfaithfulness.

We can face death boldly, following the example of Christ, doing so without fear, and knowing that our death can be meaningful. It can be a time of blessing others, leaving helpful and nourishing memories for those who follow us.

Lord, thank you that life and death are in your hands. We acknowledge that our deaths are coming and ask that they might honor you. We praise you that every day of life we experience is a gift from you.

June 27

David's Lament — II Samuel 1

John 11:32-35 When Mary arrived and saw Jesus, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if only you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping and saw the other people wailing with her, a deep anger welled up within him, and he was deeply troubled. "Where have you put him?" he asked them. They told him, "Lord, come and see." Then Jesus wept.

Christ's grief in the face of the death of his friend, and David's grief in the face of Saul and Jonathan's death reminds us that the depths of our grief are also tenderly understood by God.

Any of us who have lost a deeply loved friend or family member can resonate with David's lament for Jonathan. Any of us who have lost an intimate person with whom our relationship has been conflicted can identify with his lament for Saul.

David is like Christ in truly demonstrating love for his enemies. When Saul died, and David learned of this, David expressed affection and respect for Saul who had pursued him, as well as Jonathan whom he had loved. Three times he repeats “How the mighty heroes have fallen!”

The “Dead March” Handel composed for his oratorio on Saul has been used for solemn funerals of heads of state ever since. Comparing it to the elegy of David for his slain rival, perhaps this is fitting.

As I look back on my losses, I am struck that as time goes by it is the most tender parts of the relationship that still stand out to us and cause us to remember them with appreciation and affection. But reaching that point takes time and we need to accompany our grieving friends with kindness and patience.

Lord, thank you that you are present with us when we lose someone we love. Thank you that we are able to be comforted by you and by others who share this loss. Give us the grace to reach an acceptance of the reality of death and not become bitter in the face of it.

June 28

Innocent blood — II Samuel 2-3

Matthew 27:24 Pilate saw that he wasn't getting anywhere and that a riot was developing. So he sent for a bowl of water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood. The responsibility is yours!"

Christ's death was acknowledged by Pilate as a case of shedding innocent blood. David judged the actions of his commander Joab as meriting judgment because “He pretended that it was an act of war, but it was done in a time of peace, staining his belt and sandals with innocent blood.” (I Kings 2:5)

After Saul and Jonathan's death, David moved to Hebron where Judah, his own tribe, crowned him King. Despite his outreach, Israel remained loyal to a son of Saul, Ishbosheth. Civil war was threatening, and Joab led David's troops, and Abner led those of Ishbosheth. In an early encounter, Abner unwillingly killed Joab's brother Asahel. Later Abner was offended by Ishbosheth and joined David's side. Joab still held a grudge however, and killed Abner.

Though he verbally complained and championed Abner as an innocent victim, David felt too politically weak to oppose Joab, a relationship complicated by family ties. Joab was David's cousin, son of Aunt Zeruah (I Chronicles 2:16) and brother of Abishai and Azahel, other top commanders. Amasa was another cousin, son of Aunt Abigail. These men and 400 other malcontents joined

David when he fled from Saul, (I Samuel 22:1) and were part of the “mighty men”. (II Samuel 23) At David’s death, he asked his son Solomon to carry out the judgment.

This story helps us see that though David was a warrior, he lived by an honor code of who could be fought and who could be killed and who could not. For us the standards have been raised even higher by the call to love our enemies. In Revelation Christ is presented as a warrior, but the imagery firmly places his triumph over evil in His Words (“a sword came from his mouth”) and in his sacrifice (“a lamb who had been slain.”) These are our weapons.

Lord, help us to be just and not fall into personal vengeance as a means of advancing our efforts. May we maintain high standards of justice, even in the case of violent deaths.

June 29

The Shepherd King — II Samuel 4-5

Luke 23:3 So Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus replied, “Yes, it is as you say.” John 10:14 “I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me.

David was crowned as King of Israel when he was 30 years old, the same age at which Christ began to announce His Kingdom. David of all Kings is the one who best bears the image of Christ and of whom it is said Christ was his son. He is a towering figure in the scriptures, his name occurring more than any other figure. In the Gospels his name occurs 32 times, 11 of those referring to the “son of David” who is, of course, the Messiah, Christ.

With the murder of Ishbosheth (which David condemned and punished), the way was open for him to become king of the whole nation, not just his tribe of Judah. The people acknowledged him as having been promised by God: “You will be the shepherd of my people Israel.” This identity tied him more to Christ who called Himself both shepherd and king.

His first acts included conquering Jerusalem which had remained unconquered for nearly 500 years, renaming it the “City of David” and moving his capital there. He built his palace, married more women and had more children. He defeated his old enemies, the Philistines, by carefully asking for guidance on his strategy. These victories began a process that would allow his kingdom to live in peace.

While these meditations emphasize that Christ is King, it is important to hold on to other images as well. That of shepherd is extremely comforting since we

know that sheep cannot survive well without the care and protection of their shepherd. Our dependency and need for God are acknowledged in this image.

Lord, we celebrate you as King and Shepherd who rules us, cares for us, and loves us.

June 30

Moving the Ark — II Samuel 6

Mark 5:30 Jesus realized at once that healing power had gone out from him, so he turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who touched my robe?"

God's presence became centered in God's city with God's king when David moved the Ark to Jerusalem. In Christ God's presence also went to God's city and became King through his death and resurrection.

Jerusalem, the capital of the Kingdom under David, became the spiritual center, the center of Christ's ministry, and where he died and rose again. We first heard of Jerusalem with Melchizedek, the king and priest. Mentioned in Joshua as they entered the land, it occurs 1027 times in scripture with the final occurrences showing that it looks forward to the perfect City of God at the end of time.

The Ark, as we have seen before, carried God's presence. They had forgotten this and forgotten that it was only to be carried by particular dedicated priests. Their sloppiness in carrying it on an oxcart and the inadvertent near accident led Uzzah to touch it. It is almost as though it was electrically charged, a power so characteristic of God's presence even today, that Uzzah died from the shock.

The more respectful and joyful move included David leaping and dancing, and massive celebration with sweet food. His joy in God's presence could not be contained even if his first wife, Michal, critiqued it.

Christ was the Ark of God, carrying God's power and presence in the world, a power that could be felt as He touch people in healing. He has offered that same power to us and we can also be a means of touching others with His presence.

Lord, feeling the power of your presence fills us with joy and delight. Keep us open channels to that power to be used for good for others.

July 1
The Covenant with David — II Samuel 7

Revelation 19:16 On his robe and thigh was written this title: "King of Kings and Lord of Lords."

The everlasting throne promised to David is fulfilled in Christ. Having brought the ark to Jerusalem, it was in this context that David desired to build a Temple. At first the prophet Nathan agreed, but returned saying God had never thought it necessary to have a building, a tent was enough. Instead, God wanted to build David a house, a dynasty of kings. "Your dynasty and your kingdom will continue for all time before me, and your throne will be secure forever." (II Samuel 7:16)

David's prayer of response shows the depths of his faith. We have the benefit of hindsight, knowing that the promise was fulfilled in Christ, his lineage that of kings. Though different in Matthew and Luke (possibly a difference between Joseph and Mary's lineage), both trace back to Zerubbabel, the last named king, and back to David. Without question, Christ took to himself the title of Son of David. Joseph was addressed by the angel as a son of David (Matthew 1:20), Mary was told by the angel that he would have the throne of his ancestor David, (Luke 1:32) and the Messiah was identified as David's son. (Matthew 22:42)

This story is repeated word for word in I Chronicles 17. The everlasting throne with an everlasting king who is David's son is an important prophesy of Christ, and reinforces the coming theme of the Kingdom of God.

The final words of David's prayer are applicable to our own families, and it has served me well in praying. Here is part of the prayer from the *Message*:

Bless my family; keep your eye on them always. You've already as much as said that you would, Master God! Oh, may your blessing be on my family permanently!

July 2
David as Warrior King — II Samuel 8, I Chronicles 18, Psalm 60

Philippians 2:8-10 He humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross. Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

Once David received the promise of an everlasting kingdom, he set about conquering Israel's long-time enemies. Christ gained victory over sin, Satan, and death, on the cross.

David's victories brought peace to Israel. Opponents of Israel since Moses' time — Edom, Moab, Ammon, Philistia and Amalek (vs. 12)—were finally defeated. These victories were a turning point in Israel's history of dominating other nations that had harassed them up to this point. The decimation of Edom meant that only a few survivors fled to Egypt. (I Kings 11:14-22) When Moab rebelled against paying taxes to Israel, Edom served as Israel's ally to put down the revolt. (II Kings 3)

The comment that "David reigned over all Israel and was fair to everyone" comes after the story of his laying out a rope to measure two-thirds of the Moabites to be killed, crippling chariot horses, and destroying 18,000 Edomites. He wrote a poem pleading for God's help for these victories. (Psalm 60) We cringe at the distinctions between how he treated his own people versus his enemies. Today these actions would invite a war crimes tribunal and protests from animal rights activists. There was a repercussion; he was not allowed to build the temple because of being a man of war. (I Chronicles 28:3)

Before feeling self-righteous about David's wars, it is important to look at ourselves. In our own Civil War only about 150 years ago over a million soldiers were killed, wounded or missing. Weapons had become more sophisticated and destructive, but medicine was primitive, leading to horrendous suffering, and deserters were subject to barbaric tortures. Statistics for World War I are 17 million dead and 20 million wounded. For World War II over 60 million were killed. David's wars seem small in comparison.

Today we claim to have higher standards, but in actuality we constantly fall below those standards and struggle with the high incidence of civilian deaths, issues of torture, the destructive nature of bombing. Horror and disappointment at the destruction of war are legitimate Christian responses, particularly as our weaponry has become so sophisticated. We have a call to commit to the hard work of peacemaking instead.

Lord, make us peacemakers.

July 3

David's Tenderness and Triumph — II Samuel 9-10, I Chronicles 19

Phil. 2:9-11 God raised him up to the heights of heaven and gave him a name that is above every other name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

David's triumph over enemies reflects the day when every knee will bow to Christ. David went from a fugitive taking refuge with Israel's traditional enemies to becoming a King who defeated all the surrounding nations. They became his vassals, without power to fight back. Just as at the end of time all will bow to Christ whether they believed in Him or not, so all the surrounding nations bowed to David.

Between the battles, there is the tender story of David's compassion and loyalty as he reached out to Jonathan's son Mephibosheth, and welcomed him into his palace. He further gave him the astonishing abundance of all of his grandfather Saul's property.

In our day, the Jewish people went from severe persecution and unjust suffering and death in the Holocaust, to the astonishing creation of the state of Israel. Marc Chagall was asked to make tapestries and mosaics for the Israeli Knesset, the legislature in Jerusalem. The biblical themes in these works tied the modern history of Israel to the ancient stories. One draws images from Isaiah and the Patriarchs, another includes Moses and David with the people suffering and being led out, and the last depicts the entry to Jerusalem and establishment of Israel.

We look forward to a time when the promise to Messiah of complete victory will be realized and we will live in a permanent state of peace. For us, there is a life of "overwhelming victory" that comes from our faith. (Romans 8:37) We also have a place at Christ's table "seated with him in heavenly realms." (Ephesians 2:6) We are provided for abundantly since when we seek Christ's kingdom "all these things will be added to you." (Matthew 6:33) These are the new spiritual realities that are foreshadowed by David's victory and David's hospitality. It can change our self-image to grasp these three things.

Lord, thank you that you give us victory, welcome us to your table, and provide all that we need. Make us deeply grasp these truths.

July 4

Bathsheba — II Samuel 11-12, I Kings 1

John 8:4-11 “Teacher,” they said to Jesus, “this woman was caught in the very act of adultery. The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?” They were trying to trap him into saying something they could use against him, but Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust with his finger. They kept demanding an answer, so he stood up again and said, “All right, stone her. But let those who have never sinned throw the first stones.” Then he stooped down again and wrote in the dust. When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman. Then Jesus stood up again and said to her, “Where are your accusers? Didn’t even one of them condemn you?” “No, Lord,” she said. And Jesus said, “Neither do I. Go and sin no more.”

Bathsheba is like this woman who Christ forgave. When the story begins, she a foolish adulterous woman, who invited the King’s attention by bathing on her roof within his view. After her husband’s contrived death, she went to the King as a wife. A beautiful but foolish woman, she added to the discord in David’s already dysfunctional family, harming his rule and reputation.

David repented and grieved the promised judgment of their son’s death. Bathsheba may also have repented, because their next child was a sign of grace. David comforted his wife, Solomon was conceived, and “God had a special love for him.” David promised Bathsheba that Solomon would succeed him as king. As David was dying, she collaborated with Nathan the prophet to make sure Solomon became King rather than another son, a spoiled child David had never reprimanded, who had claimed the throne. Bathsheba became an ancestress of Christ and is acknowledged in Matthew 1, along with her late husband.

This story comforts us if we have made bad sexual choices or if anyone in our friends and family have created relational messes. Overwhelming redemption is possible.

Lord, teach us to be faithful and pure, and to be tenderhearted. May we offer the forgiveness that David and Bathsheba were given.

July 5

A parable to change the heart — II Samuel 12

Matthew 13:11,12 Then he explained to them, “You have been permitted to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, but others have not. To those who are open to my teaching, more understanding will be given, and they will have an abundance of knowledge. But to those who are not listening, even what they have will be taken away from them.

Prophets used parables to appeal for repentance just as Christ did. David, a Spirit-filled man obedient to God, was brought to repentance by a story. It got his attention and helped him see his behavior in a new light.

The story was post-Bathsheba when Nathan the prophet told him about a greedy rich man who stole a poor man's little pet lamb. After getting angry and having the analogy to his own behavior pointed out, David confessed, "I have sinned against the Lord." His subsequent behavior showed true repentance.

Fiction digs deeply into us. Books, movies, plays, and operas open our hearts. Christ knew this and made storytelling his principle form of teaching. As a child, the Narnia tales transformed my imagination, awakening me to spiritual realities as nothing else had done. Even now a good work of fiction opens up new worlds, new ideas, and new insights.

God warned David of the consequences of his sin: there would be violence in his family, his own family would rebel, his wives would be publically violated, and his child would die. In God's mercy he would not die because God had forgiven him. But all these terrible things did happen for the time of David's life covered in the next eight chapters.

David's response was fasting and repentance followed by worship when he knew his request had been refused. This is such a humble response that it challenges me to ask how I respond in my relationship to God when I have failed in a significant way.

Lord, thank you that you reach and touch our hearts with stories. Thank you that we respond in a whole-person way that opens up doors for spiritual changes. We praise you for your stories and for the overall story of your book.

July 6

No Consequences — II Samuel 13-14

Hebrews 12:7 As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children. Who ever heard of a child who is never disciplined by its father?

God's faithful love includes wise discipline for us his children, and most fathers discipline their children. But David failed in this role, and allowed his children to act without consequences. Perhaps he knew he had lost moral authority because of his own adultery and his own murder. Rather than strong authority and strong love, he modeled permissiveness and emotional distance.

David's son Ammon raped his half-sister Tamar, and though David was angry, nothing was done. Tamar's brother Absalom was angry enough to arrange for the murder of Ammon and then escaped to avoid consequences. When David was unwilling to condone his son Absalom's murder of his brother, and refused to allow him to return to Jerusalem, Joab asked a wise woman to tell a story to change the King's mind. When the woman made the application David asked, "Did Joab send you here?" But he did relent though he refused to see his son.

The scriptures tell us to be grateful for God's discipline as a sign of his love, as sign we are his children, and as a way of making us holy. Sometimes his discipline takes the form of disappointments or setbacks, but our best strategy is to humbly accept these difficulties and let them change us.

Lord, thank you that you are a wise father and that your discipline is good and gracious.

July 7

The Rejected King — II Samuel 15-16, Psalm 3

John 13:21 Now Jesus was in great anguish of spirit, and he exclaimed, "The truth is, one of you will betray me!"

Absalom prefigures Judas who betrayed Christ. Setting aside David's overindulgent attitude to his children that created so much difficulty, one can see a parallel to Judas in the betrayal of Absalom. As the crisis built, both David and Christ left Jerusalem.

David was a poor husband and father, and had to deal with terrible consequences in his family for his sins as a parent. Nevertheless, redemption is always part of his story. He humbled himself and repented when he recognized his sin, and we still use his prayers. He loved rebellious Absalom, and he humbly left his capital and trusted God to restore his Kingdom.

David's heart shows in the prayer written for this occasion, Psalm 3. He felt that many were against him and didn't expect God to help him, but expressed faith:

- God is my shield
- God is my glory and the one who lifts me up
- God heals me when I cry
- God sustains me so I can sleep and wake
- I'm not afraid of my opponents
- God saves me and defeats my enemies
- God gives blessing and salvation

Lord, give us deep compassion and forgiveness toward anyone who betrays us. May we remain ever trusting of your protection when experiencing any kind of unfair opposition.

July 8

Absalom's Death — II Samuel 17-18

Hebrews 12:9 Since we respected our earthly fathers who disciplined us, shouldn't we submit even more to the discipline of the Father of our spirits, and live forever?

God's compares His love for us to that of a father grieving over his wayward children. In this story we see David's grief over Absalom's death despite every cruel, rebellious, devious, shaming, deceitful and arrogant thing Absalom had done.

Like a parent with a rebellious or troubled child, God calls to us: "My wayward children," says the LORD, "come back to me, and I will heal your wayward hearts." "Yes, we're coming," the people reply, "for you are the LORD our God." (Jeremiah 3:22)

In this case, Absalom's rebellion ends in death by hanging from a tree, a death not dissimilar to Judas, Christ's betrayer. The pathos of the father/son relationship has become part of our literature in several well-known works. Chagall painted them at the moment of their temporary reconciliation, a moody green tree with the hanging Absalom as a small figure in the corner, foreshadowing his tragic end.

A parent's grief over a troubled child is deep. We so want good things for our children that we feel their distress. We think about how we contributed to their problems. Hopefully, as Christian parents, we devote ourselves to prayer. But it has to be the kind of prayer that does not displace God or other people in our lives. Painful and difficult.

Lord, help us to turn quickly from our waywardness and become children who love and respect you and do not invite tragedy into our lives.

July 9

David's Care of Mephibosheth — II Samuel 19

Matthew 9:36 He felt great pity for the crowds that came, because their problems were so great and they didn't know where to go for help. They were like sheep without a shepherd.

David's care of Mephibosheth reflects Christ's care of us as vulnerable people taken into his household. David sought out any survivors of Saul's, found Jonathan's lame son, and brought him into his household. This parallels our being sought for, found, and taken in to Christ's household and provided for. This is reminiscent of Jesus' parable of the lame brought to the wedding feast.

When David fled from Absalom, Ziba, the steward in charge of Mephibosheth's land, lied to David, saying Mephibosheth was disloyal, and in consequence, David gave Ziba all the land. When David returned to Jerusalem, he reconciled with Mephibosheth who assured him he cared more about being back at the King's table rather than his property. He saw his place there as an undeserved honor, since he merited death as a descendant of David's enemy.

There are times when I have been particularly aware of my own vulnerability and helplessness to confront the situations of life. In my weakness I have cried out and experienced the compassion and transformative power we see in the Gospels in the character of Jesus.

Lord, teach us to show respect and compassion to the vulnerable, to those with any kind of disability or difficulty. Make us practical in meeting the needs of others. Teach us to be grateful for the unmerited privilege to eat at your table. We bless you for the Eucharistic meal.

July 10

Rebellion—II Samuel 20

Luke 23:21 But they shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

Israel's rebellion against David reminds us of the opposition of the people stirred up by Christ's enemies. Having already been through the rebellion fomented by his son Absalom, David was still politically weak. His nephew Amasa had supported Absalom, so David tried to regain the support of his own tribe of Judah by offering him the job as commander of his troops, replacing Joab.

We see a time of weakness in Christ during his passion when Judas betrayed him, his disciples abandoned him, Peter denied him, and the crowd insisted he be crucified.

Meanwhile Israel, which had seemed supportive, was instigated to rebellion. David sent Amasa to mobilize troops against the leader Sheba, but had to follow up by sending Abishai. Abishai's brother Joab went along and killed Amasa as soon as they found him. They put down the rebellion with the help of a woman who persuaded the people to betray Sheba.

Amasa's murder was one reason David told Solomon to put Joab to death. Nevertheless, at this point of political weakness, he made Joab his commander once more. His personal isolation in accepting collaboration from someone he disapproved of must have been painful.

How easily we fall into rebellion and are unhappy with how God leads our lives. We take control, make decisions without reference to Him, and often end up in a mess.

Lord, forgive my times of thinking I know better than you what should be happening. Forgive me for the times when I am unkind to others, gossipy, or treacherous. I praise you that you really are in the business of fixing me!

July 11

The Last Battle — II Samuel 21, I Chronicles 20

Mark 12:35-37 Later, as Jesus was teaching the people in the Temple, he asked, "Why do the teachers of religious law claim that the Messiah is the son of David? For David himself, speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, said, 'The LORD said to my Lord, Sit in the place of honor at my right hand until I humble your enemies beneath your feet.' Since David himself called the Messiah 'my Lord,' how can the Messiah be his son?" The large crowd listened to him with great delight.

David had his last battle, laid down his weapons, triumphant over all his enemies. Christ used David's prophecy of God putting "your enemies under your feet" and said it applied to the Messiah. Just as David experienced this level of victory, the quote from Psalm 110:1 is repeated four times in the New Testament showing the importance of the triumph of Christ over all.

After fighting the Philistines all of his adult life, a people who had plagued Israel in the times of Samson, Samuel and Saul, their harassment came to an end. In a reprise of his early conflict with Goliath, David once more fought a Philistine giant. He was nearly killed, but was rescued by one of his men, and this became his last battle. A total of four giants were killed, and the Philistines only reappear in the time of Hezekiah to be defeated once again. (II Kings 18:8)

David's reign was a victorious turning point, turning enemies who had been a problem for Israel for the previous 500 years into vassals. During the time of the Judges the oppressors included various nations: Aram, Moab, Canaanites, Midianites, Ammonites and Philistines. David defeated them all and handed over a kingdom at peace to his son Solomon.

A tragic judgment on Saul's sons for the sins of their father in breaking an ancient treaty once more shows David's struggle to find the balance between compassion and justice. He authorizes these deaths to protect the rest of his people from a famine. But he gave them a compassionate burial. Statecraft is a difficult balancing act and we see it for David in this story.

We know in theory that Christ is the Victor, but in the midst of life's struggles, seeing the chaotic and violent political situations in our world, it is hard to grasp that. All enemies are under his feet—we need to explore this truth as part of our approach to living as kingdom people.

Lord, thank you that you are the Victor and all enemies are under your feet.

July 12

God is my Rock — II Samuel 22, 23:1-7, Psalm 18

Matthew 7:24 Anyone who listens to my teaching and obeys me is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock.

Christ is our rock, as David sang. At the end of David's life, he called God "Rock" five times in a poem here which is repeated in full as Psalm 18. In his dying words he addressed God as the Rock of Israel. Psalms uses this image 22 times, and the Hebrew scriptures an additional 19 times. The Rock is part of the wilderness wanderings, and Moses' song uses it at the end of Deuteronomy. David's insecure years fleeing Saul are the background to this poem, and God as Rock countered his insecurity.

Often our concepts of God are weak. We think of Him as Santa Claus or slot machine, a puppet-master, or as a distant and disengaged engineer. But David's concept is robust. God rescues, brings light, gives strength. It is a relationship of a great bond of love.

At an insecure time in my life I saw this Psalm and the word "Rock" leaped out at me over and over, reinforcing that God is the source of stability, even if all else was insecure. As I continued to read the Psalms, I saw it over and over, and it implanted an image I needed.

Lord, thank you that whenever I am afraid, uncertain, or anxious, I can turn to you. When I really enter into your presence or hear your voice, there is a wise, calming effect that changes me and changes situations. I praise you for your stability. I praise you for being my Rock.

July 13

Bethlehem — II Samuel 23

Luke 2: 4-6 And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the

village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, his fiancée, who was obviously pregnant by this time. And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born.

The prophecy that Christ would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), resulted because as descendants of David, Mary and Joseph went there for a census. Just as Christ's lineage mattered, his birthplace mattered.

We first hear of Bethlehem under its name, Ephrath, when Jacob's family traveled from Bethel to Hebron. Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin. Her name for him, "son of sorrow," was changed by Jacob to "son of my right hand." Both names point toward Christ who would be born in this place, both a man of sorrows and one raised to God's right hand.

David's nostalgia for home during the time he was on the run from Saul creates a tender story. The Philistines occupied Bethlehem, and three friends went behind enemy lines to obtain well-water from his home. Rather than drink this water, so sacrificially obtained, he poured it out as an offering.

Today Bethlehem's main source of income is tourism from several million annual visitors. In addition to the site of Christ's birth, there is Rachel's tomb, and perhaps David's tomb in the church of Saint David. Near Manger Square there are three cisterns excavated in the rock, perhaps where David's water came from.

Only five and a half miles from Jerusalem, Bethlehem was where lambs for the Temple Passover were raised. It adds to the poetry of Christ's birth to remember Him as Passover Lamb welcomed by shepherds who perhaps cared for those lambs in Bethlehem. In general, shepherds had a poor reputation and low social status which makes it all the more remarkable for the angels to appear to them to announce the birth. How beautiful that "the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them", taking us back to every story of God's glory in tabernacle and temple. (Luke 2:9)

For us, not only is the prophetic fulfillment of Messiah's birth an important buttress to our faith, there is a personal aspect to this story of the shepherds. We, too, are lowly people who receive the grace of being surrounded by God's glory.

Lord, thank you that everything is connected. Ancient stories are connected to things in our world today, and stories connect to Christ. Thank you that you come to us with a message of peace, joy, and glory applicable to life today.

July 14

Innocent Victims — II Samuel 24, I Chronicles 21

Matthew 27:19 Just then, as Pilate was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent him this message: "Leave that innocent man alone, because I had a terrible nightmare about him last night."

Innocent victims foreshadow Christ who died that others might live. David's sin and pride in making an unauthorized census resulted in a choice between seven years of famine, three months of defeat in war, or three days of plague. He chose the latter because "I'd rather be punished by God, whose mercy is great, than fall into human hands." But 70,000 people died. When David saw the angel of death he said, "Please! I'm the one who sinned; I, the shepherd, did the wrong. But these sheep, what did they do wrong? Punish me and my family, not them." David was told to build an altar and carry out a sacrifice near Jerusalem and the disaster ended.

The site he purchased was where Abraham and Isaac went to sacrifice, and became the Temple site. (II Chronicles 3:1) Judgment was replaced by mercy: for Isaac, for the people in David's time, and at the Temple. Each story prefigures Christ.

These surprising details alert me to plot, foreshadowing, and symbolism in scripture. I missed that when I heard Bible stories as a child. The cross and resurrection are the climax to which the story builds.

Lord, we know that every day in our world there are victims who are innocent, children who suffer, those who experience violence, unexplained illness, or oppression. Be present, deliver, change things, we pray.

July 15

Family of the King — I Chronicles 1-9

Matthew 27:11 Now Jesus was standing before Pilate, the Roman governor. "Are you the king of the Jews?" the governor asked him. Jesus replied, "You have said it."

Chronicles presented the Kings of Judah, the kingly line of Christ. Matthew repeated this genealogy. The story before the kings is summarized by showing how this family from which the kings comes goes back to Abraham and even farther back to Adam. That is included in Luke's genealogy of Christ.

This book prepares the news that a King is coming. In the Hebrew scriptures the two books of Chronicles come at the end, thereby serving as a summary of the whole story preparing for that King. People of note from Adam through

Abraham, through Moses, through to the time when kingship began, ends with the death of the first king, Saul. The focus is then on David and subsequent kings of Judah until the fall of Jerusalem. In a quick postscript which is repeated word for word at the beginning of Ezra, we are told the captives returned from exile.

For Jacob's family, all the tribes are included, but in an interesting order. Judah, the ruling kingdom, is first and longest and most detailed. Levi, the priestly tribe, gets extensive treatment in the middle. Benjamin, the tribe that remained loyal to the king of Judah, is at the end. Genealogies at the return from the exile include Levites, people from Judah, Benjamin, and Joseph's descendants from Ephraim and Manasseh.

Admittedly boring, each name is an important background to the coming of Christ and so gives the overall story important structure. There are only a few moments that offer more in the way of material for devotional meditation, but in this section there is Jabez' inspiring prayer, given below. (I Chronicles 4:10) The postscript is that God granted him his request, and may He grant it for each one of us.

Oh that you would bless me and extend my lands. Please be with me in all that I do, and keep me from all trouble and pain!

July 16

The Godly King — I Chronicles 11-15

Acts 13:22,23 "But God removed him from the kingship and replaced him with David, a man about whom God said, 'David son of Jesse is a man after my own heart, for he will do everything I want him to.'" And it is one of King David's descendants, Jesus, who is God's promised Savior of Israel!"

David, who loved God, foreshadowed Christ, who loved perfectly. I Chronicles is the "good parts version" of David's life. In this version, we take all of David's years of agonized waiting, the civil war after Saul's death, and go directly from Saul's death to David's coronation by Israel. Much is made of moving the ark. David's song of praise in response to the arrival of the ark in Jerusalem is given in full. (I Chronicles 16) The covenant promise to David moves to his victories, his census and God's justice and mercy in that situation, and then preparations for building the temple. Here there is no failure with Bathsheba and no rebellion by Absalom.

David receives full credit for his faith and righteousness, and his sins are gently overlooked which makes him a clearer forerunner of Christ. None of his compromised moments undercover in Philistia or Moab, his family problems,

his problems with his own military officers, or even his adultery and the tragic death of his son appear.

There is a lesson for us in this. Are we able to set aside the failures and sins of the past and celebrate all the great things God has done in our lives? If I am praying for another person should I be focusing on their sin, or on the grace and victory I want to see in their lives? Here we see the gift of focusing on what is good.

Lord, I am so grateful that you forget our sins! Thank you that you forgive us, and see us through your mercy. This frees us!

July 17

David's Heart — I Chronicles 16-17

Matthew 12:23 The crowd was amazed and asked, "Could it be that Jesus is the Son of David, the Messiah?"

The answer to the crowd's question above is, of course, "yes!" Jesus was the promised Messiah, the son of David. He fulfilled the prophecy of an eternal king who would come from David's descendants.

Instead of accepting David's proposal to build him a house, God promised the Messiah: "I declare that the Lord will build a house for you—a dynasty of Kings!" He said David's son could build the temple. "I will establish him over my dynasty and my kingdom for all time, and his throne will be secure forever." David gratefully prayed something that can serve as a prayer for our families. We can ask for a lasting dynasty in the Kingdom of God as we trust that our faith will be passed on to our children. Here is part of his prayer:

O my God, I have been bold enough to pray this prayer because you have revealed that you will build a house for me—an eternal dynasty! For you are God, O Lord, and you have promised these good things to me, your servant. And now, it has pleased you to bless me and my family so that our dynasty will continue forever before you. For when you grant a blessing, O Lord, it is an eternal blessing!

July 18

David's preparation for the Temple — I Chronicles 22-29

Matthew 13:44,45 "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field—and to get the treasure, too! Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a pearl merchant on the

lookout for choice pearls. When he discovered a pearl of great value, he sold everything he owned and bought it!

David's preparations for the Temple parallel Christ's gifts to us. Once David knew that his son, Solomon, a man of peace, should build the temple, he energetically prepared place, materials, and an architectural plan. David received instructions similarly to how Moses received instructions for the Tabernacle. He set up Solomon for success in this important venture.

David gathered gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, onyx, precious stones, costly jewels, fine stone and marble for the project. He donated his personal treasure of gold and silver. David's gifts signified how much he valued making a place of worship.

An application for us as we seek the kingdom, is to use all we have for Christ. No material things in our lives have any importance other than to glorify him. At the same time, His gifts to us are lavish: spiritual, intellectual, social, and material. With these gifts He has given we can flourish in our giving back to Him.

David's prayer offered before all the people is one we can pray as well:

O Lord, the God of our ancestor Israel, may you be praised forever and ever! Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty. Everything in the heavens and on earth is yours, O Lord, and this is your kingdom. We adore you as the one who is over all things. Wealth and honor come from you alone, for you rule over everything. Power and might are in your hand, and at your discretion people are made great and given strength.

O our God, we thank you and praise your glorious name! But who am I, and who are my people, that we could give anything to you? Everything we have has come from you, and we give you only what you first gave us! We are here for only a moment, visitors and strangers in the land as our ancestors were before us. Our days on earth are like a passing shadow, gone so soon without a trace.

O Lord our God, even this material we have gathered to build a Temple to honor your holy name comes from you! It all belongs to you! I know, my God, that you examine our hearts and rejoice when you find integrity there. You know I have done all this with good motives, and I have watched your people offer their gifts willingly and joyously. ...See to it that their love for you never changes.

July 19

Solomon as Judge — I Kings 1-3, II Chronicles 1

John 5:30 My judgment is absolutely just, because it is according to the will of God who sent me; it is not merely my own.

Solomon as judge foreshadows Christ as judge. The story begins with one son, Adonijah, attempting to take the throne without his father's consent, simply knowing his father was old and feeble, and enlisting Joab and others in the coup. When told of the plot, David took the necessary measures to place Solomon on the throne.

When David advised Solomon in his new role as king, he told him to execute judgment on various people. Solomon executed Joab for rebellion, and set up an agreement that Shimei violated and executed him. David asked Solomon to treat Barzilai well because he had treated David with generosity in his moment of need, and he did so. Overly forgiving Bathsheba became a political pawn for Adonijah, who Solomon had forgiven. Seeing the danger, he executed his brother Adonijah for rebellion and deposed the priest Abiathar who supported Adonijah. Each judgment had merit and consolidated his power.

Solomon's role as a discerning judge is best-known from his decision made for two prostitutes quarreling over a living child. Through saying they should divide the child in half, he discovered which was the true mother. "All Israel heard of the judgment which the king had judged, and they feared the King: for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him to do judgment." (I Kings. 3:28)

Christ's ability to judge fairly can be trusted, particularly as the gospels demonstrate to us that his judgments are filled with mercy and tenderness. None of us are absolutely just, but He is. At the Day of Judgment, we are told that everything will be set to right, all the ills of the world will be sorted out correctly and we will know His judgments are good.

Lord, help us to be people who do not judge others, but who realize you judge in issues that arise between us and others. Give us wise earthly judges to bring justice. We thank you that ultimately your perfect justice will be done.

July 20

Good Politics — I Kings 4

Matthew 21:5 "Tell the people of Jerusalem, 'Look, your King is coming to you. He is humble, riding on a donkey—riding on a donkey's colt.'"

Solomon's peaceful kingdom foreshadows Christ's peaceful kingdom. When first crowned, he rode on King David's personal mule and all the people played

flutes and shouted for joy, foreshadowing Christ's entry to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

During his reign "The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore. They were very contented, with plenty to eat and drink." And "there was peace throughout the entire land. Throughout the lifetime of Solomon, all of Judah and Israel lived in peace and safety. And from Dan to Beersheba, each family had its own home and garden."

Taxes to support the king were not seen as too onerous, the administration was well-organized and the king was wise, not only in administering justice, but in pursuing the arts and sciences of the day. "He composed some 3,000 proverbs and wrote 1,005 songs. He could speak with authority about all kinds of plants, from the great cedar of Lebanon to the tiny hyssop that grows from cracks in a wall. He could also speak about animals, birds, reptiles, and fish. And kings from every nation sent their ambassadors to listen to Solomon's wisdom."

Security, prosperity, good administration, wisdom—all things we hope for in our political systems and sometimes achieve, even briefly. All of this foreshadows the perfect administration to come.

Had Solomon not subsequently fallen into sin, he would be a striking image of Christ, creating a peaceable kingdom without war, building a beautiful Temple, being wise. Unfortunately, because of his sin, these good accomplishments are overshadowed. But this time of his successful rule is a beautiful example of what we want in our political world today. The New Testament exhorts us to pray for "kings and all who are in authority so that we can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity." (I Timothy 2:2)

Lord, thank you for the ways in which we have been able to live under peaceful government, with economic needs met. We pray today for those in authority that they will make good decisions, be honest, wise, and truthful.

July 21

The Temple — I Kings 5-7

John 2:19-22 "All right," Jesus replied, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." "What!" they exclaimed, "It took forty-six years to build this Temple, and you can do it in three days!" But by "this temple," Jesus meant his body. After he was raised from the dead, the disciples remembered that he had said this. And they believed both Jesus and the Scriptures.

The Temple foreshadowed Christ's presence in the world. The tabernacle represented the presence of God with his pilgrim people and the Temple of

Solomon represented God's presence with his settled people. Both were based on ordinary houses, but were made more beautiful and elaborate than others. The functions of cooking, eating, resting and privacy were made part of God's house.

The dedication of the Temple took place in the fall, during a lengthened two-week Festival of Shelters. It was a feast that looked forward to the incarnation, and carried the emotions we feel about Christmas, a time of "great joy." (Deuteronomy 16:15)

This beautiful building took seven years to build and the talents of the best craftsmen and architects. The gold-covered square Holy of Holies pointed ahead to the golden city of God described as a square. (Revelation 21: 16,18) The cedar and cypress and carvings of gourds, palm trees and open flowers pointed backwards and forwards to paradisaal gardens.

In our time we have the accumulation of beautiful churches and cathedrals that have utilized the most cutting-edge architecture and art of their time. In our time an astonishing basilica is pushing architectural limits, using mathematical computer aerospace modeling, robots, and new materials. Designed by Gaudi in Barcelona, Spain, it has been under construction for over 130 years, and is perhaps on the verge of completion in the next decade. Every detail inspired from scripture and nature makes it a work of art. The nave is like a giant forest with tree-like branches holding up the roof. The entire set of eighteen towers, sculptures of nativity and passion, trees, and stars are an iconography of worship.

Though we may justly take pleasure in beautiful spaces for worship, the scriptures make clear that we continue what Christ claimed for himself. We are God's Temple that is under construction: "And you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple. What's more, you are his holy priests. Through the mediation of Jesus Christ, you offer spiritual sacrifices that please God." (I Peter 2:5)

Thank you God for all places that help us know you are close to us as we worship in our faith communities. Make us conscious that we, along with all of the community, are being built together to host your presence in the world.

July 22

The Veil — II Chronicles 2-6

Hebrews 10:19-20 And so, dear brothers and sisters, we can boldly enter heaven's Most Holy Place because of the blood of Jesus. By his death, Jesus opened a new and life-giving way through the curtain into the Most Holy Place.

Hebrews compares the veil, or curtain, protecting and separating the Most Holy place, to Christ's flesh. At the moment of His death the veil was ripped from top to bottom: "Then Jesus shouted out again, and he released his spirit. At that moment the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, rocks split apart." (Matthew 27:50-51)

In the passage in Kings on the temple, the doors are mentioned, but here we are told: "Across the entrance of the Most Holy Place, Solomon hung a curtain made of fine linen and blue, purple and scarlet yarn, with figures of cherubim embroidered on it." (II Chronicles 3:14)

Furnishings and the layout followed the outline of the Tabernacle. Two immense golden statues of cherubim with seven and a half foot wings stretched thirty feet across the Most Holy Place. The floor of the Temple was paved with gold. This golden square room reminds us of the square New Jerusalem, city of gold with golden streets described in Revelation. Innovations included two named pillars in front of the Temple and storage rooms around the outside.

The veil and Most Holy Place was entered by the High Priest once a year for the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. "Now Jesus, who has made a once-for-all sacrifice, has opened up the way for us into the presence of God at all times." The Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place represented God's throne, making this deeply meaningful: "So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most." (Hebrews 4:16)

Lord, we are full of wonder that you have made yourself completely accessible to us in your opening up your throne room and inviting us in.

July 23

Temple Dedication — I Kings 8, 9:1-9, II Chronicles 7

John 2:19 "All right," Jesus replied. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

When dedicated, the Temple building was imbued with God's presence. Christ took the imagery and applied it to himself as the combination of human and divine dimensions in one place. N.T. Wright explains: "The Temple was, after all, the place where heaven and earth met. Why not say that one particular person might be the ultimate example of the same phenomenon, a person equally at home in both dimensions."¹⁸

Solomon's dedicatory prayer reminds us of Christ's prayer. The sevenfold repetition of, "Listen from your home in heaven," foreshadows "Our Father who art in heaven." Three times there is prayer for forgiveness ("Forgive us our

sins”), and twice an appeal to deliver from enemies (“Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil.”) He begins and ends with “Blessed be God” which reminds us of “Hallowed by thy name.” He asked that “All the people on earth will know that God is the true God. And you, your lives must be totally obedient to God, our personal God,” paralleling, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Appeals for God to send rain and to help when “disasters strike, famine or catastrophe, crop failure or disease” reminds us of the prayer for daily bread.

At this high point God warns that He will not hesitate to destroy the building: “And though this Temple is impressive now, it will become an appalling sight for all who pass by. They will scoff and ask, ‘Why did the Lord do such terrible things to his land and to his Temple?’” (I Kings 9:8)

The Temple is mentioned 162 times in II Chronicles, far more than any other book. Jerusalem, the Temple site, occurs 121 times in the book. Solomon prayed “May you hear the humble and earnest requests from me and your people Israel when we pray toward this place.” This explains today’s practice of prayer at the Wailing Wall, the retaining wall for the place where the Temple once stood.

In the New Testament we are called the Temple of God, enjoined to be places where heaven and earth meet. May we live up to this high calling.

From Solomon’s prayer: “*O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in all of heaven above or on the earth below. ... Listen to my prayer and my plea, O God.*”

July 24

Solomon’s glory — I Kings 9-10, II Chronicles 8-9

Matthew 6:28-30 And why worry about your clothes? Look at the lilies and how they grow. They don’t work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for flowers that are here today and gone tomorrow, won’t he more surely care for you! You have so little faith!”

Solomon’s glory reflects the glory of Christ the King. Just as for his father David, II Chronicles only gives us the positive aspects of Solomon’s life. These chapters present Solomon as the model king: wise, glorious, admired. The Queen of Sheba came from far away and expressed amazement at his power and glory. His unique throne of ivory had twelve lions on six steps: “No other throne in all the world could be compared with it!” Jesus referred to the glory of Solomon twice, once in reference to beautiful clothing, the second time to compare his own glory as greater than that of Solomon. (Matthew 6:29, 12:42) Christ said that the Queen of Sheba would condemn those in the last judgment

who rejected Him, since she had the wisdom to seek Solomon, a lesser person, in her day.

In addition to his wisdom, Solomon surrounded himself with beautiful things: a palace that left the queen breathless, food, spices, splendid clothing for his officials, robes for his cupbearers, gold jewels, cedar wood, gold dinner service, plentiful silver, peacocks, and fine musical instruments made of beautiful wood. There were 1400 chariots, and 12,000 of the best horses that money could buy. Solomon's carriage had wood from Lebanon, posts of silver, a gold canopy, and a seat of purple cloth.

As we watch travel documentaries, we are exposed to the most beautiful palaces and thronerooms that have survived into our time. These splendid places remind us of not only Solomon's splendor, but the greater splendor of the greater King to come. There must be a deep human need for the splendid and the beautiful, giving us deep pleasure.

Lord, thank you that not only are you the ultimate, beautiful, glorious, powerful King, you are our brother and friend.

CHAPTER 3, Part 3

The Kingdom Foreshadowed: Failing

I Kings 11 — II Kings, II Chronicles 9-36

The glory of Solomon's kingdom faltered. It could not be the eternal kingdom promised to David, his father. Solomon fell into idolatry, and his son Rehoboam presided over the division of the kingdom into Israel and Judah. Not only did they war with one another, they were caught up in the wars of the surrounding empires. The Assyrians destroyed Israel in 722 BC and it never revived. Judah was taken captive by Bablyon in 586 BC, but because of the history of promises to Abraham and David and Moses, the people did not disappear.



July 25

Solomon's Failure — I Kings 11

I Corinthians 1:8,9 He will keep you strong to the end so that you will be free from all blame on the day when our Lord Jesus Christ returns. God will do this, for he is faithful to do what he says, and he has invited you into partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Solomon's failure did not negate God's promise to send Christ through David and his descendants. God removed Solomon from the throne for his idolatry and compromise, but He kept external and internal enemies from harassing him. Nevertheless, God warned him he would take all but one tribe from his son's rule.

I and II Kings demonstrates that 1) God fulfills his promises and prophecies, and 2) God punishes idolatry. The framing promise is that of the eternal Kingdom given to David that will lead to Christ. Therefore, even idolatry and failure in the Kings of Judah does not result in their removal, whereas the succession in Israel is chaotic. The chaos in Israel serves as a foil, highlighting God's faithfulness to Judah despite their failures.

In Israel the kings were uniformly disobedient. In Judah there were periodic purifications and revivals under Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah. In each revival scripture was recovered, the Temple was cleansed, and prophetic voices could be heard.

Kings has thirty-six prophecies and their fulfillment. In addition it fulfills the prophetic warnings from the Law of the consequences of disobedience. (Leviticus 26)

I and II Kings contains a *chiasm* where fulfillments follow in reverse order to prophecies.

Prophecy

David's throne eternal despite Solomon	I Kings 11
Only one tribe will remain	I Kings 11
Jereboam's false religion will be destroyed	I Kings 13
Israel will be abandoned	I Kings 14

Fulfillment

Israel destroyed by Assyria	II Kings 17
Josiah destroys the false religion	II Kings 24
Judah and her kings remain	II Kings 25
Christ, the eternal king, arrives	Matthew

Ultimately Judah was disciplined through the Babylonian captivity, but succession from David was never broken. The fundamental lesson of the books of Kings is God's faithfulness in the face of the people's unfaithfulness. That is something we can certainly apply to ourselves.

Lord, thank you that you remain faithful even when we fail you. Thank you that your forgiveness is always just a heartbeat away and that you so quickly cover our sin with the work of Christ on the cross.

July 26

Rehoboam — I Kings 12, II Chronicles 10-12

Acts 2:30 But he [David] was a prophet, and he knew God had promised with an oath that one of David's own descendants would sit on his throne.

God fulfilled His promise to David by preserving Solomon's son Rehoboam as King of Judah, so that Christ could come as his descendant. Rehoboam's idolatry was so horrendous, he deserved to be removed from the throne immediately: pagan shrines, sacred pillars, Asherah poles on every high hill and under every green tree, and shrine prostitutes.

But because of the promise to David, Rehoboam remained. Rehoboam's revolt against him was successful in part because of his foolish decision to be harsh and demanding with the people. When he decided to go to war he heeded a prophetic warning not to do so, showing some vestige of respect for the faith of his fathers.

The split of the Kingdom into Israel and Judah occurred around 930 BC and lasted until 722 BC when Israel was taken into captivity and disappeared into Assyrian culture. In contrast, Judah was not taken into captivity until 586 BC and was restored to the land.

This division between Judah and Israel led to reoccurring hostility, even war. We are reminded by Paul that "hostility, quarreling, jealousy and bursts of anger, selfish ambitions, divisions, the feeling that everyone is wrong except those in your own little group" (Galatians 5:20) are all works of the flesh. The relationship between people who were close relatives is a demonstration to us of what not to do in creating "in-group/out-group" hostilities.

Lord, thank you that no matter how compromised they are and what poor choices our political leaders make, that you are the ultimate sovereign, no matter what. You are King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

July 27

Jereboam — I Kings 13-14

Luke 1:51,52 His mighty arm does tremendous things! How he scatters the proud and haughty ones. He has taken princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly.

Jereboam was a transitory ruler who used religion to reinforce his political position. In contrast, Christ as an everlasting King of an everlasting Kingdom. Jereboam was the “first King of Israel” in a divided kingdom. Because of Solomon’s disobedience, Ahijah the prophet had told Jereboam who worked for Solomon, that God would make him king of ten tribes. Jereboam fled to Egypt when Solomon heard of the prophecy and tried to kill Jereboam. After Solomon’s death, Jereboam returned and became a citizen spokesman to Rehoboam before the revolt.

Jereboam created a false religion for political ends, worried that people would return to Rehoboam if they made pilgrimages to Jerusalem. He made two golden calves, said they brought the people from Egypt, recruited priests from any tribe, and established a fall harvest festival that mimicked that instituted by God.

A prophet warned of the consequences: “Then the Lord will shake Israel like a reed whipped about in a stream. He will uproot the people of Israel from this good land that he gave their ancestors and will scatter them beyond the Euphrates River, for they have angered the Lord by worshipping Asherah poles.” (I Kings 14:15)

The prophet warned that false religious priests and their altars would be desecrated by a future Judean king who would burn human bones on the altar. This was done by King Josiah after Israel had been removed from the land. (II Kings 23)

Jereboam experienced two miracles to which he could have responded: ashes fell out of a split altar, and his hand became paralyzed and was then healed. What an important lesson not to fall into a false meshing of politics and religion, or to invent a religion. Unfortunately, it appears that in America we have fallen into a situation where our politics is contaminating our faith, and we are not being wise and discerning. We need a lot of prayer and repentance.

Lord, we look forward to the day when all politics is your politics and there is no corruption, no misjudgments, no undue interference, and no angry rhetoric.

July 28
Abijah and Asa — II Chronicles 13-16

Matthew 6:13 Deliver us from evil. (KJV)

Christ protects us as we depend on Him. In the early years of the divided Kingdom, the Kings of Judah still depended on God for protection. Abijah attested to his faith in God when Israel tried to conquer, and God delivered them.

For 35 years Asa reigned in peace, and influenced the people to seek God “with all their heart and soul.” But then he failed, and turned to Syria for help against Israel. A prophet reminded him: “the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.” Rather than repenting, he became angry and oppressive, and when he became ill “he did not seek help from the Lord, but only from the physicians.”

While Kings and Chronicles are parallel documents, going through the same time period, Kings tells about both Israel and Judah, whereas Chronicles focuses on Judah in more detail.

Political factions engaged in constant power-struggles, with loyalists maintaining their opposing viewpoints no matter who was in power. In Israel the Baal/Asherah faction gained the ascendancy until Israel disappeared into the Assyrian Empire. In Judah there was more back and forth. Asa tore down the pagan shrines, and Jehoshaphat continued that process but “he failed to remove all the pagan shrines.” Someone always rebuilt them no matter how often they were torn down...

Parallel to our political life today, we can see that ideas not in line with God continue even if and when we are fortunate enough to have a God-fearing president. Worldliness is part of culture, and those at the top have only partial influence. Our best strategy, perhaps, is winning friends and neighbors to obedience and faith in God, building our society and culture from the bottom up, not the top down.

Lord, teach us to remain faithful, not to compromise, not to fall into sin or disobedience, not to allow things in our lives to become enshrined as something we turn to instead of you.

July 29
If you do not listen — I Kings 15, 16

Mark 4:9 Then he said, “Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand.”

Christ called his followers to keep their spiritual ears open, just as God through Moses had made the same call. For those who would not listen, Christ warned: “so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled: ‘When they see what I do, they will learn nothing. When they hear what I say, they will not understand. Otherwise, they will turn to me and be forgiven.’” In the Law God warned “if you do not listen” there would be consequences. The first consequence included diseases, defeat by enemies, and sudden terrors. (Leviticus 26:14-17) These chapters contain many sudden terrors: the king’s family was killed (15:29), another king was assassinated (16:10), family and even distant relatives of another king were killed (16:11), a king committed suicide by burning himself inside a house (16:18), two sons died when a city was rebuilt, (16:34) there was constant war (15:16), another king had a wasting disease (15:23), and there was civil war. (16:21,22)

One would think this might be enough to cause the people to question the idolatrous path they were on, but they simply continued this perilous course. In Leviticus 26 there were a set of six escalating warnings if people were not to listen, not to obey, and to break the covenant: 1) political instability, disease, sudden terrors, 2) drought, 3) wild animals killing children, 4) famine, 5) cannibalism, 6) exile.

With all the warnings, however, there was still a promise of mercy and grace. If the people would repent, they would return from exile. God said he would not harm them if they quit worshipping idols, but warned of judgment “because you have not listened to me.” (Jeremiah 25:8) As Israel and then Judah moved through these consequences to exile, there was repeated intervention, and miraculous and positive actions on God’s part, offered as a change to turn around.

Our call is to be part of those who are turning around and calling others to turn around and go once more in the direction of a life obedient to God.

Lord, thank you that mercy is always available. It was available to the people in these ancient times and it is available to use today. Help us turn constantly toward you to receive that mercy.

July 30
Elijah — I Kings 17-19

Matthew 17:10-13 His disciples asked, “Why do the teachers of religious law insist that Elijah must return before the Messiah comes?” Jesus replied, “Elijah is indeed coming first to set everything in order. But I tell you, he has already come, but he wasn’t recognized, and he was badly mistreated. And soon the Son of Man will also suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples realized he had been speaking of John the Baptist.

The New Testament compared Elijah and John the Baptist. In his discourse on John the Baptist (Matthew 11:7-19) Christ pointed out this prophecy: “I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.” (Malachi 4:5)

Here he appeared on the scene to announce drought, the second sign of judgement prophesied. (Leviticus 26) Up to this point the principal figures were the kings, with the prophets in a secondary role. Elijah took the stage as an equal to evil King Ahab, in direct competition for the hearts of the people. After him, the prophets became the principal characters and the king the minor characters to whom they spoke. When he announced the end of the drought it was yet another moment of mercy, allowing more time for people to respond to the call to repentance.

In Elijah’s discouragement after the victory at Mount Carmel, he began to replicate much in the life of Moses. He was alone in the desert and had a direct encounter with God’s messenger, much as Moses at the burning bush. He then spent forty days and nights wandering in the desert—since it is 200 miles between where he started and the traditional site of Mount Sinai his journey involved detours. There is important symbolism in Elijah’s encounter with God at Mount Sinai. God’s presence had gloriously appeared at the Temple at the beginning of the book, but with both Judah and Israel engaged in idolatry, the Temple had been corrupted. What was needed was a return to the roots of faith when the law was first received.

Christ used Elijah’s example to demonstrate God’s love for all nations, mentioning how he went to a Gentile, a widow in Sidon, during famine. (Luke 4) When Christ called a Gentile woman in Sidon “a little dog,” softening a racial slur, it changes the story to recognize that this was the place where Elijah also helped a widow. (Matthew 15)

Elijah’s journey into the desert parallels Christ’s desert experience as well. Elijah miraculously multiplied oil and flour just as Christ miraculously multiplied wine and bread. When the widow’s son died, Elijah’s successful prayer resulted in a return from the dead, just as Christ raised a widow’s son.

The layers of spirituality are clear here: Moses, Elijah, Christ, John the Baptist, and us today. We are to walk in the footsteps of all these spiritual giants.

Lord, increase our faith! Make us mighty people like Elijah who expect you to act.

July 31

Ahab and Jezebel — I Kings 20-21

John 3:20, 21 “They hate the light because they want to sin in the darkness. They stay away from the light for fear their sins will be exposed and they will be punished. But those who do what is right come to the light gladly, so everyone can see that they are doing what God wants.”

Ahab and Jezebel foreshadow Christ’s enemies. Naboth, their victim, is an image of Christ. Jezebel, an archetypal evil woman, comes to a much-deserved gruesome end, thrown out a window like a fairy-tale witch. Her bad character negatively influenced her husband and children, encouraging idolatry and disbelief in God. She supported her husband’s childishness and sulkiness, determined to get him whatever he wanted, no matter the cost, including murder.

The couple most parallel to Ahab and Jezebel in Christ’s life were Herod and Herodias. Just as Ahab opposed Elijah, Herod opposed John the Baptist. Just as Herodias asked for John the Baptist’s head on a plate, Jezebel put Elijah on notice that she planned to kill him. In the life of Christ, opposition and cruelty came from political and spiritual leaders who, like Jezebel and Ahab, did not want their leadership challenged. Naboth and Christ both had false accusers who said they blasphemed God and deserved death.

Prophets gave Ahab messages that could have brought him to repentance: no rain, rain would come, he would defeat Aram, he would be attacked within a year, he would die for allowing the king to survive, dogs would lick his blood, his wife and descendants would be killed, he would temporarily be spared because of his repentance. At the end, he was warned he would die in battle. His life story is structured around prophecies and their fulfillment, and his tragic refusal to repent.

Lord, make us aware and sensitive to even the smallest acts of selfishness, and give us the grace of repentance, that they might not grow into greater sin. Clean us up. Fill us with your Spirit.

August 1

Jehoshaphat—I Kings 22, II Chronicles 17-20

Mark 1:21,22 Jesus and his companions went to the town of Capernaum, and every Sabbath day he went into the synagogue and taught the people. They were amazed at his teaching, for he taught as one who had real authority—quite unlike the teachers of religious law.

Jehoshaphat prefigured Christ as a wise ruler, teacher, and defender of his people. Jehoshaphat was a good king who removed pagan shrines as did all the good kings. In addition, like Christ, he sent out excellent men on a teaching mission throughout Judah, using scripture as their text to draw people to God. Later the king visited his whole nation, exhorting them to return to God.

He set up three levels of the judiciary and charged the judges to make decisions based on respect for God and His law. When threatened by an enemy, Jehoshaphat called the nation to fasting and prayer. God gave an unusual victory with a choir leading the army.

Jehoshaphat's failures came from collaborating with wicked Israelite kings. He accepted correction humbly, for example, a shipwreck in a shared business venture, and repented of these moments of poor judgment. His godly life models Christ better than most of Judah's kings.

As a child I observed a Christianity strong on service, sacrifice, study, perseverance in suffering, accompanying sadness and suffering in the world. Weaker on joy, worship, and delight in victories, I have sought to add these to my adult faith. Jehoshaphat faced an overwhelming army, routed without human effort, since "the battle is not yours, but God's." The people engaged in worship, praise, shouting, singing, giving thanks. Their acknowledgement of blessing, their joy, and their harp, lyre and trumpet music are a great example.

Lord, may the mark of my life, what others really notice, be joy in you! May worship, praise, thanksgiving, and delight be what overflows in all I do.

August 2

Elijah's Ascension — II Kings 1-2, II Chronicles 21

Acts 1:9-11 After saying this, he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him. As they strained to see him rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!"

Elijah was like Christ in challenging an evil king and being pursued and in danger of his life. Like Christ, he called a disciple, Elisha, to follow him and continue his ministry. A beautiful parallel was his disappearance into heaven in a fiery chariot, much like Christ's ascension.

Elijah appeared in the gospels at the transfiguration along with Moses, both towering figures who prepared the way for Christ's ministry. When Samaritans rejected Christ on his way to Jerusalem, and the disciples proposed

sending fire from heaven on them. Some manuscripts add “like Elijah.” Jesus said no. (Luke 9:51-56)

Elijah was powerful in the Spirit, doing many miraculous signs. Christ promised us power when we receive the Spirit, a gift now available to all believers rather than selected leaders only. In the last 120 years there have been so many miraculous signs: healing, protection from danger, visions and dreams, mass evangelism, amazingly effective ministries, prophetic words, and speaking in tongues. This surge of spiritual gifts means many walk in Elijah-like power, and I feel challenged to pray boldly when I see their examples. Christ said this is a gift God wants to give any who ask. (Luke 11:13)

Lord, give us the faith to be like Elijah in our time.

August 3

Elisha — II Kings 3-5

Luke 4:27 Think of the prophet Elisha, who healed Naaman, a Syrian, rather than the many lepers in Israel who needed help.

Elisha foreshadows Christ as prophet, healer, teacher, miracle-worker, and trainer of a group of followers. He reached beyond the ethnic boundaries of Israel, and healed a Syrian, an example Christ used to speak of God’s universal love. Elisha’s life is full of good stories taken on their own terms.

Elisha’s relationship to Elijah resembles that of Joshua to Moses. Both served as assistants, both were nearby when the leaders were taken to heaven, both divided the waters of Jordan to cross it. He also resembles Moses: purifying water, providing water, rescuing from poisoned meat, and healing a leper. But there are even more parallels to Christ that are unique to Elisha.

We have a disturbing story of wild bears who attacked 42 mocking young men. (II Kings 2: 23-24) This recalls the Levitical warning that if people persisted in their stubborn disobedience they would be cursed. Attack by wild animals was the third curse in a set of six escalating curses. What follows, however, are seven miracles that directly look forward to Christ. These intrude before the fourth curse (famine) and fifth curse (cannibalism) occur. Leprosy as a curse on the greedy servant Gehazi is one of the first curses from Leviticus 26.

II Kings	<i>Elisha's actions</i>	<i>Reminders of Christ</i>
3	Prophesied victory to a believing king	Prophesied his victory over evil to his disciples
4:1-7	Multiplied oil	Turned water to wine
4:8-37	Raised a child from the dead	Raised the widow's child
4:38-44	Multiplied bread	Multiplied bread twice
5:1-19	Healed a leper	Healed many lepers
6:1-7	Floating ax head	Walking on water
6:8-21	Protected by angels	Served by angels

Elisha's example inspires me to pray for miraculous interventions, healing, protection, and a deeper awareness of the spiritual world. We, too, can receive the Holy Spirit as he did and impact our world for good.

Lord, open our eyes to see spiritual realities more clearly. Please make us teachers, healers, and people of faith who see miracles.

August 4

The Angelic Hosts — II Kings 6-7

Luke 2:13,14 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." (KJV)

At Christ's birth, a host of angels came announcing peace on earth. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures they played many roles: messengers, protectors, rescuers, singers, and worshippers. They fought alongside or in place of Israel. Elisha had the capacity to see the angel armies and their fiery chariots surrounding the human army that had come after him. Here they not only protected Israel, they brought peace. Elisha prayed for the army to be blinded, singlehandedly led them to the king, and insisted they be released as prisoners of war.

Then comes the tragic story of famine and resulting cannibalism, once again part of the series of curses from Leviticus 26. But more stories of mercy follow. The angel army created enough noise for the attackers to be alarmed and leave. Outcast lepers were the means of bringing the good news that the famine was over.

God's warriors played a decisive role in many stories, and God was called the "Lord of Hosts" 269 times. The Psalmist gave us a sense of their vastness: "The chariots of God are twenty thousand, even thousands of angels: the Lord

is among them, as in Sinai, in the Holy Place.” (Psalm 68:17) John wrote: “Then I looked again, and I heard the voices of thousands and millions of angels around the throne and of the living beings and the elders. (Revelation 5:11) And Daniel also wrote of many millions of angels serving God. (Daniel 7:10) Christ chose not to call the angels of heaven to his rescue, but knew that he could: “Don’t you realize that I could ask my Father for thousands of angels to protect us, and he would send them instantly?” (Matthew 26:53)

These are mysterious, but inspiring, spiritual figures that we have been told we may encounter, especially in any acts of kindness to a stranger.

Lord, keep me conscious that there is an unseen spiritual world, unseen spiritual battles, and that you will win and bring peace. Make me a peacemaker.

August 5

Mercy and Judgment — II Kings 8

John 3:18 “There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God’s one and only Son.”

Christ brought a message of mercy for those willing to believe, and judgment for those unwilling. Elisha brought a similar message. After the judgment of the famine which was reversed, people could respond with belief. One who did was the woman whose son was raised from the dead. She returned to the land, trusting that the seven years of famine Elisha prophesied were over. Further, her testimony of resurrection was being recounted to the king by Elisha’s servant Gehazi when she arrived. She received back her land and the value of her crops, receiving justice.

While the sixth Levitical curse of being taken from the land would happen, there was still time for repentance. There would be more disbelieving kings and some believing ones. Elisha gave messages of political judgments on unbelieving kings, thereby fulfilling work commissioned to Elijah

Elijah was told to anoint leaders:

Hazael to be king of Aram	I Kings 19:15
Jehu to be king of Israel	I Kings 19:16
Elisha selected and anointed	I Kings 19:16, 19

Elisha carried out these anointings:

Elisha anointed Hazael	II Kings 8:13, 15
Elisha sent younger prophet to anoint Jehu	II Kings 9: 3,6

Elisha gave yet one more prophesy to Jehu's grandson when on his deathbed. (II Kings 13:14-19) Always, he stood out as a believing man in contrast to the unbelieving kings of his time. May we have a similar profile.

Lord, help us to make the choice to believe and to turn to you. Help us to see the examples of those who did not obey you as warnings to avoid.

August 6

Jehu — II Kings 9-10, II Chronicles 22

Matthew 16:27 For the Son of Man will come with his angels in the glory of his Father and will judge all people according to their deeds.

Jehu exercised judgment reminiscent of final judgment. However, his cruelty contrasts with Christ who will judge with perfect justice. Jehu's story is one of prophecy and fulfillment. He was the instrument of judgment on Ahab's family, but in turn was warned that his family would only last four generations.

Prophecy and fulfillment explain much about Israel's kings.

Jereboam's descendants will all die	I Kings 13:10
Baasha kills all of Jereboam's family	I Kings 15:29
Baasha's family will be destroyed	I Kings 16:3
Zimri kills all of Baasha's family	I Kings 16:11
Ahab's family will die	I Kings 21:19
Jehu kills all of Ahab's family	II Kings 9,10
Jehu's throne would last four generations	II Kings 10:30
Fourth generation assassinated	II Kings 15:10,12

Three more assassinations before Israel fell meant that the line of succession was continually broken. In contrast, Judah's succession was unbroken. As the writer editorializes: "But the Lord was not willing to destroy David's dynasty, for he had made a covenant with David and promised that his descendants would continue to rule forever." (II Chronicles 21:7)

Jehu vigorously destroyed Ahab's family. He killed prophets of Baal, destroyed Baal-worship, and desecrated their temple, making it a public toilet. However, he kept the golden calves. The promise that his descendants would be kings to the fourth generation was fulfilled in Jehoahaz, Jehoash, Jereboam II, and Zechariah, none of whom were obedient kings. Zechariah ruled six months before his assassination, and Jehu's succession ended.

A prophet confirmed that Jehu overdid the judgments: "I am about to punish King Jehu's dynasty to avenge the murders he committed at Jezreel. In fact, I will bring an end to Israel's independence." (Hosea 1:4)

In contrast, John's gospel speaks of Christ's judgment: God sent his son into the world not to judge, but to save (John 3:17, John 12:47), Christ judges justly because he carries out God's will (John 5:30), he looks beneath the surface (John 7:24), and does not judge by human standards (John 8:15). Our model when called to make judgments in political, economic, or religious spheres needs to copy Christ, not Jehu.

Lord, thank you that your judgments are perfectly just.

August 7

Joash — II Kings 11-12, II Chronicles 23-24

Matthew 2:16 Herod was furious when he learned that the wise men had outwitted him. He sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, because the wise men had told him the star first appeared to them about two years earlier.

Joash was preserved as an infant foreshadowing Christ's preservation in the slaughter of the innocents. Though his brothers died, he became king as a young child, started well, cleansed the temple, but eventually turned away into sin.

Power-hungry Queen Athaliah reminds us of King Herod who ordered the massacre of the innocents. Related to Israelite King Ahab, she married the Prince of Judah, and had an evil influence. When her husband became king, he killed his brothers, and he ruled so badly, no one regretted his death. When her son Azariah became King, she encouraged his wrong-doing. When he was murdered, she attempted to kill the royal heirs, failing to kill Joash only because he was rescued by his aunt.

Jehoiada, the priest who killed Athaliah and installed the seven-year-old Joash as King, lived until he was 130 years old. He was honored by burial among kings. While he lived, King Joash supported Temple restoration and repair, but as soon as Jehoiada died, Joash failed. He resisted Jehoiada's son Zechariah's prophetic words against Asherah poles, and ordered Zechariah to be stoned. The story did not end well for Joash who was wounded in battle, and assassinated on his sickbed by his own officers.

Christ spoke of this when he said that generation would be guilty "of murdering all the godly people from righteous Abel to Zechariah." (Matthew 23:35, Luke 11:51) Since the Hebrew scriptures places Chronicles last, this is a way of saying, "all the prophets from A to Z." Christ's lesson is for us to be humble enough to listen to prophetic voices, not to resist them. In our time it

is metaphorical killing that uses insults or slander that is particularly prevalent in our on-line world.

Lord, make us faithful deep in our hearts and not just adapting to good people around us. Give us inner strength.

August 8

The Eternal Kingdom — II Kings 13, 14

John 11:25 Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying."

In the midst of political chaos as Israel continued to decline and head toward destruction and exile, Elisha continued to faithfully give prophetic messages to the kings. Even his death became a sign of hope that previewed Christ's work of resurrection. An unnamed man was in the process of being buried, but since enemies surprised them, his friends put him in Elisha's tomb. Upon touching Elisha's bones, he returned to life.

This is one of three resurrection stories in the Hebrew scriptures, and they compare to stories in Christ's life. Christ raised Jairus' daughter and the son of the widow of Nain, just as Elijah and then Elisha raised children to life. (I Kings 17, II Kings 13) Then Christ raised Lazarus. (John 11)

These stories make Christ's resurrection the seventh of scripture. His was qualitatively different, because he will never die. A few scriptures predict resurrection. (Psalm 49:15, Psalm 71:20, Hosea 13:14) Christ predicted general resurrection (John 5:25, John 6:40, John 11:25) and specifically his own resurrection. (Matthew 16:21, Matthew 20:19, Matthew 26:32, Mark 9:9, Mark 14:28, John 2:19)

Our experiences of illness and healing have a similar connectivity to the power of the resurrection. I will never forget the powerful experience of my sister Beverly's healing. When she was 18 she had convulsions, went into a coma, and doctors predicted either death or significant brain damage. When she opened her eyes at first she could not speak and was like a small child. Slowly she regained her memory and her abilities, and when she went to college the next year no one would have known that she had suffered such a significant and life-threatening illness. For us, this was a resurrection.

Lord, we praise you that you are a God of the living! Thank you that life after death is eternal life for those who trust in you. Lord, thank you that you are the King, the fulfillment of all the promises. We gladly confess that yours is the Kingdom, the power, and the glory.

August 9

Obedience and Failure — II Kings 15-16, II Chronicles 26-28

John 3:36 And anyone who believes in God's Son has eternal life. Anyone who doesn't obey the Son will never experience eternal life but remains under God's angry judgment.

Kings in Judah alternated between obedience and disobedience, showing the same ambivalence we have today. Christ called us to obedience and warned that judgment awaits the disobedient. All these kings—Uzziah, Jotham and Ahaz—had the benefit of Isaiah's prophetic ministry warning them and calling them to obedience. (Isaiah 1:1) Micah preached in the time of Jotham and Ahaz. (Micah 1:1)

Uzziah began well. He had many accomplishments, listened to the prophet Zechariah, built towers and cisterns, defeated surrounding enemies, and had engineers build engines to defend his towers. Then, in pride he took on the priestly role, and was struck with leprosy and knew it was God's judgment. He lived in quarantine and never could enter the Temple again, nor could he be buried in the royal cemetery. Uzziah's son Jotham became co-regent, lived in obedience, and in consequence became powerful.

In contrast, Jotham's son Ahaz returned to idolatry and suffered defeats. Judah and Israel went to war, and Judah lost. In a precursor to "just war" theory, a prophet told the returning Israelite soldiers, "The Lord, the God of your ancestors, was angry with Judah and let you defeat them. But you have gone too far, killing them without mercy, and all heaven is disturbed." (II Chronicles 28:9) A further encounter served as preview to Geneva Convention standards for treating prisoners of war. (II Chronicles 28:14)

We want to be obedient people, and we want to avail ourselves of God's mercy when we fail. We want to experience the blessings of healing, God's power in our lives, and victory instead of defeat. These are things we can claim: "Overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us." (Romans 8:37)

Lord, thank you that you give us the power to be obedient people. Thank you that we are promised victory in our lives as a result of walking with you.

August 10

The Fall of Israel — II Kings 17

Matthew 25: 31,32 But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered in is presence, and he will separate them as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

The judgment that fell on Israel parallels end-time judgment. Christ will make a separation between those who love him and those who do not. In this case, judgment meant the loss of identity as part of the kingdom foreshadowing Christ's future kingdom, a loss of being members of Israel and heirs of the promises to Abraham, Moses and David.

The last Kings of Israel, Pekah and Hoshea, met their doom from Assyria. Judah had about 135 more years of existence than Israel before she, too, went into exile. But unlike Israel, she returned in a great act of God's mercy and faithfulness.

This climactic moment of judgment had been warned of ever since the giving of the law. Repeated warnings came through Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah and Micah, and all went unheeded. Instead the people and their kings continued their idolatry. Hoshea, subservient to Assyria, conspired with Egypt, and after a three-year siege, lost his kingdom. Israel was taken away and Samaritans were resettled from various places in Assyria. The ten tribes of Israel disappeared, assimilated into the pagan culture to which they were taken.

Due to their cruelty and arrogance in destroying Israel, Assyria earned judgment as well. Compared to a tall, beautiful cedar tree (Ezekiel 31: 3-9), Assyria was warned it would be cut down. By 605 BC, only 117 years after their conquest of Israel in 722 BC, Assyria fell to Babylon.

This is a final defeat that we as believers in Christ do not have to experience. The way of mercy is always open to us, and we can turn back to Him at any time.

Lord, we see that those who fail to follow you fall under the judgment and are cut down. We also see that those who turn to you in faith always received your mercy. Help us to always turn to you in humility and ask for your mercy.

August 11

Hezekiah — II Kings 18-19, II Chronicles 29-31

John 2:13-15 It was time for the annual Passover celebration, and Jesus went to Jerusalem. In the Temple area he saw merchants selling cattle, sheep, and doves for sacrifices, and he saw money changers behind their counters. Jesus made a whip from some ropes and chased them all out of the Temple.

Hezekiah prefigures Christ as sanctifier. Both engaged in cleansing the Temple. Jesus cracked a whip and knocked over tables to take the Temple from a den of thieves back to a place of worship. Hezekiah called for repentance, organized a group which took sixteen days to clean out the mess.

Consecrated with worship, he then reinstated a Passover celebration which motivated people to tear down pagan altars and give generously to Temple maintenance.

Several prayers are recorded, including one for deliverance from the attacking Assyrians, and another for healing when he was dying. When he was healed he became arrogant instead of grateful. Fortunately, he repented, but not before inappropriately showing his treasures to Babylonian messengers. He failed to pass on his faith to his son Manasseh and was complacent that the Babylonian conquest would fall on his descendants. While his temple-cleansing offers much to admire, his pride serves as a warning.

When I have seen a situation that seems impossible and overwhelming, Hezekiah's story encourages me to not give up, but to keep praying. His miraculous experience is repeated three times—in II Kings, II Chronicles, and Isaiah—highlighting its importance.

Lord, may I never become arrogant as a result of seeing you answer my prayers. Keep my heart humble, open to whatever you have in store next.

August 12

The Remarkable Rescue — II Kings 20, II Chron. 32

John 15:7 But if you stay joined to me and my words remain in you, you may ask any request you like, and it will be granted!

Judah's rescue from enemies foreshadows Christ's rescue through the cross. Ten years after the fall of Israel, the King of Assyria attacked Judah and forced Hezekiah to pay tribute. Judean leaders despaired, engaged in the mocking dialogue of the Assyrian representatives who boasted of their strong army with many successful conquests.

In this dark moment Hezekiah prayed and sought the prophet Isaiah's wisdom. Isaiah assured him the enemy would return home, the king would be assassinated by his sons, and his army would fail to enter Jerusalem. Miraculously, this happened, and utterly astonishing reversal in an impossible situation.

God's angel destroyed 185,000 Assyrians without a battle. Nor did they suffer more threats, since the King returned to Nineveh, remained there, and was murdered by his sons.

Once again, a lesson we can claim is that God will give victory if we trust Him. It is not our strength or wisdom that make the difference, it is our confidence in asking for His help. Christ has already won the victory over our spiritual foes,

and we can ask for that to be made evident in our lives. “In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross.” (Colossians 2:15)

Lord, thank you that when things seem impossible, we can turn in trust to you and see miraculous turn-arounds. I bless you for my memories of these things in my life and the lives of those I love.

August 13

Josiah — II Kings 21-23, II Chronicles 33-35

I Peter 1:15-16 But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. For the Scriptures say, “You must be holy because I am holy.”

Josiah foreshadows Christ as sanctifier. He tore down pagan shrines, cleansed and repaired the Temple, found the missing scriptures, read them aloud and committed the people to obedience. This near-to-last Judean King celebrated Passover better than any since Samuel’s time.

Temple worship had deteriorated quickly since Hezekiah’s cleansing. Utensils were used to worship Baal, Asherah and heavenly forces. Prostitutes wove coverings for an Asherah pole, and there were altars and shrines all over the country, including one for sacrificing children. Josiah’s purification, parallel to Christ’s purification of the Temple, could not prevent the coming judgment in the next generation when Judah was taken into captivity.

Josiah’s grand-father Manasseh had sacrificed his sons in pagan rituals. (II Chronicles 33:6) Taken captive in Babylon, he repented there and God restored him as king. When he died, his 22-year-old son Amon was crowned, but was assassinated after two years on the throne.

Josiah may have been influenced by his penitent grandfather during his first six years of life, but an even stronger influence was a prophetic voice. Josiah became king at eight, began to seek God at sixteen, and set out to reform Israel at seventeen. Jeremiah started preaching when Josiah was 21, a great voice joining him to promote reform.

This reminds us that no matter what our spiritual heritage or lack of spiritual heritage might be, we are responsible to learn to follow God with our whole hearts and live in obedience and faith.

Lord, thank you that these examples teach us to continually seek renewal and restoration no matter what failures come into our lives. Thank you that you are a God who continually arranges second chances.

August 14

The Destruction of Jerusalem — II Kings 24-25, II Chronicles 36

Luke 19:41-44 But as they came closer to Jerusalem and Jesus saw the city ahead, he began to cry: “I wish that even today you would find the way of peace. But now it is too late, and peace is hidden from you. Before long your enemies will build ramparts against your walls and encircle you and close in on you. They will crush you to the ground, and your children with you. Your enemies will not leave a single stone in place, because you have rejected the opportunity God offered you.

The destruction of the Temple foreshadowed Christ’s death. Christ’s death was followed by resurrection, and the destroyed Temple was rebuilt. What did it mean after so many years of emphasis on the Temple as the meeting place with God for it to be destroyed? God’s people had to learn to worship Him without a particular house in which to do so.

The captivity cured the tendency to build pagan altars. The Jews become known for their faith expressed through scripture study, community life, prayer, and economic generosity. When the Temple was restored, these lessons remained, and even when once again destroyed after Christ’s ministry, these expressions of faith continued until today. In 70 AD Romans destroyed the rebuilt Temple. Though it has never been rebuilt, faith has continued, not dependent on a building.

Temple destruction occurred on the 7th to the 9th day of the 5th month, or the month of Av. Because the Jewish calendar is lunar, the date varies between the end of July and beginning of August. The second Temple destruction occurred on the same day. Strangely, numerous subsequent Jewish tragedies occurred on this same day which is why *Tisha B’Av* continues as a day of repentance.

Just as the Law promised, despite their sins, God would show mercy and restore the people. (Leviticus 26:40-45) The very end of II Chronicles (36:22-23) takes the story to the moment of the proclamation to return to the land. These same verses are repeated in Ezra. (1:1-3) But the destruction of Jerusalem and Temple is such a climactic moment of despair and horror that Jeremiah, who had been warning this would come, wrote his poem in Lamentations to capture this terrible time.

But perhaps the real end of the story comes in Nehemiah with the profound repentance for a history of rebellion and not listening to God. They acknowledge: “Every time you punished us you were being just. We have sinned greatly, and you gave us only what we deserved.” (Neh. 9:33) Always God also shows mercy and their prayer is appropriate for us as well. (Neh. 9:31b, 32)

“What a gracious and merciful God you are! And now, our God, the great and mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of unfailing love, do not let all the hardships we have suffered be as nothing to you.”

CHAPTER 3, Part 4

The Kingdom Foreshadowed: Promise Regained

Ezra — Esther

After seventy years of captivity, a small group of the surviving people of Judah were allowed to return to their land. They rebuilt the Temple and rebuilt their expectation of a coming glorious Kingdom. Meanwhile other survivors who remained at the center of the empire where they also struggled to maintain their identity and their hope.



August 15
Zerubbabel — Ezra 1-4

John 17:1,4 when Jesus had finished saying all these things, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son so he can give glory back to you. ...I brought glory to you here on earth by doing everything you told me to do."

Zerubbabel is a king like Christ whose glory was temporarily hidden. Though the Kingship was diminished, a son of David was still King. The royal line continued and Zerubbabel was Christ's ancestor.

He led the return of the first group of exiles. The king's abundant provision encouraged them and perhaps explains why they made a detailed list. He led the group through the difficult process of Temple re-building. Zerubbabel's faithfulness to make worship the center of the return is something we can admire and emulate.

In Chapter 3 Zerubbabel and Jeshua the priest led a Festival of Shelters. In Chapter 6, before Ezra's arrival, they led Passover. This is the last Passover mentioned before the coming of Christ: 1) leaving Egypt, 2) in the desert the following year. (Numbers 9), 3) preparing to enter the land when the provision of manna ended (Joshua 5), 4) Hezekiah's Passover, 5) Josiah's Passover, and 6) Zerubbabel's Passover. This once more puts emphasis on Christ's Passover observances as the seventh in the series.

The restoration of the Mainz, Germany Cathedral serves as a beautiful analogy to rebuilding the temple. During World War II, the Allies bombed repeatedly and the cathedral was hit several times in 1942 and badly burned. Restoration work continued well into the 1970s. Because the glass had been destroyed, the church appealed to Chagall to make stained-glass windows. The leader of this effort pointed out that Mainz had been the capital of European Jewry and Chagall hoped this work would represent Jewish/Christian reconciliation. His windows included not only images of Moses and David, but also the crucifixion and annunciation to Mary.

In light of the despair of the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem, and the long captivity, this is such an important moment of fulfillment. In our lives also we may find that we go through dark times, but hope is essential. The fulfillment of hopes is always possible even when it seems so unlikely.

Lord, restore our lives. Take everything that is broken and fix it! May the people who see the good job you have done be motivated to praise you.

August 16
Cyrus — Ezra 5-6

Luke 19:5 When Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name.

Just as Christ called Zacchaeus by name, God called Cyrus by name. Isaiah predicted Cyrus would restore Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. As the 70 years of exile were reached. Daniel, taken into captivity at the beginning of the exile, remained as an advisor when Cyrus came to power. Perhaps he influenced Cyrus to pay for Temple supplies and allow exiles to return. When opposition arose in the transition to a new King, records were searched, and this authorization was found.

Isaiah 45:1 calls Cyrus the “Lord’s anointed,” a phrase that means Messiah, or is translated into Greek as “Christ.” The phrase was applied to four people in the Hebrew scriptures: Saul, David (numerous times in I Samuel), Zedekiah (Lamentations 4:20), and Cyrus. Daniel prophesied of a future Messiah, an anointed one who we recognize as Christ.

What a statement that a Gentile king served to fulfill prophecy and served as an image of Christ. No one knows all of his motives in allowing the captives to return, but both Ezra and II Chronicles say he was fulfilling Jeremiah’s prophecy.

Cyrus conquered Babylon in 539 BC by diverting the Euphrates and entering through the lowered river. Under Darius, Babylon flourished as a center of learning with advancement in astronomy and mathematics. It served as the capital of the Persian Empire for two centuries. Remarkably, it is estimated that Cyrus ruled over 44% of the world’s population, more than any other emperor in history.

It is reassuring that God knew how He would use an unbelieving king to accomplish his great purposes. This can be reassuring when we see unbelievers in political power; we simply can pray that God’s hand will be on them.

How remarkable the predictions and fulfillments are in your word, Lord. They teach us that you are sovereign over all nations. This is awe-inspiring!

August 17
Ezra — Ezra 7-10

Mark 10:17 As he was starting out on a trip, a man came running up to Jesus, knelt down, and asked, “Good Teacher, what should I do to get eternal life?”

Ezra foreshadows Christ as teacher. Both recruited disciples to become leaders in the new community. He called for separation and a holy life, and injected new life into Temple worship.

Chapter 7 starts 57 years after the Temple dedication in 515 BC. Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458 BC (Ezra 7:9), and Nehemiah would arrive 13 years later.

There is much of God's undeserved mercy and favor in Ezra's story. The phrase "the gracious hand of the Lord" is repeated four times. First, because the King of Babylon gave him everything he asked for; second, because he and his group arrived safely in Jerusalem after a four-month journey; third, because he was honored before the king, his council and all the powerful princes; and fourth, because their group was protected from enemies and bandits on their journey. In his prayer Ezra says, "We have been given a brief moment of grace."

When Nehemiah arrived to rebuild the wall, Ezra continued as a leader. At the Festival of Shelters Ezra read aloud from the Law for seven days. Ezra is credited with compiling much of the Hebrew scriptures, and writing not only the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, but perhaps I and II Chronicles as well. This love and dedication to teaching God's word, and being the author of scripture points toward the New Testament writers who left us accounts of Christ's life, and epistles of instruction.

His example of loving and teaching scripture inspires us today to take seriously the written account we have of centuries of seekers of God recording their experiences. May we be people who love to study.

Lord, teach us to immerse ourselves in your Word, to love it deeply and to be part of sharing it with others.

August 18

Nehemiah — Nehemiah 1

Ephesians 4:9 Notice that it says "he ascended." This clearly means that Christ also descended to our lowly world.

Nehemiah prefigures Christ incarnation. Leaving the palace out of love, building his people up, creating protection, sacrificing his rights to privilege, advocating for the poor, teaching the word, purifying the community, are all part of Nehemiah's story that parallel Christ's incarnation.

Nehemiah was so grieved by Jerusalem's suffering that he wept and prayed, much as Christ was grieved for the city. (Luke 13:34) The empathy Nehemiah

felt for the suffering of his people, while knowing it was a just judgement, caused him to take responsibility. “I confess that we have sinned against you. Yes, even my own family and I have sinned!” (Nehemiah 1:6) How parallel to Christ who took complete responsibility for all of our sins.

Nehemiah’s compassion evoked the King’s sympathy, resulting in financial support and a decree to rebuild. Remarkably, this king had commanded the city to stop rebuilding and not to start again without his express command. (Ezra 4:17-23) Nehemiah’s position of influence as the king’s cupbearer, made change possible.

Nehemiah’s example of prayer and a vision for the progress of the Kingdom can serve as an inspiration for us. His prayer in Chapter 1:5-11 is beautiful model. It begins:

“O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of unfailing love with those who love him and obey his commands, listen to my prayer!”

August 19

Rebuilding the Wall — Nehemiah 2-6

Matthew 6:13 Deliver us from the evil one.

Nehemiah’s actions on behalf of the people as he led rebuilding the wall, parallel Christ’s protection from danger, opposition, and slander. As Christ taught us in his prayer: “Deliver us from evil and lead us not into temptation.” Nehemiah teaches that God will both protect us from enemies and defeat them, and we see this happen as they face opposition from all sides.

Since we live in a day when cities do not depend on walls for protection it is hard to understand the depths of Nehemiah’s despair that Jerusalem’s walls lay in ruins. Cities were built on hills, walls were either double or extremely thick, and the gates of iron served to protect from enemies. Ruinous walls not only left the people unprotected, they indicated an uncivilized place. What a terrible thing for the city that was to be the place of God’s presence on earth.

As I intercede for people I care about, the imagery of needing a wall of protection around them is a useful one, recognizing that good boundaries, gates that open and close, safety, alertness to opposition as one is building security, are all relevant to the spiritual and emotional lives of each one of us.

Lord, thank you that when we have a task to do for you, that you know the protection and help that we need, the wisdom we need to complete that task.

August 20
Hearing God's Word — Nehemiah 7-9

Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our inmost thoughts and desires.

The people paid close attention to God's Word as it was read, and listened to an explanation of each passage. As we have seen in these meditations, the meaning pointed to the coming Messiah, Christ himself.

As they listened they were convicted of sin, and wept and repented. But they were told to rejoice because the Festival of Shelters they were celebrating was to be a time of joy, acknowledging God's presence with them as a pilgrim people. The festival looked forward to Christ's presence with us.

Though normally the time of repentance would precede this time of joy in the festal calendar, this was reversed and the Levites led them in a great prayer of confession several weeks later. This great prayer in Nehemiah 9 tells the story of Israel, using "they" for the disobedient actions of their ancestors. But at the end, it becomes a personal prayer of confession, using "we", an example for us.

From Nehemiah 9:31-33: *What a gracious and merciful God you are! And now, our God, the great and mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of unfailing love, do not let all the hardships we have suffered be as nothing to you. ... Every time you punished us you were being just. We have sinned greatly, and you gave us only what we deserved.*

August 21
Called by Name—Nehemiah 10-12

Luke 6:12 At daybreak he called together all of his disciples and chose twelve of them to be apostles. Here are their names.

Christ called his disciples by name, and he calls each one of us by name. In Nehemiah, four and a half chapters are largely names: chapter 3 lists families working along the wall, chapter 7 repeats Ezra 2 listing settlers, much of chapter 10 lists signatories of the covenant, half of chapter 11 lists those resettling Jerusalem, and half of chapter 12 which lists priests, Levites and musicians. It raises interesting questions about this literature. Is there another ancient literature that so faithfully gives us the names of individuals? More commonly in old stories the focus is on the hero and his enemies.

The culture of appreciation for the individual and respect for each person, each family, seems to be deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian thinking. All are created

important. All of the names in Nehemiah represent “pioneers,” “founding fathers,” “signers of the constitution.” We even learn the names of seven trumpet-playing priests, eight singers, and the conductor.

With so many publications of scripture, think how many times these obscure names have been highlighted! We may feel unimportant, but as members of the community of faith, our names are important.

Lord, thank you that your intention is to build a just community in our time as well. Thank you that each person matters, every name is important.

August 22

Purification — Nehemiah 13

II Peter 3:11 Since everything around us is going to be destroyed like this, what holy and godly lives you should live.

The purity of the people was Nehemiah’s concern as he came back to revisit Jerusalem. We see this same concern for the purity of the people of God in Paul and the other apostles as they began to build the community of faith.

Nehemiah’s intense anger over the issue of foreign wives came from his horror at the possibility of repeating the sins that led to exile. Children were losing not only their faith, but even their language. Strong commitment was needed in this community of just under 50,000 (Ezra 2, Nehemiah 7) if it was to retain its identity. By the time of Christ there were 7 million Jews, 2 million in Palestine. Today there are over 14 million, with over 6 million living in Israel. Despite pogroms, holocausts, intermarriage, and modernization, Nehemiah’s goal for them to retain their identity as messengers of God’s word succeeded.

It serves as a model for us to follow Christ’s call to maintain our distinctive identity in the world, to be salt and light that are influencing the people around us in a positive way, rather than being pulled into the wrong thinking that surrounds us.

Lord, make us people who recognize how important it is to live pure and uncompromised and holy lives today.

August 23

Esther — Esther 1-5

II Timothy 4:18 Yes, and the Lord will deliver me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly Kingdom. To God be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Esther foreshadows Christ as mediator and deliverer, risking her life to save her community. It is beautiful to have a woman prefigure Christ, and to be at the side of the most powerful emperor of that time.

To place this story in history, Jews from Babylon had moved back to Jerusalem after 538 BC. Though over 1700 miles away, Cyrus built a winter palace in Susa, and perhaps traveled back and forth between Babylon and Susa. Located in southwestern Iran, it is the modern city Shush. As immigrants, Jews were vulnerable, and the story reflects the racism to which immigrants are so often subject.

Persia's wars with Greece had begun around 500 BC and lasted for 50 years. In the midst of this Xerxes I, known also by his Hebrew name King Ahasuerus, invaded Greece in 480 BC. Possibly the banquet that resulted in deposing Queen Vashti took place during the six-month summit at Susa to plan his war against Greece in 483 BC.

For women especially, the example of the bold, clever, and beautiful queen inspires. Her faith, influence and obedience encourage us in whatever challenge we are facing. Her success in stopping a genocide is celebrated in Israel with floats, costumes and fun. Today we have many female role models who have worked for justice. Some of my favorites: Rosa Parks in the civil rights movement, Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement, and Claudia Paz y Paz, the Guatemalan Attorney General who dramatically advanced human rights. Modern Esthers.

Christ, make us like this brave queen who risked her own position to care for and protect others.

August 24
Mordecai — Esther 6-10

John 17:12 During my time here, I protected them by the power of the name you gave me. I guarded them so that not one was lost, except the one headed for destruction, as the Scriptures foretold.

Mordecai foreshadows Christ. He served as protector and defender of the people, just as Christ does. He took in his orphaned niece, just as Christ adopts us. He raised her and nurtured her as a godly woman, promoted her to a high and honored position, remained near her to protect and guide her, and checked on her every day. She continued to obey him even as queen. He encouraged her to fulfill her calling through the opportunity she had been given, and inspired her courage.

The figure of evil in the story is Haman and Mordecai overcame him. Mordecai won the conflict to the point Haman was forced to bow to him. Mordecai then became the King's advisor once he had removed Haman and his evil advice, and the King responded to Mordecai's advice to undo the damage he had done. Mordecai was raised to honor with a royal robe and crown. Similarly, Christ, when raised to power and honor at God's right hand, rules wisely. Mordecai's rise to power helped preserve the Jewish people to fulfill God's promises.

God's blessing on Jewish people continues. For example, Jews make up .8% of the world's population and 2% of that of the United States, but in science Jews have won 27% of the Nobel prizes, and women in science are 35% Jewish winners. Twenty-three percent of peace prizes have been awarded to organizations founded by Jews. Since 2000 Jews have been awarded 27% of all Nobel prizes.

God's blessing was on the Jewish leader Mordecai, and still today they are important in His purposes for the world. Anti-semitism, such an ugly part of Christian history, should have no part in our hearts today.

Lord, thank you that you make your people stand out, and that you confer excellence. Thank you that you are faithful to your promises to Abraham and David even today.

CHAPTER 4

Wisdom of the Kingdom

Job — Song of Solomon

Throughout the time of the kingdom, literature grew as well, deepening the understanding of what it means to be a people of God living in hope of a future perfect kingdom. Poems, proverbs, and questioning God and life are all part of the deeper side of a reflective people.



August 25

Job's death and resurrection — Job 1-3

Matthew 20:17-19 As Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside privately and told them what was going to happen to him. "When we get to Jerusalem," he said, "the Son of Man will be betrayed to the leading priests and the teachers of religious law. They will sentence him to die. Then they will hand him over to the Romans to be mocked, whipped, and crucified. But on the third day he will be raised from the dead."

Job foreshadows Christ's passion and resurrection in that he was a righteous man who did not deserve his suffering. Christ was a victim of Satan's work, just as Job was. This is the first appearance in scripture of Satan, a name Christ also used for his chief opponent. (Matthew 4:10) Job's reflections teach us that not all suffering can be explained as a consequence of sin, nor can we always discover why suffering occurs.

Job's story is practical wisdom regarding suffering. We are given the back-story that Job was righteous, Satan made the accusation that His loyalty was due to blessings received, and God permitted suffering as a test. We can see how wrong Job's friends were to make the simplistic argument that if you are good you will be blessed, if you are bad you will be punished. Job never learned the back story, but his example teaches us to confront suffering in our own lives.

Knowing how deeply painful the death of a child has been for those I know, I cannot imagine Job's grief in losing all ten of his children at once in a tragic accident. It is impressive that he did not blame God. The natural disasters had no explanation.

As I look at suffering in our lives today, I see that there are times when we are rescued from suffering, times when God is with us as we go through it, times when we have a reprieve after suffering, and times when we are taken to God's presence. If we face suffering with faith, it can purify us.

Lord, thank you for the example of Job and the suffering he experienced that was so impossible for him to understand. Thank you that you are with us in these difficult moments in our lives.

August 26

Why Suffering? — Job 4-8

Luke 13:1-5 About this time Jesus was informed that Pilate had murdered some people from Galilee as they were sacrificing at the Temple in Jerusalem. "Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than other people from Galilee?"

he asked. “Is that why they suffered? Not at all! And you will also perish unless you turn from your evil ways and turn to God. And what about the eighteen men who died when the Tower of Siloam fell on them? Were they the worst sinners in Jerusalem? No, and I tell you again that unless you repent, you will also perish.”

Job’s dialogues and Christ’s observations on suffering make a similar point: suffering does not equal punishment. Reframing suffering is essential to prepare for Christ, the innocent sufferer.

After Job broke his silence, the book repeats advice from each friend, countered each time by Job. On the third cycle, a new, younger man speaks without response from Job. Then God himself speaks.

The three friends say the wicked are punished with suffering, Job is suffering, therefore he must be wicked. He insists this is not so, that his friends are no different from him and they are not suffering, and that they are miserable comforters. At one point he warns them that their judgmental attitude is dangerous (Job 19:28,29), reminiscent of Christ’s warning to stop judging others lest we be judged. (Matthew 7:1)

Scripture shows suffering as both deserved and undeserved, and God as both one who suffers with us and one who rescues from suffering. He offers us comfort in our suffering and we are able to take what we have learned and comfort others. (II Corinthians 1:4) Offering comfort out of our own suffering is the best, rather than the moralizing and condemnation we see in Job’s friends, and unfortunately, so often today.

Lord, thank you that you are not unrealistic, not in denial about how much we suffer. Thank you that you suffer with us and that you find creative ways to turn our suffering into good. Keep us from naïve and hurtful interpretations.

August 27

The Mediator — Job 9-11

John 7:29 I represent one you don’t know, and he is true.

Job called for God to send a mediator so they could resolve the issue of his suffering. Christ came saying He was that representative that brought God and man into dialogue. Christ’s answer includes the reality that He came to share our suffering.

Job said: “If only there were a mediator who could bring us together, but there is none.” (Job 9:33) And “Oh, that someone would mediate between God and me,

as a person mediates between friends.” (Job 16:21) He could not know that his questions were part of the preparation for this mediator.

We now know that the mediator who came fully understands human suffering having endured discomfort, rejection, and physical torture. In part, the answer to Job’s questions about suffering are that God in Christ suffers with us. There is no depth of our anguish that He does not understand. We also learn from Job and from Christ that the very act of suffering in faith has a redemptive quality for other people. One person’s suffering may be meeting the need of another.

It was this lesson that my sister-in-law’s family could see from the suffering of Karis, a sensitive and creative young woman who had health challenges from birth, times of healing, and ultimately the suffering of death. The book *All I See Is Grace* tells her story, much in her own words. Though her suffering is a mystery, her life clearly served those around her.

Lord, thank you that you are in the perfect position of fulling understanding both sides—the human struggles and the divine perspective. Thank you that your holiness makes you someone who can bridge our divide from God.

August 28

You are no better — Job 12-15

James 4:11 Don’t speak evil against each other, dear brothers and sisters. If you criticize and judge each other, then you are criticizing and judging God’s law. But your job is to obey the law, not to judge whether it applies to you.

Job protested the criticisms of his friends by twice saying that his critics were no better than him. Christ warned of the same principle by saying we should not condemn others, saying that the standard we use for others will be turned back on us. Further that if we think we can critique another, perhaps we need to look carefully at our own distortions, the log in our eye versus the speck we are removing from another. (Matthew 7:1-5)

This seems to be one of the hardest lessons for us to learn. When I see the faults of others, I am enthusiastic about correcting them, but perhaps not quite so enthusiastic to have others correcting my faults. This becomes particularly pernicious when we interpret difficulties in another’s life as a sign of God’s disfavor, just as Job’s friends were doing to him. I repeatedly have to ask myself, “Am I being judgmental? Am I assuming I am better than this other person?”

Far better is tender empathy. Chagall designed a tapestry for the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, a center for the disabled. Toward the right

Job is barely standing, supported by his wife. To the left are small figures. Looking closely one can see they are disabled people. The shape of the crowd is vaguely the figure of an evergreen tree, and on the top of the tree, almost like a star, is the figure of Christ crucified. On the back is the text: "For there is hope of a tree if it be cut down, that it will sprout again. And that the tender branch thereof will not cease." (Job 14:7) This was Chagall's last work.

Lord, forgive me for my judgmental streak. Convict me quickly when I am taking on your role as judge, condemning others, rather than humbly trying to do what is right myself.

August 29

The Resurrection — Job 16-19

John 11:25 Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying."

A cryptic comment foreshadows Christ's resurrection: "If mortals die, can they live again? This thought would give me hope, and through my struggle I would eagerly wait for release." (Job 14:14) His second declaration is a clearer vision of Christ resurrected: "But as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives, and that he will stand upon the earth at last. And after my body has decayed, yet in my body I will see God! I will see him for myself. Yes, I will see him with my own eyes. I am overwhelmed at the thought!" (Job 19:25-27)

Before reaching this declaration, however, Job protested against his friends, saying they were torturing, breaking and insulting him, being harsh, and using his humiliation as evidence of sin. His protest against God is even more poignant: God has wronged him, blocked his way, plunged him in darkness, stripped him of honor, demolished him, destroyed his hope, and considered him an enemy.

I think anyone who has lost a child can identify with this, much less someone like Job who suddenly lost all of his children in a terrible accident. I have seen friends go through this level of despair in their relationship with God. For whatever reason, He has let them down. I try not to be harsh, like Job's friends, but rather, understanding and empathetic. When I feel like God has let me down, I try not to be harsh to either Him or myself.

Howeve, this level of pain cannot go on forever, and the hope of resurrection gives us strength to face our struggles. As Paul reminds us: "For our present troubles are quite small and won't last very long. They produce for us an immeasurably great glory that will last forever! So we don't look at the troubles we can see right now, rather, we look forward to what we have not yet

seen. For the troubles we see will soon be over, but the joys to come will last forever.” (II Corinthians 4:17,18)

Lord, we bless you for your promise of eternal life, of resurrection from the dead for those who trust in you. Thank you that this gives us a long range perspective to see that suffering has limits and brings glory.

August 30

Job's Friends — Job 20-25

Matthew 26:38 He told them, “My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and watch with me.”

Job's friends, failures at alleviating suffering, contrast with Christ who alleviated suffering well. He wept with Mary over the death of her brother Lazarus, and we can weep with those who weep. In His case He did not simply listen compassionately, He changed things and brought Lazarus back to life.

Sometimes we are poor listeners like Job's friends, full of advice, correction, theological interpretation, and self-righteousness. Just as Job's friends failed him, Christ's friends failed Him as well. He asked His disciples for empathy as He prayed in the garden. They were not able to give it and fell asleep.

Empathetic listening, grieving and mourning with others, beginning to look toward the future, and taking care of our physical needs help heal trauma. When I was grieving a great loss, it was not helpful to be told that “depression is sin.” Instead, it helped to have some willing to mourn with me.

My sister is perhaps the one in my life who taught me the most about suffering. She went into a coma when she was 18, and though it took several months, she was healed completely. At 48 she was diagnosed with cancer, and lived bravely through the challenges and reprieves for 14 years after a diagnosis. Knowing she would probably die before her children, she made a point of writing out her life experiences for them, and making baby blankets for grandchildren she would never see. After terrible physical suffering in the last year of her life, she died at 52. Her faith in going through all of these experiences was an example to me of how to suffer “correctly”. She did not give up her fight for health, she did not blame God, she sought to love those around her, and yet she accepted her moment of defeat with grace and the hope of resurrection.

Lord, make me a tender and compassionate friend, able to listen, able to mourn, able to respond with wisdom. May we be like evergreen trees, always ready to grow again, even when confronted with great difficulty, pain, suffering or disappointment.

August 31

Job's Final Defense — Job 26-31

James 5:10,11 For examples of patience in suffering, dear brothers and sisters, look at the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. We give great honor to those who endure under suffering. For instance, you know about Job, a man of great endurance. You can see how the Lord was kind to him at the end, for the Lord is full of tenderness and mercy.

Job insisted that he was a good man, and demonstrated it by his faith amidst suffering. But Christ calls us to something deeper, a relationship with God not based on our goodness, and Job experienced a call to justification through faith. God had twice affirmed Job: “He is the finest man in all the earth. He is blameless—a man of complete integrity. He fears God and stays away from evil.” (Job 1:8, 2:3)

In Job's final defense he agreed that the wicked will suffer. Even though he had given instances when they do not (Job 21), he agreed that they should. (Job 24) He believed their wealth would disappear. (Job 29) But, he insisted, experiencing suffering is not a sign one is wicked, and he maintained his innocence. He spoke of how difficult it is to find wisdom (Job 28), recalled past times of happiness. He contrasted being respected (Job 29), and his suffering in being disrespected. (Job 30) He enumerated sins he had not committed. (Job 31)

A bargaining relationship with God is challenged in Job. God as a slot machine giving us good things as a result of our gambles, or God as a Santa Claus, making us happy if we have been good, God protecting us from trouble if we are good, and allowing trouble if we fail, are all popular viewpoints. But Job teaches us we cannot realistically demand that everything go our way. Further, that suffering does not equal punishment.

Perhaps the strongest lesson, however, is that we must not judge others who are suffering, but rather come alongside them with the God's comfort of those who mourn.

Lord, sometimes we think we have a right to things going well, and we are disappointed with you for not managing the world the way we think would be best. Forgive us for our arrogance in thinking our good behavior earns us a right to tell you how to do things.

September 1

Elihu's point of view — Job 32-37

I Peter 4:1,2 So then, since Christ suffered physical pain, you must arm yourselves with the same attitude he had, and be ready to suffer, too. For if you

are willing to suffer for Christ, you have decided to stop sinning. And you won't spend the rest of your life chasing after evil desires, but you will be anxious to do the will of God.

Job suffered physically, Christ suffered physically, and in both cases the suffering brought purification.

Job, as we have seen, wanted an explanation from God for what was going on. Elihu accused Job of arrogance in thinking that he has a right to question God's justice. He said that an obsession with judgment on the godless is not right, and offered an alternative explanation of suffering. "By means of their suffering, he rescues those who suffer. For he gets their attention through adversity." (Job 36:15) He suggested that suffering was a preventative to sin, similar to the passage from I Peter. (Job 36:21)

He then pointed to God's power, wonderful miracles of nature, something God himself would do as soon as Elihu's speech was over. Job had no response. The dialogue ended.

I can identify with questioning God's justice. As we saw terrible human rights abuses in Guatemala, I asked all Job's questions: "Why God? Explain this. You should not be letting this happen. You need to stop this." It encourages me that the book of Job does not teach condemnation for asking questions, but teaches humility in looking for answers.

Lord, thank you that your complex purposes are much bigger than my limited viewpoint on how things should happen. I trust you and know you are trustworthy.

September 2

The Glory of Creation — Job 38-41

Colossians 1:15-16 Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth.

Christ, the one through whom God created, is before and above creation. Ultimately He, supreme over all creation, will come and respond to Job's questions by sharing our suffering. Here God celebrates mysteries of creation as his response to Job. As an answer to "why am I suffering?" it is entirely beside the point. Instead, it is a glorious poem to the incredible complexity of the world we live in.

Yet in some mysterious way it answers the questions. At a point when I was discouraged, I had a dream of many beautiful things in the natural world. It

filled me with awe and happiness and when I woke up I was still amazed and cheerful. I thought to myself, “I have been given the same answer to suffering as Job. The world is so full of the astonishing works of the Creator that my inability to understand this suffering is eclipsed.” It did not resolve the problems, but it served as a touchstone to which I returned.

God’s challenge is to interact with creation as a way of knowing him. Today we are privileged to enjoy the work of documentary filmmakers and nature photographers who seek out beautiful, strange, compelling, and unknown things in our world. We enjoy seeing things no one could have seen in the past, such as ocean depths. Today cutting edge questions include particle physics, black holes, dark matter, the expanding universe, how our brains work, creatures deep in the sea and many other things that awaken wonder as we explore the questions. Neither the questions nor the glory have ended.

Lord, may I see your glory and continually celebrate it with great joy! Being in your great outdoors brightens our day and gets our attention off negative things—thanks!

September 3
Job’s Happy Ending — Job 42

John 16:22 You have sorrow now, but I will see you again: then you will rejoice, and no one can rob you of that joy.

Job repented, the same repentance Christ required for entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven. The book climaxes as Job says, “I had heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes. I take back everything I said, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance.” (Job 42:5) He recognized his self-righteousness and his arrogance in feeling he was a righteous man in a position to judge God.

Job’s friends who thought all suffering could be explained as a consequence of sin were wrong, and Job served as their priest to obtain forgiveness. The book reviewed wrong, but common, images of God. But all wrong views need to make way to see the powerful creator God with whom we can have a relationship of loving forgiveness.

Job did not get his children back, but he was given new children and lived to see four generations. The last line of the book says: “Then he died, an old man who had lived a long, good life.”

My husband has suffered from chronic pain for many years. Unlike Job, he does not complain, but he seeks to make the most of his life within his limits. He is even understanding of many well-meaning “Job’s comforters” who think

he must be to blame, must lack faith, or must not have tried a treatment they know will work. He has received several significant healings, and we keep praying for complete wellness. But meanwhile, he appreciates his friends, his family, his prosperity, and his exceptionally beautiful daughters, and is thankful for the many good things in his life.

Lord, thank you that we can repent and you forgive our sins. Thank you that it is not by our works of righteousness that we are saved, but by your work of righteousness and your on-going work in our lives.

Book 1: Psalms 1-41

September 4

Fruitful Trees — Psalm 1

Matthew 7:20 Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions.

Both the Psalmist and Christ compare a godly person to a fruitful tree. Christ compares the soil to our hearts, water to the Spirit, fruit to character, and the tree to the word bringing in the Kingdom. The fruitfulness of the righteous life in the living tree is the outworking of the resurrected life in us. If we are fruitful trees we are told we will prosper in all we do, the life of Christ flowing out of us.

Several passages describe flourishing earthly kingdoms as beautiful trees. (Daniel 4, Ezekiel 31) In both cases, the trees were cut down, introducing the metaphorical component of death combining with tree imagery from elsewhere in scripture to foreshadow the cross. Christ's parable of a mustard seed becoming a tree filled with birds is imagery for the Kingdom of Heaven and reminds us of the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden, and the Trees for the Healing of the Nations in Revelation.

As a way of meditating on this, I appreciate John Michael Talbot's song which beautifully combines Jesus' imagery of the vine, Jeremiah's description of drought-resistant trees (Jeremiah 17:8) and Psalm 1 imagery:

I am the vine
and you are the branches
Live in me
and you will never die.

I am the vine
And My father is the keeper
Come to me
Let the Spirit bring you life.

Like a tree planted by the living waters
To stretch the fruits into the living stream
You will show no distress
In the heat of the drought
But still bear fruits and leaves.

Come to me all you heavy laden
My yoke is easy, my burden is light.
I will raise you up on the wings of an eagle.
And through God's mountain will fly.

Come to me
Let the spirit bring you life.

Lord, help us to let our roots go down deep in the soil of your love. May we receive all the blessings that you long to give us.

September 5

Son of God — Psalms 2-3 (*Psalm 3 previously read*)

Matthew 27:54 The Roman officer and the other soldiers at the crucifixion were terrified by the earthquake and all that had happened. They said, "This man truly was the Son of God!"

Christ identified himself as the Son of God, and Psalm 2 introduces us to "the Lord's son" (verse 7) and "God's royal son". (verse 12) In Daniel, a figure who protects three young men in a fire is identified by the King as a son of God. (Daniel 3:25) These were recognized as Messianic prophecies.

Satan addressed Christ as the Son of God (Matthew 4:3), as did evil spirits (Matthew 8:29) Nathanael gave him this title and acknowledged him as the King of Israel. (John 1:49) The miracle of Christ walking on the water convinced his disciples he was God's son. (Matthew 14:33) The religious leaders said Christ's claim to be the Son of God made him worthy of death. (John 19:7) Christ claimed his identity, (Matthew 26:63-64) and it was used to taunt him on the cross. (Matthew 27:40,43) But those who crucified him realized when the earthquake came that this is who he was.

The Nicene Creed tried to capture the wonder of God's son: "I believe...in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made."

We are invited to become God's children, and that the effect of this is to make us like him. (I John 3:1-3) In light of the supernatural implications of Christ as Son of God, reigning in power over all, this is a remarkable promise of

transformation and spiritual power for us. It changes my view of myself and others in my life to remember this.

Lord, thank you for these early promises of your coming and the promise that you will take the throne and create a just world. Thank you that you are the promised Son of God.

September 6

Our Hearts — Psalms 4-7

Mark 7:20-23 And then he added, “It is what comes from inside that defiles you. For from within, out of a person’s heart, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, deceit, lustful desires, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness. All these vile things come from within; they are what defile you.”

Christ taught that the heart is central, and the Psalmist did the same. Christ’s antidote to the evil things in our heart is His call to be pure in heart, to have an uncluttered focus allowing us to see God for who He is, the Sovereign Lord of all creation.

The heart is a great scriptural theme, occurring 573 times. In these Psalms David teaches us that God knows our hearts. “For you look deep within the mind and heart, O righteous God,” and God is “saving those whose hearts are true and right.” (Psalm 7:9,10) He contrasts the hearts of the wicked and their actions with the hearts of those who trust God. But God knows because he “looks deep within the mind and heart” and he consequently is a “judge who is perfectly fair.” (Psalm 7:11) God understands when we are “sick at heart” (Psalm 6:3) and suffering emotionally.

Elsewhere in the Psalms we have the honest cry that “my heart is breaking.” (Psalm 42:4) Whatever breaks our hearts, it comforts us to know that Christ shares the anguish. The reassurance that God cares about our heartbreaks and responds to our cries for help increases the longer we follow him.

Lord, forgive me and give me a clean heart. Thank you for caring about what is painful to my heart.

September 7

Incarnation — Psalms 8-10 (Psalm 9 previously read)

Hebrews 2:9 What we do see is Jesus, who “for a little while was made lower than the angels” and now is “crowned with glory and honor” because he suffered death for us. Yes, by God’s grace, Jesus tasted death for everyone in all the world.

According to the writer of Hebrews, Christ's incarnation was prophesied in Psalm 8. The writer of Hebrews didn't look up the reference but wrote, "somewhere in the Scripture it says..." This appeals to me because it reinforces that studying scripture is about seeing wisdom and is not rigidly perfectionistic.

The commentary is that all things will eventually be under Christ's authority. "But we have not yet seen all of this happen." We are in the midst of the "already, but not yet" of God's Kingdom since Christ's came to establish His kingdom and will complete it at the end of time.

Christ was literally lower than the angels as they announced his birth to the shepherds and He lay in a manger. His death was something angels do not experience. But his resurrection, ascension, and his ascent to the Father's right hand raised him higher than the angels once more.

The humility of his humanity comes through to me in this lovely Nativity poem by Luci Shaw, *Some Christmas Stars*.

The planets blaze behind the hill. Snow stars glint from the wooden sill. A spider spins her silver still	Where does a spider find the skill To sew a star? Invisible, Obedient, she works your will
Within your darkened stable shed: In asterisks her webs are spread To ornament your manger bed.	With her swift silences of thread. I weave star-poems in my head; The spider, wordless, spins instead.

Lord, thank you that you took up our humanity and became an ordinary man.

September 8
Our Sin — Psalms 11-15

Romans 3:23 For all have sinned, all fall short of God's glorious standard.

The New Testament theme of universal sin and a universal need for repentance and new birth is presented in Psalm 14:2, 3: "The Lord looks down from heaven on the entire human race, he looks to see if there is even one with real understanding, one who seeks for God. But no, all have turned away from God; all have become corrupt. No one does good, not even one!" The New Testament message is clear: the way sin can be forgiven is only because of Christ.

Paul quoted this Psalm in Romans 3 as evidence that all, Jews and Gentiles, need salvation. He chained together additional Psalms (53:1-3, 5:9, 140:3, 10:7, and 36:1 as well as Isaiah 59:7-8) to build his case that mankind needed redemption.

After concluding that all have sinned, he gave the hopeful transformation of this problem in Christ: “Yet God freely and graciously declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when He freed us from the penalty for our sins.” (Romans 3:24-26)

The Psalmists repeatedly request for God to declare them innocent. (4:1, 7:8, 17:2, 26:1, 43:1) There is simultaneously an acknowledgement that no one is innocent before God. (Psalm 143:2) We see from Paul’s exposition that innocence is declared through Christ’s work. “So now there is no condemnation for those who belong in Christ Jesus. For the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you through Christ Jesus from the power of sin that leads to death.” (Romans 8:1,2) The good news made real in my life means I am innocent, my past wrong behavior has vanished.

Lord, we bless you that though we are guilty and sinful people who do not do good, you declare us innocent because of the cross.

September 9

Preaching Christ — Psalms 16-21 (*Psalm 18 previously read*)

Acts 2:24 God released him from the horrors of death and raised him back to life again, for death could not keep him in his grip.

Peter preached his Pentecost sermon and used, among others, a text from Psalms that prophesies resurrection: “You will not leave my soul among the dead or allow your Holy One to rot in the grave.” (see 16:8-11) Peter applied this to Christ, saying that David was a prophet and knew that one of his descendants would sit on his throne and be resurrected. (Acts 2:29-32)

The Psalms that follow have images evoking New Testament themes: hiding in God’s wings is similar to Christ’s desire to protect Jerusalem (Psalm 17:8, Matthew 23:27); God is our light (Psalm 18:8); the beauty of creation is a revelation of God. (Psalm 19) A promise of answered prayer parallels Christ’s promises of hearing our prayers. (Psalm 20:5) There is even a hint of resurrection: “The days of his life stretch on forever.” (Psalm 21:4)

God’s military victories through David are transfigured by Paul who uses quotes in his argument that the gospel is for the Gentiles. Paul moves from David’s context of God paying back those who harm him to the good news of the gospels that brings nations into God’s community. (Psalm 18:47-49, Romans 15:11) Paul gives us a post-resurrection reinterpretation.

From the obvious to the subtler prophecies, the Psalms tell us about Christ, just as one might expect from good poetry and its allusions. Seeing ancient poetry made real in history awakens us to notice how God is present in our lives now.

Lord, we praise you for being our living Lord. We praise you that you rose from the grave and you promise resurrection to us as well. We are grateful that your gospel of peace is for all people.

September 10
Three Prophetic Psalms — Psalms 22-24

I Corinthians 15:3-4 I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me—that Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, as the Scriptures said.

These Psalms prophesy Christ's death, resurrection, care for his people, and his second coming. Psalm 22 begins with the cry of Christ on the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" It highlights the mockery of those who said He should appeal to God to bring him down from the cross: sneering, scorn, and being despised are foreshadowed. (verses 6-8) His bones out of joint (verse 14), His thirst (vs 15), His pierced hands and feet (verse 16), His clothes divided by lot (verse 18) all describe the crucifixion story. At the end of the Psalm we look forward to the day when every knee will bow (verse 27) because he is King. (verse 28)

This well-known prophetic Psalm is followed by even better-known Psalm 23, the Psalm of the Good Shepherd, the role Christ claimed in his relationship to us, His sheep. Psalm 24 celebrates the return of the King; the moment he entered the gates of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and looking ahead to His re-entry at the end of time.

While prophecy can seem cryptic, these are specific, particularly the description of the crucifixion. Our faith includes these messages that foretell history, and must be taken with some seriousness. In our era of reason competing with metaphor, we can point people to a place where they meet and encourage unbelievers to be honest with the evidence.

Lord, I worship you for being the one who fulfilled the promises. Thank you that these promises included the warning that you would suffer and would be rejected, but that you will rule all.

September 11
Whispers of Christ — Psalm 25-30

Luke 24:45 Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.

Christ took themes from Psalms and developed them in his own teaching, using metaphors for God found in these prayers—Light, Rock, Shepherd, Teacher, Guide, Helper, Father, King, Judge. Interestingly he did not use imagery of God as Warrior, or metaphors for God that are tools of war—Shield, Horn, Fortress, High Tower. In each of these Psalms we see at least one thing that Christ later applied to himself or his Kingdom.

Psalmist	Commonality	Christ
"Show me the path where I should walk, O Lord, point out the right road for me to follow" (25:4) Also verses 8 and 12.	Path/Way	Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)
I do not spend time with liars or go along with hypocrites. (Psalm 26:4)	Rejecting hypocrisy	Jesus replied, "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote, 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.'" (Mark 7:6)
The Lord is my light and my salvation. (Psalm 27:1)	Light	"But while I am here in the world, I am the light of the world." (John 9:5)
Lead them like a shepherd, and carry them forever in your arms. (Psalm 28:9)	Shepherd	"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep." (John 10:11)
Give honor to the Lord, you angels. (Psalm 29:1)	Worship by angels	Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God (Luke 2:13)
You brought me up from the grave, O Lord. (Psalm 30:3)	Resurrection	"He isn't here! He is risen from the dead." (Matthew 28:6)

Christ knew the Psalms and recognized Himself in them. Our challenge is to stay alert and recognize Him there as well.

Lord, once we get used to looking, we see you everywhere in the Word. And truly, with our eyes open, we see whispers of you everywhere in our daily lives. Thank you!

September 12

Protection — Psalms 31-35

John 17:11 Now I am departing from the world; they are staying in this world, but I am coming to you. Holy Father, you have given me your name; now protect them by the power of your name so that they will be united just as we are.

Christ protects us, and the Psalmist celebrates protection. Psalm 31 has particular significance for me from when I read it as a college freshman. I had always felt protected and secure, so the idea of experiencing anguish of soul, grief, tears, scorn, being ignored, having rumors circulate about me, conspiring enemies, the possibility of disgrace, accusations, and my city under attack all sounded awful. Surely this could not be right, and God's obedient children would be blessed instead.

Years later I remembered this Psalm when difficult things befell me, but then the promises stood out in sharper relief: God would see to it I was not put to shame, He would be a rock of safety, He would lead me out of danger, I could feel that God cared about the anguish of my soul, He hid me in the shelter of His presence, He blessed me before the watching world, and I was able to put my future in His hands. I was comforted.

Psalm 32 is a well-known song of praise for forgiveness. Psalms 33 and 34 are simply cheerful. David affirmed: "The righteous face many troubles, but the Lord rescues them from each and every one." (34:19)

While enemies are a major theme in Psalms (130 occurrences), positive words outnumber that. Praise (186), love (174), joy (97), saved/salvation (73), bless (47), glory (43), rest (27), worship (25). Any difficulties we face are balanced by remembering God's protection. In Psalm 35 there is a prayer for processing things when friends have been treating one badly, but it ends with joy, praise for God's greatness, and testimony of God's justice and goodness.

Lord, thank you for the deep personal experience of your unfailing love. I know you are real, because you have been so present to me in my struggles.

September 13

Waiting on God — Psalms 36-38

Matthew 11:28,29 Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

Christ and the Psalmist call us to rest, to a tranquility of waiting, “Be still in the presence of the Lord, and wait patiently for him to act.” (Psalm 37:7) To do this requires the humble, meek heart that Christ called for in the Beatitudes, quoting this Psalm: “But the meek shall inherit the earth.” (Psalm 37:11 KJV)

I supposed “waiting on God” meant to pray and fast vigorously, but another Psalm says: “Let all that I am wait quietly before God, for my hope is in him.” (Psalm 62:5) A turning point in my understanding came when a pastor said waiting on God was just waiting, like waiting in line or in a doctor’s office—just waiting to see what God would do. This was a, to me, shocking alternative to bustling about and trying to fix things myself. This way of waiting is an act of trust in God’s goodness, and the peace and hope it brings are a healthy way of living.

I have to admit, though that waiting prayer is hard for me, as this poem attests:

Dear God,
I figure you’re on Facebook
And if the NSA can read my emails,
You can too.
So I’m just wondering
Since you know all languages,
You doubtless see binary as beautiful,
And electronics as elegant.
But I’ve put in several requests
For miracles and all I’m getting
Is that annoying circle
Saying something is buffering.
As we know,
A watched file never downloads.
Oh I know about miracles
Since I’ve already seen a few,
And I know about your love for language
Since I’ve seen that, too.
But couldn’t you please move my requests
A little higher up the queue?

A voice that has encouraged me regarding God’s purposes in waiting is George MacDonald: “Perhaps, indeed, the better the gift we pay for, the more time is necessary for its arrival. To give us the spiritual gift we desire, God may have to begin far back in our spirit in regions unknown to us, and do much work that we can be aware of only in the result...”¹⁹

Lord, thank you that when we turn to you in a trusting way, you are able to act on our behalf. Thank you that when we are patient and give you time to do your work, results are more remarkable than we could have expected or imagined. Give us humble, trusting, patient hearts that have a capacity to wait.

September 14
Healing — Psalms 39-41

Matthew 8:7 Jesus said, "I will come and heal him."

Healing was the mark of Christ's ministry, and Psalms returns repeatedly to faith in God's promise to heal:

Have compassion on me, LORD, for I am weak. Heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony. (6:2) O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you restored my health. (30:2) "O LORD," I prayed, "have mercy on me. Heal me, for I have sinned against you." (41:4) He forgives all my sins and heals all my diseases. (103:3) He sent out his word and healed them, snatching them from the door of death. (107:20) He heals the brokenhearted and bandages their wounds. (147:3)

There are 31 healing stories in the Gospels. In the scriptures as a whole some variant of the word healing is used 252 times, with over half of the occurrences in the Gospels –124– showing how central this was in Christ's life.

There are the above affirmations, but also the following complaints about bad health: Have compassion on me, Lord, for I am weak. Heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony. (6:2) Because of your anger, my whole body is sick; my health is broken because of my sins. (38:3) A raging fever burns within me, and my health is broken. (38:7) "O Lord," I prayed, "have mercy on me. Heal me, for I have sinned against you." (41:4)

David knows, however, that relationship with God is more important than his health: "My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever." (Psalm 73:26) I appreciate the balance that God is both with us in illness, and can also restore our health: "The Lord nurses them when they are sick and restores them to health." (Psalm 41:3) We also have an example of fasting for the health of another. (Psalm 35:13) We need all three of these principles in facing our own illnesses or those of others: my relationship with God is more important than my health, He is present with me, and miraculous healing is real. All of these are part of our prayers.

Lord, thank you that you are our healer. We are wounded and our bodies fail. There are always several people in our lives who need your work as the healer and we bring them to you now. We bless you for those we know who have received healing.

Book 2: Psalms 42-72

September 15

Christ the King — Psalms 42-48

Matthew 6:10 May your kingdom come soon. May your will be done here on earth, just as it is in heaven.

Christ came preaching the Kingdom of God. “Kingdom” occurs 158 times in the New Testament, and 123 of those instances are in the Gospels. In Psalm 45 we begin with an earthly king marrying his beautiful bride, something not too difficult to transfer symbolically to the marriage of Christ and the church. In Psalm 46 we have references to earthquakes, mountains falling in the sea, the end of war, and a river in God’s City—all reminiscent of end-times imagery in Revelation. The rule of God as King of Kings and Lord of Lords is prefigured in Psalm 47, even the trumpets blaring.

We are reminded “God reigns above the nations, sitting on his holy throne.” (Psalm 47:8) This imagery of God’s throne, as we will recall, is art of the imagery of God in the Holy of Holies of the Temple, and is taken up in visions by Ezekiel, Isaiah, and ultimately, John in the book of Revelation.

Understandably, when Christ came people expected this imagery to be literally fulfilled by Messiah, and were puzzled when He rejected becoming the leader of a revolutionary movement to overthrow Roman domination. Between resurrection and ascension Christ taught them about the Kingdom of God, but even then they wondered if literal freedom for Israel was at hand. (Acts 1:3,6) He explained that timing of completion is known to God, but they could announce that Christ had come. They preached the kingdom (Acts 8:12), as did Paul. (Acts 19:8, 20:25, 28:23, 28:31)

Today, we have the same charge. Imperfect as our efforts must be, we always look ahead to the perfect realization of everything under God’s reign and seek to bring our own hearts into that place.

Lord, the notion that you are King is a beautiful promise, a helpful vision for our personal daily life, and a vision for our community and our world.

September 16

The Good News — Psalm 49-55 (*Psalm 52 and 54 previously read*)

I Corinthians 15:1 Let me now remind you, dear brothers and sisters, of the Good News I preached to you before. You welcomed it then, and you still stand firm in it.

These Psalms present Christ's good news of forgiveness through his sacrificial death and the proof of the resurrection. Each aspect of the core message of the good news is prophesied:

Resurrection: Christ rose from the grave and His ransom is high enough to enable us to live forever. (49:8,9, 15)

Sacrifice of the cross: animal sacrifice is no longer needed. (50: 8,9,13,19)

Repentance and forgiveness of sins: (51:1,2,17)

Betrayal and judgement: (52:1,5)

Universal sin: The text declaring this is repeated in the New Testament to explain the need for the good news. (53:1-3, Romans 3:12)

Enemies calling for death: But they fail and Christ is again alive and triumphant over enemies. (54:3-5)

Betrayal by a friend: (55:12-14, 20-21)

All of us who come to faith in Christ learn of the resurrection as evidence of His divinity, and His sacrificial death as the means for our forgiveness. We experience personal repentance for sins, and realize that though we were not the literal betrayers or crucifiers, we were His enemies. The message of grace is that we are welcomed as His friends.

Thank you Lord, for the gift of salvation from sin. Thank you for how personal this experience is for each one of us.

September 17

Thanksgiving — Psalms 56-58 (*Psalms 56 and 57 previously read*)

Matthew 15:36 Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, thanked God for them, and broke them into pieces. He gave them to the disciples, who distributed the food to the crowd.

Christ and the Psalmist model gratitude for us. Christ prayed, using the word thanks, three times; the Psalmists repeated it 51 times. It is compared to a sacrifice (Psalm 56:12) and God says it is one that truly honors him. (Psalm 50:23) It is a public act among all the people and among the nations. (Psalm 57:9)

Thanksgiving arises among expressions of distress: fear, enemies, distress at injustice, criminals, murderers, hostile nations, sneering people. David wrote Psalm 56 when rescued from the Philistines, Psalm 57 when he fled into the cave from Saul. These were unhappy moments in his life, yet he returned to

faith, trust, gratitude, and confidence that God would fulfill his purpose. He exalted God and asked for His glory to shine over all the earth, and promised to sing among the nations.

We need to remember this when we think we can only be thankful if everything is going right. There is room for a “sacrifice of thanksgiving” in the midst of difficulties. I discovered that psychologists studying happiness here determined that even writing three items one is grateful for each day for twenty-one days improves ones’ baseline of positivity. Adding time for kindness, meditation, journaling good memories, and even fifteen minutes of fun each day enhances contentment from which to face the ups and downs of life.

Lord, we thank you. Thank you for life, thank you for salvation, for provision, for people who love and care for us, for all the many gifts of beauty in our days.

September 18

Transformation — Psalms 59-62 (*Psalm 60 previously read*)

Mark 5:34 And he said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace. Your suffering is over.”

Christ met the needs of suffering people, and the Psalmist celebrates going from trouble to joy. We see this transformation in each of these Psalms:

- 59—from a need for rescue to singing and joy
- 60—from rejection and failure to victory and might
- 61—from being overwhelmed to singing praises
- 62—from trouble with enemies to power in God
- 63—from thirst and weariness to joy
- 64—from complaint to joy

It is good to be self-aware enough to know our negative feelings, but we also need to have strategies for dealing with despair, fear, and trouble. One key to their transformation is to share them with God honestly, and to acknowledge that He is in control, not us. Christian psychologist Larry Crabb formulated this shift in emotions through relinquishing things to God’s control, and through the years I have elaborated this and found it beneficial.²⁰

Experience	My control	God’s control
Success	Pride	Gratitude
Failure	Depression	Humility
Conflict	Anger	Patience
Uncertainty	Anxiety	Hope
Challenge	Fear	Faith
Rejection	Resentment	Forgiveness

Each negative emotion signals a perspective that needs to be challenged by recognizing God's control to make the same journey from trouble to joy that the Psalmist makes. Over and over, in large and small things, this has given me the self-awareness to once more offer up my need to control things that are beyond me.

Lord, thank you that you care about our suffering. But thank you that you have the power to change our hearts and even our circumstances so that we can go in peace, healed, our suffering over.

September 19

King of the Nations — Psalms 63-68 (*Psalm 63 previously read*)

Revelation 5:9, 10 And they sang a new song with these words: "You are worthy to take the scroll and break its seals and open it. For you were killed, and your blood has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. And you have caused them to become God's Kingdom and his priests. And they will reign on the earth."

In Psalms Christ is presented to us as King of the nations. We are told that the Lord is "the great King of all the earth" and that "he reigns above the nations, sitting on his holy throne" and that "all the kings of the earth belong to him." (Psalm 47) He will cause wars to cease and be honored throughout the earth. (Psalm 46) Those from the ends of the earth stand in awe of his wisdom, and God inspires joy. (Psalm 65) The nations will be glad because God governs with justice and directs the actions of the whole world. (Psalm 67) All nations will be blessed through him and give him praise, and the whole earth will be filled with his glory. (Psalm 72)

A Psalm that celebrated military victory and conquest (Psalm 68:18) was spiritualized in the New Testament. Paul used the quote as a reference to the ascension, spiritual liberation, and the giving of spiritual gifts. (Ephesians 4:8) This precedent of using formerly physical warfare as an image of our spiritual warfare makes clear the transformative nature of Christ's coming to earth.

Christ as the righteous king worshipped throughout the earth re-occurs in the prophets, with a finale from Malachi: "For I am a great king," says the Lord of Heaven's Armies, "and my name is feared among the nations!" (Malachi 1:14)

A great theological mistake was made by forgetting that Christ came to us through Israel, that the Gentile nations reconcile with God through Him. Instead, Gentiles began to imagine that they replaced Israel, and that they had a right to treat potential colonials as Canaanites.

Isaac Watts (1674-1748) turned the Psalms into singable English poetry, and some of his hymns are loved and sung today, but he reinforced the theological mistake. For example, some of the lines from his treatment of Psalm 67 include:

Shine, mighty God, on Britain shine...
While British tongues exalt his praises,
And British hearts rejoice...
Our God will crown his chosen isle
With fruitfulness and peace.

Theologian Willie Jennings demonstrates how this and other distortions helped historically justify slavery, dispossession of colonized peoples, and anti-Semitism, establishing the racism that troubles modern American Christianity.²¹ The United States adopted the same self-ascription as Israel and the same sense that her enemies were God's enemies. The more accurate reading of these Psalms is that through Israel's Messiah the world will be brought to unity and peace. We need to let go of our inappropriate self-regard as a nation, and humbly acknowledge that God loves all.

Lord, we are full of awe at your great love that created so many people and desired to call each one of them to yourself. Help us to be part of sharing that good news of the Kingdom when all things are justly under your reign.

September 20
Zeal for God's House — Psalms 69-72

John 2:15,16 Jesus made a whip from some ropes and chased them all out of the Temple. He drove out the sheep and oxen, scattered the money changers' coins over the floor, and turned over their tables. Then, going over to the people who sold doves, he told them, "Get these things out of here. Don't turn my Father's house into a marketplace!"

Christ's actions in expelling merchants evokes the above quote. (Psalm 69:9) To us, this is taken out of context. The disciples seemed to feel that since all of scripture was about Christ it was acceptable poetic license. The Psalm goes on to say "they offer me sour wine to satisfy my thirst" (verse 21), an event mentioned in all four gospel accounts.

After the ascension, Peter quoted a prediction of Judas' betrayal: "Let his home become desolate, with no one living in it." (Psalm 69:25) He added "Let his position be given to someone else," (Psalm 109:8) and so they chose a replacement. Again, these seem taken out of context, but Peter said, "This was predicted long ago by the Holy Spirit, speaking through King David." (Acts 1:16)

Using their freedom, one can see references to insults and suffering in Psalms 70, 71, and 72 as applying to Christ as well as the Psalmist. There is also resurrection prophecy: “You have allowed me to suffer much hardship, but you will restore me to life again and lift me up from the depths of the earth. You will restore me to even greater honor and comfort me once again.” (Psalm 71:20,21) In Psalm 72 we look ahead to a king who defends and rescues the poor and needy, who has an everlasting Kingdom, and whose glory fills the earth.

In our political life today we have taken “zeal for God’s house” to a point of unloving cruelty in our public discourse. Having on-line venues has further corroded what is considered acceptable speech. It is time we combine our zeal with wisdom.

Lord, thank you that so many aspects of your life were predicted and prepared for through all the years of meditation and writing in the Jewish community that led to the climactic moments. We praise you that we can look back both to the prophecies and to their fulfillment.

Book 3: Psalms 73-89

September 21

Persistent Prayer — Psalms 73-77

Luke 18: 1 One day Jesus told his disciples a story to illustrate their need for constant prayer and to show them that they must never give up.

Christ commands not giving up, making our requests to him persistently. Asaph, author of these Psalms, begs for action: “All night long I pray, with hands lifted toward heaven, pleading.” (Psalm 77:2)

Asaph, author of Psalms 73-83 is mentioned as a musician and Levite David appointed to lead worship. (I Chronicles 15:16) He seemed to have a Job-like philosophical bent and worried about judgment on the wicked and how badly things were going for the nation and for him. But faith in a glorious and majestic God kept him persistent in his prayers: “there can be no joy for me until He acts. I think of God, and I moan, overwhelmed with longing for his help.” (Psalm 77:3) I identify with his struggles to pray in faith as he had trouble sleeping. Sometimes my concerns for people and situations overwhelm me, and I have to pause and remind myself God is ruler over all.

Christ tells us to keep asking, to persist, not to give up, but to keep hoping and knocking. Sometimes it seems that it takes forever for a prayer to be answered, or the answer is against our preference. As long as something is in the “open-ended” category, it seems fair to keep asking with deep trust that God is loving, faithful, and intervenes for our good. When uncertainty gives me

anxiety, relinquishing my imaginary control and humbly recognizing God's sovereignty gives peace. Then when prayers are answered, there is no pride, just gratitude.

Prayer can take many forms, and because of being able to vary style, we can experience times of extended prayer. Here are some options: meditating on a scriptural story or passage, claiming a scripture (and putting a date next to it), speaking aloud, reading prayers of others including those in scripture, fasting, eating mindfully, writing/journaling, keeping lists and noting answers,, speaking in tongues, praying while working, taking an action based on an inner prompt, listening, silence, communion, corporate worship and prayer, singing, listening to music, theological reading, contemplating the outdoors, and quick requests for help or guidance or wisdom. A life of prayer becomes a habit one then is unwilling to break, not an onerous duty.

Lord, thank you that you expect us to have some struggles over prayer and you understand our distress when things don't happen fast enough to suit us. Thank you for the reassurance that we should keep bringing all of our concerns to you.

September 22
Parables — Psalms 78-79

John 16:25 "I have spoken of these matters in parables, but the time will come when this will not be necessary, and I will tell you plainly all about the Father.

Christ chose parables as His preferred mode of teaching, and Asaph used Israel's history as a parable. The lesson is that though the people rejected God, He continued to love them and show mercy. "I will speak to you in a parable" is quoted in the New Testament to explain Christ's teaching style. (Psalm 78:2, Matthew 13:35)

In his preface to Psalm 78 Asaph emphasized the importance of sharing history with new generations. He castigated Israel (Ephraim), for forgetting history (vs. 1-12). He highlighted:

The Exodus	vs. 13
Wilderness wanderings	vs. 14-41
Plagues that liberated them	vs. 42-51
Exodus	vs. 52-53
Conquest	vs. 54-55
Time of the judges	vs. 56-66

He concluded with the start of David's reign and high hopes that the people would now be obedient, recalling this checkered history. However, we know these hopes were not realized and that David, Solomon, and the subsequent

kings failed, with the result that the people went into exile. Yet God's mercy still allowed them to return. Ultimately, mercy came in its greatest form in Christ.

Psalm 79 describes Jerusalem's destruction and the beginning of exile, so was written by Asaph's descendant who returned from exile. (Ezra 2:41, Nehemiah 7:44) God's mercy still did not fail.

Lord, help us not to be people who forget. Cause us to review the great things you did in scripture, for heroes of the faith, and in our own lives. By remembering and reviewing, keep our faith strong in the face of things we pray for today.

September 23

Sheep and Vine — Psalms 80-83 (*Psalm 81 and 83 previously read*)

John 10:16 "I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd." John 15:1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener."

Christ is shepherd, we are sheep. Psalm 80 says God is Israel's shepherd, and Christ extends this to all who listen to him. Christ is the vine, and we are the branches. God is the gardener, and the Psalmist appeals for God to care for the vine He planted. (80:8,14)

This is tender imagery of being loved and cared for that reoccurs throughout scripture as the fundamental reality of our relationship to God. Both are images of dependency and need for care. The theme of wandering sheep and fruitless vines reoccurs as an expression of God's disappointment that His care is not appreciated, and that we His people choose to resist the healthy dependency He desires.

At the same time, there are images given us of our nature as strong and independent in our relationship to Him, including the characterization that we can take on the divine nature. Christ quoted from Psalm 82:6 to counter the accusation of blasphemy by the religious leaders when they picked up stones to kill him "because you, a mere man, have made yourself God." He replied, "It is written in your own law that God said to certain leaders of the people, 'I say, you are gods!' And you know that the Scriptures cannot be altered. So if those people, who received God's message, were called 'gods' why do you call it blasphemy when the Holy One who was sent into the world by the Father says, 'I am the Son of God'?" (John 10:33-36)

Lord, bring back our straying hearts to you. You give us the grace to bring forth good fruit that is a blessing to others. Make us appreciative of your work in our sanctification. On our own, we pretty much do it wrong.

September 24

Home vs. Abandonment — Psalms 84-89

John 14:1-3 "Don't be troubled, you trust God, now trust in me. There are many rooms in my Father's home, and I am going to prepare a place for you. If this were not so, I would tell you plainly. When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am."

Christ promised that He is making a home for us. The Psalmist celebrated home: the Temple, (Psalm 84) Israel's land, (Psalm 85), and Jerusalem (Psalm 87). All of scripture can be framed as a story of returning home.

Psalms 84-88 introduce several new authors, including Heman the Ezrahite for Psalm 88, and others from his clan. Heman's song expresses great sadness. He descended from Samuel and was put in charge of Temple music and service by David. Asaph and Ethan were his assistants (I Chronicles 6:31-48). Ethan wrote Psalm 89 which celebrates David's eternal throne, but ends with distress over abandonment.

The contrast between feeling alone or abandoned with feeling secure and at home is something most of us understand. We so easily go from solitude to loneliness rather than in the healthy opposite direction. We so easily put our efforts into an earthly home, being too attached to it as part of our quest for security. One of my most profound experiences was a moment when I acknowledged feeling abandoned, and suddenly realized that Christ had not abandoned me. That gives the deepest sense of home and security.

Lord, thank you that you understand our feelings of loneliness. Thank you that you understand what it is to be abandoned. But we bless you and are grateful that you are our home. You have given us a place of security in yourself now, and in the future we have the promise of perfect security, perfect love, no feelings of isolation or fear. We look forward to that!

Book 4: Psalms 90-106

September 25

Miracles — Psalms 90-95 (Psalm 95 previously read)

Matthew 4:5-7 Then the devil took him to the holy city, Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, and said, "If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, 'He will order his angels to protect you. And they will hold

you up with their hands so you won't even hurt your foot on a stone.' Jesus responded, "The Scriptures also say, 'You must not test the Lord your God.'"

Prophetic references to Christ's miracles include: "Let us see your miracles again; let your child see your glory at work." (Psalm 90: 16,17) "O Lord, what great miracles you do and how deep are your thoughts. (Psalm 91:5) Christ refused to exploit miracles manipulatively including when Satan tempted him to jump off the Temple. (Psalm 90:11-12)

But miracles do not guarantee belief. We are reminded that Israel had seen God's miracles, and yet they still did not trust God. (Psalm 95:9) Hebrews 4 quotes this warning and urges us to enter God's rest. If we do not notice God's miracles on our behalf, our hearts are turning from God, and we are not resting in appreciation. "God confirmed the message by giving signs and wonders and various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit whenever he chose." (Hebrews 2:4)

Lord, thank you for the promise of miracles which you so liberally fulfilled in your ministry on earth. Thank you that these miraculous interventions have not stopped and that so many of your people have situations they can look to and acknowledge as a miracle from you.

September 26
Joy — Psalms 96-100

Luke 10:21 Then Jesus was filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit.

The Psalms are full of joy, reminding us that Christ is in joyful communion with his Father and with the world. Because the Psalms are prayers, they lend themselves to being read daily. As a young person from a Christian family, my protected life lent itself readily to the celebratory, joyful Psalms. The depressed, angry or fearful ones were more of a puzzle. Life, which is difficult for anyone, has a way of opening ones' eyes and over time I have learned to appreciate all the range of emotions.

But I truly enjoy the fact that there is a lot of good cheer in being a believer in God. Knowing his love for us, knowing his sovereignty in the world, knowing his redemptive work, and knowing his ultimate triumph gives us a solid basis for joy no matter what the circumstances. Psalms far outstrips any other book with 97 references to "joy," another 44 references to "rejoice." The poems give us plenty of ideas of what to be joyful about, particularly, of course, God himself.

We celebrate the creator God, (Psalm 96) Christ the King (Psalm 97), God's victory (Psalm 98), God's supremacy above all (Psalm 99), and our place as the people of God. (Psalm 100)

The call to live a joyful life is repeated throughout scripture. The apostles give us an example of joy in their opportunity to suffer for Christ. Add appreciation for the beauty of relationships, the created world, and our gratitude for salvation, and the joy builds. Joy is so often a matter of perspective, of noticing what is terrific, and thereby is a choice we make. Even in difficulties there can be humor or beauty to remind us that life is good.

Thank you for being wonderful! Thank you for making a beautiful wonderful world and giving us life to enjoy it. We thank you for your goodness, we celebrate you, we praise you for your unequaled greatness, a greatness beyond discovery!

September 27

A Father's Care — Psalms 101-104 (Psalm 104 previously read)

Luke 11:11-13 "You fathers—if your children ask for a fish, do you give them a snake instead? Or if they ask for an egg, do you give them a scorpion? Of course not! If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."

Christ compared God to a compassionate Father as did the Psalmist: "The Lord is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him." (Psalm 103:13)

God's compassion is cited in many ways: He hears the prayers of the destitute (102:17), releases those condemned to die, forgives sins, heals diseases (103:3), ransoms from death, fills our lives with good things, He is merciful and gracious (103:2-8), salvation extends to grandchildren (103:17)

As a parent, I long for good things for my children. If I am able to do something for them, I am eager to do it. If I see they are suffering, I suffer with them. If I as an imperfect, fallible, and limited parent, care this much, and yearn for good for my children, how much deeper is God's heart of love toward us.

Psalm 104 celebrates the Creator's care for His creation with poetic enthusiasm. Lights and stars, clouds and wind, mountains and valleys, springs and streams, cedars and firs, wild goats and rock badgers are described with delight in the "variety of things you have made." God's care for creation includes providing every creature, including us, with food: "You cause plants to grow for people to use. You allow them to produce food from the earth—wine to make them glad, olive oil as lotion for their skin, and bread to give them strength." (verses 14,15) God's care brings joy.

Our fathers are often a mixture of terrific and not so terrific, and we often project their failures onto God. Much better to remember that God is the perfect Father and project His excellence onto our earthly fathers.

Lord, I thank you that you are my Father. Your love and care are perfect, and I receive it with joy and gratitude.

September 28

Israel's Miraculous History — Psalms 105-106

John 2:11 This miraculous sign at Cana in Galilee was the first time Jesus revealed his glory. And his disciples believed in him.

In the Gospels the word “miracle” occurs twenty-five times and “miraculous” an additional eleven times, an indication of how important these signs were in validating Christ’s ministry. The miracles God did for Israel parallel Christ’s miracles, culminating in the greatest miracle of all, the resurrection.

These two Psalms tell us to “Tell everyone about his miracles,” (Psalm 105:2), to “think of the wonderful works he has done, the miracles and judgments he handed down.” (Psalm 105:5) It reminds us of the “miraculous signs among the Egyptians” (Psalm 105:27) We are asked, “who can list the glorious miracles of the Lord? Who can ever praise him half enough?” (Psalm 106:2)

But the sorrowful thing is that “Our ancestors in Egypt were not impressed by the Lord’s miracles. They soon forgot is many acts of kindness to them.” (Psalm 106:7) The Psalm concludes, “Even so, He pitied them in their distress and listened to their cries. He remembered his covenant with them and relented because of his unfailing love.” (Psalm 106:45)

We are not so different from Israel in that we so easily forget God’s interventions in our history. We have so little faith sometimes, that we fall into the same complaining ways of the people. Making lists of things that have seemed miraculous to us and reviewing them can counter our forgetfulness.

Lord, teach us never to forget, to constantly review how you have worked in our lives, what your kindness and goodness have been toward us. We bless you for your great love in pitying us and listening to our cries for help.

Book 5: Psalms 107-150

September 29

Calming Storms — Psalms 107-109

Luke 8:23-24 As they sailed across, Jesus settled down for a nap. But soon a fierce storm came down on the lake. The boat was filling with water, and they

were in real danger. The disciples went and woke him up, shouting, "Master, Master, we're going to drown!" When Jesus woke up, he rebuked the wind and the raging waves. Suddenly the storm stopped and all was calm.

Psalm 107:29 previews one of Jesus' miracles: "He makes the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still." Calming waves reminds me of my sister. When she was told she had cancer she was understandably frightened and wondered why God had allowed such a tragedy for her and her family, including an infant son. Another friend with cancer pointed her to the following beautiful song. She survived, often with good health, for fourteen years, and when she died the confidence and tranquility of her faith moved many people. We sang *He Calms the Storm* at her funeral:

All who sail the sea of faith
Find out before too long
How quickly blue skies can grow dark
And gentle winds grow strong

Sometimes He holds us close
And lets the wind and waves go wild
Sometimes He calms the storm
And other times He calms His child

Suddenly fear is like white water
Pounding on the soul
Still we sail on knowing
That our Lord is in control

He has a reason for each trial
That we pass through in life
And though we're shaken
We cannot be pulled apart from Christ

Sometimes He calms the storm
With a whispered peace be still
He can settle any sea
But it doesn't mean He will

No matter how the driving rain beats down
On those who hold to faith
A heart of trust will always
Be a quiet peaceful place

—Scott Krippayne

Lord, thank you that even when things go seriously wrong, you are with us, calming our spirits, giving us peace.

September 30

Seated at God's Right Hand — Psalms 110-112

Psalm 110:1 "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit in honor at my right hand until I humble your enemies, making them a footstool under your feet.'"

The Psalmist prophesied that Christ would be seated in victory at God's right hand. This verse is quoted five times in the New Testament, giving it particular prominence out of at least 100 Messianic prophecies in the Psalms, and 100 direct quotations. Peter quoted the same verse in his Pentecost sermon, and the writer of Hebrews did so to demonstrate Christ's superiority to the angels.

Christ pointed out the paradox of saying Messiah is David's son and is David's Lord. C.S. Lewis wrote that Christ was "hinting at the mystery of the Incarnation by pointing out a difficulty which only it could solve."²² In *Reflection on the Psalms* he wrote:

We find in our Prayer Books that Psalm 110 is one of those appointed for Christmas Day. We may at first be surprised by this. There is nothing in it about peace and good-will, nothing remotely suggestive of the stable at Bethlehem. It seems to have been originally either a coronation ode for a new king, promising conquest and empire, or a poem addressed to some king on the eve of a war, promising victory. It is full of threats. The "rod" of the king's power is to go forth from Jerusalem, foreign kings are to be wounded, battlefields to be covered with carnage, skulls cracked.

The note is not "Peace and goodwill" but "Beware. He's coming."²³

Because He is at God's right hand and coming in power, He is full of blessings. The Psalms that follow (111-115) are full of joy for those who fear God. Psalm 112 celebrates happiness, successful children, blessing a whole generation, wealth, good deeds, light bursting into the darkness, all going well, not being overcome by evil circumstances, trust in the midst of bad news, and influence and honor.

Lord, we are amazed at the prophecies and foreshadowing of your coming, and that your power brings blessings to those who honor You.

October 1

The Rejected Stone — Psalms 113-118

Matthew 21:42-44 Then Jesus asked them, "Didn't you ever read this in the Scriptures? 'The stone rejected by the builders has now become the cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous to see.' What I mean is that the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation that will produce the proper fruit. Anyone who stumbles over that stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone on whom it falls."

These Psalms are the Hallel prayer, recited on Jewish holidays, and probably what Jesus and his disciples sang at the Last Supper. In their midst is an important Messianic quote (Psalm 118:22-23) repeated by Christ and others. (Acts 4:11, Ephesians 2:20, and I Peter 2:4-7)

We are repeatedly told that the lesser, the rejected, the poor, and the weak will be lifted to honor, and those with power, wealth and privilege will fall. The humble will be exalted, the proud will be humbled. The most archetypal case is Christ. He was rejected to the point of death, and then exalted to the right hand of God.

The pun between “stone” and “son” (*eben* and *ben*) makes a fitting allusion to God’s son. The “foundation stone” on the Temple Mount may have been under the Holy of Holies or under the altar, and though an ordinary-looking rock which one might consider discarding, it became Judaism’s holiest site.

This Psalm is also the source of praise for Palm Sunday: “Praise God! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessings on the coming Kingdom of our ancestor David! Praise God in highest heaven!” (Mark 11:9-10, Luke 19:38, John 12:13)

Lord, thank you that you are the foundation, the rock, the center. Thank you that though considered unimportant, your resurrection reversed everything.

October 2

Poetry — Psalm 119:1-64

John 1:1 In the beginning the Word already existed. He was with God, and he was God.

All my heart seeks you. (2)
Buried in my heart are your words. (11)
Clear my eyes to see truth. (18)
Delight in your miracles satisfies me. (27)
Entering your path gives me happiness, (35)
Failure isn’t possible when it comes to your love. (41)
Guff from the proud doesn’t stop me. (51)
Have mercy on me as you promised. (58)
I used to wander off until you disciplined me. (67)
Just as you promised, you surround me with mercy. (76, 77)
Keeping your ways keeps me from shame. (80)
Longing for your salvation gives me hope. (81)
Must I wait to see your promises come true? (84)
Never will I forget you for you restore health and joy. (93)
O how I love you and your word! (97)
Paths are well-lit with the lamp of your word. (105)
Questioning you is not right. (113)
Rejecting your principles is not right. (118)
Sustained faith in your salvation is right. (117)
Truths in your promises will be fulfilled. (123)
Up above you can look down on me with love. (135)
Very trustworthy and tested are your promise. (140)
When I get up I cry out to you for help. (147)
Xtreme sorrow makes me need your protection. (153)
Your word is a great treasure to me. (162)
Zoning out, I leave your ways. Please come find me. (176)

Christ is the Word and this Psalm celebrates the Word. Celebrating the Hebrew scriptures, the poem is an acrostic, starting each stanza with the same letter, then going through the alphabet. In honor of the form, I made my own acrostic, and the number indicates the verse from which the line is drawn:

Lord, even when we do not get it, your Word has something to offer us. Help us to be more and more open to receive what that is.

October 3
God's Discipline — Psalm 119:65-121

Hebrews 12:11 No discipline is enjoyable while it is happening—it's painful! But afterward there will be a peaceful harvest of right living for those who are trained in this way.

God's people are called to humbly submit to his discipline, knowing that it will produce good character. Christ submitted to the cross, knowing that it would transform all things. He gave us the example to be able to say "not my will, but your will be done" in the face of difficult and unpleasant things. The Psalmist acknowledges that he wandered before being disciplined (verse 67), that the suffering sent was good for him (verse 71), that he needed the discipline (verse 75), that he is exhausted with waiting (verse 83), that he would have died in his misery without the law (verse 92), that he has suffered much (verse 107), and he begs for God to sustain him (verses 116-7).

Kierkegaard said, "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards." It is only after difficulties have passed that we can look back and see how things "worked out for good" even when it seemed quite unlikely there was anything positive happening as we went through it.

The examples of scripture of the difficulties faced by almost every principle character pound home the message that it is necessary to be disciplined, even through very painful things, before one is prepared to take on the responsibilities that make one a "hero of the faith". From Abraham to Joseph to Moses to David we see the discipline of God's delays preparing them for great things. Hopefully the recognition of this truth can help give us backbone in the middle of our stresses.

Lord, we want happy, easy lives, and apparently you want us to learn things that require unhappiness and difficulty. This is hard for us to accept, so help us to see that there really can be positive results.

October 4
Loving God's Word — Psalm 119:122-176

II Timothy 3:16,17 All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.

God's people are called to love his word, and the Psalmist shows us his depths of delight and joy in what God has said. Today we have so many excellent resources to help us appreciate even things that are difficult: commentaries, multiple translations, creative Bible Studies, and even on-line sermons.

As I have spent several years writing these meditations, the scriptures have become more beautiful to me. I hear lines and phrases I had not really noticed before, find structures that surprise and delight me, and see the whole story in better perspective. The beauty is mixed for me with struggles over what seems barbaric or boring. But my engagement with the text is such that even the struggle is intriguing.

I have become convinced that the stories are designed to convince us that a just, merciful, invisible presence intervenes in "real life" and thereby demonstrates He is not imaginary. Scripture is a record of his actions in history, with the climactic moment being the arrival of Christ claiming to fulfill every promise made.

Lord, so much about your world is mysterious, and the mysteries in scripture keep us poking about, wondering, asking questions.

October 5
Psalms of Ascent — Psalm 120-134

Matthew 26:30 Then they sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives.

Christ knew and sang the Psalms.²⁴ These "psalms of ascent" were sung on the way to Jerusalem for three mandated feasts: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. As a child with His family, as an adult with His disciples, Christ walked to Jerusalem's festivals, singing, talking, and part of holiday crowds.

Well-loved lines are in these songs, most familiar in the King James Version:

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth. (Psalm 121:1,2)

I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord.
(Psalm 122:1)

Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain. (Psalm 127:1)

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! (Psalm 133:1)

Behold, bless ye the Lord, all ye servants of the Lord, which by night stand in the house of the Lord. (Psalm 134:1)

Themes include God's protection, His City, His mercy, liberation, security, restoration, rest, humility, harmony and blessing. Tender encouragement and hope in the celebration of God's restoration are applied to the return from exile (Psalm 126). We can apply it to anything that has fallen down and been restored: marriage, health, estranged relationships with children or friends, addiction, or financial security. Whenever there is a dramatic turn-around, this is a Psalm for celebrating.

Lord, thank you for the happiness that comes from large community celebrations, from walking together, singing together, being with family and friends. Thank you that this sense of being connected is available to any one of us if we are following you. We bless you for life in community.

October 6

Anger — Psalm 135-137

Matthew 5:22 But I say, if you are angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you say to your friend, "You idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell."

Christ and the Psalmist part ways regarding anger. Christ speaks of its dangers, the need to quickly reconcile with others, and the need to bless enemies. The Psalmist is sure God is as angry with his enemies as he is, and suggests methods for revenge. One of the most dreadful images is that of smashing babies against rocks. (Psalm 137:9)

C.S. Lewis in *Reflections on the Psalms* devoted a chapter to these vengeful Psalms and began: "In some of the Psalms the spirit of hatred which strikes us in the face is like heat from a furnace mouth. In others the same spirit ceases to be frightful only by becoming (to a modern mind) almost comic in its naivety."²⁵

I empathize with the anger. Captives had suffered defeat and were traumatized by violence. In the Guatemalan war terrible things were done to babies, and people remember what they saw. Revenge is a natural desire, but I admire how victims chose justice instead.

While I cannot identify with wanting what the Psalmist wants done here, I can identify with being angry enough for wanting his enemies to be punished. If I express my anger and outrage to God, it dissipates. I become calm enough to know He can deal with the situation, and I can recognize my faults in the matter. I can then forgive whether the other is ready for reconciliation or not.

Reconciling after wounds of war is painfully difficult, at times impossible. After the Bosnian war one experienced peace-maker developed a model of reconciliation.²⁶ It contains a circle of revenge that parallels Psalm 137 very well: deep hurt and depression, suppression of grief, great anger, longing for justice, retelling the story, and justifying revenge. The vengeful prayers can serve to dissipate hurt as a necessary way of mourning and coming to terms with loss. Traumatic losses must be grieved before one can move forward.

The fact that these natural human emotions are expressed in prayer rather than acted out toward others creates the possibility of new outcomes. One can seek to understand the opponents, forgive them, and take risks to reconnect. If the other can respond there is the possibility of apologies, new stories, new plans together. While created for a post-war situation, this reconciliation model works interpersonally and provides guidance toward forgiveness and reconciliation.

Lord, thank you for the gift of anger. Thank you that it is useful and that you show us how to deal with situations wisely that have aroused our anger.

October 7

Justice — Psalm 138-140

John 16:33 I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.

Christ promises that though our life has many sorrows, He has triumphed over evil, and the Psalmist expresses the same faith.

This Psalm and others encouraged me to pray for justice in the face of the violence and human rights abuses of the Guatemalan conflict we lived through. People plotted evil, and poisonous tongues betrayed others. I agreed with the prayer: “Don’t let liars prosper here in our land. Cause disaster to fall with great force on the violent.” (Psalm 140:11)

When the human rights movement gained strength and brought successful lawsuits in Guatemala against perpetrators of violence against civilians, I affirmed, “I know the Lord will surely help those they persecute; he will maintain the rights of the poor.” (Psalm 140:12) Human rights leaders expressed

a desire justice and recognition, not vengeance or death for their opponents. Even one night in jail for a former head of state before the conviction was challenged is seen as a victory.

When direct action is blocked in some way, we can still appeal to God for justice. In the Psalm, burning coals on heads or falling into fires and pits was vengeful, but Paul took the image and focused on leaving vengeance to God and conquering evil by doing good. (Romans 12:19-21) Psychologists affirm that we need to be self-aware of our anger, name it, but then engage in problem-solving based on respect, justice, reconciliation, and creativity.

Lord, teach us to desire and demand justice, to trust your ability to punish appropriately and to extend mercy to the repentant.

October 8

Feeling Alone — Psalms 141-142

Matthew 27:46 At about three o'clock, Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" which means "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

Christ expressed a lament of abandonment and feeling God was not there, and David also expressed this. It is reassuring that both Christ and a "man after God's own heart" expressed frustrations I am all too familiar with: complaints, troubles, despair, danger, traps, a feeling no one cares, no alternatives, loneliness. In Psalm an "anointed one", someone for whom we know that the promise of a kingdom turned out in the end, wrote when things looked very dark in his life. "I have never been this low."

We can learn from him as he appealed to God as his last choice, appealed for rescue, and envisioned being able to give God public thanks, once more surrounded by loving people, and overwhelmed by blessing.

It reminds me of Victor Frankl in the concentration camp of World War II recognizing that in this most terrible situation there was still love, beauty, and a sense of purpose that could give meaning and hope. He did go on to benefit many with his work after being freed, and taught "tragic optimism" a hope that has looked into the face of the worse despair and yet knows life is still meaningful. When I or those I know are tempted to despair I remember these examples.

Lord, we are so small, and our problems and disappointments can seem so overwhelming. Dark times in our lives are terrible and we are so tempted to give up and decide either you are not real or you are not good. Have mercy on us.

October 9
A Powerful God — Psalms 143-144

Matthew 7:7-8 “Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

Christ tells us to persist in prayer, and the Psalmist demonstrates it. There are repeated pleas for God to act: “I am calling, hurry, listen, I cry, I am in constant prayer, I look to you, I cry out, I plead, I pour out, I pray, hear my cry, rescue me, hear my prayer, answer me, I reach out, I thirst for you, come quickly, save me, bend down, reach down, rescue me.”

Some Christians focus on faith and positive expectations to an extent it leaves no room for longing, uncertainty, and desperation. If one is in need it is just a sign you need to believe more or pray more. The Psalmist can admit “I am overwhelmed, I am losing all hope, I am paralyzed with fear, my depression deepens, and bring me out of my distress.” He only asks because he knows God is powerful and able to act for him.

Psalm 144 focuses on God’s power, referring to awesome natural phenomenon, including a volcano: “Touch the mountains so they billow smoke.” (Psalm 144:5) Because I live near an active volcano, there are days when a huge cloud of smoke billows up from the Volcán de Fuego. “Fuego” means fire, and at times there are rumbling loud noises, shaking, bright fire shooting up, and red-hot lava streaming down the mountain.

Now when I watch my volcano, I think about it as a sign of God’s power, and the amazing show as provoked by “God’s touch.” Given that, why not have more confidence God will hear my prayers?

Lord, thank you that you are powerful and compassionate and desire to open doors, give us what we ask, and find what we need.

October 10
Worship — Psalms 145-150

Luke 19:36-40 Then the crowds spread out their coats on the road ahead of Jesus. As they reached the place where the road started down from the Mount of Olives, all of his followers began to shout and sing as they walked along, praising God for all the wonderful miracles they had seen. “Bless the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in highest heaven!” But some of the Pharisees among the crowd said, “Teacher, rebuke your

followers for saying things like that!” He replied, “If they kept quiet, the stones along the road would burst into cheers!”

Christ is the King worthy of our worship. The King and the Kingdom we celebrate were announced in Christ’s teachings. He gave us 46 parables, or stories, and two-thirds of them refer to the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God. The nature of that kingdom, prefigured in the Psalms, is a kingdom of peace.

The celebration of Christ as the King entering Jerusalem was full of singing, and the last two Psalms are praise full of music and dance. The Psalmist finds praise delightful (147:1) and in turn is grateful God delights in us. (Psalm 147:11, 149:4) The result is a crescendo of happy praise, delighting in nature, in music, in dancing, in God’s victory.

Chagall gives us a joyous depiction of Psalm 150 and all the instruments being used in the worship of God. The stained glass image in the Cathedral of Chichester England has a red background, an image of King David on a donkey on the top, surrounded by all the musicians and worshippers. That image evokes Christ coming into Jerusalem on his donkey, and the praise surrounding him.

Part of what is attractive about modern Christianity is the great, cheerful, celebratory music that has become so much a part of our worship. We are delighted as we are lifted up by the experience of praise in a congregation. We have continual ways to celebrate our King.

Lord, thank you for the joy and beauty of celebrating you with music. It is not only so much fun, you say it is good for our hearts, and we have found that to be so.

October 10
For Children — Proverbs 1-4

Luke 18:15-17 One day some parents brought their little children to Jesus so he could touch and bless them. But when the disciples saw this, they scolded the parents for bothering him. Then Jesus called for the children and said to the disciples, “Let the children come to me. Don’t stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children. I tell you the truth, anyone who doesn’t receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.”

Both Proverbs and Christ emphasize children. Proverbs tells children to listen to instruction. Christ tells us to receive instruction from the example of child-like humility and trust. Proverbs beings with warm, wise and affectionate appeals to “my child,” reiterated at least ten times in these four chapters.

The book encourages parents raising children to follow God:

11:21 Evil people will surely be punished, but the children of the godly will go free.

14:26 Those who fear the Lord are secure; he will be a refuge for their children.

20:7 The godly walk with integrity; blessed are their children who follow them.

22:6 Direct your children onto the right path,
and when they are older, they will not leave it.

For parents, it is important to remember how responsible we are to teach our children wisdom. In a fine book called *Raising An Emotionally Intelligent Child: The Heart of Parenting*, psychologist John Gottman demonstrates how empathizing with a child's anger and sadness, but seeing it as a teaching moment when you guide them to a wise response, develops much more capable adults. It is this kind of wise teaching and learning that Proverbs is urging for parents and children.

Lord, thank you for the blessing and gift of children. Thank you that your kindness to children was a transformative moment in making us see that children need to be respected and understood.

October 11

Lady Wisdom — Proverbs 5-9

Colossians 2:3 In him [Christ] lie hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Proverbs prefigures Christ as the wisdom of God. He is metaphorically identified as a woman, Lady Wisdom, who engaged in the creation, sustains us, and calls us to listen and gain the treasures she has to offer. Wisdom is said to be the first thing created and a lyrical exposition of the process of creation follows, thus linking wisdom even more closely to the person of Christ. (Proverbs 8:22-31)

The Beatitudes are presented as a set of proverbs. They parallel things we are taught in the book of Proverbs: both call us to humility, to mourn, to be meek and uncontrolling, to desire righteousness, to be merciful, to focus on God, to make peace, and to be strong enough to take opposition. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus takes wisdom from Proverbs and re-presents it.

In addition to Lady Wisdom, there are two more women, one foolish and one wise. A foolish woman is described at the beginning of the book who destroys men's lives, seducing with no consciousness or repentance of doing wrong. The book ends with the image of a wise woman who loves her husband and children, cares well for her household, is diligent with her

money/food/clothing/crafts/decor, generous to those who are poor, and who teaches with kindness and wisdom.

Christians do not always show wisdom in how they analyze situations or people or political choices. Consequently, the exhortations to learn to think and process information are as badly needed today as they were when Proverbs was written.

Please make us wise. Help us to see life clearly and to react as you desire. We praise you for your promise to give us wisdom when we ask for it. We worship you as not only the source of all wisdom, but as someone willing to freely share your wisdom with us as we need it.

October 12

Wisdom versus Foolishness — Proverbs 10-15

Matthew 7:24, 26 “Anyone who listens to my teaching and follows it is wise, like a person who build a house on solid rock. ... But anyone who hears my teaching and ignores it is foolish, like a person who builds a house on sand.”

Christ contrasts the wise and the foolish as those who follow him versus those who do not. For example, the wise and foolish builders mentioned above, the wise and foolish virgins waiting for the wedding, or foolish Pharisaical teaching versus His wisdom. One of his parables concludes: “Yes, a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God.” (Luke 12:21)

This section of Proverbs sets up a similar opposition between the wise and the foolish. The series of wise sayings do not seem to come in any particular order, though nearly 300 themes have been identified. As one reads through, we enter a rhythm of contrasts between someone wise and foolish, generous or stingy, joyful or angry, diligent or lazy, just versus unjust, using words to bless or using words to hurt, accepting reproof, or ignoring it. A pattern builds up in the mind of a thoughtful, kind, and gracious character which is the outcome of living in wisdom.

As I think about people I know who exemplify wisdom, they are thoughtful, do not rush to insist on their opinions but are very good listeners, and look for ways to help others on every level. Their words are kind, their actions are kind, and they take for granted they are not the center of the world. My desire is to assimilate the advice of Proverbs and the example of wise people and to be such a person myself.

Lord, thank you that you have a deeper wisdom than the wisdom of the world. We acknowledge that yours is the true wisdom.

October 11

Wisdom's Humility — Proverbs 16-21

Matthew 11:25 At that time Jesus prayed this prayer: "O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, thank you for hiding these things from those who think themselves wise and clever, and for revealing them to the childlike."

Christ calls us to humility, and Proverbs emphasizes that humility and fear of God are the beginning of wisdom. In this section the teaching is not by way of contrast, but is rather a calling to a godly life.

Christ explains humility with a call to be as little children. "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children. I tell you the truth, anyone who doesn't receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it." (Luke 18:15-17)

C.S. Lewis wisely wrote: "True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less."²⁷ And "Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call 'humble' nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what *you* said to *him*. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all."²⁸

Lord, thank you that your Spirit works this godly character into us, and that we can see by reading these wise remarks what areas of our lives need work. Give us the humility to let you do your work.

October 12

Wisdom's Rewards — Proverbs 22-24

James 1:5, 25 If you need wisdom—if you want to know what God wants you to do—ask him, and he will gladly tell you. He will not resent your asking. ... But if you keep looking steadily into God's perfect law—the law that sets you free—and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.

Both Proverbs and Christ tell us that obedience to the call of wisdom results in rewards. In Proverbs we are given a trilogy of rewards for true humility and fear of the Lord: riches, honor, and long life. (Proverbs 3:16, Proverbs 22:4)

If we seek these things in a worldly way, our passion for riches opens up obsession with material things, work out of balance, and even lying and

stealing. The opposite error can be a poverty mentality that expects nothing, and becomes lazy or discouraged. Instead, in Christ we receive and give all the gifts of life.

Seeking honor in the world creates pride in our accomplishments, the illusions of fame, attention, and approval from others. Or we can be overly low in our self-esteem, expecting and getting abuse and put-downs. But in Christ, his ways of honoring us do not bring pride, but delight and appreciation.

The wrong approach to long life can be an obsession with self-care, overly focused on exercise, food, and our looks. The opposite error is to ignore these things and be careless, with resulting bad health. The balance of God is a life appreciative of his gifts. One lives in peace with less stress which results in better health, constantly turning all our concerns over to him.

Lord, we bless you for the gift of life, for your provision, for opportunities to have enough wealth to bless others. We bless you for the times you give us honor and appreciation, even from others here on earth. We bless you for the health you give us.

October 13
Criticism — Proverbs 25-29

Matthew 7:1-2 Stop judging others, and you will not be judged. For others will treat you as you treat them. Whatever measure you use in judging others, it will be used to measure how you are judged.

Solomon's proverbs collected by King Hezekiah's advisers (Proverbs 25:1) include the topic of giving and receiving criticism. Christ also warned us to criticize with wisdom and without falling into the trap of condemnation. Proverbs on this include:

Valid criticism is as treasured by the one who heeds it as jewelry made from finest gold.
(25:12)

An unfair curse will not land on its intended victim. (26:2)

An open rebuke is better than hidden love! (27:5)

Wounds from a friend are better than many kisses from an enemy. (27:6)

The heartfelt counsel of a friend is as sweet as perfume and incense. (27:9)

As iron sharpens iron, a friend sharpens a friend. (27:17)

Whoever stubbornly refuses to accept criticism will suddenly be broken beyond repair.
(29:1)

To discipline and reprimand a child produces wisdom, but a mother is disgraced by an undisciplined child. (29:15)

Fearing people is a dangerous trap, but to trust the Lord means safety. (29:25)

Many of us live under the delusion that receiving a critique is a tragedy, and that offering criticism is cruel. Proverbs tells us and Christ shows us that this is not so. Giving and receiving criticism can be a very good thing, a valuable resource for growth. My best efforts in giving criticism have involved thinking through when to say something and how to be tactful, and preparing not to panic if I get a bad reaction. My best efforts in receiving it have been to listen appreciatively, apologize if need be, and take myself lightly enough not to be defensive.

Lord, help us to see what a great gift criticism from others can be, how it can actually be your words to us, helping us to learn something you want us to know. Help us to be wise and gentle when we offer criticism, to obey you to never feel we are the judge who can condemn another.

October 14

Christ our Wisdom — Proverbs 30

Acts 1:11 Jesus has been taken away from you into heaven. And someday, just as you saw him go, he will return!

Agur son of Jakeh offers a beautiful prophetic word about Christ: “Who but God goes up to heaven and comes back down? Who holds the wind in his fists? Who wraps up the oceans in his cloak? Who has created the whole wide world? What is his name—and his son’s name? Tell me if you know!” (Proverbs 30:4)

Agur humbly says he has not mastered human wisdom nor knows the Holy One. He comments on his weariness, ignorance, and lack of common sense. There is something deeply ironic here. Solomon’s proverbs often sound like he “has it all together” and yet we know that his life fell apart—a little pride and idolatry led to a fall. In contrast, Agur gives us a clear vision of Christ and the promise that God’s word is reliable.

Among other pieces of advice, he uses the rhetorical device “there are three things,” “no four.” We are given five sets of four things that offer insights on dissatisfaction, amazement, unfortunate events, things small but wise, and things that are stately.

The answer to Agur’s question, of course, is Christ. He is the one who ascends and will return. He holds the winds and the oceans and created the whole world with the Father. He is the son of the Father. He is even the reliable word of God. He defends all who come to him for protection.

Lord, we praise you that you are hidden in every corner of scripture. Everything points toward you, and we know that just as you came once, you will come again and set everything to right.

October 15

A Wise Woman — Proverbs 31

1 Peter 3:4 You should be known for the beauty that comes from within, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is so precious to God.

Christ's character can be expressed through an ordinary housewife who allows Him to make her extraordinary. In the beginning of the book wisdom was identified with a woman and contrasted with a foolish, immoral woman. At the end of the book we are introduced to a wife and mother who exemplifies wisdom in her particular context of caring for home and family. Her qualities of character abstracted out of her activities can equally well be seen as qualities of the character of Christ.

These include: being of great value, trustworthy, creative, a provider, strong, observant, hard-working, caring for those who are poor, giving honor, peaceful, instructing with wisdom, and worthy of praise.

An acrostic, this is a "wise woman from A to Z." Women sometimes read about her and think, "I cannot measure up." The lesson is that by allowing Christ to change us we uniquely become what he envisioned for us to be. The poem helps men notice the talents and wisdom of women in their lives. The secret of her excellence and foundation from which her accomplishments emerge is given at the end: she fears God.

Since so many young women are single and might get an inferiority complex reading about this wife and mother, or since wives and mothers might look at her with some anxiety and envy, we need to remember this is an example, not the only one. Hebrew scriptures places Proverbs right before Ruth, which means one goes from reading about one great woman to another.

Lord, thank you that any one of us, no matter our circumstances or our calling, can become an example of your wisdom to the world. We thank you that good character and holiness are a gift of your grace.

October 16

Meaningless — Ecclesiastes 1-2

John 14:6 Jesus told him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me."

Ecclesiastes reflects Christ as the source of meaning for our lives and grapples with how meaningless life is without Him. This book seems to reflect well the skepticism and negativity about life and its purpose that infects our post-modern world at times.

Perhaps we have felt moments of despair or depression or discouragement when we ask with this author, “What is the point of life?” In the midst of his evaluation that so many things can be meaningless, he offers these ideas of what does give meaning:

- Enjoying food and drink
- Satisfaction in work
- Receiving wisdom, knowledge and joy
- Enjoying oneself as long as you can
- Enjoying fruits of ones’ labor
- Receiving wealth as a gift from God
- Receiving good health
- Enjoying what you have
- Enjoying prosperity
- Having fun
- Living happily with the woman you love
- Giving generously
- Rejoicing in every day of life

This fits well with the mantras of living in this moment, of noticing, of being grateful. With just a slight shift in perspective we can go from meaningless to meaningful.

God, thank you that when I feel rather despairing I can quickly be reminded that I am suffering from a partial or distorted perspective. Thank you that so often my pride, or anxiety, or depression, or anger can become gratitude, or hope, or humility or patience, just by realizing you are really there. Your presence matters.

October 17

God’s timing — Ecclesiastes 3-6

John 7:8 “You go on. I’m not going to this festival, because my time has not yet come.”

In this famous poem about time and how each aspect of life has its moment, we see the paradox that Christ referred to in his own life: timing matters. With the coming of Christ, John the Baptist announced “The time promised by God has come at last!” (Mark 1:15) Christ’s last days, His death and resurrection were carefully timed to fit the prophetic calendar of Passover time. As He said, “For the time has come for this prophecy about me to be fulfilled.” (Luke 22:37)

Perhaps one of my greatest struggles has been regarding God’s timing. Many of my prayers have been answered in my life, but often after long waits. It is

only in looking back that I can perceive benefits in the wait and benefits in the timing of seeing my request granted. I still start fretting about the next thing I am waiting to see answered. Joseph experienced a long delay in his life. We are told “Until the time came to fulfill his dreams, the Lord tested Joseph’s character.” (Psalm 105:19) I have felt like the delays have been a test of my character and faith, and so I ask God to help me stop fretting.

Lord, give me the grace to really trust that your timing is wise, good and full of benefits I could not guess, even when I think the waiting has been long.

October 18
Prosperity Gospel — Ecclesiastes 7-9

I Peter I:6 So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while.

The people of God must endure suffering with grace and humility. In this section of wise proverbs, we are given several thoughts to make us realize that we cannot expect everything to go our way: “Enjoy prosperity while you can, but when hard times strike, realize that both come from God. Remember that nothing is certain in this life.” (Ecclesiastes 7:14) The teacher goes on to remind us that we all die, and that we cannot count on having an easy life. (Ecclesiastes 9:1)

In our time the teachings of “prosperity Gospel” have helped many to expect God’s guidance, provision, healing, and blessings on their families and their ministries. These are all godly and biblical things and the awakening of faith for them is a great gift. When I have heard those known for this teaching present the side that God expects us to endure suffering with grace, I am also blessed, because this, too, is Biblical. To accept the trials and difficulties of life as part of God’s purposes, including his refining purposes, gives us a mature character able to wisely guide others through their difficulties.

There is a subtle balance here between faith and acceptance. At the root of both is a deep commitment to God’s trustworthiness.

Lord, help me to never be too simplistic when I see that others are struggling, or even when I am struggling, but to acknowledge that you do allow things we would prefer not to happen. Give us the grace to stay in faith and keep asking for good things.

October 19

Meaningful — Ecclesiastes 10-12

John 10:10 The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.

Meaning in life becomes visible by recognizing God as our creator, one of Christ's roles. In that context, we have purpose, and there is a hope for us in Christ. Even the mundane becomes meaningful in the context of a loving and obedient life. Ecclesiastes snaps photos of the world as it is with all its beauty, pain, and difficulty.

When I learned that Ecclesiastes is read during the Feast of Tabernacles, I was puzzled at first. Then I could see that it is a good book to recall the forty years of wilderness wanderings when life could have seemed quite meaningless. The presence of God with his people in the tabernacle would have been a constant reminder of what matters and makes life meaningful. As the author ends his book: "Here is my final conclusion: Fear God and obey his commands, for this is the duty of every person. God will judge us for everything we do, including every secret thing, whether good or bad."

As we continue on our pilgrimage through life, whenever tempted to feel like it is meaningless, a return to God's presence can renew our perspective and make clear what our task for this moment might be. In these acts of faith and obedience the meaningless and despair melt away.

Lord, thank you that you give us meaning and purpose. Thank you that life is not meaningless, but that as we learn to live with you in our life, it can be not only good, but truly exciting to see the way you pull scattered pieces together to create meaning. I feel awe when I see the puzzle pieces of my own life fitting together into interesting pictures.

October 20

Courtship — Song of Solomon 1-3

Ephesians 3:19 May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.

Christ's inexpressibly great love for us is analogous to the depth of passion and desire in the romance of this book. Our own experiences of romance teach us about the depths of love and widen our hearts.

Paul taught that marriage and singleness are both gifts. (I Corinthians 7:7) The imagery of femininity or masculinity apply to us all, married or single, and

invite us to appealing character. All of us, no matter our marital state, can apply this to our intimacy with Christ. During our singleness, even if it is only for a time, we can use that time well to be completely devoted and focused on Christ, without the distractions of spouse or children. It is a time to be treasured.

There is a story line in the book from attraction to marriage to a life-long relationship of committed love. Read in this way, one sees how the physical and emotional passion deepen and it becomes a model for God's ideals for our romantic love. It is thereby preparation for marriage, and a reminder to refresh our marriages.

Historically, however, various commentators and teachers have said that this story serves as an analogy to that of each heart in its love relationship with God. Many of us cannot honestly say we strongly love God, and perhaps it is worth asking for more if we are not experiencing much passion.

Thank you for the gift of romance and how much joy and delight it has brought us. We celebrate your romance with us, your people. Thank you for those moments in our lives when something makes us extra aware that you deeply love us.

October 21

Marriage — Song of Solomon 4-6

Ephesians 5:11,12 As the Scriptures say, "A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one." This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one.

Song of Solomon reflects Christ as the Bridegroom. Here is a love poem of great beauty, full of delight, longing, misunderstanding, making up, contentment, public recognition. Just as Paul tells us that the husband is an image of Christ and the wife an image of the church, so also in this poem Christ is the King/lover and we are the queen/beloved.

The poem celebrates the passion and joy of marriage. In addition to lauding the details of one another's bodies, the groom repeats "my treasure, my bride" and tells her she is a private garden, a lovely orchard with precious fruit, a fountain, a beautiful city. These images are of delicacy in contrast to the brides' praise of the groom with images of strength and beauty: a swift gazelle or young deer, a fine apple tree with delicious fruit, a bouquet of flowers, or a king surrounded in procession with his warriors in a great chariot. They both say that the love of the other is better than wine. The lavish, sensual imagery weaves a spell of two people in joyful harmony with one another, feeling that deep security that comes from loving and being loved.

But indifference and a conflict occur, something familiar for anyone in any marriage. The relationship is diminished and harmed, and similar things happen in the years of a Christian life. Reconciliation is modeled in the story and once more the couple return to celebrating and praising one another, even with the same imagery as in the earliest days of marriage.

Lord, may you always be refreshing our human loves and always refreshing our love relationship and intimacy with you. May we spontaneously celebrate all the many gifts that you give!

October 22

Undying Love — Song of Solomon 7-8

John 1:14 So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.

Christ's love for us is unfailing, and the passion of human love is compared here to several things: to fire, to something that survives a flood, to something worth more than a fortune. Once again, the husband celebrates the beauty of his wife and the wife responds with eagerness for a country retreat or a return to their childhood homes.

In scripture God's unfailing love is repeated 121 times, 73 of which are in the Psalms. This quality of his character makes our relationship with him reliable, trustworthy, unshakeable. In the struggles of life, we may be tempted to doubt this or forget it, but in any situation, refocusing our attention on God's love changes our hearts and gives us peace.

In the ups and downs and challenges of life it is so often the case that we do not feel loved. We question the reality of God's unfailing love, and actually the story of scripture has so many instances where disobedience leads to difficult consequences that it is hard to hold on to an idea that "unfailing love" means that everything goes well in life. Here we are reminded of how deep and interior the experience of that love must be—strong as fire and flood—to take us through life with the unseen.

Lord, thank you that your message to us is that you love us, and that this is repeated not only in words but in your actions. We turn to you in gratitude and adoration for that love.

CHAPTER 5

The Kingdom Foretold

Isaiah — Malachi

Throughout the reign of the kings, the role of prophet continued. Many prophets gave their messages verbally, but others wrote down and preserved their messages. Embedded in the messages was reinforcement that a promised King, Messiah, would come and set all to right. A glorious and just kingdom would come into effect, and the suffering of the people would end. At the same time, they continued to call kings and people to account for sinful behavior, including the idolatry and injustice that had destroyed the kingdom. Nevertheless, their message was that God would love them and restore them.



October 23

Call to Repentance — Isaiah 1-3

Matthew 4:17 From then on, Jesus began to preach, “Turn from your sins and turn to God, because the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”

Each prophet hammered repentance, the same message Christ brought as foundational to entering the new life of the Kingdom. The written prophets began at the time of the divided kingdom, admonishing Israel that the call to create a healthy, blessed, prosperous, God-fearing community, had failed. They are full of conflict, judgment, tragedy, war, interspersed with occasional flashes of hope.

Isaiah called for repentance, warning of coming judgment for idolatry, social injustice, and ungodly leadership. Christ as a prophet also confronted hypocritical religious leaders, predicted judgment on Jerusalem (70 AD), and anticipated final judgment.

Isaiah began with his political context, that of four Judean kings who heard his messages, and these chapters are in the time of Uzziah. Uzziah began well, seeking God and becoming successful as a result. “But when he had become powerful, he also became proud, which led to his downfall.” (II Chronicles 26:16) He inappropriately burned incense in the Temple, and was struck with leprosy. Though Isaiah’s message was to the nation, one can hear a call to the king who had invited punishment by rebelling and become sick from head to foot. The incense he offered was offensive, his worship insincere. God appealed for him to do good by seeking justice and help for the oppressed. Instead of leprous snow white skin, his heart could become snow white.

Uzziah never responded to the offer of repentance and healing, and so died a leper. Judah and Jerusalem responded sporadically, but finally their rebellion was sufficient that the predicted judgment fell. Anticipating the mercy in Christ, Isaiah promised restoration for survivors of coming judgment. (e.g. Isaiah 4) For us, Christ has brought mercy, repentance is always available, and it is as simple as turning around.

Lord, keep us humble enough to listen to calls to repentance, and to respond to the hope you offer us. May we never be too proud to allow the searchlight of your Spirit to point out where we need your grace once more.

October 24

The Vineyard — Isaiah 4-5

Luke 20:15 So they dragged him [the Son] out of the vineyard and murdered him. “What do you suppose the owner of the vineyard will do to them?” Jesus asked.

The prophets described disobedient Israel as a failed vineyard, and Christ used this in his parables. Despite excellent care, grapes were sour and God decided He must abandon the vineyard, tear down the fences, and allow the field to grow wild. Having warned of destruction, Isaiah wrote of hope for restoration, using imagery of a lush, beautiful, and fruitful land. Then he turned to the vineyard which must be pruned.

Christ took the image and added characters in the parable alluded to above. The owner was still God, and the vineyard was still the people of God, but the servants caring for the vineyard were the ruling religious authorities. The owner sent servants to collect the rent (the prophets) but each time they were badly mistreated. The owner decided to send his son (Christ), but he was killed. When Christ asked what would happen to these wicked servants, the answer was that they would be put to death and the vineyard given to others (the church).

Isaiah began warning of coming destruction about 175 years before Jerusalem was destroyed (586 BC) and the people were taken captive. God warned them to change their ways, but carried out judgment when they failed to do so. But He did not let that be the end of the story. He planted a new community by allowing the survivors to return, and by sending the long-promised Messiah to start a new vineyard, the Kingdom community.

Christ told his disciples that He is the vine and we are the branches, and through our union with him we give good fruit. (John 15:5) As his followers, we desire to be in Christ and allow his life and love to flow out of us. From the grapes comes the new wine of the Spirit. In Christ we become a beautiful vineyard, giving sweet-tasting grapes that make a delicious drink. The result: joy and celebration!

Lord, make me a fruitful vine, a member of a healthy vineyard that brings honor to you with delicious grapes, delicious wine. We praise you that you planted us, cultivated us, and cause the fruit to be good.

October 25

Isaiah's vision of God — Isaiah 6

Matthew 17: 2 As the men watched, Jesus' appearance was transformed so that his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light.

When Isaiah had a vision in the Temple of God on His throne surrounded by angels, it paralleled Christ's transfiguration where the disciples saw him as a glorious being. In Isaiah's the Temple shook and was filled with smoke. In the transfiguration a bright cloud overshadowed him. In both stories the glory of God humbled those present.

Isaiah's commission to preach parallels Christ's commission to preach and teach as an ordinary man. Christ quoted this chapter, "You hear but don't understand, see but don't perceive" to describe unresponsive people. (Isaiah 6:9, Mark 4:12) Isaiah's commissioning also reminds us of Christ commissioning his disciples and sending them into the world, and our own call to this task.

Isaiah's response to God's question "Who will go for us?" is "Here I am. Send me." "Here" expresses his desire to be present to God, and a hope for God to be present in his work. This communion of love can happen anytime, anywhere, and if we are like Isaiah, we respond. As we learn to be truly present in this moment with others and with God, we then have the greatest chance for others to sense that we were sent to them in whatever their need might be.

John quoted the warning to Isaiah that people would not listen. John wrote that "Isaiah was referring to Jesus when he said this, because he saw the future and spoke of the Messiah's glory." (John 12:41) It reminds us to keep our spiritual eyes and ears open, and our hearts soft so that we can receive what God wants to give us.

Lord, keep our hearts open to these moments when we are sensing your transcendent presence, and help us translate that into practical love for those we can see.

October 26

Hope for Messiah — Isaiah 7-9

Matthew 1:23 "Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God is with us.'"

Messianic prophecies in this section of Isaiah point out Christ's miraculous birth. The text above is a quote from Isaiah 7:14. The context is a prophecy to King Ahaz of Judah that God will triumph over Israel and Damascus. Layers of fulfillment mean it both predicts the birth of Isaiah's son, still young when

Assyria would defeat Israel and Damascus, and simultaneously refers to Christ. The angel quoted Isaiah to Joseph to tell him to take Mary as his wife, and Joseph accepted that this prophecy was meant for him.

When an infant in a manger, and as an itinerant preacher, Jesus' poverty proved God's love for the poor. His roots in Galilee made the same point. Unlike other places with a textured history in Israel, Galilee was rural back-country. Hiram, King of Tyre, turned down Solomon's offer of 20 Galilean cities in payment for Jerusalem building projects, calling them "Dirty!" (I Kings 9:11-13) When Jesus gained attention, the Pharisees reacted— "Have any prophets ever come from Galilee?" Isaiah prophesied that this marginalized area would see a great light (Isaiah 9:1,2), and Matthew 4 says Jesus' arrival fulfilled this.

Here also is the prophecy familiar from *Handel's Messiah* of a king who will transform the world with his righteous rule: "For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. And the government will rest on his shoulders. These will be his royal titles: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His ever expanding, peaceful government will never end. He will rule forever with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David. The passionate commitment of the Lord Almighty will guarantee this!" (Isaiah 9:6-7)

These are glorious and unlikely fulfillments, part of the proof that our faith has history and supernatural vision behind it. We do not need to take an intellectual back seat to anyone regarding Christ.

Lord, you fulfilled these promises: virgin birth, a light in Galilee, a royal kingdom, your resurrection and ascension. We delight to see you as the fulfillment of our hope.

October 27

David's Son, the Savior — Isaiah 10-13

Luke 2:11 The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!

The angels announced the Savior born in David's line, just as Isaiah foresaw the Messiah as coming from David's family. (Isaiah 11:1) Isaiah celebrated the salvation that the Messiah would bring. (Isaiah 12)

Having announced Israel and Judah's coming judgment and having included promises of the coming Messiah, Isaiah turned to judgment on the nations. He had warned Israel that within 65 years it would be completely crushed and destroyed (Isaiah 7:8) The instrument of destruction would be Assyria. (722 BC) But Isaiah warned that Assyria would be conquered in turn, and though Judah

may have reason to be alarmed by the Assyrian armies, God would protect them. These predictions came true when Assyria was defeated in Israel (701 BC Isaiah 14:25), and when Babylon destroyed Assyria. (623 BC)

And yet despite this destruction the Messiah would come with the Spirit of God on him, and he would come to defend the poor and exploited. Ultimately he would bring a Kingdom of peace where nothing destructive could affect anyone. He would be a banner of salvation for the world, a standard raised high to whom everyone could come. He would raise a flag for Israel and bring them back to their land. And most importantly, He would bring salvation, and live among His people.

The warnings of judgment are challenging to read, but the word of hope lies in the promise of Messiah and the transformation He can bring. That is our source of hope today as we live through the political chaos of our world.

Thank you, Lord, that you have brought salvation and bringing yet greater salvation for all who turn to you to be spared from the judgment we deserve.

October 28

Judge of the Nations — Isaiah 14-18

Matthew 25:31-32 But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

Christ told us in the parable above that He will come as judge of the nations. Isaiah warned surrounding nations of coming judgment for their evil behavior.

Babylon would conquer Assyria, and Isaiah warns that they would in turn be conquered by the Medes. All the smaller surrounding nations would be harmed in this political upheaval: Philistia, Moab, Damascus, and Ethiopia. All the judgments foreshadowed Christ's final judgment on the nations. The nations did suffer as predicted.

Amidst the warnings there were signs of hope in promises of the gospel: the good news is for all the world, it is a rule of love, and people will respond.

- Israel will return to their land and be helped by many nations (14:1-3)
- God's power will reach through the world, and His plans cannot change (14:26,27)
- God promises to feed the poor and give the needy peace (14:30)

- A faithful king from David’s throne will always do what is just and right on a throne established by love (16:5)
- Suffering will cause people to turn to their Creator God (17:7)
- Nations will be converted and bring gifts to God in Jerusalem (18:7,8)

Political upheaval creates suffering refugees that, even today, causes our hearts to weep. (15:5) Through it all, God reassures us that there is a plan to bring about His Kingdom built on love. This reminds us to engage in the struggles of the 65 million refugees in our world, one out of every 113 people.

Lord, you are a gracious God. Though you judge, you also forgive. Though you allow us to make wrong choices, ultimately you are strong enough to carry out your good plans. Help us to be compassionate when political upheaval is so harmful.

October 29

The Gospel to the World — Isaiah 19-23

Acts 1:8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Christ commissioned His disciples to go and share the good news to the whole world. In the midst of his warnings of judgment, Isaiah foresaw the success of this message of love and hope.

Isaiah warned Egypt, which fell to Assyria as predicted. (664 BC) What follows is a promise of the spread of the gospel in the early Christian era. There were many Egyptian church fathers, and the important port city Alexandria became a center of Christian learning. Heliopolis, mentioned in the text, is a suburb of Cairo, and on maps showing the spread of Christianity one sees how it began in cities and then spread through the countryside. By 600 AD Christianity was the dominant religion from Egypt to Assyria and the promise of free mobility among those worshipping the same God was fulfilled. (Isaiah 19:23-25)

Isaiah continued warning Egypt, Ethiopia, Babylon, Edom and Arabia. He warned Jerusalem of coming destruction (586 BC) and reproached them for their choice to “eat, drink and be merry” since “what’s the difference, for tomorrow we die”, phrases Christ used in His parable regarding a foolish wealthy man. (Luke 12:19-20) In a warning to a specific leader, there is a Messianic prophecy that one will come who can open doors that no one can shut, a phrase applied to Christ. (Revelation 3:7)

The warning to Tyre, a great commercial capital, was that they would decline for 70 years and then be revived. Again, this happened. They were conquered

by the Assyrians (720 BC), but were able to revive again (650 BC) and successfully resist Babylon's attempt to conquer them. A final message of hope was that Tyre's wealth would be used for God. (Isaiah 23: 18) Paul spent a week with believers there in this successful port city, their generosity doubtless contributed to the mission. (Acts 21:3,4)

What a remarkable vision of early successes in spreading the gospel are hidden in these grim messages. The tide turned against Christianity when Islam overcame this region, and an uneasy struggle has continued until this day. But we should not forget the miracle that loving people who had no arms "conquered" the most powerful world empire of that time. They used the "weapons of grace" that Martin Luther King, Jr. exhorted us to use in our time that the Kingdom might advance.

Lord, thank you that you accomplished your purpose to spread your good news in Christ across the world and that this spread of faith is continuing even today.

October 30
Salvation — Isaiah 24-27

I Peter 1:9-10 The reward for trusting him will be the salvation of your souls. This salvation was something even the prophets wanted to know more about when they prophesied about this gracious salvation prepared for you.

In advance, Isaiah celebrated the salvation that Christ brought. The Hebrew scriptures use salvation 58 times, and 26 instances occur in Isaiah. The word "salvation" is prophetic—translated into Greek, it becomes the name "Jesus." Isaiah's own name means "Yahweh is Salvation." "Save" occurs 190 times in the Hebrew scriptures, mostly referring to physical rescues.

Isaiah's vision extended to the end of time: "Then the Lord Almighty will mount his throne on Mount Zion. He will rule gloriously in Jerusalem, in the sight of all the leaders of his people. There will be such glory that the brightness of the sun and moon will seem to fade away." (Isaiah 24:23)

Beyond salvation from earthly trials he looked forward to a great feast in Jerusalem when death had ended and people would proclaim "This is our God. We trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the Lord, in whom we trusted. Let us rejoice in the salvation he brings!" (Isaiah 25:9) Surely the Eucharist fulfills this prophecy, as will the marriage supper of the lamb. He also foresaw resurrected life: "Yet we have this assurance. Those who belong to God will live, their bodies will rise again! Those who sleep in the earth will rise up and sing for joy! For God's light of life will fall like dew on his people in the place of the dead!" (Isaiah 26:19)

Christ announced salvation's immediacy, (Luke 19:9) but we simultaneously look forward to it: "And God, in his mighty power, will protect you until you receive this salvation, because you are trusting him. It will be revealed on the last day for all to see." (I Peter 1:5) In our time, "Jesus saves" became shorthand for the Gospel, drawing on the promise that if we confess Christ as Lord and believe in the resurrection, we will be saved. (Romans 10:9) Salvation is not just my individual pass to heaven; it is social, comprehensive, includes creation, and includes all nations.

Lord, thank you that we can look forward to the new heaven and earth when everything has been set to right, and we celebrate complete salvation.

October 31

Messianic prophecies — Isaiah 28-32

Luke 1:32 "He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever, his Kingdom will never end!"

Isaiah presented Christ as Messiah, as healer, and as a man from the poor. At least 36 of Isaiah's prophecies present the Messiah in His conception, birth, redemptive suffering, character, healing, and ultimate triumph. The scope of his vision of Christ is remarkable throughout the book.

In these chapters we see the following allusions to Christ:

- 28:5 Lord of Heaven's Armies will be Israel's glorious crown, pride and joy
- 28:16 A foundation stone placed in Jerusalem, a precious cornerstone
- 28:29 The Lord of Heaven's Armies is a wonderful teacher
- 29:2 Jerusalem will become an altar (place of Christ's death)
- 29:13 Jesus quoted this in Matthew 15:8
- 29:14 Astounded people with his miracles
- 29:16 He is the potter and we are the clay (compare II Corinthians 4:7)
- 29:18 Deaf will hear
- 29:18 Blind will see
- 29:19 Poor will rejoice
- 30:19 He will be gracious if you ask for help
- 30:20 You will see your teacher with your own eyes
- 30:21 A voice will say, "This is the way you should go." (Holy Spirit)
- 31:5 The Lord will protect Jerusalem like a bird protecting its nest
(compare Christ's desire to protect Jerusalem
like a hen protects chicks—Matthew 23:37)
- 32:1 A righteous king is coming!
- 32:3 Eyes to see and ears to hear the truth (compare Matthew 13:16)
- 32:15 The Spirit will be poured out from heaven

There are lists of 365 Messianic prophecies in scripture, and odds of fulfillment are astronomical. But, as we have seen, there are even more allusions and imagery prefiguring Christ beyond specific verses. In our skeptical, secular age, we need to examine this honestly and help others see this proof.

Lord, thank you that the prophecies, so many from Isaiah, give us confidence that you are truly the promised Messiah.

November 1
Preview of Paradise — Isaiah 33-35

Revelation 22:1,2 And the angel showed me a pure river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, coursing down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations.

Israel as fruitful land predicts Christ's paradisaical Kingdom. In addition, there is a straightforward Messianic prophecy of healing the blind, the deaf, the lame, the mute. (Isaiah 35:5,6) Christ used these miracles to affirm himself as Messiah. (Matthew 11:2-5)

Once more messages of judgment on Assyria and Edom stand in contrast with Messianic promises: He will bring mercy and salvation (33:2,6), He will show His power (33:10, 21), we will see him as a King in His splendor (33:17), a judge and lawgiver (33:22) and he will forgive our sins. (33:24)

Perhaps reading prophecies of a fruitful land inspired the Jewish people who returned to Israel. They have planted forests in the desert, and flowers from the desert are exported to Europe. Isaiah predicted, "Even the wilderness will rejoice in those days. The desert will blossom with flowers. Yes, there will be an abundance of flowers and singing and joy! The mountains of Lebanon, as lovely as Mount Carmel's pastures and the Plain of Sharon. There the Lord will display his glory, the splendor of our God." (Isaiah 35:1,2, and see Isaiah 51:3)

Abundant water is predicted and the Israelis have become expert in irrigation and water treatment. "Springs will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams will water the desert. The parched ground will become a pool, and springs of water will satisfy the thirsty land. Marsh grass and reeds and rushes will flourish where desert jackals once lived." (Isaiah 35:6,7, and see Isaiah 41:18-20)

Israel's flower export business, providing 5% of the world's flowers, and creative water projects in the desert beautifully fulfill these prophecies. But all looks forward to a future when the environment is whole and can never again

be damaged in the new heaven and new earth. When we succeed in making the land beautiful today it is an act of worship.

Lord, thank you for these beautiful images of life growing where nothing was growing before. Thank you that this fulfills your promises connected with the amazing return to the land of your people.

November 2

Resurrection — Isaiah 36-39

Matthew 28:6 He isn't here! He is risen from the dead, just as he said would happen. Come see where his body was lying.

Hezekiah's rescue from inevitable death to unexpected life bears a resemblance to the story of Jonah, in that the recovery took place in three days. (II Kings 20:5) Christ used the story of Jonah as analogous to his coming death and resurrection. (Matthew 12:40) Christ also said that his resurrection on the third day was prophesied clearly in the Hebrew scriptures. (Luke 24:46) The closest prophecy is a word to Israel: "After two days will He revive us, on the third day He will raise us up, and we shall be in His sight." (Hosea 6:2 King James Version)

However, this is one of six stories that include the detail of three days that take place at the same time of year as Christ's death, or in the same place. In two cases a prophetic psalm uses resurrection imagery.

Abraham and Isaac	Genesis 22:4	At Mount Moriah
Crossing Red Sea	Exodus 14:5	Three days after Passover
David's plague ends	II Samuel 24:15	At Mount Moriah
Hezekiah's illness ends	II Kings 20:5	Prophetic psalm
Esther's intercession	Esther 4:16,5:1	Three days after Passover
Jonah	Jonah 1:17	Prophetic psalm

It is fitting that Christ's death and resurrection after three days are the seventh and perfect instance of the reversal of death and judgment.

Eugene Peterson's book on the resurrection encourages focus on three aspects of Christ's resurrection as the basis for our spirituality: wonder, the mix of the ordinary and symbolic in resurrection meals, and friendship in the baptized community.²⁹ The centrality of resurrection to our faith is only hinted at in these stories. They are subtle and faintly prophetic, but in light of Christ's resurrection, they blaze brightly.

Thank you Lord, that you are the resurrected one!

November 3
Hope of all the world — Isaiah 40-44

Matthew 12:21 And his name will be the hope of all the world.

Isaiah's prophecies of Messiah are fulfilled in Christ and Matthew selected from this passage to point that out. His selection emphasizes that Christ is for all people.

The tone of Isaiah changes so dramatically here at Chapter 40 that many see it as a second book by an author writing during the exile. Honoring the first prophet, a third author may have composed Chapters 56-66 after the return from the exile.

Isaiah 40-44 is rich with allusions to Christ, and among those are four references to making the blind see. (Isaiah 42:7, 16, 18, 43:8) This had never been done, and Christ did so repeatedly, noting it as a sign. When John the Baptist asked if He was Messiah, Christ responded (Matthew 11:5): "The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side." Lepers had been healed, and the dead had been raised in the Hebrew scriptures, but there were no instances of healing the blind, lame, deaf, and mute, all of which Christ did. Even the critique of powerless, lifeless, man-made idols are in contrast to Christ, God with us.

Each Advent we prepare our hearts to celebrate Christ's coming as a child, and many perform Handel's *Messiah*. I deeply appreciate the exquisite annual candlelight performance in a partially restored baroque-era church in our town. The first three passages sung are the first five verses of chapter 40. The tenor calls out: "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people..." and we are comforted. He goes on to announce that the way is being prepared for the coming of the Lord, and then the chorus sings loudly and triumphantly that "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

There are tender passages that encourage us to be afraid, and to know that our sins are forgiven. Israel was encouraged that exile would end, something we too can apply to our welcome to God's family. The message of comfort is very personal for me in the promise, "I will pour out my Spirit and my blessings on your children. They will thrive like watered grass, like willows on a riverbank." (Isaiah 44:3,4) Since blessings on my children are among my deepest desires, this is a beautiful scriptural gift, a message of hope.

Lord, thank you that your promise of Your coming to be with us has been fulfilled in your incarnation. Thank you that the triumph of your kingdom is certain, that you, the Messiah were the hidden king. We who believe see your glory and anticipate the joy of everyone recognizing you.

November 4

Fulfilling Prophecy — Isaiah 45-48

Matthew 12:17 This fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah concerning him.

Christ repeatedly fulfilled prophecies of Isaiah as the Gospel writers assert. In these chapters of Isaiah are direct prophecies for Cyrus the Great. Starting actually at the end of the previous chapter, Isaiah writes “When I say of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd,’ he will certainly do as I say. He will command that Jerusalem be rebuilt and that the Temple be restored.” (Isaiah 44: 28)

If this section of Isaiah was written during the exile, perhaps Cyrus had already begun his reign as King of Persia. He ascended that throne in 559 BC conquered the Medes ten years later, conquered Babylon ten years after that, and allowed the Jews to return to their land and rebuild their Temple the following year. All of this fulfilled Jeremiah’s prophecy of a return seventy years after captivity.

As we have seen over and over, God uses macro-politics to carry out His purposes. While Cyrus became great and ruled over more people than any other ruler has done, he was still a servant to the greatest ruler. This prophetic moment reminds us to see the macro-politics of our own time as something within God’s hands, potentially carrying out his purposes.

Lord, we thank you that these are evidences that you are in control of history and that we do not need to be afraid. You are working out your purposes and we know that all will be well.

November 5

Preview of Messiah — Isaiah 49-53

Acts 8:32-35 The passage of Scripture he had been reading was this: “He was led as a sheep to the slaughter. And as a lamb is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth. He was humiliated and received no justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.” The eunuch asked Philip, “Was Isaiah talking about himself or someone else?” So Philip began with this same Scripture and then used many others to tell him the Good News about Jesus.

Isaiah presented Christ as the suffering servant. Until Christ came it was a mystery how Messiah could both be a suffering servant and a triumphant king. The cross and resurrection resolved the paradox.

Christ is visible everywhere in these chapters, and yet the same promises can apply to us: excellent sticky-note-on-my-mirror material.

The Lord called me before my birth; within the womb he called me by name.	49:1
At just the right time, I will respond to you.	49:8
The Lord has comforted his people and has compassion on them in sorrow.	49:13
Those who wait for me will never be put to shame.	49:23
I will save your children.	49:23
Morning by morning he wakens me and opens my understanding to his will.	50:4
I am determined to do his will. And I know that I will triumph.	50:7
Do not be afraid of people's scorn.	51:7
I have put my words in your mouth and hidden you safely within my hand.	51:16
I will reveal my name to my people, and they will come to know its power.	52:6

The phrase “the Lord will go ahead of you, and the God of Israel will protect you from behind” (Isaiah 52:12) stood out to me after we had made a decision to return to Guatemala. Encouragement deepened when that same day a student at the university told me God was telling her on my behalf that “He would go ahead of us and protect us from behind.”

Thank you for coming to earth as a human being and fulfilling prophecies. It is hard to deny that you are the one we were looking for.

November 6

Call to Joy — Isaiah 54-58

Luke 10:21 At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.”

Christ brings joy. Joy, rejoice, and delight are all key words in Isaiah, occurring more than in any other book except Psalms. Joy has 242 references in scripture, 33 in Isaiah, 57 in Psalms. Rejoice, 154 total, 20 in Isaiah, 43 in Psalms. Delight, 105 total, 14 in Isaiah, 29 in Psalms. No other books come close.

In these chapters some sources of joy include family (54:1), God's protection (54:17), God's word prospering (55:11,12), being in God's house (56:7), healing and comfort (57:18,19), and honoring the Lord's Day. (58:13)

The litany of things elsewhere in Isaiah that are said to bring joy include: harvest, salvation, God's presence, ripened fruit, wine, celebration, music, worship, resurrection, the blooming of the wilderness, water and streams in the desert, the lame leaping, the mute shouting, being rescued and returned to the land, God's acts, redemption of Israel, God's comfort and compassion, singing, God's return to Jerusalem, the city itself, children, peace, prayer, triumph,

riches, success, mourning reversed, honor, God's creation, God's glory, trust in God, humility, festivals, blooming flowers, marriage, fear of God, Messiah, good food, rest of the Sabbath, the gift of righteousness. Joy is promised to us as a fruit of the Holy Spirit and here we have examples of where to find it in our lives. The final triumph of Messiah brings us joy, and this section is rich in prophecy.

When we are unhappy we often have a choice to think differently and return to joy. It delights me that we are called to live lives of joy and that there is a wide range of words to describe nuances of that emotion: Amusement, Delight, Elation, Excitement, Happiness, Joy, Pleasure, Cheerfulness, Amusement, Bliss, Gaiety, Glee, Jolliness, Joviality, Enjoyment, Gladness, Jubilation, Satisfaction, Ecstasy, Euphoria, Zest, Enthusiasm, Zeal, Excitement, Thrill, Exhilaration, Mischief.

Lord, help us pay attention so that we can see things that bring joy. Thank you that even in hard times confidence in your ultimate triumph fills my days with joy!

November 7

Sin, Savior, Spirit — Isaiah 59-61

Luke 4:12-19 The scroll containing the messages of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him, and he unrolled the scroll to the place where it says: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has appointed me to preach Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the downtrodden will be freed from their oppressors, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come."

When Christ came he used this prophecy from Isaiah to announce his arrival as Messiah in his first sermon in Nazareth. (Isaiah 61:1,2) It announces a glorious new kingdom where joy replaces mourning. In his quote, Christ stopped short of the line "and with it, the day of God's anger against their enemies." Instead, He focused on mercy. God's vengeance is suspended for any who respond to Christ.

These three chapters teach us the good news. Chapter 59 begins with our problem: our sins have cut us off from God. Justice is nowhere to be found, our sins are piled up before God, so He must act. God promises that a Redeemer will come to buy back those who turn from their sins, and His Spirit will be one them. (59:20-27)

Isaiah 60 says the nations will come to the light of God in Jerusalem, beginning with an allusion to the wise men at Christ's birth. Mighty kings will come to

see his radiance, coming on camels, bringing gold and incense. (60:6) There are then more promises for Israel's final restoration which Christ will bring.

Chapter 61 is one of the most beautiful in the book. Not only are there the verses regarding the Spirit as quoted by Christ, there are promises of beauty for ashes, joy instead of mourning, praise instead of despair, being planted like strong and graceful oaks. The blessings of restoring ruins, receiving treasures of the nations, prosperity and joy, honor blessing, salvation, and justice. What a litany of promises to speak out in faith, celebrating what God longs to give those who have turned from sin to the Savior. The chapter is one of my favorite prayers for myself and others.

A public prayer celebrating the light of Christ coming is possible every year in listening to Handel's *Messiah* as the chorus urges us to "Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee." The bass continues the next two verses of Isaiah 60 promising that the "Gentiles will come to thy light". I am one of those Gentiles, one of the nations, who has been brought into this story of a rescuing Messiah.

Lord, thank you for all your promises of salvation, and for having fulfilled your promise to bring light that draws all nations to you.

November 8

Prayer for Jerusalem — Isaiah 62-66

Revelation 21:10 So he took me in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and he showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God.

The earthly Jerusalem and its restoration and glory are a symbol of the holy city of God at the end of time where Christ reigns. The Psalmist tells us to pray for peace in the earthly Jerusalem, and we are so aware how elusive peace has been for this city. Those who do love the city are promised that they will prosper. (Psalm 122:6)

Chapter 62 celebrates Jerusalem and the return of the Jews to the land, and ends with final judgment in chapter 63, a harvest from the world and a new heavens and a new earth in chapter 65, and God reigning from his heavenly throne in chapter 66.

In the last chapter we have a prophecy for modern Israel: "Has a nation ever been born in a single day? Has a country ever come forth in a mere moment? ...Would I ever bring this nation to the point of birth and then not deliver it?" says the Lord. "No! I would never keep this nation from being born." (Isaiah 66:8,9) Israel announced the new nation on May 14th, 1948 at midnight, and a

United Nations vote confirmed it in the morning. In one day, people who had not had a nation for nearly 2,000 years were part of something new.

We thus live in astonishing times when we can compare newspapers and scripture and begin to see things shaping up for the grand finale we are waiting for. Come, Lord Jesus!

Lord, thank you that we are living in times where these prophecies are being fulfilled. Help us stay alert and notice the times and seasons.

November 9
Jeremiah's Call — Jeremiah 1

John 7:16-18 So Jesus told them, "I'm not teaching my own ideas, but those of God who sent me. Anyone who wants to do the will of God will know whether my teaching is from God or is merely my own. Those who present their own ideas are looking for praise for themselves, but those who seek to honor the one who sent them are good and genuine."

Jeremiah and Jesus were called to deliver God's word. There was a specific moment of commissioning for their public ministries, Jeremiah with visions and a voice, Jesus with the vision of the dove and the voice of the Spirit at his baptism. The message they brought included hope, but because it included judgment, the religious and political leaders resisted them, and caused them much suffering.

This is a very personal story. In contrast to Isaiah where his name occurs 20 times in his book, Jeremiah's name occurs 147 times in his, and there are at least 60 other personal names. Hence, rather than Messianic prophecies, the prophetic aspect is Jeremiah himself, his life foreshadowing that of Christ.

Like Jeremiah we may be called to do something we feel is far too difficult for us. God's promise to Jeremiah can help us: "I am with you, and I will take care of you." Responding to God's call, discerning our vocation, and remaining faithful in it are all critically important in our spiritual development.

In our case, our call came through seeing a need, and was reinforced by significant external signs. My childhood among impoverished Mixtecos in Mexico developed a vocation to serve people who are poor. My husband developed the same vocation from his Guatemalan childhood, and together we engaged in service with the Ixil Maya people with whom he grew up. When in San Diego, California, the sense of vocation remained the same, though methods changed. Through a university position I was able to connect students to people in poverty in San Diego, Tijuana and elsewhere.

A return to Guatemala represented the opportunity to once more carry out our vocation in an international context. At each step along the way, the sense that this was our calling gave us the energy and enthusiasm to tackle all the everyday tasks involved in the work.

“A vision without a task is a dream,
a task without a vision is drudgery.
A vision and a task is the hope of the world.”

— From a church in Sussez England c. 1730

Lord, thank you so much that you call us to ministries that are unique and appropriate for us. We bless you for the power, love, and strength you give us to carry out your call to us.

November 10

God Our Father — Jeremiah 2-6

Matthew 6:1,4, 6, 8, 9 Take care! Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired, because then you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven. ...Give your gifts in secret, and your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you ... But when you pray, go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father secretly. Then your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you. ... Don't be like them, because your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him! Pray like this: Our Father in heaven, may your name be honored.

Jeremiah referred to God as Father, (Jeremiah 3: 4,19) and this became Christ's preferred name for God. In Jeremiah the Father was frustrated with rebellious and difficult children who disobeyed him. In contrast, Christ was the Father's perfectly obedient son.

Scripture gives us ideals of fathers who are wise teachers and who protect, provide, and love their children. So many fathers, however, were poor examples: Abraham with Ishmael, Isaac with Jacob and Esau, Jacob with his quarrelsome children. David, the man after God's own heart, was a very poor father who failed to discipline his children appropriately. In fact, we are not given a model of a father who exemplifies the ideal until we come to Joseph, Christ's father.

God appealed to his people as a parent, saying “Come home to me again, for I am merciful. I will not be angry with you forever” and “My wayward children, come back to me and I will heal your wayward hearts.” (Jeremiah 3:12,22) The Psalmist (2:7, 68:5) Isaiah (63:16, 68:4), Malachi (1:6, 2:10, 3:17), all used the imagery of God as Father. Malachi gave a beautiful promise: “On the day when I act in judgment, they will be my own special treasure. I will spare them as a father

spares an obedient child.” (Malachi 3:17) Our hearts’ desire is to have the loving, obedient, trusting relationship with God the Father that Christ modeled for us.

Lord, give us obedient and loving hearts, and an ability to acknowledge you as our Heavenly Father who is responsive to our cries.

November 11

The Broken Covenant — Jeremiah 7-13

Matthew 11:28-30 Then Jesus said, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke fits perfectly, and the burden I give you is light.”

The broken covenant represents sin Christ removed through the cross. Nearly 1000 years of disobedience were coming to a climactic end with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. In Chapter 11 God made the case that judgment was for breaking the covenant.

Jeremiah offered his warnings with vivid images of the people and their sin: cracked cisterns, corrupted wild vines, prostitutes, wayward children, rejected silver. His images of destruction are equally vivid: lion from the forest, wolf from the desert, leopard lurking, burning wind, storm wind, billows and waves.

Reading Jeremiah can be painful, since not only is his message difficult, but he suffered, got depressed, and felt overwhelmed. Reading the prophets all at once is hard. They were intended for specific situations over a 400-year time-span and a wide geographic area. They are tough medicine necessary to the overall story, critical testimony of God’s faithfulness in calling for repentance and offering mercy at every juncture in the story.

During a time in my life when I felt very broken, I identified with both reproach for having put trust in things other than God (i.e. my kind of idolatry), and I was deeply touched by Jeremiah’s promises of restoration. I have seen promises of restoration fulfilled, including a literal return to the land where I had lived, a comfortable secure home, and meaningful life. Because of that I tend to focus on the messages of hope folded in among all the warnings.

Lord, make me like Jeremiah, with a tender heart that weeps for those who are struggling. Help me to honestly acknowledge any ways I put something above you and to quickly repent of it.

November 12

Jeremiah's Imagery — Jeremiah 14-19

Matthew 4:19 Jesus called out to them, "Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!"

Jeremiah used vivid images in his preaching that Christ re-used. Jeremiah said, "Now, watch for what comes next. I'm going to assemble a bunch of fishermen. They'll go fishing for my people and pull them in for judgment." (Jeremiah 16: 16) Jesus used the imagery of fish being caught, but in his parable in fish were sorted into those unfit to eat (judgment) and those to be saved (mercy). (Matthew 13:47-50) When he called his disciples he invited them to become fishers of men.

Jeremiah and Christ used the image of godly people being like fruitful trees. (Jeremiah 17:8) Christ took references to shepherds and amplified them in his stories of seeking lost sheep and being the good shepherd. (Jeremiah 17:16, Jeremiah 23:3,4) Christ took the image of the fountain of living water and repeatedly used it regarding the spirituality he gives us in the Holy Spirit; Jeremiah spoke of God as this fountain. (Jeremiah 17:13, 2:13)

Jeremiah's visit to the potter's house spoke of God's control of the nations. (Jeremiah 18) Paul took this image and applied it to us as individuals. "We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure." (II Corinthians 4:7)

The metaphorical thinking Christ immersed Himself in reading the prophets re-emerged in His teaching in ways to fit His time. Seeing this example inspires us to re-imagine how to present the good news today.

Lord, thank you that you have fished for us, sought us as lost sheep, planted your seed in us, made us fruitful trees, put living water in us, given us a cup of salvation, and that you are the potter forming our lives.

November 13

70 Years of Captivity — Jeremiah 20-25

Galatians 5:1 So Christ has really set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law.

Seventy years of captivity were judgment for sin. An innocent man, Daniel, experienced this judgment, just as Christ innocently bore the judgement.

In the first year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, 605 BC, Jeremiah prophesied 70 years of captivity. (Jeremiah 25) In the first verse of Daniel we are told that he went into captivity that year, the third or fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign.

Eight years into Nebuchadnezzar's reign he took king Jehoiachin into captivity along with 10,000 others, including Ezekiel. At this point Daniel worked for the king in Babylon, and Jeremiah remained with the poor left in Judah. During the fifth year of Jehoiachin's captivity, Ezekiel began his prophetic ministry in Babylon. We thus have two giants of the faith prophesying Jerusalem's coming destruction, Jeremiah in Jerusalem, Ezekiel in Babylon. Zedekiah, Jehoiachin's uncle made puppet king, foolishly rebelled against Babylon. Result: the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem as predicted.

Daniel did not comment on the fall of Jerusalem, but both Ezekiel and Jeremiah did. Daniel saw the predicted fall of Babylon to the Medes, and perhaps he brought Isaiah's prophecies to Cyrus' attention. Daniel applied Jeremiah's prophecy of 70 years of captivity and prayed for release. (Daniel 9) Cyrus authorized the return in 538 BC. Thus Daniel experienced the beginning of captivity and saw the release of the people at the end, and his fasting and prayer for the prophecy to be fulfilled are a beautiful example of humble, earnest seeking of something long desired.

Jeremiah, who gave this prophesy, died long before its fulfillment at one of the very worst moments in his country's history. The contrasting experiences of Jeremiah and Daniel can serve us: perhaps we are in a time to see a great spiritual success or perhaps we are in a time of particular darkness. But in either situation we can remain confident that God is at work.

Thank you, Lord, that you are so full of mercy. Though you discipline, you restore. Thank you for the limits you place on correction and that you fulfill Your promises to be kind to us despite our sin.

November 14

Street Theater — Jeremiah 26-28

Matthew 24: 1,2 As Jesus was leaving the Temple grounds, his disciples pointed out to him the various Temple buildings. But he told them, "Do you see all these buildings? I assure you, they will be so completely demolished that not one stone will be left on top of another!"

Jeremiah's street theater shared his message and compares to Christ's theatrical actions. They brought parallel messages of coming destruction in parallel locations. Jeremiah went to the Temple and gave God's warning that Temple and City would be destroyed by Babylon; Christ warned of the coming destruction of Temple and City by the Romans.

First Jeremiah wore a rotting linen belt (Jeremiah 13), then smashed a clay jar to represent judgment. (Jeremiah 19) He then wore a yoke to represent the coming dominance of Babylon over Judah and surrounding nations. A rival prophet broke Jeremiah's yoke, promising deliverance, but Jeremiah challenged the false prophesy and warned that the prophet would die, which happened two months later. When he sent a message to Babylon he told the messenger that when he had delivered the message he should throw the scroll into the river, weighted by a stone. (51:63)

Christ's theatrical moments included tossing out moneychangers in the Temple. He quoted Jeremiah, "The Scriptures declare, 'My Temple will be called a place of prayer,' but you have turned it into a den of thieves!" (Matthew 21:13, Isaiah 56:7, Jeremiah 7:11). When Christ destroyed a fig tree he also drew on Jeremiah. (Jeremiah 8:13) Both warned of coming judgment.

In many ways this reminds me of Augusto Boal's "theater of the oppressed" where the unheard can be heard and explain in a touching way their exploitive or difficult experiences. Movies touch our hearts, live theater even more so, and being part of theater the most of all. Our artists today can be prophets calling us out of our self-destructive ways, and if we have artistic gifts we are called to creatively connect them to our faith.

Lord, thank you that you spoke to the people through Jeremiah to warn them. Thank you that there are ways beyond words to try to reach our hearts.

November 15

New Covenant — Jeremiah 29-33

II Corinthians 3:6 He has enabled us to be ministers of his new covenant. This is a covenant not of written laws, but of the Spirit. The old written covenant ends in death; but under the new covenant, the Spirit gives life.

Jeremiah predicted the new covenant that Christ would bring. (Jeremiah 31:31-34) Chapters 30-33, the "Book of Consolation," is filled with promises of restoration. Prefaced by correspondence between Jeremiah and the captives, he encourages them to be part of life in Babylon and to work for its peace and prosperity.

The letter says: "For I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord, "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. In those days, when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me in earnest, you will find me when you seek me." (Jeremiah 29:11,12)

Jeremiah was told that God would give rest to the weary and joy to the sorrowing, and he woke up saying “my sleep had been very sweet.” In this context the promise of a new covenant was given with laws to be written in our hearts.

In these four chapters are fifteen repetitions of the promise, “I will bring you home.” I took this touching comfort to heart. Though working for peace and prosperity in the United States, it opened hope for a return to Guatemala where I had lived before. To my delight, the hope of return was fulfilled. For each one of us, our ultimate home is heaven, but our hearts find security in earthly homes as well. If we feel homeless on any level, we can claim this promise.

Lord, thank you that you are a God of love and mercy who offers us hope and offers us home. Thank you that you forgive our sins and write your new covenant on our hearts.

November 16

Integrity — Jeremiah 34-35

Matthew 5:37 “Just say a simple, ‘Yes I will,’ or ‘No, I won’t.’ Your word is enough. To strengthen your promise with a vow shows that something is wrong.”

Jeremiah condemned not keeping promises and commended keeping them. Christ’s ethics also teach integrity, being straightforward in what we say and to follow through.

King Zedekiah made a contract to free slaves, and people obeyed the order. They then changed their minds, and in a stroke of startling cruelty, took people back into slavery. God challenged them for having “shrugged off your oath” and said that since they have not obeyed “by setting your countrymen free, I will set you free to be destroyed.”

Earlier Jeremiah had offered the Recabite family wine. They refused out of respect for an ancestral command. God pointed out the contrast: “The families of Recab have obeyed their ancestor completely, but you have refused to listen to me.”

The rebuke to slavery in this passage was not taken seriously by Christian slaveholders in our country. Nor was the compassionate call to voluntarily free slaves in Philemon heeded. Instead they interpreted other references to slavery as Biblical justification for injustice. Today we have other issues, but we need to recall how easy distorting scripture toward our advantage can be.

Our culture readily accepts lying. A survey revealed that 76 percent of Americans thought lying could be justified. Nearly half of men have lied about their financial well-being, and over half of women have lied about their weight. People admitted they lie on Facebook profiles, resumes, lie about diet and exercise, and lie to doctors. Fact-checking politicians and rumors circulating on the internet has created a small website industry.

I need to examine myself and see if there is somewhere I am failing to act with integrity which is so easy to do.

Lord, make us people who are highly ethical. Help us to treat others the way we would like to be treated, make us truthful, make us people who fulfill our word.

November 17

Jeremiah's story — Jeremiah 36-45

John 5:39 "The Scriptures point to me."

Jeremiah's experiences as a rejected prophet point to Christ's rejection. Jeremiah made relatively few Messianic prophecies, but his life was prophetic:

<i>Called to preach</i>	"Before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my spokesman to the world." (1:7)
<i>Suffered opposition</i>	"I am suffering for your sake." (15:7)
<i>Confident of God's care</i>	"All will be well with you...I will rescue you from their cruel hands." (15:11, 21)
<i>Arrested and whipped</i>	"So he arrested Jeremiah and had him whipped and put in stocks..." (20:2, 37:16)
<i>Mocked</i>	"Now I am mocked by everyone in the city." (20:7)
<i>Message rejected</i>	"Neither the king nor his officials showed any sign of fear or repentance at what they heard." (30:24)
<i>Protested innocence as arrested</i>	(cf. comments in the garden Matthew 26:55): "What crime have I committed? What have I done against you, your officials, or the people that I should be imprisoned like this?" (37:18)
<i>Leaders appealed for his death</i>	"So these officials went to the king and said, 'Sir, this man must die!'" (38:4)
<i>Ruler abdicated authority</i>	(cf. Pilate): "So King Zedekiah agreed, "All right," he said, "Do as you like. I will do nothing to stop you." (38.3)
<i>Placed in a "tomb"</i>	The officials...lowered him by ropes into an empty cistern in the prison yard. (38:6)

Raised out of the “tomb”

They pulled him out. (38:17)

Rescued from judgment

(Cf. resurrection)

Released from chains of prisoners. (40:1-6)

Because the means of extending God’s rule is the suffering of the cross, God expects His people to extend the Kingdom through love and willingness to bear suffering. This is clear in Jeremiah’s life who serves as a model of how to love people and faithfully give a difficult message even when it is rejected.

Lord, thank you that Jeremiah was conformed to your death and resurrection even before you came. Do that for us, so your sacrificial love shows through our lives.

November 18

Idolatry in the Nations — Jeremiah 46-51

I John 5:21 Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God’s place in your hearts. [Greek: keep yourself from idols.]

Jeremiah called the nations to repent of idolatry. Christ never used the word “idols”, but the spiritual world behind them was evident as he was opposed by demonic forces. In Christ these spiritual forces were completely overcome at the cross, and they are empty, ready for us His people to overcome today through sacrificial love.

Each nation had its own idols: Egypt revered Amon, Moab revered Chemosh, Ammon revered Molech, and Babylon revered Bel and Marduk. Other forms of false worship challenged are more similar to our own temptations today. Edom relied on pride, and the nomadic tribes were self-sufficient.

Jeremiah warned surrounding nations that Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was coming. Just as God’s people were to receive correction and judgment, the nations were subject to the same principles. When called, Jeremiah had been told he would give messages to nations and kingdoms which he does in these chapters.

In Eugene Peterson’s beautiful reflection on Jeremiah’s life, *Run With the Horses: The Quest for Life at Its Best*, he points out that the ten kingdoms to whom Jeremiah wrote covered 750,000 square miles. The experts say the messages are great poetry, and show “extraordinary knowledge of the geography, the history and the politics of these nations...This feature makes our understanding of the message more difficult, for many of the geographical features and political alliances can no longer be determined. But every difficulty we encounter in reading the text represents a local detail in which

the Philistines and the Babylonians recognized that they were being addressed with attentive and personal seriousness.” Peterson points out how un-ethnocentric Jeremiah was in these messages, and applies this to our call to be skilled at crossing cultural boundaries.³⁰

A poem about God the Creator contrasted with idols is repeated twice in the book. (Jeremiah 10:12-16 and Jeremiah 51:15-19) It is like bookends for why nations and God’s people are under judgment: they favor idols over the living God.

Today we minimize idolatry as a problem, not recognizing that it is a profound rejection of the living God when we put other things in His place. My worries can serve as an indicator of what I might be putting something higher in the scheme of my life than it should be. These things are nothing, they have been conquered by Christ.

Lord, thank you that you are fair and you correct fairly. Forgive us for ignoring you, disobeying you, putting other things first in our lives, and generally allowing our lives to be ruled by false gods.

November 19

Jerusalem’s Fall — Jeremiah 52, Lamentations 1-2

Matthew 27:45-46 At noon, darkness fell across the whole land until three o’clock. At about three o’clock, Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani!” which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Jerusalem’s destruction prefigures Christ’s passion and crucifixion. The agony of suffering in Lamentations gives words for our painful experiences: loss, death, rejection, no one to help, feeling God’s rejection, or a tragedy that provokes repentance. It captures the emotions of any trauma.

God’s Temple was burned, the city burned, walls knocked down, silver and gold stolen, prisoners from the leaders taken and killed in cold blood. (Jeremiah 52, II Kings 25) The king was captured, his sons were executed, and he was blinded and taken to Babylon in handcuffs. Judah went into exile, orphaned from her land. Those who remained were afraid and left for Egypt after another bloody massacre.

All the suffering of the world, Jewish suffering, and our own suffering comes together in the suffering of the Christ. In eight crucifixion paintings Chagall’s portrayed Jesus as a suffering Jew juxtaposed with images of contemporary suffering. Chagall collapsed 400 years of slavery, years in exile, two destructions of Jerusalem and the Temple, nearly 2,000 years of homelessness and wandering, pogroms and the holocaust and wove them together in poignant pictures.

Our times of suffering are part of this bigger story that ends well with resurrection, triumph and joy as the final reality. I do not need to deny any pain, but its reality is transfigured knowing how it fits into a bigger story. In the midst of the pain Lamentations exhorts us to quietly hope for God's help, not to give up, to choose solitude and silence and prayer, to let go of our questions, and to face the trouble honestly. (Lamentations 3:25-33)

Lord, I know there are people suffering today from the impacts of war, civilians displaced and losing home and happiness. Please comfort them in this moment. We acknowledge your mercy in preserving some, even in the most tragic moments of life.

November 20

Hope — Lamentations 3-5

Matthew 12:21 And his name will be the hope of all the world.

Christ represents hope for all, and even in the midst of this cry of depression and despair over the loss of Jerusalem and the nation, there is a word of hope.

We, too, can experience feeling that God has been angry with us, plunge into emotional darkness, and fall into deep sorrow. Most of us can identify with the cry, "Everything I had hoped for from the Lord is lost!" (verse 19) and "I will never forget this awful time as I grieve over my loss." (verse 20)

In the midst of this despair the prophet affirms that God's unfailing love never ends and this gives us hope. In twelve beautiful verses there is wise thinking for anyone in despair. There is further affirmation that things do not happen without God's permission, that He hears our cries.

After more laments in Chapters 4 and 5 the prophet ends with the confidence that God remains the same. Even if we feel forgotten, feel rejected, feel He is angry with us, we can still pray for restoration and joy.

These are practical sources of comfort, since all of us experience dark times in our lives. We need this model when "the joy of our hearts has ended; our dancing has turned to mourning." (verse 19)

Lord, thank you for your promises to turn our mourning into dancing. Thank you that we are blessed when we mourn, because you comfort us.

November 21

The Glory of God — Ezekiel 1

Matthew 17:1,2 Six days later Jesus took Peter and the two brothers, James and John, and led them up a high mountain. As the men watched, Jesus' appearance changed so that his face shone like the sun, and his clothing became dazzling white.

Ezekiel presents Christ's transfiguration, a vision of his glory. God is seen as a glorious king with rather startling transportation at the beginning of the book and an enormous house at the end. He sees Christ's ascended glory in heaven. These visions of God's glory incorporate movement, energy, creatures, and brightness. The imagery reoccurs in Christ's transfiguration which is full of light, in Daniel and in Revelation. Ezekiel, with his amazing visions, is shouting "glory to God!"

There are 313 references to glory in scripture, 50 in Psalms, 22 in Ezekiel, 20 in John's gospel, 14 in Revelation, and 11 in Exodus. All these authors emphasize the glory of God on his throne.

Twice Ezekiel says God's throne is sapphire blue. (Ezekiel 1:26, Ezekiel 10:1) In Exodus when the elders had a meal with God, we are told that "there seemed to be a pavement of brilliant sapphire, as clear as the heavens." (Exodus 24:10) In Revelation the vision has a glow of emerald and a sea of shiny glass. (Rev. 5)

Chagall made a stained glass image of Ezekiel reaching for God's book in a church north of Manhattan. As with most of his stained glass windows for cathedrals, the United Nations, and the Chicago Art Museum these windows a brilliant and beautiful blue predominates—a transcendent blue, a very joyful blue. The artist said, "Stained glass windows represent the transparent partition between my heart and the heart of the world." The beauty of these windows causes me to cry out "glory to God!"

Whenever I am getting stale, awaken once again my sense of your glory, please! You have left so many beautiful evidences of your creativity and presence in the world and we celebrate them.

November 22

God's Scroll — Ezekiel 2-5

Mark 1:1 This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.

Ezekiel was given a bitter scroll to eat, full of sorrow and judgment as his message. While Christ adopted the name used to address Ezekiel, Son of Man, his message was one of Good News. He came to bear the sorrow and judgment and to free us from the consequences of our sin.

Ezekiel's message was discordant, warning of the coming siege and destruction of Jerusalem. Though he was already in exile in Bablyon, he warned that things would get worse. While Christ also came predicting Jerusalem's destruction, he also offered the hope of entering now into God's Kingdom.

In Ezekiel's time, in Christ's time, and in our own time, there has been great suffering, and some of that suffering has resulted in great art and reflection. One modern musician, Schoenberg, left the rich cultural environment of Vienna as the Nazi's rejected his music. Composed in a 12-tone scale that rejects traditional harmonies, his work can be hard to listen to and enjoy, but there is one particular piece I appreciate. In 1947 he wrote *A Survivor from Warsaw* which combines speech with plaintive discordant music for a little over six minutes. The climax is a portion of the Shema Israel, a prayer from Deuteronomy 6:4-9, sung in Hebrew. In the context of terror, Schoenberg's music seems completely appropriate.

Ezekiel's dissonant message bears a resemblance to that music: challenging to listen to, but deeply touching our souls. We need to have the stamina to take difficult spiritual medicine from time to time, to eat bitter but truthful words.

Lord, there is so much suffering in our world, a constant stream of public and private tragedies. As we engage with the tragedies described in scripture, help us to find their relevance for our world today.

November 23

The Glory Departs — Ezekiel 6-10

Luke 21:37 Every day Jesus went to the Temple to teach, and each evening he returned to spend the night on the Mount of Olives.

Ezekiel describes the glory of God leaving the Temple in preparation for the judgment. Since Christ compared his own body to the Temple, one could say that his death, the crucifixion itself, is the closest parallel to the glory leaving the Temple. The last week of his life, He taught daily in the temple, but when He left for the last time God's glory had departed.

Ezekiel saw great evils being done in the Temple. Seventy leaders worshipped among walls engraved with snakes, lizards, and hideous creatures. In the inner courtyard men faced east, worshipping the sun. The indictment is that God's people have done evil, and consequently will be scattered among the nations of the world. (6:8) Love of money helped lead them astray, but they will throw it away like trash. (7:19)

God's glory in the Holy of Holies moved to the entrance. (9:3) He told an angel to put a mark of protection on those who wept over sin, sparing them and

killing the rest. Then God's glory departed from the east gate, and finally left the city altogether. (11:22) This tragic exit is a very low moment in the story-line of scripture.

The glory returned at Christ's resurrection, and we can always step into that glory. Christian art has associated the four faces of the angels in these texts—man, lion, ox, and eagle—with the four gospel writers. They are the messengers of the glory of God in Christ, so it is a fitting association. Most associate Matthew as man (Messiah), Mark as lion (courageous), Luke as ox (sacrificial service), and John as eagle (ascended God). Christ in Majesty, ruling in his glory, is at the center. That glory is to be the focus of our lives.

Lord, I praise you that when your glory is shadowed by my sin, it takes so little to turn once again and receive that gift of the presence of the Holy Spirit glorifying my life.

November 24

Idols in their Hearts — Ezekiel 11-15

Matthew 23:27 “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity.

Ezekiel accused Judah's prophets and leaders of hypocrisy just as Christ reproached religious leaders in his day. They both used the image of whitewashed walls. Ezekiel repeats the word four times (Ezekiel 13). In the next chapter is the repeated accusation that leaders have idols in their hearts.

The phrase “idols in their hearts” helps us identify with the problem. We may have fetishes or may be materialistic, but anything can become a substitute for God in our hearts. Even good things can be placed higher than Him. In my own life I most often do this with relationships, and do not realize this until the relationships began to fail me. Work, romantic love, pleasure, religious ministry, money, pleasing others can elbow out God's primary place.

Dr. Timothy Keller's book *Counterfeit Gods*³¹ makes this point. Idolatry is such a strong theme in the Hebrew scriptures, but we are tempted to think that was a problem of primitive cultures and we do not have a problem today. Keller effectively shows us that is not the case.

Lord, thank you that you do not let us get away with putting things in your place. We praise you for the love that forces us to let things go.

November 25

Parables — Ezekiel 16-19

Mark 4:13 “But if you can’t understand this story, how will you understand all the others I am going to tell?”

Ezekiel’s gift of teaching with parables and imagery prefigures Jesus’ use of parable and imagery in his teaching. Jesus drew an image of judging between sheep and goats (Ezekiel 34) and transformed it into the magnificent parable that tells us why he separates them. (Matthew 25) Jesus focused on compassion or the lack thereof. Christ as good shepherd as contrasted to other dangerous, unworthy shepherds (John 10), and the story of the lost sheep he seeks and finds, (Luke 15) are also from Ezekiel (34).

Great nations are compared to tall trees that need to be cut down. (Ezekiel 17 and 31) Jesus compared his kingdom which from a small seeds grows to become a large tree, holding birds, far more important than the nations whose trees have to be cut down. (Matthew 13:31,32)

In Babylon Ezekiel warned of coming tragedy using street theater:

Siege of Jerusalem	4,5
Going into exile	12

Ezekiel told parables to warn the exiles of what would happen in Judah.

Rejected child; unfaithful wife	16	God’s rejection and grief for Jerusalem’s unfaithfulness
Great Eagles and the Vine	17:1-10	Political warning over the consequences of breaking the treaty with Babylon
Lion put into a cage	19:2-9	The coming capture of Judah’s king
Two Beautiful Sisters	23:2-21	Both Israel & Judah in sin
Boiling Pot and scum	24:3-5	Fall of Jerusalem
Cedar in Lebanon	31:3-18	Fall of mighty empires
Shepherds and the Flock	34:1-25	Failures in spiritual leadership
Dry Bones	37:1-15	Restoration of the remnant

This style of story-telling teaching is one that Christ adopted and that is available to us and effective today. Sometimes the way to our spiritual growth is through a good movie or a good novel.

Thank you that these actions and stories are a way of getting through to our hearts with the spiritual warnings that we need. Help us to recognize when we are falling into patterns of disobedience and need to repent.

November 26

Son of Man — Ezekiel 20-24

Mark 8:31 Then Jesus began to tell them that the Son of Man must suffer many terrible things and be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but three days later he would rise from the dead.

Ezekiel was addressed by God as “Son of Man” 92 times. This name for a prophet speaking out the word of God was adopted by Christ for himself and used more than any other title. The phrase occurs 86 times in the New Testament, and includes various meanings: Christ’s incarnation as a poor man, his warm friendship with unworthy people, a prophet who forgives, and teaches. Also as a man who will die, rise from the dead, and return in glorious triumph.

Christ used the term to speak of the opposition He received to his message, an opposition that Ezekiel and other prophets also experienced. This emphasis on his humanity, his role as a prophet who followed in a tradition of being killed and opposed, is one side of the coin. The other side is His divinity as Son of God.

The Nicene Creed captures the essence of his role as a man: “I believe...in one Lord Jesus Christ...Who, for us men for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures.”

We have the same calling in our fragile humanity to be prophetic messengers, able to endure the suffering that may come in opposition to our message.

Lord, we are grateful you experienced life as a human person at the same time you held the divine nature that is able to rescue us from our sin and limitations.

November 27

A Fallen King — Ezekiel 25-28

Matthew 11:21,22 “What sorrow awaits you, Korazin and Bethsaida! For if the miracles I did in you had been done in wicked Tyre and Sidon, their people would have repented of their sins long ago, clothing themselves in burlap and throwing ashes on their heads to show their remorse. I tell you, Tyre and Sidon will be better off on judgment day than you.

The judgment on the King of Tyre in Chapter 28 bears an uncanny resemblance to a much more spiritual figure, and tradition holds that this

describes the fall of Satan, Christ's opponent. God says, "I ordained and anointed you as the mighty angelic guardian. You had access to the holy mountain of God and walked among the stones of fire. You were blameless in all you did from the day you were created until the day evil was found in you." (Ezekiel 28:14-15) Here, then, is the root of the idea that Satan is a fallen angel whose rebellion introduced evil into the world.

Satan tempted Christ with the offer of power over the nations of the world in exchange for his worship. (Matthew 4:8,9) Christ not only rejected this, His life, death, resurrection, ascension, and coming return are the means of His battle to regain sovereignty over all the nations of the world.

In these chapters, condemnation of surrounding nations was for their attitudes toward Judah's suffering: Ammon's scoffed at the desecrated temple, Moab denied Judah's uniqueness, Edom and Philistia avenged themselves, and Tyre rejoiced.

Three chapters warned Tyre of coming judgement. A great commercial city on an island, it dominated Mediterranean trade, but Nebuchadnezzar besieged it for 13 years after the fall of Jerusalem, finally conquering. The Persians conquered it in 539 BC, and Alexander the Great destroyed it in 332 BC thereby fulfilling prophecy of attack by many nations. Alexander fulfilled prophecy by taking stones, timber and soil from the mainland and putting it into the sea as a land bridge.

We are called to be part of the battle between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of Christ. Our small part may be prayer, service or testimony, but it gives meaning to our lives to see we have a role in a much larger battle. For us, too, the ultimate enemy is Satan, but we have the confidence that he has been defeated.

Lord, give me the grace to be part of your army that is combating Satan's evil army. May I do my part as a brave spiritual warrior.

November 28

Message to the Nations — Ezekiel 29-32

Matthew 25:31,32 But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

Ezekiel warned of judgment on nations reacting to Jerusalem's fall. Christ warned of final judgment on all nations at the end of time.

Egypt, often used symbolically for the world in its disordered and unjust state in contrast to God's coming kingdom, is warned in these four chapters. One emphasized the underworld so central to their culture. Up until this point, Egypt had been a great empire, but was told she would never again dominate other nations. Egypt fell to Nebuchadnezzar after he subjugated Tyre, it fell to the Persians in 343 BC, and the last Pharaoh, Cleopatra, was subjugated by Rome in 30 BC.

Today international political chaos alarms us and in a world where we have nuclear weapons we can too easily imagine total disaster. The prophets repeatedly offer the message that God is in control of seemingly out-of-control politics. We must confess our fears about political realities and declare in faith that Christ is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Lord, thank you for the lesson that you are ruler of all the nations. Their rise and fall is under your supervision. Help us acknowledge your sovereignty.

November 29

The Good Shepherd — Ezekiel 33-34

John 10: 14-16 "I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep, and they know me, just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice; and there will be one flock with one shepherd."

Ezekiel prophesied against the shepherds of Israel and that God himself would become their shepherd, a prophecy Christ applied to himself.

In the twelfth year of captivity in Babylon, a man who had escaped from Jerusalem came and told Ezekiel the city had fallen. Ezekiel's tongue had been loosened the day before so he could explain this to the people.

In this context selfish shepherds are castigated: they feed themselves, let their flocks starve, allow the sick to be uncared for, don't seek the wandering, are cruel, scatter the sheep, and allow them to be prey. Their invalid leadership results in their removal. Instead God says, "I myself will search and find my sheep." Christ came and declared himself to be the shepherd.

Henry Ossawa Tanner so loved the theme of the Good Shepherd seeking his sheep that he painted it many times. Each painting is a tender homage to the love of Christ who seeks each one of us. There is comfort in knowing that it is not our searching for God, but His searching for us that is the basis of our faith. I want to be a sheep carried by the shepherd, not one who wanders.

Most importantly in the light of this chapter, I want to be modeled on the good shepherd rather than be one of the selfish, irresponsible shepherds.

Thank you, Lord, for seeking us, your lost sheep. Thank you for picking us up, healing our wounds, and making us comfortable in safe and abundant pastures. We bless you for your tender love.

November 30

Dry Bones — Ezekiel 35-37

Matthew 24:3 Later, Jesus sat on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. His disciples came to him privately and asked, “When will all this take place? And will there be any sign ahead of time to signal our return and the end of the world?”

Israel was promised a glorious future after suffering, and we have become part of that glorious future in Christ. While He established his Kingdom at the first coming, its completion is still ahead of us.

In our days we have seen unexpected literal fulfillments of renewal for Israel, even to such details as “heavy crops of fruit” and “great harvests from fruit trees and fields.” While the parable of dry bones restored can be applied to any miraculous move of God, it is particularly poignant as prophetic of the state of Israel in the light of the Holocaust.

“Dry bones” have not been forgotten. There are at least 175 Holocaust memorials and museums world-wide. The nation of Israel has the Yad Vashem museum in the midst of a forest near Jerusalem. This honors those who died, including non-Jewish people who saved lives. About a half hour west of Jerusalem is the Martyr’s Forest, a place for six million trees planted in memory of holocaust victims.

In addition to the forest, there is a natural cave as a place of meditation, and a place for memorial plaques. Impressive art work includes a sculpture of a Torah scroll, one side commemorating the Holocaust, the other Independence. An artistic memorial recalls the chestnut tree that Anne Frank could see outside her hiding place in the Netherlands.

I have a very tender place in my heart for the painful stories of the Holocaust, and have been brought to tears more than once by stories of love and heroism in the face of such great evil. As I went through a Holocaust museum and read the list of all genocides that have occurred in recent memory, I was personally touched to see that of Guatemala. In every case we are reminded that these are inexcusable tragedies we must be vigilant to work against.

Lord, out of great tragedy you did bring the nation back to life just as prophesied. We know we live in a time of great fulfillment and it gives us hope that you will come and bring perfect justice.

December 1

Israel's Future — Ezekiel 38-39

Matthew 24:6-7 And you will hear of wars and threats of wars, but don't panic. Yes, these things must take place, but the end won't follow immediately. Nation will go to war against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.

Christ taught that upheavals and wars would characterize our world, as did Ezekiel.

Some interpreters link Gog and Magog to Russia, but mysteriously, London has two statues with these names that are periodically carried in procession. Regarding their future defeat, it is said these are “nations from every corner of the earth, which are called Gog and Magog.” (Revelation 20:7,8) Whoever they are, God will win.

The ending is reassuring: “I will never again turn my back on them, for I will pour out my Spirit upon them, says the Sovereign Lord.” (Ezekiel 39: 29) We need not fear political upheaval, because God cares for us and gives His Spirit.

Christ already began the Kingdom, we are on his winning team, and so know the championship is already ours. This winning perspective keeps us positive, and as Christ exhorted in the text above, we do not need to panic.

Lord, thank you that there is no need to live in fear or to have any kind of anxiety over the chaotic world we live in that is so prone to war. We bless you that we are promised a happy ending.

December 2

Ezekiel's Temple — Ezekiel 40-43

John 2:20 “What!” they exclaimed. “It took forty-six years to build this Temple, and you can do it in three days?”

Ezekiel's vision of a future Temple far better than what could be physically rebuilt points to Christ as Temple. The Temple served as a particular point of the intersection of heaven and earth. Ezekiel's warnings of corruption inside it (Ezekiel 3), and his vision of the removal of God's glory from it (Ezekiel 11:22) climaxed with the sorrowful news that 12 years into their exile, the city of Jerusalem, including the Temple, had fallen. (Ezekiel 33:21) God's visible presence with His people was gone.

Fourteen years later, twenty-five years into captivity, Ezekiel had a long and detailed vision of an immense and beautiful temple. Years remained before the exiles would return to build a temple, something smaller and more modest than the vision, but this grand vision must have served as a source of hope to the disheartened exiles.

Ezekiel's dimensions for the entire Temple area was 1000 feet by 1000 feet. The inner courtyard and 200 feet square, and the Temple building was inside that. When Christ came He entered a Temple complex that was 1000 feet square, a porched area 150 feet square, and a Temple building within that. While the details did not match Ezekiel, the overall dimensions bear a distinct resemblance. The wailing wall, still revered by Jewish people, was actually a retaining wall built to make the larger complex possible.

Starting in 20 BC, King Herod, though not a believing Jew, tore down the smaller Temple Ezra had built. The Temple proper was completed in a year and a half, and more courts and cloisters had been built when Christ was taken there as an infant. When He went there as an adult, it had been under construction for 46 years and construction continued until only six years before its destruction in 70 AD. The white marble building with gold plating rose in terraces, and Josephus compared it to a snow-covered mountain, dazzling from every side. It was magnificent.³²

It is most important to see the Temple structure described as prefiguring Christ Himself. He was the full expression of what the Temple had once been, the place of God's full presence, the full intersection of heaven and earth. Now we have become His temple, the place where He is present. We may get lost in the details and measurement, but the New Testament is firm in letting us know that we are God's Temple, bearing the glory of God to the world today.

Lord, thank you that your glory and grandeur, so much greater than we can imagine, was received in a grand and glorious building! We bless you that we can worship anywhere since your presence does not require a building.

December 3

Land Restored — Ezekiel 44-48

Matthew 4:16 "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light. And for those who lived in the land where death casts its shadow, a light has shined."

Ezekiel 40-48 are notoriously difficult chapters to interpret, ranging from the extreme of early Jewish controversy as to whether the book belonged in the canon at all, to today's Temple Institute preparing to build a temple using these architectural plans. One question is to what point in time this occurs,

with many expecting a literal fulfillment in Christ's Millennial reign with Temple and sacrifices commemorating His past work. Others, because of the sacrifices, see this as having been fulfilled symbolically in his first coming, and then continuing with the growth of the church.

Our theme of finding Christ in every passage lends itself to the later interpretation, even if other views are valid. For Ezekiel's readers, it was an image of hope. They were in exile, Jerusalem destroyed, living under political domination. He raised the image of a return to the land, a gloriously rebuilt Temple and reestablished worship, just rulers, and the return of all the tribes, even those who had disappeared into the Assyrian empire several centuries before. Just as with the original ideal of a utopian land, this utopia was not fulfilled either, but Israel's God came to fulfill it in His own person.

The critique of priests who welcomed sacrifices from non-believing foreigners fits the time of Christ very well according to Josephus.³³ Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, was one of the godly priests descended from Zadok. (44:15, I Chronicles 24:10, Luke 1:5) John was ascetic, as the passage describes, and a priestly forerunner of Christ.

Christ fulfilled numerous images in the passage. He worshipped at the Temple, going in and out without fanfare as the righteous prince is said to do. (46:2) Some have said that God's enthronement (43:7) means the prince must not be Christ, but as God's son the princely role fit. The prince offers the sacrifices, and Christ gave Himself and His crucifixion covered every sacrifice—Day of Atonement, Passover, Festival of Shelters, Sabbath, and daily sacrifices. He identified Himself as the Temple, the presence of God and His glory. The fruitful luxurious trees serve as resurrection and Kingdom imagery, and His Spirit is described as living water flowing out into the whole earth. The sacred meals of the Temple compare to the Eucharist. The gifts of land and the land itself forecast a Kingdom where Israel is completely restored and membership is opened to all nations in the new community of God.

The Eastern Gate was first sealed by Muslims in 810 AD as a measure to prevent the Messiah's return based on the prophecy in Ezekiel (44:2). Ironically that actually fulfilled the prophecy: after Christ's entrance there as "the Lord, the God of Israel" the gate was closed and will open at his return.

Dimensions of a holy city surrounding the Temple are repeated twice, highlighting its importance, and the people living there are a "kingdom of priests." Christ and his disciples traversed the land, making it something we today still call the "Holy Land." The City of God which we are promised in the new heavens and new earth, is an image of the people of God today who have become part of His Kingdom.

All the imagery of a promised Messiah crescendos together in these passages, offering hope in the midst of hopelessness. As we begin Advent, these prophetic words anticipating Christ serve as a call to place our attention on Him. For us as well, a focus on Christ is the antidote to discouragement and hopelessness. He is the center from which holiness and meaning flow out like a mighty rushing river.

Lord, thank you that you are the mighty source of life, justice, beauty, and that our lives become what they should be by being centered on worshipping you. We thank you for your sacrifice that has made it possible for us to be intimate with you.

December 4

Christ Appears — Daniel 1-3

John 1:51 Then he said, "The truth is, you will all see heaven open and the angels of God going up and down upon the Son of Man."

Daniel has images of Christ in every chapter and these they contrast strongly with the pride of the world and the idols of the world. In these first three chapters we see Daniel and his friends realizing God is still with them even though they have been ripped away from their homes and culture. They are able to continue their own ways of eating in an alien environment, God responds to their prayer for wisdom though they are far from the temple, and then God appears to them in their suffering.

1—**Wisdom:** Daniel, wise advisor to three kings, is like Christ in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. He was a faithful witness to many kings, just as Christ was a faithful witness to the rulers of His day. Daniel gave advice "ten times better" than any other advisor. Daniel also resolved to maintain his faith and integrity in the face of a hostile culture. He is one of the few characters we never see fall into sin, pointing toward the sinless Son of God.

2—**Rock:** When Nebuchadnezzar could not recall his dream Daniel, prayed and received an interpretation of coming kingdoms in a statue made of different metals. The statue was destroyed by a rock growing into a mighty mountain representing an eternal kingdom. Christ is that Rock, bringing a kingdom greater than all.

3—**Divine being:** Having dreamt of a great statue, Nebuchadnezzar decided to make an immense one. When Daniel's three friends refused to worship it, they were thrown into the fiery furnace. Their reaction to the threat of suffering can help strengthen us to face suffering that honors God and is an

acknowledgment of His Kingdom and power. In their case, they suffered briefly, but a fourth person joined them, a “divine being”.

These images of Christ inspire me to have confidence in His wisdom and integrity, the greatness of His Kingdom, and His presence with us in the midst of suffering. He is willing to share with us His wisdom and strength, and He has given us a role in bringing in His Kingdom. In “fiery trials” we can remember that He uses them to purify us, just as fire purifies silver or gold. (1 Peter 1:7) In the advent season, all the prophets serve to prepare us once again for our seasonal celebration of Christ’s birth, and Daniel is a particularly rich source for anticipation.

As Daniel praised God, so can we.

Daniel’s prayer (Daniel 2:20-23): *Praise the name of God forever and ever, for he has all wisdom and power. He controls the course of world events, he removes kings and sets up other kings. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the scholars. He reveals deep and mysterious things and knows what lies hidden in darkness, though he is surrounded by light. I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors, for you have given me wisdom and strength. You have told me what we asked of you...*

December 5

A Tree Cut Down — Daniel 4

Luke 13:7 Finally, he said to his gardener, ‘I’ve waited three years, and there hasn’t been a single fig! Cut it down. It’s just taking up space in the garden.’

Christ compared the unrepentant in His parable to trees that needed to be cut down. Similarly, God sent a dream to Nebuchadnezzar of a large and fruitful tree which was cut down. Daniel interpreted the dream and urged Nebuchadnezzar to repent. If he remained proud, God would cause him to lose his mind. Daniel urged him to be merciful to the poor. He went mad, but God’s grace healed him.

Here we see the power of the Jewish faith, as Daniel’s faith influenced the most powerful ruler of the world, with the result that the message of God went out freely. Nebuchadnezzar, once healed, sent a message to “the people of every race and nation and language throughout the world,” urging them to worship God.

The dream of the tree is a vivid image of how beautiful a peaceful and prosperous kingdom can be: “fresh green leaves...loaded with fruit for all to eat. Wild animals lived in its shade, and birds nested in its branches. All the

world was fed from this tree.” (Daniel 4: 12) Built on man’s pride, it needed to be cut down.

In contrast, the Kingdom of God is a tree cut down in the cross, now flourishing in the resurrection. From the very first stories in Genesis to the final scenes of Revelation, trees are important imagery of a flourishing Kingdom. As I see the beautiful trees in my daily life I am continually struck by the beauty and relevance of this imagery and am inspired to be part of the flourishing and fruitfulness.

Lord, when I see trees, I think of these scriptural trees and how much they serve as a symbol of your Kingdom. May our witness extend far throughout the earth.

December 6

Losing a Kingdom — Daniel 5

Ephesians 5:5 You can be sure that no immoral, impure, or greedy person will inherit the Kingdom of Christ and of God. For a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world.

Daniel warned Belshazzar that he would lose his kingdom, and Christ warns that those that remain in sin will not be able to enter His Kingdom. Belshazzar desecrated the cups captured from the Jewish Temple to honor idols made of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood, and stone. Our greed and attachment to material things is classified as our idolatry that disqualifies us for the Kingdom.

Daniel reproached the King, reminding him of Nebuchadnezzar’s story of being humbled, and not learning from the example to humble himself. God therefore had weighed him, found him wanting, and was bringing his kingdom to an end.

Historical records of precisely how the Persians conquered Babylon vary. The last king of the Babylonians was Nabonidus who apparently entrusted the kingdom to his son Belshazzar as co-regent when on military campaigns. Thus as a reward for interpreting the warning of doom Belshazzar could only make Daniel “third highest in the kingdom” presumably being in the second place himself. (Daniel 5:29)

Who was the coming conqueror? It was Cyrus who would liberate the Jewish people and fulfill the prophecy that the people would return to their land. Oppressive rule was replaced by a rule more favorable to the people and God’s purposes for them.

Christ placed so much emphasis on humility and detachment from material things as a part of his spirituality, that this story reinforces how easy it is to

fail in this regard. It is good to repeatedly remind myself that all that I have is something I am administering, not something that is mine to use selfishly.

Lord, thank you that these stories have so many layers of meaning we can unpack and apply to ourselves today. Make us faithful witnesses like Daniel.

December 7

The Lion's Den — Daniel 6

Matthew 28:6 He isn't here! He is risen from the dead, just as he said would happen. Come, see where his body was lying.

Daniel in the lion's den is an image of death and resurrection, paralleling Christ's rise from death. Daniel was placed in the lion's den by enemies who betrayed him, manipulating the king into punishing him, and they placed him in a death trap, all of which happened to Christ. A stone was laid over the mouth of the den, just as a stone was laid over the mouth of Christ's tomb. (6:17) Angels appear in both stories.

Darius' confession acknowledging God's protection of Daniel prefigures Christ's Kingdom: "I decree that everyone throughout my kingdom should tremble with fear before the God of Daniel. For he is the living God, and he will endure forever. His kingdom will never be destroyed, and his rule will never end." (Daniel 6:26)

Daniel is a truly admirable model of faith, and someone whose spirituality remained strong and uncompromised even in the midst of the temptations of power and wealth in a non-believing environment. It is fascinating how often the theme occurs of one of God's people serving at the highest levels of a secular government: Joseph in Egypt, Nehemiah in Babylon, Esther in Persia. In the case of Daniel, he served a series of governments: Babylon, Medes, Persians. His faithfulness in the complex environment of international politics inspires anyone called to work in government.

This story had particular meaning to the African-American Christian painter, Henry Ossawa Tanner who painted it twice in the impressionist style he learned in France. For him, it spoke of the recent freeing of slaves in the United States Civil War, and served as an image of any suffering and rejection responded to with hope and faith and ultimately, triumph. We can make the application to our own suffering, or that of others, and pray in hope of protection and rescue and testimony.

Lord, thank you that you call us to a life of prayer and to serve and live in the world giving testimony to our faith. How gracious you are to hear our prayers, and how gracious to offer us your wisdom and insight.

December 8

Son of Man and Son of God — Daniel 7-8

Matthew 26:63-64 But Jesus remained silent. Then the high priest said to him, "I demand in the name of the living God—tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God." Jesus replied, "Yes, it is as you say. And in the future you will see me, the Son of Man, sitting at God's right hand in the place of power and coming back on the clouds of heaven."

In the midst of his visions of the future, Daniel saw a vision of a glorious Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven, being led into the presence of God with authority, honor, and royal power over all the nations of the world, with an everlasting kingdom. (Daniel 7:13,14) This prophecy clearly is of Christ who took the title of Son of Man to himself and repeatedly predicted he would fulfill this vision and come in glory and power. (Matthew 16:27, 19:28, 24:27, 24:30, 25:31, 26:64)

Just as the prophet Ezekiel was addressed as "Son of Man", Daniel also is addressed in this way. (8:17) Daniel also has a reference to the "Son of God" in a pre-incarnate vision of Christ when a fourth figure went into the fiery furnace and so protected three men who would not bow down and worship the statue of the king. (Daniel 3:25) The reference to the Son of God in Psalm 2 established that as a prophecy of Messiah, and in Daniel these two images are brought together.

Daniel saw a vision of the future kingdoms under the guise of different animals that symbolized coming historical kingdoms: A lion with eagles' wings for Babylon, the bear for Medes and Persians, and a leopard for Greece. A monster with huge iron teeth is unnamed, but prefigures Rome accurately. In chapter 8 the animal figures change: a ram for Media and Persia, a goat for Greece, the large horn on the goat Alexander the Great replaced by the four horns of his kingdom divided into Asia, Egypt, Thrace and Macedonia, an interpretation offered by the angel Gabriel. (8:19-22) One of the later rulers, Antiochus Epiphanes, oppressed the Jews and ordered the worship of Zeus in the Temple, as foreshadowed here.

This is the conflicted situation into which Christ came and transformed the political world by establishing the Kingdom of God. Many project that these are prophecies for end of time, but if we accept that Christ established his Kingdom when on earth through his death and resurrection, details of that time correspond to the visions. Revelation seems to point to a moment in the future when similar things will occur when Christ the King comes to rule over all.

Lord, thank you that you respond to our prayers, and thank you that you offer the reassurance that you are in control of history. You allow empires to rise and fall, but your plan is that your peaceable kingdom will be the final one.

December 9

Daniel's Prayer — Daniel 9

Luke 11:1 Once Jesus was in a certain place praying. As he finished, one of his disciples came to him and said, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

Daniel's prayer includes elements that Christ taught us to pray: worship, repentance, and a desire for God's kingdom to come. Daniel realized the 70 years of captivity were reaching an end, having himself been one of the first captives. (605 BC) Under the Medes who had just conquered Babylon, there was hope for a change, and it soon came with Cyrus' decree. (538 BC)

His prayer is a deep, humble, and beautiful model which can serve us well as a model of repentance for our sins and those of our nation. How much difference did Daniel's prayer make? Would the captivity have ended with God faithful to his promises anyway? In Jeremiah's prophecy the end of the captivity is linked to prayer: "In those days, when you pray, I will listen." (Jeremiah 29:10-14) His prayer was, at the very least, an expression of faith that an unlikely prophecy would be fulfilled.

Daniel asked for a return to the land, but the answer promised much more. The first 49 years, a preparation for a Jubilee Year, was a period in which the culture was consolidated and purified, the Law was read, feast were reintroduced, Ezra compiled and completed scripture, the walls and city were rebuilt, and the prophetic ministry came to an end, beginning 400 years of silence.

The Messiah would come after the command to rebuild Jerusalem. Ezra was given this command in 458 BC (Ezra 7:13) and moving forward 483 years (7x7 plus 62x7) takes us to 25 AD, a year before John the Baptist started his ministry, announcing the Messiah. God would bring an end to sin, atone for guilt, bring in everlasting righteousness, confirm the prophetic vision, and anoint the Most Holy One. The Messiah would be killed appearing to have accomplished nothing, but in reality having begun a kingdom that now has outposts all over the world and adherents in a third of the world's population.

We therefore see Christ as the ultimate answer to every prayer, even this specific prayer for freedom and national restoration. Daniel was surely part of the answer to his own prayers, since Daniel would have been well-placed to plead the Jewish case to Cyrus. (Daniel 6:28) His example inspires us to both

pray with humble repentance for our nation whenever it loses its way, and to act in a way that contributes to answering our prayers. Daniel identified with his nation's sin, pleading for its redemption, and we can do the same.

From Daniel's prayer (Daniel 9:4-19): *O Lord, you are a great and awesome God! You always fulfill your covenant and keep your promises of unfailing love to those who love you and obey your commands. But we have sinned and done wrong. Lord, you are in the right; but as you see, our faces are covered with shame. O our God, hear your servant's prayer! Listen as I plead. We make this plea, not because we deserve help, but because of your mercy. O Lord, hear. O Lord, forgive. O Lord, listen and act! For your own sake, do not delay.*

December 10

Daniel's Fasts — Daniel 10

Matthew 6:17,18 But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Then no one will notice that you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in private. And your Father, who sees everything, will reward you.

Daniel had prayed and fasted, wearing dark clothing and putting ashes on his head pleading for a return to the land. He then chose a vegetarian/no sweets/no wine diet for three weeks in this chapter. Christ encouraged us to follow the examples of fasting, but to do so as a private practice, to dress normally, and to expect God's reward.

Perhaps the provocation for Daniel's fast was the opposition to rebuilding the Temple that arose in Cyrus' third year and kept things at a standstill for 16 more years. Even this was providential because the rebuilt Temple was dedicated 70 years after it had been destroyed. (586 BC to 515 BC)

In his vision he realized that the Jews would be dominated by various coming kingdoms, but would eventually be replaced by Christ ruling over all. These visions remind us of Christ's end-times sermons. (Matthew 24-25) We glimpse a mysterious battle between good and evil angels, and learn that our prayers are part of this battle. When waiting for an answer to prayer, this is encouraging: "Don't be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day you began to pray for understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your request has been heard in heaven. I have come in answer to your prayer." (Daniel 10:12) And: "Don't be afraid...for you are very precious to God. Peace! Be encouraged! Be strong!" (Daniel 10:19)

When I returned to Guatemala I was surrounded by people who take for granted the necessity of fasting. Daniel's example of a 21-vegetarian fast is a practice encouraged in my Guatemalan church as each year begins. A group of 2000 women entered into the three day fast of Esther, drinking only water.

Others I know fast monthly or weekly. Thanks to their example, I have come to see fasting as a very humble and valuable form of prayer.

Lord, thank you for the promise that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled. We long for all good things, your good will, to be done on earth as in heaven.

December 11
End Times — Daniel 11,12

Matthew 24:5 Later, Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives. His disciples came to him privately and said, "Tell us, when will all this happen? What sign will signal your return and the end of the world?"

Daniel had a vision of the end times that parallels Christ's teaching on the end times. Both make references to more immediate political crises, and then move on to the end of time and Christ's return. The man in white linen giving the explanation is thought to be Christ himself.

Chapter 11 begins with Persian kings and Xerxes' war against Greece, moves on to Alexander the Great, and the break-up of his kingdom into four: Asia (Seleucids), Egypt (Ptolemy), Thrace, Macedonia. It then gives us much more detail on the period of struggle during the inter-testamental period. The kings of the North are the Seleucids, and the kings of the south, Egypt. Their power-struggles and drama are outlined here, and various commentaries explain the historical details. Reading it is a head-spinning introduction to political chaos. The story of Hanukah is once more referenced here in the desecration of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes.

Into this chaos comes Christ who raises people from the dead, and who fills people with wisdom and light. Though the political chaos continues, the end will come, and there are allusions to three and a half years. That is the amount of time of Christ's ministry, was the length of the Jerusalem siege before the Temple was destroyed, and is repeated in Revelation as part of the end of the world.

There will also be an explosion of knowledge, (Daniel 12:4) which is true of our time. It is calculated that until 1900 human knowledge doubled about each century, by the end of World War II it was doubling every 25 years. On average knowledge is now doubling every year and is getting even faster.

Daniel's prophecies focused on empires who would dominate Israel until the moment the Kingdom arrived:

Ch.	Babylon	Medo-Persian	Alexander	His four generals	Antiochus Epiphanes	Roman	Christ's Kingdom	Nation dispersed
	605-538 BC	538-331 BC	331-323 BC	323-140 BC	175-164 BC	63 BC — 135 AD	33 AD	66 AD – 135 AD
2	Head of gold	Chest/arms of silver	Belly and thighs of bronze			Iron legs iron/clay toes	Rock	
7	Lion with eagles' wings	Bear with ribs in mouth	Leopard with four wings			Iron teeth 10 horns	Man in heaven	
8		Ram with two horns	One-horned male goat	Four-horned goat	Temple polluter			
9		458 BC return under Ezra	A lapse of 483 years as prophesied by Daniel between these two events				Anointed one	Temple destroyed, Zeus idol (70 AD)
11		Three kings, 4 th to attack Greece	Mighty king	4 non-descendants; Kings of North and South as rivals	Stole the throne; Polluted temple			
12								Temple destroyed

Daniel could not have foreseen what is now so evident to us—Israel's restored empire would come through suffering and humility, and conquer through love.

Lord, thank you that you are in control of history. You allow empires to rise and fall, but your plan is that your peaceable kingdom will be the final one. We praise you as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

December 12
God's Bad Marriage — Hosea 1-6

Ephesians 5:25-27 And you husbands must love your wives with the same love Christ showed the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by baptism and God's word. He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault.

Hosea remained faithful to his unfaithful bride as does Christ. New Testament imagery of the church as the bride of Christ builds on imagery of the people of Israel as God's spouse, and a dreadful and difficult spouse at that. Idolatry is repeatedly compared to adultery in marriage. The prophet Hosea was called to marry a known prostitute, and warned she would be unfaithful. This is one of the saddest callings I can imagine.

Two prophecies that refer to the restoration of Israel, (Hosea 1:10, 2:23) were applied by Paul to God's desire to show mercy to the Gentiles. (Romans 9:25,26) Hosea made it clear that God has the deep feelings of hurt and disappointment

of a betrayed spouse. Christ experienced rejection from those conspiring to kill him, crowds turning away, the disciples fleeing from his arrest, Peter denying he ever knew Christ, and Judas' betrayal.

God's pain comes through: "your love vanishes like morning mist and disappears like dew in the sunlight." "You betrayed my trust." "They have told lies about me." He expresses confidence in a restored relationship: "I will win her back once again." "You will finally know me." I will show love." "My love will know no bounds." We can turn with gratitude to this tender and passionate love, knowing He cares so deeply for each one of us.

Lord, thanks so much for this reassurance that you do not give up on us. No matter how many people may have given up on us, it is astonishing and wonderful that you never give up, your love is unfailing.

December 13

Plant Righteousness — Hosea 7-14

Matthew 13: 23 The good soil represents the hearts of those who truly accept God's message and produce a huge harvest—thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted.

Hosea appealed for a change of heart and planting good seeds of righteousness, just as Christ appealed for repentance and receiving God's word planted in our hearts. As God said through Hosea, "Plant the good seeds of righteousness, and you will harvest a crop of my love. Plow up the hard ground of your hearts, for now is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and shower righteousness upon you." (Hosea 10: 12)

He warned of judgment, going back to the terrible story from the end of Judges as a sign of just how bad things were, saying they were as depraved as the people from that time, and God must punish. (Hosea 9: 9) God grieved that they had never changed. "You have made no progress whatsoever." (Hosea 10: 9)

But the hope of redemption is here also. Matthew applied something about Israel to Christ: "Out of Egypt I have called my son." (Hosea 11:1) There are at least three parallels: 1) Christ and Israel were taken to Egypt to survive, 2) they returned to the promised land, and 3) they are both God's son.

Have I repented of my sins and of the sins of my nation? Am I allowing God's word and righteousness to be planted in my life? Am I depending on the promise of redemption in Christ? And am I allowing God to make me fruitful? God says "I am like a tree that is always green; all your fruit comes from me." (Hosea 14:8) I want to be someone whose heart has been plowed up, that receives

the rain of God's righteousness, and who is fruitful, giving a hundred-fold harvest.

Lord, thank you that you can change our hearts from hard ones to nourishing, fruitful ones. We praise you that no matter how badly we have acted, no matter how rebellious, you so quickly respond to any signs of repentance on our part.

December 14

Joel

Acts 2:14-18 Then Peter stepped forward with the eleven other apostles and shouted to the crowd, "Listen carefully, all of you, fellow Jews and residents of Jerusalem! Make no mistake about this. These people are not drunk, as some of you are assuming. Nine o'clock in the morning is much too early for that. No, what you see was predicted long ago by the prophet Joel: 'In the last days,' God says, 'I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams. In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on my servants—men and women alike—and they will prophesy.'"

Joel announced Christ as the one who pours out the Spirit. At the day of Pentecost, Peter quoted Joel regarding the outpouring of the Spirit they were seeing at that moment. (Joel 2:28-32)

The giving of the Spirit was in the context of a locust plague, repentance, and a promise of the Kingdom. Joel reminds to take the dramatic challenges of life, including natural disasters, as a chance to pay attention and hear God's call to repentance. As an ecological text, Joel is particularly strong in contrasting the destruction of locusts with a healthy world of rain, lush fruit, grapevines and wine. Wine is a sign of blessing and its lack is a sign of suffering. Fire represents destruction versus rain and water that represents blessing.

Our lives flourish when we experience the Holy Spirit and accept this gift of God's presence poured out on us. Christ promised the Spirit's presence and power as He left and said that God will give the Spirit if we ask. If your life feels fruitless or dry or empty, do not hesitate to ask for the filling of the Spirit, gifts of the Spirit and the power of the Spirit. This is a birthright for all of God's people.

Lord, bless us with good fruit and make us fruitful people who bring you glory. We accept your call to repentance and repent today on behalf of our world that is so busy ruining your creation.

December 15

Amos

Suggestion: Because Amos has nine chapters and Obadiah that follows has only one chapter, it may be helpful to read Amos 1-5 on one day, and Amos 6-9 and Obadiah on the next day.

Luke 13:6-8 Then Jesus told this story: "A man planted a fig tree in his garden and came again and again to see if there was any fruit on it, but he was always disappointed. Finally, he said to his gardener, 'I've waited three years, and there hasn't been a single fig! Cut it down. It's just taking up space in the garden.' The gardener answered, 'Sir, give it one more chance. Leave it another year, and I'll give it special attention and plenty of fertilizer. If we get figs next year, fine. If not, then you can cut it down.'"

Amos, a shepherd and a fig tree farmer, was called to be a prophet. (Amos 7:14) Christ was a prophet who metaphorically identified himself as a shepherd and told stories of himself as fig tree farmer, identifying the fruitless tree as resistant Israel.

Amos called for justice for the poor, twice speaking of the cruelty of selling the poor for a pair of sandals. (Amos 2:6, 8:6) He spoke of denied justice, oppression of the poor versus living in luxury. Christ brought good news for the poor and urged those with means to give to be generous. Amos cried out: "I want to see a mighty flood of justice, and endless river of righteous living." (Amos 5:24)

The book ends with a Kingdom promise: "In that day I will restore the fallen house of David. I will repair its damaged walls. From the ruins I will rebuild it and restore its former glory." (Amos 9:11) On one level, this occurred after the return from exile when Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. As always it points to the greater Kingdom to come under Christ, and James used this as evidence of how God had opened up salvation for the nations. (Acts 15:14)

One of the evidences that we are not being fruitless fig trees is loving those who are poor and loving justice. How am I doing?

Lord, thank you for your promise of rebuilding, of abundance, of blessing. Give us hearts that genuinely suffer with those who are poor and who refuse to live in luxury so that we may be generous. Give us hearts that cry out for justice and lives that overflow with goodness.

December 16

Obadiah

John 19:6 When they saw him, the leading priests and Temple guards began shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" "Take him yourselves and crucify him," Pilate said. "I find him not guilty."

Obadiah rebuked the descendants of one brother for being cruel toward the descendants of the other brother. While this looks back at the conflicts between Jacob and Esau, it also looks ahead to Christ's suffering at the hands of his brothers. Christ's main opponents –Herod father and son– were descendants of Esau.

Obadiah focused on Edom, the descendants of Jacob's brother Esau, who would be judged for indifference to Judah's suffering. Edom had even added to Judah's distress as she was destroyed. Nevertheless, they were offered a completely underserved mercy in the future which would come through the very ones they had harmed.

Though our translations refer to Edom and Israel, the Hebrew refers to Esau and Jacob, as though their sibling rivalry was still present in this moment, and Esau was glad that Jacob was having such a difficult time, just as when Jacob went into exile with Laban. It further recalls the prophecy to Rebekah, not only of their rivalry, but that Jacob would eventually triumph over Esau.

Edomite Kings (Genesis 36) were conquered by David. The Maccabees conquered them and under John Hyrcanus (c. 125 BC) they converted to Judaism. After Jews were expelled in 135 AD, Idumaeans/Edomites "disappear from history, as though you had never even existed." (verse 16) Yet we know that wherever they were, mercy was available to them in the coming of Christ.

This passage causes me to ask if I am sensitive am I to the suffering of my relatives. Do I care enough to pray faithfully for their concerns, to see how I might be able to love and support them, and to communicate with kindness and compassion. I think I can always do better.

Sometimes we think so much about final judgment, Lord, that we forget that there are consequences being carried out in history. Keep us aware of that in our own lives as well. Keep us from being indifferent to the suffering of others.

December 18

Coming Resurrection — Jonah 1-2

Luke 11:29, 30 The only sign I will give them is the sign of the prophet Jonah. What happened to him was a sign to the people of Nineveh that God had sent

him. What happens to me will be a sign that God has sent me, the Son of Man, to these people.

On Christ's authority, Jonah prefigured Christ's preaching, death, and resurrection. Jonah ultimately preached in Nineveh and triggered a great revival, but only after running in the opposite direction, going overboard on a ship, and being rescued by a great fish. Jesus used the three days in the fish as analogous to his three days in the tomb. In Jonah's prayer he prefigures the resurrection: "You pulled me up from the grave alive."

Jonah's disobedience resulted in a horrendous storm, and the sailors threw him overboard to calm it. In contrast, twice when his disciples were caught in a storm Jesus calmed the waters and calmed them with his presence. Paul also preserved his shipmates in a storm. (Acts 27:27-44)

Luci Shaw makes clear the analogies with Christ in this poem, *Rib Cage*.

Jonah, you
and I were both signs
to unbelievers.

Learning the anatomy
of ships and sea animals the hard way—
from inside
out—you counted (bumping your stubborn
head)
the wooden beams and curving bones
and left
your own heart unexplored.
And you were tough.
Twice, damp but undigested
you were vomited. For you
it was the only
way out.

No, you wouldn't die.
Not even burial softened you
and, free of the dark sea prisons,
you were still
caged in yourself—trapped
in your own hard continuing rage
at me and Nineveh.

For three nights
and three days dark as night—
as dark as yours—
I too charted the innards
of the earth, swam
in its skeleton, its raw under
ground. A captive
in the belly of the world
(prepared, like the fish, by God)
I felt the slow pulse at the monster's
heart,
tapped its deep arteries, wrestled
its root sinews, was bruised
by the undersides of all
its cold bony stones.

Submerged,
I had to die, I had
to give in to it, I had
to go all the way
down
before I could be freed,
to live
for you and Nineveh. — Luci Shaw

Lord, forgive us for the many times that we choose to disobey, and thank you that even then you are quick to rescue and forgive.

December 19

The Critical Missionary — Jonah 3-4

James 3:10 Blessing and cursing come pouring out of the same mouth. Surely, my brothers and sisters, this is not right!

The same mercy that Christ shows to those who turn to him in repentance was shown to the repentant people of Nineveh. Despite an effective ministry of bringing Nineveh to repentance, Jonah proved to be critical of those to whom he was sent and was unhappy God did not judge them. As the first foreign missionary, he resisted a call to people he disapproved of, was cranky about his own comforts, and critical and judgmental even when people responded to his message.

Unfortunately, we have not changed. David Bosch wrote a compelling and now widely-used history of missions, *Transforming Mission*, which documents how missionaries have taken a Western superiority complex into the world for the past three centuries.³⁴

Jonah teaches us to humble ourselves, that God loves all people and all cultures, and that we need to recognize our superiority complex as sin. We need to learn genuine respect for all as we seek to serve anyone, but particularly across cultures. In the last line of the book, God asks why He should not be compassionate, showing the heart we should have.

Lord, thank you that Jonah was right, that you are sheer grace and mercy, not easily angered, rich in love, ready at the drop of a hat to turn your plans of punishment into a program of forgiveness. Give us that same deep love for all people.

December 20

Bethlehem — Micah 1-4

Matthew 2:4-6 He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?" "In Bethlehem in Judea," they said, "for this is what the prophet wrote: 'And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.'"

Micah announced that Christ would be born in Bethlehem, (Micah 5:2) but every chapter has prophetic phrases.

- 1: The Lord speaks from his holy Temple. (verse 2)
He leaves his throne in heaven and comes to earth. (verse 3)
- 2: "I will bring you together like sheep in a fold, like a flock in its pasture." (verse 12)

- 3: "I am filled with power and the Spirit of the Lord, I am filled with justice and might, fearlessly pointing out Israel's sin and rebellion." (verse 8)
- 4: People from many nations will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of Jacob's God. There he will teach us his ways, and we will walk in his paths." For the Lord's teaching will go out from Zion; his word will go out from Jerusalem." (verses 1-2) Kingship will be restored there. (verse 8)
- 5: In addition to the prophetic reference to the birth in Bethlehem, we are told of a "time when the woman in labor gives birth to the son." "He will stand to lead his flock with the Lord's strength," "he will be highly honored all around the world," and "he will be the source of our peace." (verses 3-5)
- 6: "O people, the Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you; to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." (verse 8)
- 7: The Lord will bring me out of my darkness into the light. (verse 9)
O Lord, come and rule your people; lead your flock in green pastures. (verse 14)
"I will do mighty miracles for you." (verse 15)
You will trample our sins under your feet and throw them into the depths of the ocean. (verse 19)

Teaching from the Temple, incarnated from heaven to earth, the good shepherd leading His flock, filled with God's Spirit, teaching in Jerusalem, born of a woman, bringing light, doing miracles, removing our sins—all of these outline who Christ was and what He did. But His Bethlehem birthplace, combined with the rather unlikely combination of circumstances that made that possible, is a prophecy so specific that it is a source of wonder for us in this Advent Season.

Lord, thank you for the depths of the details that prefigured your coming and that let us know that you truly are the one who can forgive our sins, give us peace, act miraculously in our lives, and teach us justice.

December 21
Cursing the Fig Tree — Micah 5-7

Matthew 21:18-19 In the morning, as Jesus was returning to Jerusalem, he was hungry, and he noticed a fig tree beside the road. He went over to see if there were any figs, but there were only leaves. Then he said to it, "May you never bear fruit again!" And immediately the fig tree withered up.

Christ's mysterious actions in cursing the fig tree have some explanation in Micah 7:1 where the prophet complained he could not find a single fig to satisfy his hunger, and then compared this to the absence of godly and fair-minded people. "They are all murderers, even setting traps for their own brothers." Christ knew a trap was being set for him, his unjust death in Jerusalem was very soon when he sought the figs.

In *Promise and Deliverance* we are given a beautiful interpretation of this story.³⁵

“On a certain morning, as He was returning again from Bethany to Jerusalem, He saw a fig tree standing by the side of the road. That fig tree was in leaf unusually early: it was just before the Passover feast. Jesus took special notice of the tree because He was hungry. Apparently He had not eaten anything that morning. Ordinarily the fig tree produces its first edible fruit as soon as it is in leaf. Hoping to find something He could eat, Jesus went over to the tree. But He was disappointed; there was no fruit on the tree.

“The Lord Jesus saw in this a reflection of human life. God looks for fruit in our lives and we have much to show for ourselves. Our lives are fully developed and seemingly productive—we are so to speak, in full leaf—but all men are self-seeking and there is no fruit for God.

“The Lord Jesus pronounced a curse on this fig tree and declared that it would never bear fruit again. By that He meant to say that the curse would come upon the fruitless life of men in the same way, including fruitless Israel. His work in the midst of Israel appeared to have been without fruit. The people had not let Him gather them together. In the heart of Israel and its elders the decision to kill Him had already been made. That same week they were going to deliver Him up. Therefore the curse would strike Israel.

“Yet the Lord Jesus Himself stood in the midst of the curse He pronounced. After all, *He* had come to bear the curse. Thus He represented the fig tree that was cursed. He would exhaust that eternal curse and thus save His own, including Israel. Israel will also be among the nations as they praise the Lord one day for their salvation.”

Lord, thank you for the wonder that the curse you were pronouncing was one you were prepared to take upon yourself, making it possible for us to be blessed.

December 22

Nahum

Luke 2:14 “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.”

Nahum presented Christ as a messenger with good news, a message of peace. “Look! A messenger is coming over the mountains with good news! He is bringing a message of peace.” (Nahum 1:15) Amidst a message of war and battle, Christ’s message—both good and peaceful—stands in contrast to our chaotic and violent world.

Nahum's warning is for Nineveh. King Sennacherib made Nineveh a particularly beautiful city with new streets, squares and a grand palace of 80 rooms. But in 722 BC Assyria destroyed Israel, leaving Judah still struggling to survive. It was in response to their cruelty in this destruction that Nahum gave his prophecy that God would judge Assyria.

Nineveh remained the largest city in the world for about fifty years until civil war and rebellious subjects, the Medes and Persians, destroyed it, just as Nahum predicted. This occurred in 612 BC and served as a confirmation to Judah of God's sovereignty over the nations. Nineveh is still in ruins, across the river from Mosul in Iraq. When Nahum made his predictions it would have seemed as likely as a prophet saying New York would fall and remain a ruin.

Nahum sorrowed over Nineveh, and Chapter 1 is an acrostic poem. Nineveh and Babylon served as "anti-cities," the symbols for all that must be torn down and never rebuilt since it is part of a rebellious world system. Jerusalem had a more ambiguous symbolism. It was the City of God, but also rebellious and thereby subject to destruction. Yet for Jerusalem there was always the promise of restoration and ultimately, being the City of the new heaven and new earth. It is Christ, who the angels announced as the one who brings peace to the earth, who makes that change possible.

Lord, we thank you that you are the one who brings peace, not only to our hearts, but to all the challenges of earth.

December 23
Habakkuk

John 12:31,32 The time of judgment for the world has come, when the prince of this world will be cast out. And when I am lifted up on the cross, I will draw everyone to myself.

Habakkuk presented Christ as a righteous judge of all nations. The prophet was deeply troubled by the political injustice he saw, and received God's answer that the Babylonians would be raised up to correct His people. The prophet was then distressed by the unfairness that his nation would be defeated by an evil nation, and questioned God's justice. Habakkuk was reassured to learn that Babylon would in turn be judged.

He asked how God would deal with the cruel Babylonians, and was assured that what they had done to others would be done to them. God's word to proud conquerors was "Now you will be cut down!" (Habakkuk 2:17) The powerful nations are compared to large and beautiful trees, but they will be felled.

The theme of the tree has gone from the tree of life in the Garden of Eden, to the trees of the knowledge of good and evil that resulted in expulsion from the garden, to the great trees of kings and empires. All along there are promises of another tree—the tree of the death of Christ on the cross—which would reverse the fall. The small seed of the Kingdom would be planted to grow into a tree that is living and fruitful. And finally, one day there will be trees of life in the garden of the City of God. The cross is the final answer to Christ as the righteous judge—He takes the judgment upon himself and offers mercy.

At Christmas time we have our trees that symbolize the season for us, the joy of Christ's incarnation, and delight in His birth. When the trees fade and the holiday is over, the joy is still with us, and there is a similar word of faith as Habakkuk ends his reflection. "Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the LORD! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation!" (Habakkuk 3:17,18)

Lord, thank you that you are a God of justice. Thank you that you took judgment on yourself on the cross. Thank you that because of your faithfulness we can rejoice, no matter what our circumstances might be.

December 24
The King's Arrival — Luke 1

Luke 1:37 For nothing is impossible with God.

All that has come before is preface to the seemingly impossible fulfillment of God's Kingdom coming, the King himself arriving on earth. In this Gospel reading we realize finally that God Himself will be born among men, born to a Jewish virgin in the line of David, a miracle, a seeming impossibility.

Luke explains that his book presents "what God has done in fulfillment of his promises." One promise was of a forerunner to prepare the way for Messiah, and we are told the important story of John the Baptist's birth. The promise of a birth to a virgin in Isaiah was repeated for Mary. She responded with praise for being part of the story of God's deliverance of his people. When John was born his father prophesied that "the light of heaven is about to break upon us."

While December 24, Christmas Eve, is the traditional moment to celebrate Christ's birth, we do not really know that this is the right date. But we do know that everything we have read has led up to this birth, this new beginning, the arrival of the promised King.

Lord, your complex historical plan included so many times when your people failed you, yet you remained faithful and carried out your purpose to allow your people to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins.

December 25

The King is Born — Luke 2:1-20

Luke 2: 11 The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem, the city of David!

We celebrate the coming of Christ with great joy. The anticipated birth that will lead to the fulfillment of all of God's promises to us is here. The glory of God is revealed in a human child, celebrated by the singing armies of heaven and humble shepherds.

We recall that the everlasting Kingdom was promised through the line of King David and hence the promise of a birth in his city, Bethlehem. We are reminded that the sheep raised for Passover sacrifices were from Bethlehem. Hence, these were no ordinary shepherds, but keepers of the sheep who foreshadowed the sacrificial Lamb of God.

Though coming from a history full of conflict, a nation full of its history of victories and defeats, Zechariah had prophesied that the Messiah would "guide us to the path of peace" and the angels celebrated "peace on earth." We are offered that peace, and made people who share the good news of peace with God and one another. No wonder our greeting for this season is "Merry Christmas" since merriment is the only proper response to this good news.

Lord, we are full of the great joy that comes from the wonder of your incarnation. We are full of the peace and hope you give us. Glory to you, Lord Christ.

December 26

Zephaniah

John 12:23-25 Jesus replied, "The time has come for the Son of Man to enter into his glory. The truth is, a kernel of wheat must be planted in the soil. Unless it dies it will be alone—a single seed. But its death will produce many new kernels—a plentiful harvest of new lives. Those who love their life in this world will lose it. Those who despise their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

Zephaniah presented Christ who brings forth a renewed world. The prophet described the horrors of the end of the world, and Christ reiterated that it will be difficult, dangerous and painful.

Zephaniah began with alarming images of coming apocalypse, images that are picked up and amplified in Revelation: destruction of birds and fish, death of leaders, darkness, trumpet calls, battle cries. His thundering conclusion at the end of Chapter 1 is that “He will make a terrifying end of all the people on earth.”

In Chapter 3 judgment day is said to be one where all people will be purified so all can worship God together in humility, peace, joy, presence, protection, honor, and glory.

As is so often the case, C.S. Lewis has a helpful perspective. In *Perelandra* the King spoke about the “end of the world” which he described as the “beginning of all things.” Evil must be dealt with, “the siege of your world shall be raised, the black spot cleared away, before the real beginning.” There will be a war and “the evil things in your world shall show themselves stripped of disguise so that plagues and horrors shall cover your lands and seas.”³⁶ Zephaniah’s terrors are instances of evil stripped of its disguise so good can come. This idea of stripping evil of its disguise explains the horrors of the Last Judgement to me.

From the Book of Common Prayer, a prayer for Advent:

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal, through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

December 27

Coming King — Zechariah 1-6

John 16:13 When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not be presenting his own ideas, he will be telling you what he has heard. He will tell you about the future.

Zechariah presents Christ as coming King. Zechariah offers a set of visions that bear a striking resemblance to the visions in Revelation as well as John’s gospel. His work, like a set of canvases, has artist’s notes to explain the meaning of each item in the exhibit. Zechariah’s images that reoccur in John’s gospel include bad shepherds vs. a good shepherd, healthy sheep, the king on a donkey, 30 pieces of silver for betrayal, the spear thrust of the crucifixion.

In Revelation, John used Zechariah's images such a woman in a basket, and surveyors with a measuring rod. John knew Christ, however, and so in Revelation changed Zechariah's visions by placing Christ at the center of them.

Images	Symbolism	Christ present
Horsemen (Zech. 1:8-10, 6:1-2)	God's sovereignty over the earth	The Lamb sends the horsemen (Rev 6:1-8)
Priest in a robe (Zech. 3:7, 8)	Priests as "symbols of the good things to come" i.e. Christ (Zech. 3:8)	Vision of Christ as priest (Rev. 1:13-16)
Lampstands (Zech. 4:2)	Believing congregations and God watching over them	Christ among the lampstands (Rev. 1:12-13)
Olive trees (Zech. 4:11-14)	Prophetic witnesses	Resurrected and ascended to God (Rev. 11:1-12)
Scroll (Zech. 5:1)	Judgments	Lamb takes and opens the scroll (Rev. 5:6-7)
Warrior (Zech. 9:14)	Defeating evil	Christ leading heavenly army (Rev. 19:16)
Fountain (Zech. 13:1)	Cleansing evil	Fountain comes from Lamb's throne (Rev. 22:1)
Continuous light but its source unknown (Zech. 14:6-9)	Holiness	Lamb is the light (Rev. 21:22-24)

The beautiful lesson is that once Christ had come and could be seen clearly, he completed the picture and became the center of it. For us too, He is the center, and our lives make sense as we live in that reality.

Lord, thank you for your glory as coming King, the completion of every beautiful image of kingship we have ever glimpsed in our world. We praise you that it meets our desire to be loved and protected.

December 28

Christ is Coming! — Zechariah 7-14

Matthew 21:5 Tell the people of Jerusalem, 'Look, your King is coming to you. He is humble, riding on a donkey—riding on a donkey's colt.'

Zechariah prophesied Palm Sunday. (Zechariah 9:9) The latter half of Zechariah is one beautiful Messianic prophecy after another, many predicting the Kingdom of Peace with the Righteous King in charge.

The betrayal and purchase of the potter's field with the money Judas returned before his suicide is prophesied. (Zechariah 11:12, 13 is quoted in Matthew 27:9 and attributed to Jeremiah. I love these kind of "mistakes" because I make them too. There is a "potter's field" reference in Jeremiah, but the actual quote is from Zechariah.)

There are numerous contrasts between poor shepherds and the good shepherd. Christ quoted Zechariah to warn the disciples they would all desert Him: “God will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.” (Zechariah 13:7 Matthew 26:31)

Zechariah is quoted regarding Christ’s piercing. “They will look on me whom they have pierced.” (Zechariah 12:10, John 19:37)

Prophecies of the “day of the Lord” speak of how “his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east. And the Mount of Olives will split apart, making a wide valley running from east to west...” (Zechariah 14:4) We are told that “the Lord my God will come, and all his holy ones with him.” (14:5) This is taken up by Christ saying all the nations will “see the Son of Man arrive on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory, and he will send forth his angels with the sound of a mighty trumpet blast, and they will gather together his chosen ones from the farthest ends of the earth and heaven.” (Matthew 24:30,31)

When quoting Zechariah regarding Christ’s arrival on a donkey, John commented: “His disciples didn’t realize at the time that this was a fulfillment of prophecy. But after Jesus entered into his glory, they remembered that these Scriptures had come true before their eyes.” (John 12:16) So often we are blind to spiritual realities and only later look back in amazement and recognize how God was present. The call is to keep our spiritual eyes open.

All of these very specific prophecies about Christ were given about 500 years before they occurred. This helps confirm to us that Christ was the promised one. The center of history, the center of the universe, can become the center of our hearts.

Lord, such specific prophecy reinforces that you were the one we were expecting. Help us to be always expectant of your return.

December 29

Haggai

John 17:17, 18 Make them pure and holy by teaching them your words of truth. As you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world.

Haggai presents Christ’s arrival at the Temple. Haggai spoke at a key moment after the return from Babylon to motivate the people to complete rebuilding the Temple. In this time when the second Temple was being rebuilt, the prophet linked the work of making a place for the presence of God to an even stronger expression of the presence of God to come when Messiah, Christ, would enter

that temple: “The future glory of this Temple will be greater than its past glory, says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies. And in this place I will bring peace.” (Haggai 2:9)

Jesus identified his body as the Temple to be torn down in death and resurrected after three days, analogous to this rebuilding project. (John 2:20,21) Zerubbabel, the king, and Jeshua, the high priest, were insecure leaders after years of oppression, prejudice and marginalization in Babylon. Haggai’s encouragement was needed.

Christ came first to the Temple to be dedicated as an infant, bringing the Temple greater glory than it had ever had. He then came as a youth wise beyond His years with knowledge of scripture, and as an adult he taught and healed in that place. In the victory of His death as Lord of Heaven, He tore town the Temple curtain separating man from God, bringing the promised peace.

Lord, thank you for the image of your dwelling place that runs as a thread throughout scripture. Thank you that your purpose is that we would be your dwelling place with your light shining through our lives to attract others to love and follow you. Thank you that you have brought true peace.

December 30
Malachi

Matthew 3:11 “I baptize with water those who repent of their sins and turn to God. But someone is coming soon who is great than I am—so much greater that I’m not worthy even to be his slave and carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

Malachi presented Christ as a blazing fire: “But who will be able to endure it when he comes? For he will be like a blazing fire that refines metal, or like a strong soap that bleaches clothes. He will sit like a refiner of silver, burning away the dross.” (Malachi 3:2,3) In the previous verse is a messenger identified as John the Baptist in gospel quotations: “Look! I am sending my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.” Then there is an announcement of Christ: “Then the Lord who you are seeking will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger of the covenant, whom you look for so eagerly, is surely coming.” (Malachi 3:1) John reinforced the fiery nature of Christ’s work, will “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” (Matthew 3:11)

Malachi wrote during Nehemiah’s time when the faltering community was dealing with indifferent and sloppy Temple worship, foreign marriages, and post-exilic depression. The promise was that because of God’s grace in choosing them as preparers of the way for Messiah, the community would survive. A

celebrating, worshipping, Torah-studying culture needed to exist as the context for the promised one. Even if they lived under political domination, they could continue to live in hope of a Kingdom led by righteous Messiah.

Malachi responded to questions we have a tendency to ask also:

“How have you loved us?” “How have we ever despised your name?”

“How have we been insincere in worship?” “How have we spoken against you?”

“What’s the use of serving God?”

Perhaps receiving the Spirit and allowing His fire to purify us is central to the answer. As we recall our celebration of Christ’s coming we are reminded of the passages in Handel’s *Messiah* where lines from Malachi regarding preparation and purification precede receiving Emmanuel, God with us.

Lord, we praise you that you prepared everything for the coming of Christ. You let nothing, not even the failures of your people, stop this great moment from arriving. Thank you that this is the testimony of all the scriptures we have read.

December 31 **Celebration**

As the Hebrew scriptures have drawn to a close, and all is prepared for the arrival of Christ, we can see that the theme of the coming Kingdom is at a crossroads. The Jewish people, largely the tribe of Judah, have returned to the land promised to their ancestors, but they are under Roman domination. The line of David is known but is not actually the ruling family. The people have finally learned the difficult and painful lesson that idolatry results in death and destruction, and have renounced it. All is prepared and Christ came down from heaven to show us the face of God.

Everything in the book has led us to the Messiah. The theme of Christ as King of the Kingdom of God is a thread running through all we have seen and read. He is the one who gave dominion over created things to Adam. He is the one who Abraham met in the covenant promise of land for a kingdom, and in the form of Melchizedek, Jerusalem’s King. He called the freed slaves to become a “kingdom of priests” at Mount Sinai, and gave a covenant to the people as their King. Once in the land of Canaan, he was King with representatives in the form of warriors and prophets until a formal Kingship was instituted. To David he promised an everlasting kingdom with one of David’s descendants on the throne. Prophetic references to a future righteous King and a peaceable kingdom were repeated throughout Psalms and all the prophets.

After teaching of the Kingdom Himself, He died, taking on all suffering and all sin as the loving God who could redeem all people. He was raised to the right

hand of God, and sent His followers out to spread the good news of the Kingdom. In the final chapters of the New Testament we have the final images of His taking up His position as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Perhaps the most fitting ending prayer possible are these words of praise from Revelation:

Great and marvelous are your actions, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations. Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous deeds have been revealed. We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the one who is and who always was, for now you have assumed your great power and have begun to reign. It has happened at last—the salvation and power and kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ! King of Kings, and Lord of Lords! (Revelation 15:3,4)



New Testament readings for each week

1. Matthew 1-4
2. Matthew 5-8
3. Matthew 9-11
4. Matthew 12-15
5. Matthew 16-20
6. Matthew 21-25
7. Matthew 26-28
8. Mark 1-3
9. Mark 4-5
10. Mark 6-10
11. Mark 11-16
12. Luke 1-3
13. Luke 4-7
14. Luke 8-10
15. Luke 11-13
16. Luke 14-18
17. Luke 19-21
18. Luke 22-24
19. John 1-4
20. John 5-8
21. John 9-12
22. John 13-17
23. John 18-21
24. Acts 1-5
25. Acts 6-9
26. Acts 10-14
27. Acts 15-19
28. Acts 20-23
29. Acts 24-28
30. Romans 1-5
31. Romans 6-8
32. Romans 9-11
33. Romans 12-16
34. I Corinthians 1-5
35. I Corinthians 6-11
36. I Corinthians 12-16
37. II Corinthians 1-5
38. II Corinthians 6-9
39. II Corinthians 10-13
40. Galatians
41. Ephesians
42. Phillippians, Colossians
43. I and II Thessalonians
44. I Timothy
45. II Timothy, Titus, Philemon
46. Hebrews 1-6
47. Hebrews 7-13
48. James
49. I and II Peter
50. I John
51. II, III John, Jude
52. Revelation

ENDNOTES

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- ⁴ Radius. Page 8.
- ⁵ Stone, Rachel. *Eat With Joy: Redeeming God's Gift of Food*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).
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- ¹⁰ Kasdan, Barney. *God's Appointed Customs*, Chapter 9.
- ¹¹ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. Page 376.
- ¹² Wright, *Revolution*.
- ¹³ Moyter. Chapter 13.
- ¹⁴ Lewis, C.S. *The Last Battle*. Chapter 9.
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²¹ Jennings, Willie James. *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010). Chapter 5.

²² Lewis, C.S. *Reflections on the Psalms*, page 118.

²³ Lewis, *Reflections*, page 122.

²⁴ Keller, Timothy with Kathy Keller. *The Songs of Jesus*. (New York: Viking, 2015), page ix.

²⁵ Lewis, *Reflections*, page

²⁶ Botcharova, Olga. "Implementation of Track two Diplomacy: Developing a Model of Forgiveness". Chapter 14 in Helmick, Raymond G., S.J. and Rodney L. Peterson, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy and Conflict Transformation*. (Philadelphia and London: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008).

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²⁹ Peterson, Eugene. *Living the Resurrection: The Risen Christ in Everyday Life*. (NavPress, 2006).

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³⁵ *Promise and Deliverance, Volume 3*. Page 113.

³⁶ Lewis, *Perelandra*. page 182.

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- ◆ *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*,
- ◆ *God's Appointed Times*,
- ◆ *God's Appointed Customs*,
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