



The season of Lent is meant for deep reflection. In *The Marks of Love*, we read of Jesus' unwavering love for mankind. Sent by the Father, His Son's mission and ministry was to call us "out of darkness into His marvelous light." This God has done through His Son. He took our sin and sorrow to the cross of Calvary, and raising on the third day, crowns all believers with the gift of forgiveness and eternal life.

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As an added feature, these devotions have reflection questions for each day's messages. These can be used for self-study or as prompts for discussion when reflecting as a group.

"FAITHSCAPES": This Lent we focus on the real places and terrain of our spirit, the landscapes of the ordinary where God's extraordinary love meets us. Our journey will dovetail with our Wednesday noon book study, where we read theologian Belden Lane's *The Great Conversation: Nature and the Care of the Soul*.

Enter "Faithscapes: the Great Conversation with our Creator" this winter and spring, as we combine two words – Faith and Landscape (not to be confused with "escape"!) to examine the places that affect the internal landscapes of our own spirit, as we live both outward and inward walks of faith...and how God is creating new relationship with/in us. Here is the breakdown of what we'll focus on each week:

Ash Wednesday, Feb. 17th: Mortality & "dusty" landscape "We are from dust...and shall return." • Please note: We will offer Ash Wednesday "2.0" at 7pm on Facebook and Youtube (Real Church Virtual); Parking Lot Communion and Ash distribution at two time slots: 11:15am – 12:15pm and 5:15-6:15pm

Faithscape #1, Feb. 24th: Desert, Dune and Mountain (Scarcity and highlands of the spirit)

Faithscape #2, Mar. 3rd : Countryside and Prairie (The Openness of the familiar and inviting)

Faithscape #3, Mar. 10th:City and Township (The streets we walk, the structures that define...)

Faithscape #4, Mar. 17th: Valley and Canyon ("Though I walk through the valley of the shadow")

Faithscape #5, Mar. 24th: Seashore and Lakeshore (Returning to the place/s Christ calls us)

**Also keep on the lookout for new elements for this year's Lent:
Zoom Fellowship before 7pm 2.0 worship on Wednesday's, a possible "Table for 12" and more!**

Lenten Devotions were written by Dr. Kari Vo.
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ARE YOU SURE?

Now when [Jesus] rose early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene ... But when they heard that He was alive ... they would not believe it. ... He appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them. Afterward He appeared to the eleven themselves ... and He rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw Him after He had risen. And He said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation." (Mark 16:9a, 11, 12b-13-15)

Mark 16:9-20 are the added verses of Mark—the extra endings that we can't be absolutely sure if Mark really wrote them or not, or if they were someone's extra notes. That's why your Bible will have a note or footnote to tell you so.

But there's one thing that rings very true in these extra verses, and that is the fact that people just won't believe it when they hear that Jesus is alive again! Time after time, they ignore the messengers. They laugh at the eyewitnesses. They are sure that even God could not do such a thing.

And that's the way it is for us today, isn't it? Only the Holy Spirit, God Himself, can bring us to believe this incredible but wonderful story. He is the One who is working when we hear that God loved us so much He became a Man—grew up, lived and cared for people, and finally suffered and died for us on a cross—and then rose from the dead. We do not believe because we are so smart or faithful. We believe because God is living in us, bringing us to know Him—and then sending us out to share the Good News of Jesus with others.

Lord Holy Spirit, strengthen my faith, and use me so others will come to trust in Jesus. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Tell about a time when you had a hard time believing something wonderful.
- In what way did you become a believer in Jesus?
- Pick one person you know who is not a believer and pray for him or her.

IN A HURRY

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when He came up out of the water, immediately He saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased." The Spirit immediately drove Him out into the wilderness. And He was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And He was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to Him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the Gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel." (Mark 1:9-15)

Look at how fast everything happens as Jesus begins His great work of saving us! The time has finally come, and He won't waste a minute. He gets Himself baptized, immediately sees heaven open, and immediately the Spirit drives Him out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. Jesus has a mission to fulfill, and there's not a second to lose.

And what is His message? "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel!" He says this to everyone who will listen—to the crowds, to the rulers, to His friends and enemies alike. "Whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life," He says (John 5:24b). "Whoever comes to Me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in Me shall never thirst" (John 6:35b). "Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live!" (John 11:25b). He says it to you, and He says it to me.

During these next forty days, let's listen to Jesus—and grab His invitation with both hands.

Dear Lord, turn my heart to You, to receive all Your wonderful gifts. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When are you usually in a hurry? Why?
- Would you expect God to be in a hurry? Why or why not?
- What does Jesus' hurry say about the value He puts on you?

FOUND—AND KEPT SAFE

Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” And immediately they left their nets and followed Him. And going on a little farther, He saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately He called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed Him. (Mark 1:16-20)

Jesus is no fool. He has maybe three years to get the word to as many people as possible about the forgiveness and life God is offering to anybody who will take it. Jesus knows the cross is coming, and He wants to use His time wisely. So He looks for help—people who can help Him get the word out.

And look who He finds! Four fishermen, hard at work. They’re doing an important job, but Jesus has an even more urgent one. “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men!” And they leave it all behind—jobs, nets, family—and go after Him.

I doubt any of them had a clue what the next few years would look like. What would they do, where would they live, how would their lives end up? They didn’t know. But they would have Jesus—and Jesus would have them. That was enough to get started with.

It’s enough for us, too, isn’t it? We have no guarantee what’s coming to us in our lives—next year, next month, or even tomorrow. But we have Jesus—and Jesus has us. That is all the safety we need—that we are in the hands of the One who died and rose again for our sakes.

Lord, keep me with You, and show me the way You have for me to walk. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Has your life ever taken an unexpected turn?
- When you are nervous or afraid, what do you do?
- How has Jesus helped you when you worry about the future?

AFRAID?

When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome ... went to the tomb.... And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. And he said to them, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; He is not here. See the place where they laid Him.” ... And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:1a, 2b, 5-6, 8)

This is the whole ending of Mark—that is, the text we can be sure of. (There are other bits that people have added on through the years, but we can’t be sure any of them are original. Consult your study Bible or footnotes to see what I mean.)

And boy, is it a weird place to end! “They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Afraid? Why not overjoyed, surprised, happy, delighted ... no. They were afraid.

These are not cowardly women. They had the guts to leave their safe room and travel to a tomb to handle a dead body. They knew they were risking arrest or assault. They could face all of those fears. But Jesus’ resurrection puts them over the edge.

Why? Maybe because for so many, many years, the human race has known only one story: birth, life, death. The end. It is a terrifying and heartbreaking story, but it is the only one we knew. Now comes Jesus who turns the old story upside down. He is alive—out of the grave, free from death’s power—and suddenly anything might happen. Anything!

What about you, when your life is turned upside down? What is the cure for that kind of fear? Only Jesus. He is the only One who could take their fear—or ours—and turn it into rejoicing. He came to meet them as they ran back to Jerusalem. He comes to meet us, too, because He knows our need.

Lord, let me cling to You when my life is turned upside down. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When have you been afraid of something new?
- Would you be afraid if someone you loved suddenly rose from the dead? Why or why not?
- Tell about a time when Jesus turned fear into joy for you.

UNEXPECTED LOVE

And when evening had come ... Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus ... And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking Him down, wrapped Him in the linen shroud and laid Him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where He was laid. (Mark 15:42a, 43, 46-47)

It took some courage for Joseph to go to Pilate and ask for Jesus' body. After all, he was a member of the council—the very group that condemned Jesus. Now he is breaking ranks with the others, making it clear where his heart lies—even though, as far as he knows, there is no longer any way that it will matter to Jesus.

But Joseph loves Jesus. He will not let Him be dumped in an unmarked grave. He will give Jesus his very own tomb, the one Joseph built for his own family to lie in. He will do what he can, to honor Jesus' body—even if it costs him his place on the council. To Joseph, it is worth it.

Where did this love come from? From Jesus! After all, He behaves the same way. When we sinned and came under the power of death, God did not abandon us. He came into the world to rescue us—to set us free from evil and give us a new, everlasting life. He knew that the price for this was suffering and death, but Jesus was okay with that. Why? Because He loves us.

Dear Lord, let Your love take root in my heart also. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Describe one quiet act of love you have seen lately.
- Who (besides Jesus) has given up something, big or tiny, to show you love?
- What could you do to love someone in a quiet way today?

WANTED

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, He departed and went out to a desolate place, and there He prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for Him, and they found Him and said to Him, "Everyone is looking for You." And He said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." And He went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons. (Mark 1:35-39)

Jesus had a habit of sneaking off by Himself to pray, either in the very, very early morning, or very late at night. Those were probably the only times He could get, as so many people wanted Him—for healing, for preaching, for answering questions. But Jesus needed that time with the Father—and so He took it when He could get it.

But as any parent knows, they will find you, eventually—and all their wants and needs will come pouring out on top of you. It's easy to get lost in what everyone else wants of you! But Jesus had it straight: "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out."

Are you overcome by what everyone else wants of you? It might be a good time to do what Jesus did, and find some time to spend with God. He is the One who loves and values you, not for what you do, but simply because you are His beloved child—because you are the one He suffered, died, and rose again for. You are wanted—wanted by God, purely because He loves you.

Dear Father, help me to get it straight that You love me because that's who You are, and not because of what I do or don't do. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Who wants something of you today? What is it?
- Do you ever feel overwhelmed by the wants of others?
- What does it mean to you to know that God wants you for you, and not for what you can produce?

SHOCKING

And as He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and He said to him, "Follow Me." And he rose and followed Him. And as He reclined at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners were reclining with Jesus and His disciples, for there were many who followed Him. And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that He was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to His disciples, "Why does He eat with tax collectors and sinners?" And when Jesus heard it, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2:14-17)

It's strange how relaxed Jesus is in Levi's house. There He is, reclining at the table, leaning comfortably on one elbow as people did in those days at special meals. Around Him are all the riffraff of the neighborhood—other tax collectors, prostitutes, cheaters, liars, men and women of bad reputation. And Jesus in the middle, talking, listening—as if He actually enjoyed being there, with those people. No wonder the religious leaders were shocked!

I have to admit, it shocks me a bit, too. Not that He would spend time with Levi's guests, but that He would spend time with me—draw close to me—treat me as someone worth talking and listening to. I know what I am. Why come close to me?

And yet Jesus does. He comes close to me and to you, close enough to touch—close enough to save us. He doesn't hesitate. We are the people He wants to be with, the ones He invites to His own table—the ones He lays down His life for. Why? It can only be love.

Dear Lord, since You choose to love me, help me to love You back. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Are there people you were taught to consider "not our kind of people"?
- Would you be comfortable or not with Jesus coming close to you?
- To Jesus, you are "His kind of people." What does that mean to you?

CURTAIN

And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed His last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. (Mark 15:37-38)

Curtains are for hiding things. They cover up windows when we don't want people to look in, or block hospital beds when people are being treated. God Himself had the Israelites hang a curtain between the main part of the temple and the Holiest Place, the spot where God Himself was present in a special way to care for His people, Israel.

We have learned to respect curtains—to stay out unless invited. Only one man was invited behind God's curtain, and only once a year for a single job—to make atonement with the blood of a pure sacrifice for the sins of God's people. The rest of the time, to enter was death. Stay away—God is holy, and we are not—that was the message of the temple curtain.

What must they have thought, those priests on duty, when they saw the curtain torn in two?

They could not know that, just at that moment, God's own Son had breathed His last—had allowed His own body to be torn and broken for us on the cross, as the perfect, pure sacrifice that would bring us back to God. The way to God was open now—not just for a single man, not just for priests, but for everybody. In Jesus, we are now welcome.

Jesus opened up the way. As the writer of Hebrews said, "We have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that He opened for us through the curtain, that is, through His flesh" (Hebrews 10:19b-20). The separation is gone. We can approach the holy God—because He has approached us first, in Jesus Christ our Savior.

Draw me near to You, Holy Father, through Your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What curtain do you remember most vividly, and why?
- Are you ever nervous about approaching God?
- Does it help to remember that Jesus is always at your side?

DIVINE AND HUMAN

And as they were eating, He took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is My body." And He took a cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And He said to them, "This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many." (Mark 14:22-24)

Have you ever wondered why Jesus chose bread and wine in order to give Himself to His disciples? There are probably many reasons, such as the fact that bread and wine are common, and fairly easy to get for most people. They're found in most human cultures, which makes things easier for a church that would spread worldwide.

I wonder if there might not be another reason, though. After all, eggs are cheap and plentiful. So is water. So are leafy greens. Why not choose them?

But there is one thing about bread that is also true about wine: Both bread and wine originate with living, God-created things—seeds and grapes, but both are also deeply, deeply involved with humanity. No one picks bread off a bush, or dips wine out of a well. Bread is the result of a long train of human activities—planting, harvesting, grinding, baking. Wine is similar—planting, harvesting, pressing, fermenting.

Choosing bread and wine makes sense for a Savior who is God Himself, and yet also truly human. He never holds Himself back from us—not in Person, and not in Communion. He gave Himself for us so that everyone who trusts in Him would live forever, and now, in the Lord's Supper, He joins us to Himself, making us His forever.

Thank You, Lord, for joining Yourself to us. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What is the most human-influenced food you eat? The least?
- Why do you think Jesus chose to use physical things to give Himself to us?
- What does Communion mean to you?

WITHERED

Again He entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. And they watched Jesus, to see whether He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him. And He said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." And He said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. And He looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against Him, how to destroy Him. (Mark 3:1-6)

How odd it must have been for the man in this story! I doubt he expected Jesus to go toe-to-toe with the Pharisees in the middle of the synagogue, just to heal his withered hand. After all, who was he? Nobody special. Just an ordinary man with a disability. And not something that was getting rapidly worse—this was a problem he had had for years, most likely. What was the hurry?

And yet, to Jesus, there was every reason to hurry. He looked at this man and He loved him—one of God's people—someone Jesus had come into this world to love and to save through His own death and resurrection. This man was suffering when he didn't have to. Jesus could change that, on that day, right then and there—and He did. And as a result, His enemies went out to plot how to put Him to death.

Our suffering matters to God—matters intensely to Him. Some of it He ends quickly. Some He allows to continue though we don't know the reason why. But whatever happens to us, we can be sure that God is with us in our suffering, and that He has laid down His own life to bring us through it—and out the other side, into His kingdom.

Lord, when I suffer, help me to trust that You love and care for me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you think the man felt after the uproar of his healing?
- Are you suffering now? In what ways?
- How do you relate to God when you are suffering?

JESUS IN THE BOAT

On that day, when evening had come, [Jesus] said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." And leaving the crowd, they took Him with them in the boat, just as He was. ... And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat. ... But He was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" (Mark 4:35-36a, 37a, 38)

Storms can be scary—especially when you're in a tiny boat far from shore. Even the disciples who had spent their whole lives on boats were frightened. Would they go to the bottom this time?

So they woke Jesus up. They whined: "Don't You even care we're going to die?" So Jesus sat up, dealt with the storm, and then asked His disciples: "Why are you so afraid?"

He could say the same thing to you and me, couldn't He? We have storms in our lives—sickness and danger and grief and loss, things that threaten to swamp our tiny boats. We know we could go under so easily. Of course we're afraid!

And yet, we have Jesus. As long as He is with us, we're not going to perish. Even if it looks like He's asleep, we're going to make it. The storm knows its Master!

So what should we do when we are frightened? Just what the disciples did, though hopefully with better manners! We can ask God for help, knowing that He has all power. We can trust in Him to save us. After all, He loves us enough to die for us—yes, and to rise again so that we can have everlasting life. Because He loves us, we are safe in His hands.

Dear Lord, when I am afraid, help me trust in You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you like storms? Why or why not?
- What storms have you had in your life?
- How has Jesus helped you survive those storms?

OPEN TO US

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mark 15:33-34)

Have you ever had someone shush you for saying something they believe God won't like? Maybe you expressed anger or frustration with God. Maybe it was doubt. Or maybe it was the language you used, that someone else felt shocked by. "Shush!" they hiss. "Don't say that to God." It's as if they think God is too delicate or too angry to handle our feelings.

That's why it comforts me to hear Jesus crying out these words: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" God's own Son cries out the words that so many of us have used at terrible, desolate moments in our lives. And we don't need to explain it away by saying, "Oh, He was just quoting Psalm 22." He was indeed—and His heart was in it, every word of it.

Jesus is proof that God can handle us, all of us—the good, the bad, and the ugly. He can take our desperation, our fear, our doubt, our anger. He will not give up on us because we offend His delicate ears. We can spill our hearts out at His feet, knowing that the same God who once hung on that cross will show us everlasting love, mercy, and help. He died for us and rose from the grave for us. Now He calls us to bring our every need to Him—however we word it.

Lord, thank You that You love me and do not reject me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Has anybody ever scolded you for what you said in prayer?
- Do you yourself feel nervous about saying certain things to God? Why or why not?
- How do you pray when you are in the deepest trouble and grief?

“SAVE YOURSELF”

And with Him they crucified two robbers, one on His right and one on His left. And those who passed by derided Him, wagging their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!” So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked Him to one another, saying, “He saved others; He cannot save Himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.” (Mark 15:27, 29-32a)

There was a time, shortly after our son was born, when my husband and I looked at each other and realized something had changed. In any emergency, we wouldn't try to save one another first anymore. The baby was now Number One!

The funny thing is how automatic it was. We loved our baby, he was helpless and needy, and so he became our top priority. It was rather like Jesus feels about us. “Save Yourself!” was what people kept shouting at Him on the cross. “Come down from the cross! Do a miracle and stop this whole process, here and now!”

It sounds like a temptation, and from the devil's point of view, it surely was. But the devil doesn't understand love. “Save Yourself, Jesus”? Not at the cost of our lives, no. Not if it meant we would all be lost forever, ruined, destroyed, condemned to hell. Jesus wasn't having that. We were His priority. Given the choice between His own life and ours—well, we see what He chose!

This is the tender love Jesus has for you—the love of a parent, the love of a Savior who will give up anything, even His own life, to save you.

Lord Jesus, help me to love You as You love me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Who is your first priority in an emergency?
- Have you ever sacrificed yourself in some way for a person you love?
- How does it feel to know Jesus has you that high on His priority list?

WORTH IT

They came to the other side of the sea, to the country of the Gerasenes. And when Jesus had stepped out of the boat, immediately there met Him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit. He lived among the tombs. And no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain ... Night and day among the tombs and on the mountains he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones. And when he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and fell down before Him. (Mark 5:1-3, 5-6)

You remember how this story goes—Jesus sets the man free from the demons inside him; the demons go possess a herd of pigs instead; and the pigs decide they don't like their new roommates and very sensibly drown themselves in the sea. The whole neighborhood turns out to see what has happened, and they're utterly terrified—and beg Jesus to go away. And right away, Jesus has to get back in the same boat He's already spent a night in, and go somewhere else.

Was it worth it? To Jesus, yes. He saved one life—one human being—from the power of evil. Compared to that, what did it matter about the wasted trip—the upset villagers—even two thousand dead pigs? (Poor piggies!) That one man made the whole disaster worthwhile.

And that's the way Jesus feels about you, too. You are worth it—worth Him being born in a stable, worth years as a homeless preacher, worth betrayal and beating and nailing to a cross, worth Jesus' own death. He intended to rescue you from the power of evil—and He did it, too. He bought you back for God at the price of His own life. And now He offers you everlasting life. You are worth it to Him.

Lord, thank You that I matter that much to You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you usually think of yourself—valuable, or not?
- If God sees you as valuable, does that mean you really are valuable?
- What about the people around you—what is their value?

SOMETHING BETTER

And a great crowd followed Him ... And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years ... She ... came up behind Him in the crowd and touched His garment. For she said, "If I touch even His garments, I will be made well." And immediately the flow of blood dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. And Jesus, perceiving in Himself that power had gone out from Him, immediately turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched My garments?" ... But the woman ... came in fear and trembling and fell down before Him and told Him the whole truth. And He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." (Mark 5:24b-25, 27b-30, 33-34)

The woman with the bleeding problem had good reason to be afraid. By custom, her illness made her unclean—someone who should never go into crowds, much less touch a famous rabbi. But she was desperate, and so she decided to “steal” her healing—to touch Jesus’ clothes and run, all in secret.

But Jesus wanted something better for her. And so as soon as He realized, He basically forced the issue. She told the truth, and instead of being punished, she was blessed: Jesus publicly confirmed her healing, called her “daughter,” and sent her away in peace. He gave the woman her whole life back again—not just physically, but spiritually, socially, and emotionally.

God cares about you the same way. There may be one area where you desperately want His help, and it’s good for you to seek it. But He wants more for you—He wants you to be His joyful, blessed, forgiven child, living with the real life that Jesus offers everyone who trusts in Him. That is why Jesus died and rose again—for you.

Lord, give to me what You know I truly need. Thank You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever sneaked around to get what you needed?
- What would you ask Jesus for right now?
- What good things has God given you without your asking?

WASTE NOT, WANT NOT

And they offered Him wine mixed with myrrh, but He did not take it. And they crucified Him and divided His garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. (Mark 15:23-24)

It seems heartless for the soldiers to gamble over Jesus’ clothing. The Man who had last worn it wasn’t even dead yet—He was hanging on a cross, right over their dice game! And yet the soldiers would have defended themselves, if we said so. “Cloth is expensive and hard to come by,” they might have said. “Waste not, want not.” But they weren’t the only ones recycling that day. Jesus Himself was doing something almost the same.

Think about the Garden of Eden, right after the first people rebelled against God and doomed the whole human race to misery. Why didn’t God just wipe them out and start over with a newly created species? It was what we deserved. Why should He bother any more with us?

But He did. Against all logic, God decided to try to salvage us—to recycle us—to go beyond that, even, and make us something higher and better than we had ever been. He came looking for us in the Garden. He promised to send us a Savior, Jesus, who would redeem us from our evil and make us new and clean again. How? In the costliest way possible—by becoming human, suffering, dying, and then rising again for us. God wants us, wants me, wants you—and so He gives Himself for us.

Lord, thank You for loving me and making me Your own. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you tend to mend broken things, or to throw them out and buy new?
- What do you possess that you love even though it is broken or otherwise undesirable in the eyes of other people?
- In what specific ways is the Lord mending you?

FOR THE LORD'S USE

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of His disciples and said to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it." ... And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and He sat on it. (Mark 11:1-2, 7)

It's a strange choice Jesus made. "Go bring Me a donkey colt that no one has ever ridden on. Tell them the Lord needs it!" He chooses to ride this animal and no other during the triumphant procession into Jerusalem.

Why does Jesus need an untrained colt? If it were up to me, I'd choose a very well trained animal indeed—especially if I were planning to ride it through crowds of people! Offer me an untrained colt and the only thing I'd be thinking is all the trouble it would cause me—and maybe whether my health insurance was up to date!

But then, this is typical of Jesus, isn't it? He chooses a young woman from the back of beyond to be His mother. He chooses twelve ordinary laymen to be His students and church builders. He chooses us—you and me—to be His own.

There are so many times when I look at all the mistakes I've made in Jesus' service and I think to myself, "He could have chosen much better." Maybe you feel like that, too. But Jesus' opinion is the only one that counts. He wants you, and He will have you—even if He has to suffer, die, and rise again to get you. That is how much you mean to Him.

Lord, thank You for choosing me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever trained an animal? What was it like?
- When have you made a choice in your life that looked foolish but you're happy with it?
- What does it mean to you to know that Jesus wants you—you specifically!—and won't be happy with a substitute?

HOMETOWN BOY

He went away from there and came to His hometown, and His disciples followed Him. And on the Sabbath He began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard Him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to Him? How are such mighty works done by His hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us?" And they took offense at Him ... And He marveled because of their unbelief. (Mark 6:1-3, 6a)

Sometimes a PhD in English isn't much use. When my son was about eight years old, he had questions about his grammar homework. I tried to help him, but he wouldn't trust me. "You're just my Mom," he said. "But Mrs. X is a real teacher!"

I stifled my laughter until I was out of earshot. But the same thing happened to Jesus, didn't it? The people of Nazareth heard His wisdom and saw His miracles, but none of that was good enough. They couldn't get past the fact that He was a close neighbor—a hometown boy whose family still lived among them.

We do this to Jesus too, don't we? As long as God is creating worlds and throwing lightning, we listen to Him wide-eyed. But let Him come down into our world, as a human being just like us—well, that's a different matter!

And yet that's the greatest miracle of all—that God would love us so much He would humble Himself to become a man, to live and to suffer and die upon a cross—all to make us His family. In that love He offers us a share in His eternal, resurrected life, for us to receive with joy.

Lord, thank You for humbling Yourself for me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Did anyone ever underestimate you because they knew you too well?
- Is it easier or harder for you to trust a stranger on important matters?
- What makes it hard for the people you know to trust Jesus?

VULNERABLE

And He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belts—but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. ... So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them. (Mark 6:7-9, 12-13)

Jesus is in a hurry to get the Good News out—and so He sends out His apostles to preach and teach and heal. And to make that possible, He gives them the one thing He knows they'll need—authority over demons.

But look at what He does *not* give them! No duffel bag or suitcase. No food for the road. No wallet. No extra clothes—I suppose they must have borrowed from others on laundry day! No authority over human beings—if they didn't listen, the most the disciples could do is walk away.

That must have made them feel incredibly vulnerable. And there are times Jesus does this to us, too. He sends us to show God's love to people in situations where we feel terribly vulnerable—confused, afraid, untrained, not knowing the right things to say or do. He says, "I will be with you," and that is enough.

And it is enough—because we soon discover that He gives us what we need when we need it. Looking back weeks or years later, we see that He had control of the situation the whole time. He was using us to bring others to Himself—to the One who made Himself vulnerable so that we would be saved—even to the point of suffering, dying, and rising again.

Lord, help me to trust You when You send me into difficult situations. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever forgotten to pack something you really needed?
- What is a situation where God is sending you to do something for Him now?
- What has He provided you with to get the job done?

NO PASSERBY

And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry His cross. And they brought Him to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull). (Mark 15:21-22)

Simon must have felt like the unluckiest man in all Jerusalem that day. There he was, minding his own business, on his way into the city during the Passover holiday. The next thing he knew, he was caught up in someone else's execution parade, carrying the man's cross, bound for Golgotha.

How horrifying! How embarrassing! Why, anybody might see him, Simon, carrying that cross. They would probably assume that he himself was the criminal. And there was no way of getting out of it—getting the Romans angry at you was never a good idea. How Simon must have squirmed!

It looked like bad luck—but it wasn't luck at all that brought Jesus to that place, stumbling toward Golgotha and the cross that would soon carry Him. Jesus was no passerby, and His cross was borrowed—from us. Jesus was stumbling toward Golgotha by His own free will and intent, carrying out God's plan to rescue all of us from sin and the power of the devil.

Chances are good Simon became a Christian later on. Mark mentions his sons' names, which suggests they were known in the church. If so, Simon would have realized the great honor that fell to him that day—to carry Jesus' cross, while Jesus Himself carried all our sins and brokenness away from us forever. And in their place, Jesus gives us His joyful, innocent, everlasting life—the gift of His resurrection.

Lord, thank You for carrying me and setting me free. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What is the heaviest thing you have ever carried?
- Have you ever had "bad luck" which turned out to be a great blessing?
- Why do you think God allowed Jesus to have this moment of weakness, which Simon helped Him with?

HELPLESS

And the soldiers led Him away inside the palace (that is, the governor's headquarters), and they called together the whole battalion. And they clothed Him in a purple cloak, and twisting together a crown of thorns, they put it on Him. And they began to salute Him, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they were striking His head with a reed and spitting on Him and kneeling down in homage to Him. And when they had mocked Him, they stripped Him of the purple cloak and put His own clothes on Him. And they led Him out to crucify Him. (Mark 15:16-20)

I find it very disturbing, that sentence—"they stripped Him of the purple cloak and put His own clothes on Him." It sounds very much as if Jesus could no longer dress or undress Himself. The scourging, the hitting, the mocking—by this point, He might have been having trouble staying conscious. Pain and blood loss can do that to a person.

We all have our times of helplessness. And when they come, we hope and pray that people we love will be there for us—that they will get us the care that we need, find us a safe, soft bed, give us a chance to heal while others carry our burdens for us. None of that applied to Jesus.

And why? Because He was carrying our burden. He became helpless for us—because we were already helpless in the power of evil. He took our place, rescuing us from the power of sin, death, and the devil.

And He was glad. Jesus rejoiced to save us. Even today He would do it again in a heartbeat, if it were necessary. He delights in you, and He counts you well worth the price—of pain, death, and even helplessness. You are the one He loves—forever.

Lord, thank You for loving me so much. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When have you been most helpless?
- How have you cared for helpless people?
- What does it mean to you, that God became helpless?

DARKNESS

Herod on his birthday gave a banquet ... when Herodias's daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl ... "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." ... And she said, "The head of John the Baptist. ..." And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. ... When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. (Mark 6:21b, 22a, 23, 24b, 27, 29)

John's death reminds us that faith in Jesus is not a fairytale—that sometimes things go badly, badly wrong, even for believers, and yet God is still in control. John was the final prophet born by miracle, who was to go before Jesus and prepare the way. And yet look how he died—unjustly, alone in prison, seemingly abandoned by God and by Jesus Himself.

It would have been easy for John to lose faith—to decide that there was no God, or that God was untrustworthy and not worth serving. He must have wondered why Jesus did not do a miracle and get him out of prison. And in the dark nights when we face a new cancer diagnosis—when we sit by the phone, fearing it will ring—when we come to the end of a marriage or the loss of someone we love—we may have doubts, too.

And yet—we know the Lord. We know what He is like—that He loves us, that He lay down His life for us, that He warned us ahead of time we would have trouble—and that He promised always to be with us. He has shown us these things in our lives. We may not be able to hold on to Him—but He can hold on to us, even in the darkest times.

Lord, hold on to me when I cannot hold on to You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When do you have doubts?
- How do you cope with these doubts?
- What does it mean to you, to know that God allowed John to face such a difficult end?

INSULTS!

But immediately a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit heard of Him and came and fell down at His feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, a Syrophaenician by birth. And she begged Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." But she answered Him, "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." And He said to her, "For this statement you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." (Mark 7:25-29)

Who would have ever expected Jesus to insult somebody—especially a helpless woman with a sick daughter? It just isn't like Him. And so this story drives us crazy. What does it mean?

But maybe we are missing something. Notice that Jesus never says no to her. Instead He says something about the children being fed first, before the dogs get any. And then He watches for her reaction.

She could have started crying and walked away. But she didn't.

Why? Because she's a desperate mother with a sick child. Who cares about the insult?! No mother in that situation is going to give up. No, she's going to keep bugging Jesus. And so, quick as a flash, she brings up the puppies under the table.

How delighted Jesus must have been! Now there's faith for you—faith that stands up in God's very face and refuses to be knocked down. No wonder He said to her, "For such a statement you may go your way—the demon has left your daughter." Because we knew all along He was going to heal the child, right? When did Jesus ever leave such distress unhelped?

Lord, even when it seems like You are against me, help me to keep trusting in Your love. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you usually react to insults?
- Have you ever felt that God was against you? When?
- When have you seen God suddenly turn a bad situation around?

BLIND VIOLENCE

And Pilate again said to them, "Then what shall I do with the Man you call the King of the Jews?" And they cried out again, "Crucify Him." And Pilate said to them, "Why? What evil has He done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify Him." So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas, and having scourged Jesus, he delivered Him to be crucified. (Mark 15:12-15)

It has to be one of the scariest sounds out there—to realize that all those people shouting and screaming are angry at you, you personally—that they want to hurt you—that they won't be satisfied until you're dead. That was what Jesus was facing. There He was, standing with Pilate in front of the mob, looking down at screaming faces and waving fists—people He didn't even know, humanly speaking, people He had never had any personal contact with. But they wanted Him dead—and by the worst possible method they could dream up.

If we're lucky, that kind of blind violence is something we meet only in our dreams. But not all of us are lucky. Some of us meet that violence in the street, when we cross the path of someone who is looking for a victim. Some of us meet it at school or in the workplace, on account of our race, ethnic group, looks, religion, or some other characteristic we can't help. Some of us meet it at home, at the hands of an abusive spouse or parent or child. Wherever it comes from, it is terrifying.

This nightmare, also, is what Jesus came to put an end to. If you have suffered this, God knows and cares. God has not abandoned you. God Himself has gone through it—all the way to the bitter end at the cross. And Jesus has risen from the dead, all to give you that same everlasting life—safe in His love and mercy.

Lord, when I am afraid and in danger, help me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- If you are willing, share a time when you felt very much afraid and in danger.
- Why do you think it hurts so much when someone hates you?
- Why do you think God allowed Jesus to experience this?

SON OF THE FATHER

Now at the feast he used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked. And among the rebels in prison, who had committed murder in the insurrection, there was a man called Barabbas. And the crowd came up and began to ask Pilate to do as he usually did for them. And he answered them, saying, "Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?" For he perceived that it was out of envy that the chief priests had delivered Him up. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release for them Barabbas instead. (Mark 15:6-11)

What a shock it must have been for Barabbas when he found out his fate! As a rebel and a murderer, he knew perfectly well he deserved death. But instead, someone else would die. Barabbas would live and go free.

We have no idea what happened to him after this point. Did he mend his ways and live a better life? Did he return to his crimes? Did he perhaps become a follower of Jesus, the Man who took his place? Nobody knows.

Barabbas, whose name means "son of the Father," gets rescued by the true Son of the Father—Jesus. Barabbas the rebel and murderer gets saved by the obedient, holy, life-giving Son of God. And not just Barabbas alone—Jesus lays down His life to save all of humanity, rebels and murderers that we are—everyone who has turned against God and gone their own way. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus makes us true sons and daughters of the Heavenly Father.

Now we are free—free to live for the One who loved us, and gave Himself for us. What could be better?

Lord, thank You for taking my place. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you imagine happened to Barabbas?
- What change has there been in your life situation, because Jesus took your place?
- Have you ever been able to follow Jesus' example in some small way and take someone else's place, paying the price while they gained the blessing?

STRANGE

And some people brought to Him a blind man and begged Him to touch him. And He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when He had spit on his eyes and laid His hands on him, He asked him, "Do you see anything?" And he looked up and said, "I see people, but they look like trees, walking." Then Jesus laid His hands on His eyes again; and he opened his eyes, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. And He sent him to his home, saying, "Do not even enter the village." (Mark 8:22b-26)

This is a strange little story. To begin with, we see Jesus taking a blind man outside the village to heal him—and then forbidding him to go back into the village afterward. Why? We don't know.

Then there's the healing itself. Why spit on the man's eyes? I looked at a dozen sources, and they had a dozen guesses. None of them rang true.

And then there's the two-part healing—Jesus stops in the middle of it to consult His "patient," and then finishes the miracle. I can't think of another time when Jesus does this. Why?

I don't know. But the whole thing is similar to episodes in my life where, even though I was trying to follow God as best I could, things went strange. "Why, Lord?" I asked, as God allowed us to be childless—as the church fell into division—as we got laid off from our missionary work and had to scramble to keep bread on the table.

Maybe that's the point—that God is saying, "Shhhhh—that's not your business," and instead directing us to keep our eyes on the main event. Which is Jesus, helping and healing and saving—even in unusual ways!—even, finally, saving us through a shameful death on the cross. That's enough. My questions can wait for later.

Lord, when I don't understand what You're doing, help me to trust You anyway. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What question would you most like to ask Jesus?
- What do you do when you can't understand what God is doing?
- Can you think of times in your life when you understood God's choices only afterward?

COMMITMENT

And Jesus went on with His disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way He asked His disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they told Him, “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.” And He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered Him, “You are the Christ.” And He strictly charged them to tell no one about Him. (Mark 8:27-30)

“Well, that escalated quickly!” My son says that when we have a conversation that starts off on the surface and then goes super deep. Peter might have said the same about this episode.

Jesus starts out with a safe, general question—“Who do people say that I am?” And the disciples have no trouble giving Him answers. After all, it’s just hearsay. It doesn’t matter to them whether the answers are right or wrong, realistic or outrageous. They’re not the disciples’ own answers, so who cares?

But then Jesus goes for the throat. “And who do you say that I am?” He asks. Now that one’s scary. Because you don’t want to get it wrong—not right to Jesus’ face. But it’s a really big step to say what you’re starting to believe—that He’s the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of God! No wonder Peter was the only one to speak up!

It goes deeper. If you say, “You are the Christ,” then you have just committed yourself, haven’t you? From now on you are going to have to follow this Man—obey whatever He says—stick with Him through thick and thin. You have to, because He’s the Christ and you’ve admitted it. There’s no turning back.

Thank God, the commitment goes two ways. Jesus has committed Himself to you, since long before that manger in Bethlehem. He committed Himself to rescuing you, to forgiving your sin and healing your brokenness—to giving you eternal life. If you are His, He is also yours. Thanks be to God!

Lord Jesus, keep me with You always. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When did you have to answer an awkward question?
- Are you ever afraid of commitment? Why?
- What does it mean to you, that Jesus has committed Himself to you forever?

THE KING OF THE JEWS

And as soon as it was morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council. And they bound Jesus and led Him away and delivered Him over to Pilate. And Pilate asked Him, “Are You the King of the Jews?” And He answered him, “You have said so.” And the chief priests accused Him of many things. And Pilate again asked Him, “Have You no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against You.” But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed. (Mark 15:1-5)

It’s pretty clear that Pilate’s time with Jesus was centered around one charge only: “Are You the King of the Jews?” That is the only question Jesus was willing to answer with a polite first-century way of saying “Yes.” The other charges didn’t matter, and Jesus didn’t dignify them with an answer. But King of the Jews? That mattered.

To Pilate, the question probably meant “Are You an upstart political leader who is planning to rebel against the Roman Empire?” Pilate was a practical man; he wanted to know if he was facing another rebellion.

But to Jesus? The Old Testament makes it very clear who the King of the Jews, the King of Israel, was: God Himself. God calls Himself by this Name several times: “I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King” (Isaiah 43:15). (See also Isaiah 44:6, Zephaniah 3:15). Is Jesus this King? Oh yes! He is the Lord who rules everything—and who will give up everything to save His people, even when they reject Him.

This is the King we have—a King who reigns from the cross, whose crown is made of thorns and whose royal robes are His own blood. He is our King as well, whether we are Jews or Gentiles. And He has become our Savior.

Dear Lord, I acknowledge that You are my King and my Savior. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What are kings supposed to do? What are they like?
- How is Jesus like those ideas? How is He different from those ideas?
- What does it mean to you, that Jesus is your King and your Ruler?

POWER

And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came ... and said, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus." But he denied it ... And he went out into the gateway and the rooster crowed. And the servant girl saw him and [said], "This man is one of them." But again he denied it. And after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know this Man of whom you speak." And immediately the rooster crowed a second time. And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, "Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times." And he broke down and wept. (Mark 14:66, 67b, 68, 69-72)

Peter had power on his mind that night. The power of the guards to recognize him and arrest him. The power of the council to take away his life—just as they were in the process of doing for Jesus. No wonder Peter hid in the shadows!

But he didn't consider the small, powerless things—the servant girls, the rooster. He forgot all about them—until they turned his world upside down. And Peter forgot all about the guards and the council, as he broke down weeping. All he could think of was Jesus.

It seems to me that God likes to do that—likes to use the small, weak things to turn our lives around. After all, it is God's power working through weakness that saves us. A newborn baby, lying in a manger—a flogged, naked Man, nailed to a cross—the resurrected Lord who looked so ordinary that Mary mistook Him for a gardener. As Paul said, "We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, ... Christ the power of God ... for the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Corinthians 1:23-25).

Dear Lord, thank You for saving me through Your powerful weakness. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Tell about something weak that was unexpectedly powerful for you.
- Do you consider yourself weak or powerful?
- How has God used you to care for other people?

SEEING HIS DISCIPLES

And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. And He said this plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. But turning and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind Me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." (Mark 8:31-33)

I'm caught by one phrase in this story that describes what Jesus did when Peter started telling Him not to talk about the cross. It reads, "But turning and seeing His disciples, He rebuked Peter ..."

Jesus deliberately turned and looked at the rest of His disciples first. There's got to be a reason for that, or why would the Holy Spirit put it in the text?

I suppose Jesus could be checking to see if anybody else agrees with Peter—or if they are paying attention. But knowing Jesus, I think it might be a third reason.

Peter has just suggested that Jesus should avoid talking about the cross. No, more than that, should avoid going to the cross altogether—should turn away from God's plan to save us—should save Himself from all the pain ahead.

But that would have left the rest of us—where? Still on the road to hell. Still suffering the effects of our broken, rebellious hearts. Still cut off from the God who loves us and wants us to live with Him forever.

Jesus turned and saw His disciples—not just the twelve, but you and me. The people He loves—the people He is rescuing. The people He will die and rise for. Nothing will stop Him from making us safe.

Lord, thank You for loving us so much. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Did someone ever try to stop you from doing what you needed to do?
- Why do you do the hard tasks of your life?
- How does it make you feel to know that Jesus has you always in mind?

JESUS ONLY

And after six days Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them, and His clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for You and one for Moses and one for Elijah." For he did not know what to say, for they were terrified. And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, "This is My beloved Son; listen to Him." And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only. (Mark 9:2-8)

Peter was impressed. Elijah and Moses were there, talking to Jesus—two great heroes from the history of Israel! And like so many people do under pressure, Peter started babbling. "Let's make three tents, one for each of you!" What in the world did he mean?

It sure sounds like Peter wanted all three of them to stick around with the disciples up on that mountain. It also sounds like he was putting Moses and Elijah on the same level as Jesus. Poor Peter, you are so confused!

God put a stop to that nonsense right away. "This is My beloved Son," He says. "Listen to Him!" Don't babble. Don't worry about the distinguished visitors. Keep your eyes on Jesus! He is the center, the only One who matters.

Jesus is enough. In the end, it doesn't matter if we're up on an emotional mountaintop, or down in the valleys of suffering—whether we keep company with the great or get ignored with the poor. Jesus our Savior is with us.

Lord, thank You that You are mine and I am Yours. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you get nervous around important people?
- Given who Jesus is, are you shy around Him? Why or why not?
- When has it helped you to focus on Jesus in your life?

TELL ME WHO

And some began to spit on Him and to cover His face and to strike Him, saying to Him, "Prophesy!" And the guards received Him with blows. (Mark 14:65)

It sounds a bit weird. Why were people saying, "Prophesy!" to Jesus when they were hitting Him? If we look at the same story in Matthew, we find the answer: They were playing a sick game. They had Him blindfolded so He could not see, and whenever they hit Him, they would say, "Prophesy to us, You Christ! Who is it that struck You?" (Matthew 26:68).

A sick game—but a very easy question for Jesus to answer: Who hit Him? Someone He came to save. Someone He loved before the beginning of the world. Someone He would suffer and die for, in just a few more hours. Someone who needed Him desperately, whether they knew it or not—needed His forgiveness, His love, His mercy, His gift of everlasting life.

And so Jesus stood there and took the beating—not just for the sake of those who hit Him, but for us as well, whose sins sent Him to the cross. Who did it? Me. You. All of us. And who loved us then, and loves us now, and will love us forever, sharing His everlasting joy and life with us? Jesus.

Lord, we have no words but "thank You." We love You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When you were a child, did your family ever ask you who did something? When?
- Is it difficult for you to read about what Jesus went through for you?
- Does it help at all to remember that He loves you wholeheartedly and holds none of that against you, ever?

CONFESSION OF LOVE

And they led Jesus to the high priest. And all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together ... seeking testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, but they found none. ... Again the high priest asked Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" And Jesus said, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven. ..." And they all condemned Him as deserving death. (Mark 14:53, 55b, 61b-62, 64b)

Jesus didn't say much when He was on trial before the priests and elders. The court was supposed to get their testimony from eyewitnesses. But in Jesus' case, that didn't work. If Jesus Himself did not speak, they weren't going to get a conviction.

But Jesus did speak. He answered the high priest's question: "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" He would not deny His Father, even by staying silent. There was only one answer He could give, loving God the Father as He did—and that answer was Yes.

But He did even more than that. He confessed: "You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power." The title "Son of Man" has a lot of meaning packed into it, but the most basic meaning is clear: Jesus is human, one with the people He came to save. He will not deny us either. He confessed His love for the Father and for us in the same sentence. And then He enacted that love at the cross—obeying the Father, and rescuing us from the power of evil.

Thank You, Jesus, for loving me even though it meant Your death. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- If someone wanted to make you talk, what would they have to do?
- How do you confess or show your love for people in your life?
- How has Jesus gone on showing you love, even after His death and resurrection?

LOVED

A man ran up and knelt before Him and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said ... "You know the commandments: Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother." And he said to Him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (Mark 10:17b-18a, 19-22)

He was trying. He was trying so, so hard! "I have kept all these commandments from my childhood," he said to Jesus. But he wanted to go beyond that—to have something that would guarantee him eternal life. He was sure Jesus could tell him what it was.

And Jesus looked at that earnest, religious man and loved him. So He told him the truth. The man's riches had become more important to him than anything—even God. Jesus offered to reverse that: trade your riches for God, trade your wealth for Me. I am your eternal life.

The man couldn't face it. He went away sorrowful. And Jesus? He grieved, too. He loved him! And Jesus loves us too—even when we get it wrong, when we let something or someone become more important to us than Jesus Himself. He calls us, just as He called that man: "Come, follow Me!" Why? Because you are loved. Because you are valued. Because God wants you to live forever, so much that He lay down His own life on the cross to make it happen.

Jesus is your true love, your true wealth. And you are what He wants.

Lord Holy Spirit, please make me so that Jesus comes first in my life. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What are your top five priorities in life?
- What do you spend the most time and effort on?
- What one thing is most likely to interfere with your loving and following Jesus?

IN YOUR GLORY

And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to Him and said to Him, “Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You.” And He said to them, “What do you want Me to do for you?” And they said to Him, “Grant us to sit, one at Your right hand and one at Your left, in Your glory.” Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the Baptism with which I am baptized?” And they said to Him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the Baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at My right hand or at My left is not Mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.” (Mark 10:35-40)

I wonder what James and John were imagining. A throne set up, maybe with lesser-seats to either side? Surely they were looking for power and honor—all the things that “glory” usually means.

But Jesus gave them a disturbing answer. He said, in effect, “Are you ready to suffer and die with Me?” Maybe they thought it was a kind of test. So they chorused, “Sure we can!”

But I don’t think it was a test. I think it was a description of what Jesus’ glory is really like. He is the King of the universe—who reigns from a cross. Those at His left and right hand are thieves and robbers, nailed up to die. Do you still want those places, guys?

For this is Jesus’ glory—to obey the Father and save all humankind; to love us to the point of death and beyond; to take our place in the grave and raise us to share His everlasting life.

Jesus, thank You for loving us so much. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Did you ever ask for something and then you were sorry when you got it?
- What kind of “glory” are you chasing in your life?
- Which do you prefer to look at—pictures of Jesus on a cross or on a throne? Why?

AN ORDINARY GUY

And a young man followed Him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body. And they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked. (Mark 14:51-52)

Who was the young man? Some people think it is Mark himself, as he is the only one who even mentions the story in his Gospel. It was clearly not one of the twelve apostles—they had already fled. But it was someone who loved and followed Jesus—as long as he could.

So, an ordinary Christian. And not a very well-prepared one, either. He is wearing a linen sheet, not regular clothes. Maybe he was in bed when he heard Jesus and the disciples going out to Gethsemane and decided to follow? Grabbing a sheet might have been his version of grabbing a bathrobe. Clearly he wasn’t expecting anyone to notice him that night—and so he wasn’t prepared for the mob to grab him. He skins out of his sheet and runs for it—the last of Jesus’ followers to desert Him.

What an embarrassing story! And yet, it’s a strangely comforting one as well. This ordinary follower loved Jesus well enough to try to follow, even if it did turn into a total fiasco. And Jesus’ mercy stretched to this minor young man as well. Remember what He said to the soldiers? “So, if you seek Me, let these men go.” He said, and in fact all of the disciples got away (John 18:8b). Not just the important ones—also the ordinary one, the unexpected one—the one like us.

How embarrassing, to run away naked! And yet, in the end, it doesn’t matter. Jesus trades places with us—He covers our shame and nakedness with His own forgiveness and mercy. He takes our nakedness and shame upon Himself. And He brings it all to the cross, to get rid of shame forever—and to clothe us, even us, in His own everlasting life.

Lord, thank You for loving me, ordinary as I am. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you dress if you have to get up at night?
- Tell about a time when you were embarrassed.
- How has Jesus helped you deal with shame in your own life? Only share if you are willing.

AKISS

And immediately, while He was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man. Seize Him and lead Him away under guard.” And when he came, he went up to Him at once and said, “Rabbi!” And he kissed Him. (Mark 14:43-45)

I must say, I’m not impressed with Judas’s choice of a signal. He took a sign of love—a kiss—and turned it into a sign of betrayal.

And yet, if I’m honest, my own kisses hold the seeds of betrayal. Every time I say “I love You” to the Lord, there’s still a tiny, traitorous bit of me that is either doing evil, about to do evil, or recovering from it. Oh, but my evil isn’t like that of Judas. It’s only gossip—only shading the truth—only, only, only. Only a little thing. Only something that led Jesus to the cross.

And realizing that can lead to anguish. How can I ever love God properly if sin gets in the way? What hope is there for me?

And yet... a kiss can start from either side, right? If I kiss the Lord, my betrayal is always with me. But if He kisses me... well, then. There is no evil in His love, no betrayal—only forgiveness, mercy, salvation. That is what the cross was about. That is what the empty tomb was for.

The Bible is right: “Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth! For Your love is better than wine” (Song of Solomon 1:2).

Thank You, Lord, for taking the initiative and bringing us into Your love. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Tell about a kiss you remember.
- When you feel like you’ve let God down, how do you find His comfort again?
- How do you stay focused on God’s love for you?

THINKING

And He entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when He had looked around at everything, as it was already late, He went out to Bethany with the twelve. (Mark 11:11)

I love this verse. It tells us what Jesus did immediately after He rode that donkey into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It was late. Jesus had plans for the temple—plans to clear out the merchants with a whip!—but tonight, no. He would take time.

That’s pretty typical of God’s character, isn’t it? He sees something that needs changing—maybe wickedness, violence, the idolatry the Israelites were forever falling into: maybe a major area of sin in my life or yours. But He doesn’t lose His cool and start throwing lightning bolts. He takes time. He thinks. And He even allows time for repentance—one last chance to get it right, before He makes it right by His own power.

I am glad that God doesn’t lose control—that when He does judge, He does it with love, planning the best possible outcome for everybody involved. As the writer of Hebrews puts it, “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11). And God plans for the worst of it to fall on Himself rather than on us—at Jesus’ own whipping, and when He suffered at the cross. His love and patience is our blessing.

Lord, thank You for Your care for me, even when I need correction. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you know anybody who flies off the handle? How does that make you feel?
- If you must discipline a child or subordinate person, how much do you think about it?
- Is there a time when God disciplined you and you benefited from it later?

A WARNING

On the following day, when they came from Bethany, He was hungry. And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, He went to see if He could find anything on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. And He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." And His disciples heard it. . . . As they passed by in the morning, they saw the fig tree withered away to its roots. And Peter remembered and said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that You cursed has withered." (Mark 11:12-14, 20-21)

This is a strange miracle of Jesus. It's the only one I can think of that is destructive—that kills instead of giving life. But it makes sense four days before Jesus' death, as Jesus is acting out a parable—one last warning to the people of God.

To understand it, you have to know how common figs in Israel grow. They produce two crops a year, the most important one in August or September. But the earlier, smaller "breba" crop is visible at Passover time. It doesn't produce very good figs—a lot of growers don't even bother to pick them—but still, they are a guarantee of the good ones to come. A tree with no breba figs is a tree that will be barren later on, when it really matters.

Jesus is warning God's people. When God comes looking, will there be any fruit—at least the low-quality breba fruit that is a promise for the future? For we are God's fig trees, and our fruit—sin-riddled and low-quality though it may be—is the evidence that we belong to Jesus. He lives in us. The Holy Spirit has made us living trees as we trust in the Lord who died for us and rose to make us His own.

Lord, make me fruitful through Your life living in me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you like figs? Why or why not?
- How do you feel about the Christian fruit in your life?
- Does it comfort you to know God isn't grading the quality of your fruit—that He's just happy it exists?

UNDERSTANDING

And they went to a place called Gethsemane. And He said to His disciples, "Sit here while I pray." And He took with Him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And He said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch." And going a little farther, He fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him. And He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Remove this cup from Me. Yet not what I will, but what You will." (Mark 14:32-36)

We have a woman in our church who always says she is not afraid to die. If she is telling the truth, she is a rare person. The rest of us admit our fear. Death scares us. We worry that it will hurt. We think of it as an enemy, as the Bible says: "The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:26).

How it comforts me, then, to see Jesus facing death with the same horror and sadness and distress. Not that I want that for Him! But it makes me feel better about my own weakness. If the Son of God, who gave Himself for me had those feelings, then I don't need to be ashamed myself. I can lean my whole weight of fear upon Him, knowing that He understands—that He will help—that He will strengthen me, no matter what comes. As Isaiah said, He is truly "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3b). And He is the One who will ultimately lead us up out of death, back to the land of the living, when He raises us from the dead.

When I fear death, Lord, be close to me and comfort me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you fear death? Why or why not?
- What would you miss the most if the story of Gethsemane was not in the Bible?
- Are you facing death right now, either yourself or with someone you love? Ask the Lord for strength and help.

REMEMBERING HOPE

And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. And Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away, for it is written, 'I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." Peter said to Him, "Even though they all fall away, I will not." And Jesus said to him, "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times." But he said emphatically, "If I must die with You, I will not deny You." And they all said the same. (Mark 14:26-31)

It's a strange little sentence Jesus says, buried in the middle of a story about death and denial. Facing betrayal, arrest, torture, and the cross, Jesus throws in one ray of hope: "But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." Already, He is making plans for His resurrection.

Nobody seems to notice. Nobody asks Him what He means. Instead, Peter fixates on the bad news: that everyone is going to fall away from Jesus. The ray of hope is forgotten—for now.

And this is so human, isn't it? The grief and suffering in our lives is easy to see: the blessings are hard to remember. Maybe that's why Jesus had the angels repeat it on the day He rose from the dead: "But go, tell His disciples and Peter that He is going before you to Galilee. There you will see Him, just as He told you" (Mark 16:7).

This is the kindness of Jesus, that even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, He is with us. He will remind us of His salvation every time we forget it—until the day we need no reminding, because God's kingdom has finally come in all its fullness.

Lord, whenever I forget, help me to find hope again in You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you tend to dwell on the dark or light side of things?
- Tell about a time when God used a small thing to comfort you or give you hope.
- When you are afraid, how do you seek God's strength?

COOPERATION WITH EVIL

And He entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and He overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. And He would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. And He was teaching them and saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." (Mark 11:15b-17)

When I noticed Jesus was driving out the buyers in the temple, I wondered if that was fair. After all, they never set up an animal market in the temple grounds. They simply took advantage of it. Why penalize them?

But of course, if no one was willing to buy those animals, the market would have had to shut down. The evil could only continue if buyers were enabling it.

It makes me want to take a closer look at the situations I enable—at the evils that continue because somehow I and other people are feeding money, or time, or attention into them. Jesus will not excuse me as easily as I excuse myself: "I know this is bad, but if I didn't buy this, or watch this, or read this, or enjoy this, somebody else would, so why not?"

Jesus will not excuse me—but He will forgive me. He will send His Holy Spirit into my heart to chase out greed and laziness—to teach me better when I am confused—to turn my heart to be more like His. He will do this because He has paid a high price for me and for you, the highest—His own suffering and death on the cross. He loves us too dearly to allow us to remain involved in evil. He will cleanse us—and give us everlasting life.

Lord, search my heart and make it clean for You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you think the buyers understood why Jesus chased them out? Why or why not?
- What modern evils do you know of that so-called innocent people enable through money or attention?
- Is there an area of your life you'd like Jesus to clean up for you?

WHO CARES ABOUT TRUTH?

And as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to Him, and they said to Him, "By what authority are You doing these things, or who gave You this authority to do them?" Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one question; answer Me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the Baptism of John from heaven or from man? Answer Me." And they discussed it with one another, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But shall we say, 'From man?'"—they were afraid of the people, for they all held that John really was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And Jesus said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." (Mark 11:27b-33)

This story makes me sad. The religious leaders ask Jesus how He dares to throw the merchants out of the temple, and Jesus promises to answer if they give Him an answer first. Did God send John the Baptist, or not?

A simple question—but the religious leaders can't answer it. They are too busy calculating what the effect of their words will be. They never stop for a single moment to ask: What is the truth?

God help us in our world today, for we are in the same boat. There are far too many voices, and far too little concern for truth. Let us cling to the one good Truth that we know—to Jesus, who never lies to us. Then the answers become surprisingly simple: Yes, God sent John. Yes, God sent Jesus—in fact, God came into our world as the Man Christ Jesus, who died to save us and rose to give us true, real life.

Lord, You are the Way and the Truth and the Life. Keep me with You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Is it ever okay to lie, even a little? Why or why not?
- Tell about a time when the truth of some situation made a big difference in your life.
- How did you come to know that Jesus' Good News is true?

IS IT I?

And when it was evening, He came with the twelve. And as they were reclining at table and eating, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me, one who is eating with Me." They began to be sorrowful and to say to Him one after another, "Is it I?" He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with Me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of Him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born." (Mark 14:17-21)

"One of you will betray Me." There were only two people at the table that night who knew exactly what Jesus was talking about at that moment—Jesus, and Judas. The others were in the dark. And yet each of them asked the same fearful, guilty question: "Is it I?"

What was behind that question? A terrible kind of self-knowledge, I think. Each one of them knew that there was something deep in their hearts that could possibly, just possibly, flower into something horrible. Betray Jesus? God forbid. But who could swear that they would never, ever, be capable of something like that?

And so the disciples were humble. They knew themselves, and they trembled.

We tremble too sometimes when we look inside, and we are right to do it. But we must not despair. Instead, we must immediately look to our Savior, Jesus—to the One who knows us through and through and still loves us, still saves us, still remakes us and gives us everlasting life. Because of Jesus we can say with John, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2).

Lord, keep me safe from the power of evil. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you ever worry about the evil you might be capable of? Why or why not?
- When have you been surprised by good in an evil person, or evil in a good person?
- Is it a comfort to know that Jesus knows all about you? Why or why not?

COSTLY

And while He was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as He was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over His head. ... Jesus said, "She has done a beautiful thing to Me. ... And truly, I say to you, wherever the Gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." (Mark 14:3, 6b, 9)

If you went to a dinner party in Jesus' day, there was a good chance someone would anoint you with oil. It was a way of honoring guests—much like we would do, taking your coat and seating you in the best chair and bringing out the best silver for dinner.

But what Mary did went far beyond that. She didn't use oil, but nard—a sweet ointment worth nearly a year's wages. And nard came in a long, thin-necked bottle made of alabaster—maybe the modern equivalent would be jade. You could only get the ointment out by breaking the bottle neck. In Mary's eyes, it was worth it—to love Jesus, to show Him what He meant to her.

I wonder if Mary remembered this when just a couple of days later, Jesus allowed His own body to be broken—His own life poured out—for love of her, and all of us? There is no costlier gift. Jesus' broken body poured out God's mercy on all of us; and His resurrection from the dead means that all of us, everyone who trusts Him, will be welcomed guests in God's kingdom.

Lord, thank You for Your life, poured out in love for me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What is the costliest thing in your house, do you think?
- If you are willing, mention something costly—not necessarily in money!—that you have done because you love Jesus.
- Is there an object, picture, or anything else that reminds you how much Jesus loves you?

WHY?

And He began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard ... and leased it to tenants. ... When the season came, he sent a servant to the tenants to get from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. And they took him and beat him and sent him away empty-handed. Again he sent to them another servant, and they struck him on the head and treated him shamefully. And he sent another, and him they killed. And so with many others ... He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But those tenants ... took him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard." (Mark 12:1-5, 6-7a, 8)

The thing that drives me crazy about this story is the behavior of the owner. One servant after another gets beaten or killed, and the owner keeps sending more people, until his own son gets killed. And I am listening to this story and thinking, "Why on earth didn't you send the police the minute the first guy got hurt?"

It's a fair question. But it would be equally fair to ask the parallel question: Why on earth did God not just wipe out the whole human race the minute we rebelled against Him? Why give us a second chance—and a third, and a millionth, and so on, until we killed God's only Son Jesus?

It seems lunatic. We would advise God to cut His losses. Start over. Make a fresh batch of people, and forget about the spoiled ones.

But God doesn't do this. Incredibly, He has His heart set on the spoiled batch—on us. He will not give up. He will not quit. He will save us—change our hearts—remake us as His own children—even if it costs Him His own beloved Son.

Lord, I can't comprehend this kind of love, but I am glad You love me this way. Thank You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you tend to cut your losses, or do you try to fix broken things?
- What is the most ridiculous thing you have done for love?
- Is it easy or hard to believe that God loves you to this extent? Why?

ASKING QUESTIONS

And Sadducees came to Him, who say that there is no resurrection. And they asked Him a question, saying, ... There were seven brothers: the first took a wife, and when he died ... the second took her, and died ... In the resurrection, when they rise again, whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife." Jesus said to them, "Is this not the reason you are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the dead being raised, have you not read ... how God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living." (Mark 12:18, 20a, 21a, 23-27)

How heavy is the color yellow? What shape is love? Where do shadows go at night?

The question the Sadducees asked is a lot like these. It is a nonsense question—a question that doesn't have a right answer, because the one asking is confused about something far more basic. It's no good asking marriage questions about heaven if people don't marry there! And a lot of human questions about God are like this.

It's not wrong to ask silly questions, or to be confused. But it is a problem if we are too afraid or too proud to ask our real questions—the ones Jesus wants to answer, so that we can trust in Him. Do you fear death, or wonder what happens next? Ask Jesus. Do you wonder if there is a God, or if you can trust Him? Ask. The same Jesus who is patient with doubters will be patient and loving with you. After all, you are His beloved child—the one He died and rose again for.

Lord, help me with the questions that trouble my heart. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you ask a lot of questions, or do you tend to keep quiet?
- Tell about a time when you said, "Oh, now I understand that!"
- What question would you like to ask God now?

THE RIDDLE OF THE INCARNATION

And as Jesus taught in the temple, He said, "How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, until I put Your enemies under Your feet.'" David himself calls Him Lord. So how is He his son?" And the great throng heard Him gladly. (Mark 12:35-37)

There must have been quite a few arguments in Jerusalem that night! The problem Jesus brought up had to do with the Messiah—the One everyone was waiting for, that God would send to save His people. Everybody knew that He would come from King David's family; He would be "the Son of David." God promised that to David long ago.

But then what about Psalm 110? David himself wrote that, and it's clearly about the Messiah. And David calls Him "Lord"! How can this be? Isn't a father always greater than his great-great-grandson? Who is this Messiah, that His own ancestor calls Him "Lord"?

I wonder if any of the people arguing that night managed to figure it out. Because this riddle is only solvable if you know that Jesus, the Messiah, is both God and Man—human and divine. As a Man, He is David's son; as God, He is David's Lord.

But this is more than just an academic exercise. Who Jesus is matters to us, because of what Jesus was going to do just a few days later. Only a man could rightly pay the debt of human beings; it's only fair. But only God Himself could be strong enough, holy enough, worthy enough to redeem the whole world at once. Only God could defeat the power of death and the devil, and bring us all to everlasting life.

Who Jesus is affects what Jesus does. He is God, He is Man—He is our Savior.

Please bring me to know You better, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What is your favorite riddle?
- When in your life have you not been recognized for who or what you are?
- What does it feel like, to have God as a member of your own human family?