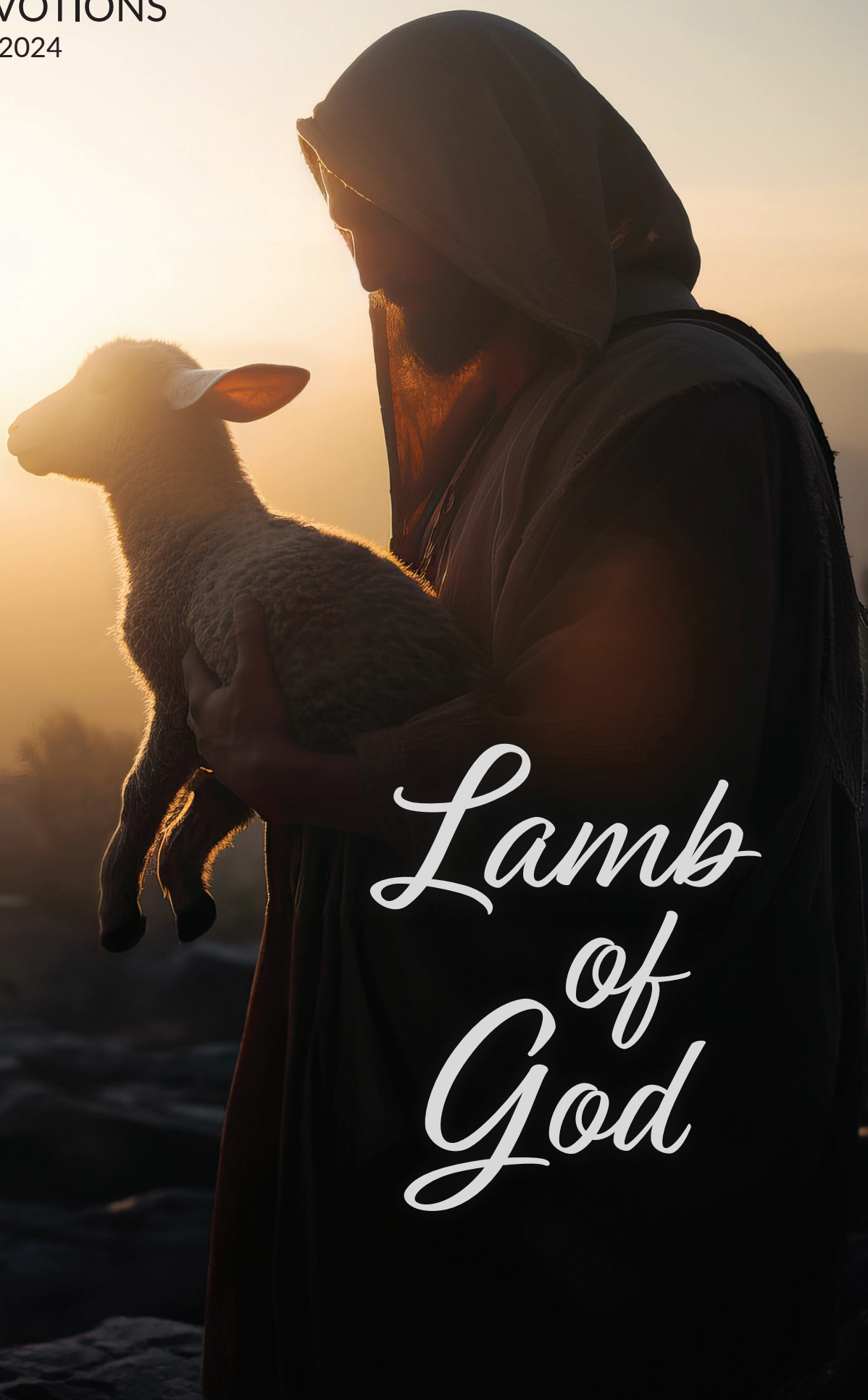




DEVOTIONS

Lent 2024



*Lamb
of
God*

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

*Lenten Devotions were written by Dr. Kari Vo.
Brought to you in partnership with Lutheran Hour Ministries*

MAKING GOD KNOWN

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him ... In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us ... No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, He has made Him known. (John 1:1-3a, 4-5, 14a, 18)

What is God really like? What does He think of me? Can He deal with my brokenness—all the things in me that make me want to hide from the light? Can I trust Him to take care of me—to love me, to protect me, and not to abuse me?

These are some of the most important questions we will ever ask. Everything depends on the answers, because we cannot escape God. No matter how strongly we try to ignore Him, sooner or later reality forces us to deal with Him. And He holds all the power in our relationship, so—what is He like?

The Holy Spirit tells us plainly: When we see Jesus, we see God. Jesus is God come down from heaven to be a human being, one of us—a real Man, full of grace and truth. Loving, teaching, healing, listening, suffering, dying, and rising again—this is God in action. God has come into the world to seek you out—to rescue you from the power of evil, and to make you His own beloved child forever.

Lord Holy Spirit, help me to see God in Jesus during these next few weeks. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Pick three words to describe Jesus, from what you know of Him.
- Why does the Holy Spirit call Jesus light in the darkness?
- Why do you think one of Jesus' names is "the Word"?

THE LAMB OF GOD

The next day [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ... I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on Him. ... And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God." (John 1:29, 32b, 34)

I wonder if Jesus shivered, hearing John call out, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" After all, everyone knew what happened to lambs of God. They were sacrificed—turned into burnt offerings at the temple; offered and then roasted for dinner during Passover. Lambs had died to save the lives of Israel's children on the night God rescued them from slavery (see Exodus 12). To be a lamb of God was to be special, dedicated, holy—and doomed to die.

Certainly Jesus would have known this from childhood. His parents were devout, and they took Jesus with them to the temple at Passover time (see Luke 2:41-43). He would have seen with His own eyes what happened to lambs. And yet, both as Son of God and Son of Man, He went forward with His mission. He never turned back.

And that is our salvation—that Jesus loved us so much He came into this world, God becoming Man, to become our sacrifice. He willingly chose to lay down that life, the life of the innocent Lamb of God, on the cross—setting us free from death and evil. And now, because He has risen from the dead, we who trust in Him will rise also—never to die again.

Dear Lord, thank You for giving Yourself for me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What ideas do you think of, when you think of lambs?
- How early would you guess Jesus understood His mission on earth?
- What kept Jesus from turning back at any point on the long journey to the cross?

WEDDING GIFT

On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with His disciples. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come." (John 2:1-4)

I love the fact that Jesus did His first miracle at a wedding feast—turning water into roughly 150 gallons of the finest wine. What a wedding gift!

And yet, there's a darker note in this story. Jesus says to Mary, "My hour has not yet come." This is the exact language He uses to refer to His suffering and death in other places (see Mark 14:41; John 7:30, 8:20, 13:1). What does the cross have to do with wine for a wedding feast?

Throughout the Bible, God uses the image of a wedding feast to describe what it will be like when He brings all His people home forever, to live with Him eternally. It will be a time of feasting and celebration—and wine is a symbol of happiness. But you can't get wine without crushing grapes—and from the grape's point of view, that's pretty painful!

Jesus knew His future—as the Holy Spirit says, "It was the will of the Lord to crush Him; He has put Him to grief" (Isaiah 53:10a). No wonder His mind went straight to the cross. And yet He's completely willing, even glad, to give us this wonderful gift. As always, He goes above and beyond—to give us life, joy, and salvation.

Thank You, dear Lord, for Your generous love. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you think the family reacted when they found out what Jesus had done?
- Do you think Mary understood what Jesus was talking about?
- When have you seen God being generous to you?

CLEANING OUT THE TEMPLE

In the temple [Jesus] found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And He poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And He told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; do not make My Father's house a house of trade." (John 2:14-16)

Would you expect to find an animal market in the middle of the temple courts? I wouldn't. Flies, stink, the sound of sheep baa-ing—how is anybody supposed to worship with that going on right next to them?

So Jesus cleans it out. God's house is not going to be a marketplace if He has anything to say about it! And He pays the price—because the temple authorities get their revenge when they crucify Him later.

But that isn't the only temple Jesus cleans out. As Paul says, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16). God knows my heart needs a good cleaning—and I expect you would say the same.

So Jesus provides it. But this time, the whip doesn't fall on the guilty parties. No, it falls on Jesus Himself, during His suffering for us. He takes our sins and evil and carries them away, destroying them at the cross. Through His death He takes them out of the world forever. And now that He has risen from the dead, He gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit—God living in us, in peace and joy forever.

Lord, live within me always. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Why were there animals in the temple?
- Why did the temple authorities care what Jesus did?
- Pray silently: What is one specific thing you'd like Jesus to clean out of your heart?

NO CONDEMNATION

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night ... [Jesus said] “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.” (John 3:1-2a, 16-17)

I think in my heart I've blamed Nicodemus for years. He came to Jesus by night—why? I've always assumed he was afraid. Afraid of what the other religious leaders might say or do, afraid for his own reputation. Right or wrong, I condemned him, if only silently, in my own mind.

But Jesus didn't. He welcomed him. He spoke with him about the kingdom of God. And Nicodemus became a secret disciple of Jesus, until the day when he helped another leader bury Him.

Jesus doesn't condemn us, either. He welcomes us, even if we come to Him secretly, even if we are struggling with our faith. His door is open 24 hours a day.

Jesus reminds us, “God so loved the world” How did He love us? Too much to condemn us or shut the door in our faces. He loves us with a love that brings us face to face with Him and teaches us what we need to know. He loves us by dying for us on a cross, and then rising again to give us—even us!—everlasting life.

Dear Lord, bring me to You in trust and love. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you ever feel judged or condemned by other people?
- Do you ever worry that God will condemn you?
- How is Jesus your comfort when you fear rejection?

LIVING WATER

So He came to a town of Samaria called Sychar ... Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as He was from His journey, was sitting beside the well. ... A woman from Samaria came to draw water. (John 4:5a, 6a, 7a)

Could Jesus ever resist a person in need? Just look at Him! Tired though He is, He sees a woman coming to the well—yet another person God loves!—and Jesus cannot resist talking to her about His mission. It doesn't matter to Him who she is or what she has done, He has something to give her.

So Jesus offers her better water than the kind she has come to fetch—living water!—and of course she is surprised. “Sir,” she says, “You have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do You get that living water?”

What a wonderful question. Because the well *is* deep, if you're thirsty for peace, forgiveness, and everlasting life. No rope is long enough, no bucket big enough. How will Jesus fetch this living water He is promising her—and us?

Jesus does in fact have something to draw with—His own body and blood, given and shed for us at the cross. He gives Himself to fetch that living water for us, gladly and joyfully.

Jesus knows how thirsty we are. He knows we are desperate for the living water only He can give us. And so Jesus goes down—down—down, even into death, to fetch us that gift. He brings it back to us, out of death into life, at His resurrection. And now He quenches our thirst forever with endless love, forgiveness, and salvation.

Lord, give me Your living water to drink. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Name a time when you were incredibly thirsty for something to drink.
- Why does it cost Jesus so much to give us living water?
- How do you think Jesus feels, seeing you drink His living water?

HARVEST WAITING

So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, "Come, see a Man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" ... Many Samaritans from that town believed in Him because of the woman's testimony ... And many more believed because of His word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world." (John 4:28-29, 39a, 41-42)

I have to laugh at what the villagers say to the woman after they finally meet Jesus for themselves. "It is no longer because of what *you* said that we believe." It sounds so much like "Neener neener" in the mouth of a small child. You have nothing to do with my salvation! I don't owe you anything!

To be sure, it isn't kind, but they're correct. Salvation comes from Jesus! We owe everything to Him who lived and died and rose again, all to make us His own. Samaritans, disciples, people in the 21st century—it doesn't matter. He wants us to be His people, His harvest.

You can hear the joy in His voice during a quiet moment with the disciples. In the distance they can already see the whole village coming out to the well to see Jesus, and He says, "Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest." If you trust in Jesus to give you the living water of salvation, you are part of His harvest, part of His joy.

Savior, thank You for making me Yours. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Does it surprise you, to know that you make Jesus happy?
- When did you become a part of Jesus' harvest?
- Who are the people around you who might be ready to hear about Jesus?

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

After this ... Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool, in Aramaic called Bethesda, which has five roofed colonnades. In these lay a multitude of invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. ... One man was there who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had already been there a long time, He said to him, “Do you want to be healed?” (John 5:1-3, 5-6)

It's a strange question, isn't it? Of course a sick man wants to be healed! Why would Jesus even ask?

But then I think again. What does being healed mean? Clearly it will change the man's life in many ways, good and bad. He will have to work instead of lying by the pool. He may become a caregiver instead of a care receiver, a provider instead of a dependent. Some people will adapt to these changes with great joy. Others might have trouble. Does he want this change?

And what about us? Jesus offers to heal us, too—of the sin and evil that have broken and ruined our lives. But that change comes at a cost. For Him, the cost is suffering and death on a cross. For us, a life made new—and some of the newness might be hard or painful. Friends or family might be angry. We might lose out on pleasures or opportunities.

Following Jesus is a great blessing—but it comes at a cost. And so Jesus asks us, too: “What do you want?”

Lord Jesus, help me to want what You want—my life, salvation, and blessing. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What has being a Christian cost you—what are the negatives?
- What are the blessings?
- Why do you think Jesus asks us instead of just rushing ahead with His plans?

LIKE SON, LIKE FATHER

So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you ... whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son ... For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom He will.” (John 5:19-20a, 21)

I have a hard time relating to God the Father. For personal reasons, I simply can't picture Him in my mind or imagine what He is like or what He might do. It's very abstract. And I don't relate well with abstractions. It's kind of scary.

Thank God, He has given people like me something much more concrete to hold on to: God the Son, Jesus Christ our Savior. Do you want to know what the invisible God is like? Take a look at Jesus. See Him in the Gospels, teaching and comforting and healing. Watch Him deal patiently with those who doubt or argue. Listen to Him speaking gently to those who are afraid or outcast. This is what God is like—God in the flesh, come into our world as one of us.

But Jesus does more than that. When His ministry is complete, He voluntarily lays down His life on the cross in order to break the power of death and evil over the whole human race. He doesn't have to, but He chooses to—because He loves us. And now that He has risen from the dead, He shares His everlasting life with everyone who trusts in Him. That's a God I can hold on to and trust and love with all my heart.

Lord, thank You for coming close to us and saving us. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Where did you pick up your own habits and ways of doing things?
- How can you get to know someone you have never seen?
- How do we know Jesus and what He is like?

TESTING

Seeing that a large crowd was coming toward Him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" He said this to test him, for He Himself knew what He would do. Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little." One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?" Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." (John 6:5b-10a)

Testing shows you the way a person thinks—do they give up? Do they get creative? Do they ask for help?

Faced with a hungry crowd, Philip analyzed the finances of the situation. Andrew summed up the resources available. Together they made the need very clear. And then Jesus stepped in and actually met that need.

It's like that for us today, isn't it? We can look at the extent of human suffering—grief, pain, evil, sin, death. We can sum up what's available to meet those needs (never enough). And then Jesus steps in and gives us—not just bread, but Himself. He gives Himself to suffer, die, and rise again, so that we may live forever—healed, forgiven, and satisfied.

When we are tested to the breaking point, the only thing we can do is cry out to Jesus for help. We see the need—but only He can answer it. And He will hear us when we pray. He who gave Himself up for us all, how could He love us less today?

Lord, help me with the problems that face me now. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Did you like or hate tests as a child? Why?
- Tell about a hard time when God provided for your needs.
- What is a major problem you are facing? Ask Jesus for help.

BREAD OF LIFE

On the next day the crowd ... went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus. ... Then they said to Him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent." ... Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to Me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in Me shall never thirst. ... All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never cast out. ... For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." (John 6:22a, 24b, 28-29, 35, 37, 40)

It's not surprising that the crowd wanted Jesus to feed them forever; life would be much easier if we didn't have to work to survive. But Jesus has something more important in mind. He wants these people—and you and me, too!—to have the kind of life that goes beyond mere survival; He wants us to be everything God created us to be, full of love and joy, living in peace with God and each other.

But how can this happen? Jesus tells them: "Come to Me ... Believe." Jesus does the hard work of saving us. He lays down His own life on the cross in order that we may be forgiven and made new, children of God. And when He rises from the dead, He shares that life with us freely, forever—why? Because He loves us. Because He is the true bread from heaven, which God the Father provides so that we may live.

Lord, give Me Yourself as my life forever. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How often do you eat bread (or rice or tortillas)?
- Why does Jesus call Himself bread and not cake or ice cream?
- What hungers has He met for you?

OFFENSIVE

After this many of His disciples turned back and no longer walked with Him. So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” Simon Peter answered Him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that You are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:66-69)

I can understand why Jesus lost so many disciples that day in Capernaum. After all, how often do you hear a man claim to be the One who raises the dead at the end of the world? Or say that if you want life, you have to eat His flesh and drink His blood?

The truth is, some of Jesus’ teachings are downright offensive from a human point of view. What about “No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6b)? That rules out all other religions as a way to eternal life! Or when Jesus says, “I and the Father are One,” or “Your sins are forgiven”? (John 10:30a, Mark 2:5b) Who is this Man, who claims to be God and goes around forgiving people’s sins?

We dare not soften away Jesus’ offensiveness, even to bring people to faith. Peter is right: “You have the words of eternal life.” These sayings will stay offensive until the Holy Spirit brings people to faith.

But we need not add our own offenses to the things that turn people away from Jesus. Hatred, backbiting, or ignoring the needs of others; sex and money scandals in the church—these offenses we can avoid—and must. For Jesus gave Himself for all the people of the world, to bring us back to God forever.

Lord, let my own offenses not stop others from trusting in You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do any of the things Jesus says bother you?
- Do you have experience with being offended by the church?
- How can we avoid giving unnecessary offense?

JUDGMENT OR GENTLENESS?

As [Jesus] passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him. We must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the Light of the world." (John 9:1-5)

Have you ever had somebody judge you for a misfortune that happened to you? "God must have cursed you," they said. "You did something wrong."

That's a horrible thing to hear when you're already suffering. And maybe you begin to wonder: What if they're right?

But Jesus makes it clear that this is wrong. People suffer for many reasons, most of them have nothing to do with punishment. God calls us to react to suffering like Jesus does—with kindness and mercy.

Look at the effect His gentle care had on the man! Within hours the man has been condemned by the religious leaders and denied by his parents. And yet when Jesus finds him later, the man is not complaining. He learns who Jesus is—the One God sent to be our Savior—and he worships Him. As long as he has Jesus, he is content.

We too can find hope, light, and contentment in Jesus. He has given His own life for us, that we might live in the light of His resurrection forever. How could He possibly not help us in our suffering now with all mercy, love, and gentleness?

Savior, be the light in my darkest times. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you prefer day or night? Why?
- Why do you think people often rush to blame those who suffer?
- Tell about a time when Jesus' gentleness helped you.

GOOD SHEPHERD

[Jesus said] "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the Good Shepherd. I know My own and My own know Me, just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep." (John 10:11-15)

The name "Good Shepherd" reminds us of what shepherds do—leading the sheep to good pasture, watching over them and protecting them from danger. But Jesus lays His finger on the one thing that distinguishes a good shepherd from any hired man. He says, "The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep." What is the life of a sheep—or several sheep—compared to the life of a man? And yet, to a Good Shepherd, the sheep are worth dying for, if necessary. They are His, and He is theirs. He will put Himself between them and danger without a second's thought.

So what of Jesus? We are His sheep, and surely He provides for us, leads us, and watches over us. But we call Him Good Shepherd because, when we were lost and in danger of spiritual death, Jesus put Himself between us and the devil. He gave up His own life rather than lose even one of us. What is this but love? And now that He has risen from the dead, we are happy, because we know that we will live forever in His care.

Dear Jesus, thank You that we are Yours and You are ours. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Name someone (other than God) who has cared for you.
- How much have they given to protect you?
- How does that person's sacrifice for you remind you of the love that Jesus has for you?

WAITING

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany ... So the sisters sent to Him, saying, "Lord, he whom You love is ill." But when Jesus heard it ... He stayed two days longer in the place where He was. Then after this He said to the disciples, ... "Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." (John 11:1a, 3-4a, 6b-7a, 14b-15)

I have never understood why Jesus waited two extra days before He went to Lazarus and his family. He loved them dearly! Why wait? Was it just to strengthen the disciples' faith? That seems rather hard on the family.

It's the kind of question I often want to ask God, too. Why allow this evil thing to happen? Why wait so long to help us, Lord?

Jesus never gives us an answer. I suppose at least He's consistent with the way God usually acts! And yet, in the end, He does go to Lazarus—even late, even though everyone has given up hope. And He raises Him from the dead. It's never too late with Jesus.

So what, then? I suppose I just have to let God be God, and wait patiently when I don't understand. But I understand one thing—that God does indeed care. That He cares so deeply that He came into this world as one of us—Jesus Christ our Savior. That He loved us enough to let Himself be betrayed, suffer, and die on a cross, all to break the power of evil over us. Now everyone who trusts in Him will live forever—even if He has to raise us first, like Lazarus.

Lord, I'll try to be patient when I don't understand You. Help me! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What is one thing God has done you don't understand?
- How do you deal with it emotionally?
- How does knowing Jesus help you with this?

NEVER TOO LATE

So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met Him ... Jesus said to her, "I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:20, 25-26)

Martha came to Jesus quickly, before He got to the house. Why? It sounds like she hoped He would raise her brother from the dead. Otherwise what did she mean by saying, "Even now I know that whatever You ask from God, God will give You"?

Jesus promised, "Your brother will rise again." But Martha still wasn't clear. Did Jesus mean the general resurrection at the end of the world? Or something sooner?

Jesus confirmed her best hopes. He said, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." The resurrection is not just some far future event. Jesus, standing right there, face to face with Martha, is the resurrection right now. He is the Son of God, and all power, including the power of life, is in His hand.

And that's still true for us today, isn't it? Jesus is our resurrection too, right now—the Son of God, the crucified and resurrected Savior, who can meet all our needs.

That means it's never too late to ask Him for help, and get it, if the thing we are asking for is in accord with God's will. Never too late to ask for help with sickness, with pain, with dying. Never too late to ask Him to heal the deathly messes we create for ourselves—broken families, ruined marriages, bad jobs, addictions.

Lord, You are my resurrection. Please raise me from the deathly situations I am in. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Why doesn't Jesus raise everybody from the dead right now?
- Think privately: What is a situation in your life that would take a resurrection to get better?
- Pray silently about that.

DISAPPOINTED IN GOD

So [Martha] went and met [Jesus], but Mary remained seated in the house. ... [Martha] went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to Him. ... Mary ... fell at His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." ... Jesus wept. ... But some of them said, "Could not He who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?" (John 11:20, 28b-29, 32b, 25, 37)

I can't help wondering why Mary stayed behind instead of going with her sister Martha to meet Jesus. Was she too upset to go? Was she angry and disappointed in Him?

After all, Mary loved Jesus with all her heart. She knew He could have saved her brother, even from far away. Small wonder if she's upset with Him.

But Jesus welcomes her with all her feelings. He shares her grief. And He shares our grief, too, when someone we love dies—when something terrible like cancer comes into our lives—when a family or marriage breaks up.

It is okay for us to share our feelings with God, even the negative ones. He can cope with them. As long as we will allow Him, He will stay with us even in our grief and anger, and turn our situation to His own good will. After all, Jesus is the "Man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3b) who lay down His life to save us all. And He will certainly raise us up from death, even if we can't imagine it now—just as He Himself has risen and lives forever.

Lord, when I am angry or upset with You, help me! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever been angry or upset with God?
- When?
- Why doesn't Jesus reject us when we are upset with Him?

PRACTICAL

Then Jesus ... came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." ... And Jesus ... said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me." ... He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." (John 11:38-39a, 41b, 43b-44)

It's the practical details that get me. While everyone else is standing around gaping at the miracle, Jesus sees that Lazarus is still tangled up in his grave clothes! So He tells the people to untie him.

It's the same sort of thing Jesus said when He raised Jairus' daughter from the dead. He told them to give her something to eat. Very practical, especially if she'd been too sick to be hungry for a long while!

And then there's Jesus' instructions about His own resurrection. He tells His disciples, "After I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee" (Matthew 26:32b). He's making an appointment with them! But they are too upset to take note. The angels have to remind them again on Easter morning (see Matthew 28:7).

How can Jesus be so practical? I think it's because He has absolute heartfelt faith in His Father. He knows God will raise Lazarus—raise the little girl—raise Jesus Himself. He is certain that His own death on the cross for our sakes will not be the end of Him; and when He rises, He will become the source of everlasting life for all of us who believe in Him. Jesus can be practical, because His resurrection—and ours—is guaranteed.

Lord, strengthen my faith in You! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What else do you suppose Lazarus needed right away?
- Do you tend to be practical, or the very opposite?
- When is your faith in Jesus strongest? Weakest? Why?

STRANGE CHOICE

[Jesus' enemies] said, "What are we to do? For this Man performs many signs. If we let Him go on like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish." He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. (John 11:49b-52)

It seems very strange to me that the Holy Spirit would stoop to speak through the mouth of Caiaphas. After all, he is the high priest who took the lead in murdering Jesus. Why would God use such an evil person to make a prophecy?

But in an odd way, this comforts me as well. If God is humble enough to use even this man for His work, then I don't need to worry that my sins and weaknesses will keep Him from using me. When I fall into sin, I can ask for forgiveness and carry on, trusting that because Jesus suffered, died, and rose for me, I am indeed God's child and my service is treasured by Him in spite of my flaws.

Dear Father, I know my sins and flaws. Please let Your Holy Spirit work through me anyway to Your glory. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How do you serve God in your daily life?
- Do you ever struggle with feelings of unworthiness?
- How does Jesus' cleansing blood take away the need to worry about our personal worthiness?

THANKFUL LOVE

Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for Him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with Him at table. Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. (John 12:1-3)

It looks like giving a dinner party was Lazarus' family's way of thanking Jesus. Martha seems to have used her gifts at cooking and serving—no surprise there. Lazarus was at the table with Jesus. But Mary—what could she do? Something very dramatic—pouring extremely valuable perfume over Jesus' feet, and wiping them with her hair. John tells us that Mary's thankful love was obvious to everyone in smelling distance!

We too have a lot to be thankful for. Jesus has given Himself into death for our sakes, all to forgive us and make us new as children of God. Now that He has risen from the dead, He gives us new everlasting life—starting now, and coming to full bloom when He raises our bodies from death on the day He returns. This is how Jesus loves us—and how can we help but love Him back?

Lord, show me how I can love and thank You in my daily life. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When you are feeling grateful, do your actions tend to be quieter like Martha's, or dramatic like Mary's?
- What kinds of things might you do to thank Jesus and show that you love Him?
- If other people "smell out" your actions of love, what might be the result?

RIDICULOUS

When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of Him but also to see Lazarus, whom He had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus. (John 12:9-11)

This story always cracks me up. The priests plan to kill Lazarus again, and just hope he stays dead this time. It's like a game of Whack-A-Mole!

But the story does a great job of reminding us why believers in Jesus have ultimate safety and joy. After all, we know that Jesus has died and risen again to release us from the power of death; and some day He will raise us from the dead, body and soul together, and we will live with Him forever in His kingdom. If this is true—and we know it is—then what exactly can our enemies do to us now?

If they kill us, Jesus can raise us; if they imprison us, Jesus can release us. If they cause us pain or grief or suffering, Jesus can stop or turn those things to our good; and in the meantime He is always with us, helping us to bear them. They cannot separate us from Jesus, and Jesus has the ultimate say on what happens to us. So where is our enemies' power now?

Lord, I know this is true, and yet I have trouble remembering it and relying on You. Help me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever had someone hate you because of Jesus or Christianity?
- If so, how did you cope with that person?
- How do you find strength in Jesus when others oppose you?

PREVIEW

The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your King is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" (John 12:12-15)

I'm glad that Jesus and His disciples had this one morning of joy and happiness before His final week of suffering began. I think they needed the encouragement! This spur-of-the-moment parade into Jerusalem—with palm leaves instead of banners, and a donkey instead of a great warhorse—this was a preview of the day Jesus comes in glory at the end of the world, the day He comes to reign forever—celebrated by all God's people.

I wonder whether the preview helped as they walked through Holy Week with all of its tension, fear, and suffering. Because of course, this—Jesus' ultimate victory—is what the cross is for. Through His own suffering and death, Jesus breaks the power of evil over the whole human race. And when He rises from the dead, His victory becomes our victory—for everyone who believes in Him will live forever in His kingdom. That's something to look forward to!

Lord, as I walk with You this Lent, help me to remember and rejoice in Your victory for me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Does it help you to get through hard times if you can see your goal up ahead? Why or why not?
- How do you find encouragement when you must suffer?
- What do you look forward to about Jesus' ultimate victory?

“WE WISH TO SEE JESUS”

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip ... and asked him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ... Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:20-21, 22b-24)

Of course they wanted to see Jesus! These were probably Gentile converts, in town for Passover. So they asked the disciple with a Greek-language name to introduce them.

But when Jesus heard about these foreigners, He immediately started talking about His death! “The hour has come,” He said (John 12:23b). “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself” (John 12:32). And after talking a bit more about the cross, “He departed and hid Himself from them” (John 12:36b). Why?

Jesus knew that His short time on earth was dedicated primarily to reaching “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24b). It would be the disciples’ job to take the Gospel of salvation to the whole world after that (see Matthew 28:19). And here were the first Gentiles, right on cue. The Greeks’ coming meant it was time for Jesus to suffer, die, and rise for everyone—and for Jesus’ followers to begin sharing their faith.

Lord, thank You for loving us so much that You became our salvation at the cost of Your own life. Let many more people around the world come to see You as their Savior. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What do you think the Greeks’ reaction was when Jesus went away?
- Do you think they might have stayed in town long enough to witness His death? Pentecost?
- Why do you think the disciple John tells us this story?

WASHING

During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside His outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around His waist. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet (John 13:2-5a)

I'm not surprised Peter cried out when Jesus started to wash his feet. That's a really intimate thing, and how hard it is to accept God Himself putting His clean hands on our dirty feet to help us! We draw back and protest—"No, Lord, that's not right." But Jesus says, "If I don't wash you, you don't belong to Me."

What is He talking about? Not just washing feet—washing hearts. Jesus comes to us, putting His clean, innocent hands on our sinful, corrupt hearts, and washing us clean again. That's intimate, isn't it? He knows the worst of us. That's humbling—that He loves us so much He does this daily, as a matter of course.

Because it's true—if He doesn't wash us, doesn't forgive us, then we don't belong to Him. Every Christian is washed clean by Jesus through His suffering and death on the cross. We cannot keep Him at arm's length if we want to be His—we must let Him do what He wants with us. And what He wants is to make us new, clean, blessed children of God, fit for God's kingdom, living in the joy and hope of Jesus' resurrection.

Let Him wash you.

Lord Jesus, wash me clean—and draw me close to You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever had someone wash your feet?
- If so, how did you feel?
- Why does God want to be so close to us, even when we're dirty?

QUICKLY

After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in His spirit, and testified, “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me.” ... Jesus said to [Judas], “What you are going to do, do quickly.” ... he immediately went out. And it was night. (John 13:21, 27b, 30b)

Why did Jesus say to Judas, “What you are going to do, do quickly”? I don’t know for sure, but I think maybe this is the human side of Jesus speaking. He knows Judas is about to betray Him, and the pain and grief is almost more than He can bear. And so He says, “Make it quick.” Don’t drag it out. Let it be over as soon as possible.

It’s good for us to remember that when Jesus suffered for our sakes, He wasn’t play acting. He wasn’t some remote God pretending to be human, but untouched by human feelings and pain. No, He was and is fully human, and He felt it. He felt the fear, the grief, the pain of betrayal.

Why would God put Himself through that? It can only be for love. God loved us enough to become one of us and to share the most painful parts of our lives. This is how He chose to save us—through betrayal, pain, and death.

But because He has shared our pain, He has opened the door for us to share His peace—His joy—His everlasting life. The same Jesus who was crucified for us has also risen from the dead for us—and He will raise us, too. We will never be separated from Him again, not even by death.

Lord, You came close to me. Let me never be separated from You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What are some events that make you say, “Let it be over quickly”?
- What events do you want to prolong?
- Do you tend to think of God as “out there” or close to you?

LOVING ONE ANOTHER

When [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, "... Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek Me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:31a, 33-35)

You can feel the time pressure on Jesus, can't you? Judas slips out the door to betray Jesus, and within hours Jesus will be laying down His life on the cross to save us all. And He knows it.

So what does He use the time for? He tells us to love. This is how non-Christians will recognize that we belong to Jesus, He says—because we love each other with all our hearts, even to the point of laying down our lives for one another.

If you're like me, your mind immediately goes to all your failures to love! But Jesus isn't trying to burden us. No, He is describing what it is like to live in Him—to be so close to Him that our lives naturally reflect Him, and He lives through us each day.

And what does that look like? Probably not hanging on a cross. But we may well find ourselves babysitting at the last minute—fixing somebody's computer or phone—pulling weeds, cooking dinner, or offering a listening ear. These are the things Jesus does—and today, He does them through us.

Lord, show me what it looks like when You live through me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Is love a feeling or an action?
- Why do you say so?
- What single act of love could you do today because Jesus is loving someone through you?

TRIBULATION

[Jesus said] “Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave Me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with Me. I have said these things to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:32-33)

My family has been serving refugees and immigrants for 35 years now. During that time, we’ve dealt with a lot of crises, our own and those that happen to other people. And I would always say to myself, “We’ll just get through today—this week—this month. Then life will go back to normal again!”

After 20 years I finally figured it out: This *is* what life is like, at least for our family. Crises are not interruptions to our life; crises *are* our life.

No doubt there are some people who do have calm, peaceful lives. But if you are not one of them, that’s okay. Because Jesus is speaking to you when He says, “I have said these things to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

What does it mean, to have peace in Jesus? It doesn’t mean the crises go away. He told us to expect suffering! But it means that we belong to the One who died and rose again to defeat the powers of darkness and to make us His own. It means that He has overcome the world; and because we belong to Him, we share in His victory.

Lord, help me to lean on You, and give me Your peace! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Is your life full of tribulation? Or is it relatively peaceful?
- When trouble comes to you, how do you usually react?
- How do you lean on Jesus when crisis comes?

FATHER

When Jesus had spoken these words, He lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son that the Son may glorify You, since You have given Him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom You have given Him. And this is eternal life, that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. I glorified You on earth, having accomplished the work that You gave Me to do. And now, Father, glorify Me in Your own presence with the glory that I had with You before the world existed." (John 17:1-5)

These words are the beginning of Jesus' high priestly prayer—the last long prayer that He said with His disciples before His arrest in Gethsemane. He is looking back over His earthly mission—from His birth to His ministry, teaching, preaching, and healing. Now the hour has come for Him to die, as God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—planned long ago, to rescue the human race and bring us back in peace to God.

So now Jesus' thoughts turn to the Father who sent Him, who will shortly welcome Him home after His death and resurrection. Because there is love there—not just Jesus' love for us, but the love between the Father and Jesus. The plan to save us was conceived and born in the love of the whole Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And now that love is about to triumph as Jesus brings us back to God, saved and set free forever.

Lord, thank You for drawing me into the love that You have with the Father. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Why does Jesus think of His Father first, and not something or someone else?
- What words would you use to describe Jesus' relationship to the Father?
- What difference does it make, knowing that the Father's love sent Jesus out to save us?

DISCIPLES AND THE WORD

[Jesus said] “I have given [My disciples] the Words that You gave Me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from You I am praying for them. ... for they are Yours I have given them Your Word Sanctify them in the truth; Your Word is truth.” (John 17:8a, 9, 14a, 17)

As He prays, Jesus’ thoughts then turn to His followers, whom He loves so dearly and is about to leave. He entrusts them into the Father’s hands. Up to this point Jesus has guarded them, but now that He is returning to the Father, the Holy Spirit will keep them faithful and safe in the truth.

But where will they find that safety? In God’s Word! The disciples had Jesus to teach them God’s Word for about three years—frankly, I’m a little jealous. But He taught them so they could teach us—so they could hand on what they learned from Him, both in the form of the New Testament and in the everyday life of the church, explaining “This is how Jesus wants us to do things” as the baby Christian church got going.

And now we have this great treasure, God’s own Word, now in printed form—and as audio files and even in online formats. We can hear God speaking to us any time we want—and we can grow closer to Him and come to know Him intimately. He makes Himself available to us in His Word. What could be better than getting to know our Lord Jesus, who died for us and rose again, because He loves us so much?

Lord, help me to come to know and love You better through Your Word. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever read old letters between lovers or relatives?
- If so, what did you learn about the people involved?
- What is one thing you’ve learned about God from the Bible?

PRAYING FOR US

[Jesus prayed] “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me. ... Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, may be with Me where I am ... I made known to them Your Name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which You have loved Me may be in them, and I in them.” (John 17:20-21, 24a, 26)

Jesus ends His high priestly prayer by praying specifically for us—the people who would come far in the future, believing in Jesus because His first disciples spread the Good News about Him. We have never seen, heard, or touched Jesus as they did; but we know and love Him through the work of the Holy Spirit and through the gift of God’s Word. And so until the day Jesus comes back, we carry on sharing the story of how God became a human being to die and rise for all of us. Now everyone who trusts in Him can become children of God, full of peace, joy, and everlasting life.

I’m glad Jesus prayed for us specifically, because it can be hard for us. We know and love a God we have never seen, though He is with us. But because the Holy Spirit is really living in us, Jesus’ prayer is coming true. We are learning every day how to love God and each other. And when we fail, we pray that God will forgive us and make us one again.

Lord, draw me close to You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever had a long-distance relationship with someone?
- If so, what was easy? What was hard?
- How does Jesus live in us?

JESUS IN CHARGE

Jesus ... went out with His disciples across the brook Kidron, where there was a garden Now Judas, who betrayed Him, also knew the place So Judas, having procured a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing all that would happen to Him, came forward and said to them, "Whom do you seek?" They answered Him, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus said to them, "I am He." Judas, who betrayed Him, was standing with them. When Jesus said to them, "I am He," they drew back and fell to the ground. So He asked them again, "Whom do you seek?" And they said, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus answered, "I told you that I am He. So, if you seek Me, let these men go." (John 18:1-2a, 3-8)

It's crystal clear from this story that Jesus is in charge of His own arrest. The soldiers can't even lay hands on Him until He agrees to it!

But Jesus agrees to be arrested, with one requirement—"Let these men go," He says. Jesus is protecting His disciples and getting them safely away from His own danger. He intends to die for them—and for us!—so that they will live.

What a wonderful Savior we have, who walks willingly to the suffering and death, protecting and saving the people He loves! Because this is just the start of His great work. As He lays down His life on the cross, He frees all of us who trust in Him forever from the powers of darkness. And through His resurrection, He raises us to live with Him forever.

Lord, thank You for saving me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Who in your life has protected you from something, small or great?
- Whom do you protect?
- What would you give to protect the person you love most?

A CUP FOR THE PROTECTOR

Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant and cut off his right ear. (The servant's name was Malchus.) So Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into its sheath; shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given Me?" (John 18:10-11)

John doesn't tell us the end of this story—that Jesus healed Malchus' ear, the last miracle of healing He would do before He died for us all. Why? Maybe because John figured the story was well known enough already. After all, the other Gospels had already been written, and it's likely that Malchus himself was a member of the young Christian church.

John focuses on something else—Jesus' reason for stopping Peter. Because Peter is doing what anybody would do when someone they love is under attack, right? He tries to protect Jesus. But this is not the right time for that. Jesus is about to drink the cup of suffering the Father is giving Him—and that means He's the one doing the protecting.

From now on, everything Jesus does is for that one purpose: to destroy the power that sin, death, and the devil hold over God's creation, and to set God's beloved people free to live with Him forever. The price will be very high, as Jesus knows. He will be beaten and mocked and scourged and nailed to a cross. He will endure pain and thirst and shame. And He will carry the sins of the whole world—mine and yours. All of this He will do gladly, to protect us from eternal death and to make us God's children forever.

Lord Jesus, You are my Protector. Thank You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Who is a protector you respect?
- What kinds of protection do the people around you need most?
- What leads a person to protect others, even at the cost of their own life?

WHAT HE WANTED

The high priest then questioned Jesus about His disciples and His teaching. Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask Me? Ask those who have heard Me what I said to them; they know what I said." When He had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, "Is that how You answer the high priest?" Jesus answered him, "If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike Me?" (John 18:19-23)

Jesus points out what everybody knew—that under Jewish law, you were supposed to question witnesses, not the prisoner. If you couldn't find two people who saw the crime and agreed on what happened, the prisoner went free.

Of course, Jesus wasn't going to get a fair trial. His enemies wanted Him dead, and they were willing to trample the law to get what they wanted.

But not Jesus. What He wanted was to see the real lawbreakers go free—you and me and the rest of the guilty, shameful human race. He wanted to see us forgiven and washed clean, at peace with God forever, living in freedom and joy. How?

Jesus took our place. As the innocent Lamb of God, He suffered death for all of us. And now everyone who trusts in Him will share in His resurrection—to a life of joy and peace with God.

Lord, thank You for wanting me to live—and giving Your life to make it happen. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Name one thing you want with all your heart.
- What would you be willing to pay to make it happen?
- Why is Jesus willing to pay such a high price for you?

WHERE HE STANDS

Now the servants and officers had made a charcoal fire, because it was cold, and they were standing and warming themselves. Peter also was with them, standing and warming himself. ... One of the servants of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, asked, "Did I not see you in the garden with Him?" Peter again denied it, and at once a rooster crowed. (John 18:18, 26-27)

Picture the scene. It's the high priest's house, and somewhere inside Jesus is on trial for His life. The lesser people—the servants and soldiers—are waiting outside in the courtyard until they are needed. It's cold, and some of them have made a fire to stand by.

And then there's Peter, waiting to see what becomes of Jesus. He's cold, too. So what does he do? He walks over to stand by the fire—among Jesus' enemies.

That's not a good place to stand, Peter! Of course they challenge him. And he denies Jesus, swearing he doesn't even know Him.

Thank God Jesus didn't make the same mistake. He stands where He has always stood—on our side, against our old enemies of sin, death, and the devil. And that is our salvation. If Jesus were not standing with us—calling us, loving us, suffering and dying and rising for us—where would we be? Nowhere good. But Jesus is Immanuel, God-with-us, and He will never leave us. As our crucified and risen Savior, He stands with us forever.

Dear Jesus, keep me with You! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Can you think of a time when the place you stood showed whose side you were on?
- What does it mean when someone stands by you as a friend?
- What does it mean when God Himself stands by you?

DEFILED

Then they led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the governor's headquarters. It was early morning. They themselves did not enter the governor's headquarters, so that they would not be defiled, but could eat the Passover. So Pilate went outside to them and said, "What accusation do you bring against this Man?" (John 18:28-29)

They wouldn't go inside Pilate's headquarters—the chief priests and others of Jesus' enemies. Why? Because it was Passover time, and they believed that if they entered a place where Gentiles lived, they would become ceremonially unclean—unfit for worship at the temple, unable to eat the holy Passover meal in their own homes.

Of course we see the irony—that while they were worrying about this, they were already stuck in immoral mud up to the eyebrows, because they were trying to kill the Son of God! How could they be so blind?

And yet, if we're honest, we too can think of times we've missed the truth about God because we were hung up over something minor. Because we, too, are broken human beings—people whose own thoughts and words and actions defile them, because those things come from a sinful heart. We cannot make ourselves clean again. Only one Person can do that for us—and His Name is Jesus.

Jesus washes us clean of our defilement and sin through the blood He shed for us on the cross. Nobody else could give us new, clean hearts but the Son of God who died and rose for us. Now we can follow Him into His home with the Father forever—not as defiled outsiders, but welcome children of God forever.

Lord, make me clean and make me Yours. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- What kinds of things make you feel unclean?
- Where does real uncleanness come from?
- Now that Jesus has washed you clean, what will you do next?

WHAT IS TRUTH?

So Pilate ... said to [Jesus], "Are You the King of the Jews?" ... "Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You over to me. What have You done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world" Then Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus answered, "... For this purpose ... I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to My voice." Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" (John 18:33, 35b, 36a, 37-38)

Pilate is having a bad, bad day. He has an explosive political case dumped on him in the middle of Passover, when it might cause a riot in the city. Jesus' accusers have no case, though it's clear they want Him dead. And now Jesus is talking philosophy! No wonder Pilate asks, "What is truth?" and walks out without waiting for an answer.

It's a shame he didn't wait. For he was face to face with truth—God's truth, Truth incarnate in the form of a human being. If Pilate had listened, he might have had all his deepest questions answered by the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. As it was, Pilate misses out. His encounter with Jesus becomes just one more step toward the cross.

And yet, there is still hope—for you, me, and maybe even Pilate. Because hanging on that cross, Jesus will take on the lies of the devil and destroy them. Through His death He will break the power of evil forever. And when He rises from the dead on the third day, He will give life to everyone who will trust in Him.

Lord, You are Truth. Keep me safe with You! Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you think Pilate might have heard and believed after Jesus rose from the dead?
- Why does truth matter, anyway?
- What truth has Jesus told you that is a comfort to you?

GETTING THE RIGHT ONE

After [Pilate] had said this, he went back outside to the Jews and told them, “I find no guilt in Him. But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?” They cried out again, “Not this Man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a robber. (John 18:38b-40)

Pilate is trying to pull a fast one. He knows that Jesus is innocent, and that the chief priests want Him killed. But he also knows Jesus has many fans among the ordinary people of Jerusalem. So he gambles. He offers to release Jesus according to the Passover custom.

But the chief priests outmaneuver him. They get the crowd to shout for Barabbas.

It wouldn't be the first or the last time people made the wrong choice. By asking for Barabbas, they got a robber and murderer instead of an innocent Man—an evil man instead of the true Son of the Father. Barabbas would go free, and Jesus would go to the cross.

And yet ... that means they got their Savior after all.

Because God the Father sent Jesus into the world to lay down His life for us—to give Himself willingly into death in order to rescue all of us. The wrongheaded crowds. The wicked chief priests. The undeserving Barabbas. You. Me.

Through Jesus' willing death and resurrection, we got our Savior after all. Praise be to God!

Jesus, I'm so glad You are my Savior. Thank You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you think Pilate was surprised by how his scheme turned out?
- Do you imagine Barabbas ever found out who took his place on the cross?
- What about you—how do you feel about the One who took your place?

IMAGINING

Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged Him. And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on His head and arrayed Him in a purple robe. They came up to Him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and struck Him with their hands. (John 19:1-3)

It is hard to imagine the soldiers doing these things. It hurts. Flogging Jesus until the blood ran and He had trouble staying conscious. Putting a purple robe on Him and a reed in His hand for a royal scepter. Jamming a crown of thorns on His head. Bowing before Him ...

That part I can imagine. Because that is what I would like to do myself, looking in the face of the One who loved me and all people so much that He willingly went through with all this—suffered all this pain and shame, in order to rescue us. Because of course He didn't have to. He could have called God's angels to rescue Him at any time (see Matthew 26:53). But then what would have happened to us, trapped by the power of evil?

No. It was love that made Jesus go through with it, all the way to the cross and the borrowed tomb. And it was love that raised Him from the dead on the third day, full of joy and happiness—because He had saved the people He loved so much. You. Me. All of us, everyone who will trust in Him. We will be with Him forever.

Lord Jesus, thank You for what You did for me. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you remember the first time you heard the story of Jesus' suffering and death?
- If so, what effect did it have on you?
- If not, what effect do you think it has on new audiences today?

TWO CROWDS

Pilate went out again and said to them, "See, I am bringing Him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in Him." So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold the Man!" When the chief priests and the officers saw Him, they cried out, "Crucify Him, crucify Him!" (John 19:4-6a)

It's horrifying that Pilate would let things go so far with an innocent man. Was he trying to play on the sympathies of the crowd? Did he think that they would have pity on Jesus, so clearly half-dead, and beg for Him to be let go?

If so, Pilate reckoned wrong. They cried out all the louder for His death.

It's never safe to rely on the sympathy of a mob. When we get together in large groups, we are capable of doing evils that would shock us individually. It is as if the large crowd made the seeds of evil in our hearts sprout and bloom.

And yet ... Jesus looked out on that bloodthirsty crowd, those people just like us, and what did He see? The people He came to die for. The people God had made at the beginning of the world and grieved to see them fall into ruin. The people that Jesus loved in spite of everything, that He would buy back from evil with His own blood.

And some day, from God's holy throne, Jesus will look out at the same crowd of humanity—all of us redeemed by His act. And we will be singing and waving palm branches and crying, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:10b)

I love and worship You, dear Lord. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever been in a frightening mob?
- Why do you think it is easier for crowds to do evil than for individuals?
- Do you think any of those in the mob became believers later?

AFRAID

The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and according to that law He ought to die because He has made Himself the Son of God." When Pilate heard this statement, he was even more afraid. He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are You from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to Him, "You will not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You and authority to crucify You?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over Me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered Me over to you has the greater sin." (John 19:7-11)

Pilate is afraid. Jesus' enemies have just brought up the possibility that Jesus might be something supernatural. Pilate is a Roman, and his culture is full of stories of gods and demigods—and the revenge that they take when human beings mistreat them. Now he's worried about Jesus.

Really, it's a pity Pilate didn't take warning and refuse to go any further with Jesus' case. At least, it would have been better for Pilate!

But maybe not for us—because Jesus is different from those Roman gods and demigods. He is gracious and merciful, and has come into the world, not to punish sinful human beings, but to cleanse, forgive, and restore us to God. His death and resurrection are good news for us—because they are the way He brings us home to the true God of peace.

Thank You, Lord, that You are gracious. Help me to trust You and not be afraid. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you know much about Greek and Roman gods? What about gods from other religions?
- Would you feel safe around any of those gods? Why or why not?
- How is Jesus different from them? Give examples if you can.

WHO IS YOUR KING?

From then on Pilate sought to release Him, but the Jews cried out, “If you release this Man, you are not Caesar’s friend. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar.” So when Pilate heard these words, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judgment seat Now it was the day of Preparation of the Passover. It was about the sixth hour. He said to the Jews, “Behold your King!” They cried out, “Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him!” Pilate said to them, “Shall I crucify your King?” The chief priests answered, “We have no king but Caesar.” So he delivered Him over to them to be crucified. (John 19:12-13a, 14-16)

Who is your king—the person to whom you give your ultimate loyalty? How far will you go to serve that person? Pilate had to choose between treating Jesus justly and keeping in Caesar’s good books. If Caesar heard bad things about him, he could order Pilate’s death. So when the crunch came, Pilate folded.

What about Jesus’ enemies? For years they had resisted calling Caesar their king. For example, they refused to display his emblems in the temple on grounds that this would be an offense to God. But when they saw the chance to get what they wanted—the death of Jesus—they also folded.

It’s fair to say that your king is whatever rules your life, whatever your heart prizes most of all. God calls us to trust in Jesus as our King—our crucified and risen Savior, the One who gave Himself for us out of sheer love and mercy.

Lord, let Your Holy Spirit give me faith and love to serve You always as my true King. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- After Jesus, what is most important to you?
- Have you ever had to choose between two important people or things?
- How did you choose?

BETWEEN US

So they took Jesus, and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. There they crucified Him, and with Him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. (John 19:16b-18)

It feels right to me that Jesus is crucified on the cross in the middle. There He hangs, between two thieves—among sinners, as He has always been for us. Jesus does not keep Himself separate from us. He does not stand off to the side, a little distant, to avoid getting involved in our mess. No, He is right there with us—in the middle, suffering with us.

But He does more than that. He is there within reach, where we can see and hear Him. We can cry out to Him for help and be sure He listens. What religion has a God like this, who comes so near to us that He shares our very death with us? Who has a Savior who chooses to leave heaven to hang on a cross in public shame, surrounded by the people He came to save?

And our sins hang on Him—all our guilt, all our shame.

“Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; ... upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4a, 5b).

Jesus is with us, even now. And because He died and rose again for us, we who trust in Him will be with Him forever in His kingdom.

Lord, I am so glad that You are with me always. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Does it matter that God has experienced death? Why?
- Where do you most need Jesus to be with you?
- Tell about a situation in which you relied on Him to be present and help you.

INHERITANCE

When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took His garments and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also His tunic. But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom, so they said to one another, "Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be." This was to fulfill the Scripture which says, "They divided my garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots." (John 19:23-24a)

According to Roman custom, a man's executioners inherited the last effects from His body. Whatever clothing He still had at the cross was theirs to claim. And so we see the soldiers sitting below the cross, gambling for Jesus' tunic, dividing up all He had.

I would like to draw back from that picture—to say it has nothing to do with me, that I would never behave that way. But the fact is, I am one of Jesus' executioners and so are you. Every human being who ever rebelled against God and needed to be rescued, forgiven, and set free from death—we are responsible for Jesus' death. We had a hand in His execution.

And so we are inheritors—but not of clothing. No! By His own free choice, all of us who trust in Him inherit much better things. He gives us His own innocence, holiness, and purity to cover our sin. He gives us His own everlasting life in the place of death. As the Son of God, He gives us son- and daughtership in the family of God.

Lord, You have made me Yours forever. Thank You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever inherited anything?
- If so, based on what relationship?
- How has our relationship with Jesus changed as a result of our inheritance?

HONORED BY HIS TRUST

Standing by the cross of Jesus were His mother and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing nearby, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then He said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. (John 19:25-27)

Jesus entrusted His mother to John's care. It was one of the last things He did as He was dying on the cross. He saw Mary's need for care—and perhaps John's need as well—and He gave them to each other.

What an honor that was for John, to be so trusted by Jesus! But if we think so, it's an honor we can share. Because the same Jesus who said "Behold your mother" to John has said to us, "As you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me" (Matthew 25:40b).

This is the honor He gives us: to take care of the poor, the sick, the lonely, the vulnerable, the ones nobody notices or cares about. It may be something great or something minor—a ride to the doctor, a phone call to check on them, a gift of tomatoes from your garden. You might help with someone's taxes or straighten out a paperwork tangle for them. Whatever you are doing, you are doing for Jesus.

And what an honor that is, to show love to the One who loved us first—so much He lay down His life for us!

Dear Savior, show me how to love You through Your people. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How much does God notice of the everyday things you do?
- Name one tiny thing someone did for you that showed the love of Jesus.
- What could you do for someone to pass that love along?

THIRSTY

After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst." A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to His mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished," and He bowed His head and gave up His spirit. (John 19:28-30)

Jesus was thirsty, just before He died. It isn't surprising—He had lost a lot of blood, and had had nothing to eat or drink since dinner with His disciples the night before. And He was utterly helpless—hands and feet nailed to the cross.

So He said, "I'm thirsty." And someone took pity on Him and dipped a sponge into the sour wine the soldiers brought to drink, and put it on a branch to reach His lips.

What a human thing for Jesus to complain of! And no surprise, for this is God become a Man, one of us—born for us, and now thirsty, suffering, and dying for us on a cross. Why? Because He loves us. Because He wants something more than water, more than life itself—He wants you to be safe and forgiven and beloved and His own forever.

Lord Jesus, I want You to have what You desire. Let me be Yours. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- When can you remember being incredibly thirsty?
- What was it like when you finally had a drink?
- What does it mean to you, to know that God desires you as His own?

EYEWITNESS

So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the [men] ... who had been crucified with Him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb ... They laid Jesus there. (John 19:32-35, 41a, 42b)

John sounds terrified, at least to me. He is describing something he finds strange and scary—how water and blood came out after a soldier used a spear to pierce Jesus' side. Medical doctors will tell you blood had pooled around Jesus' heart, and the red blood cells had separated from the clear, watery serum. John is no doctor, and he probably doesn't understand all that is going on. But he is absolutely set on telling us what he saw, so "that you also may believe."

Because of John's eyewitness testimony, we can be certain that Jesus laid down His life on that cross for us—for real, and not as some fake or sham. He truly paid the price for our salvation. Nothing remains of our sin. And we who trust in Him will live forever—just as Jesus Himself has risen from the dead, and gives us joy, peace, and life.

Thank You, Lord, for letting us know what really happened, so we can trust in You. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Have you ever been a witness in a court case?
- Why are eyewitnesses important?
- Why does it matter if Jesus really died or not?

CLINGING TO JESUS

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early [and found Jesus' body gone]. ... She turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, "Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to Him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God.'" (John 20:1a, 14b-17)

Mary was the first to see Jesus alive again, even if she did mistake Him for the gardener! But when she recognized His voice, it sounds like she grabbed Him and would not let Him go. Well, wouldn't you behave the same way if someone you love was alive again all unexpectedly?

But He said to her, "Don't cling to Me!" This wasn't the time for clinging—it was the time for running! For there were so many people who had to hear the good news that God had raised Jesus from the dead.

The time for us to cling to Jesus would come later—now that He has already ascended and sits at the right hand of the Father. Now we can cling to Him with full trust and great joy, knowing that He always lives to intercede for us with the Father.

Lord, help me to cling to You in faith and also go and tell Your good news. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- How would you behave in Mary's shoes?
- Did the disciples believe her story?
- Who could you tell about Jesus? Pray for that person.

FISHING WITH JESUS

Just as day was breaking, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, do you have any fish?” They answered Him, “No.” He said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in, because of the quantity of fish. ... When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it. (John 21:4-6, 9)

The disciples were probably antsy, waiting for Jesus. Why not go fishing? But they had no luck until the next morning when Jesus came to them. Under His direction, they caught a huge amount of fish.

But when He said, “Come and have breakfast,” they found that Jesus had some fish already.

What is all this about fish? In Jesus’ parables, fish represent the people He came into the world to save—the ones He suffered, died, and rose again for, so they might live in peace and joy, being children of God forever. And now He is sending out the disciples—and us!—to go fishing for the lost people He so desperately wants to bring home.

But we can’t do it alone. Jesus has to guide us, or we’ll never find them. And even when we do have a wonderful catch, there are still people He has caught for Himself, and we have no idea how or when. Does it matter? Our dear Lord and Savior does everything well—and gives us the privilege of being involved in His mission!

Lord Jesus, thank You for catching me to be Your own. Use me in Your love. Amen.

Reflect & Discuss

- Do you like fishing? Why or why not?
- What makes fishing for people different from fishing for fish?
- How did you come to know Jesus and trust in Him?

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