

**Prepare** is designed to help us grow closer to God. For the seven Sundays leading up to Easter, Pastor Keith will speak on the last statements of Jesus on the cross. This daily devotional guide will help us reflect deeper on those statements. As a result, we'll be affirmed by Jesus' great love for us and encouraged to share the hope that is within us.

Please join us on this amazing journey as we thank Jesus for His gift of our salvation!

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Hodge". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letter of "D" being particularly large and decorative.

David Hodge & the Discipleship Team

SUNDAY, MARCH 1

## GUILTY AS CHARGED

*Luke 23:40-41 (NLT2)*

***“Don’t you fear God even when you have been sentenced to die? We deserve to die for our crimes...”***

During the Lent season, Pastor Keith is giving us a closer look at the words spoken by Jesus from the cross. These words reveal the tender heart of God for us and His amazing love demonstrated for us through Jesus. On Ash Wednesday, we officially began the series on the last seven words of Jesus by reflecting on the untapped well of forgiveness that Jesus has for the worst of sinners. In today’s message, we heard about the amazing offer of salvation by Jesus to the penitent thief on the cross. Jesus gets two different reactions from the criminals hanging beside him that day. One of the guys basically said, “OK, big shot, since you claim to be so powerful, right now would be a great time to prove it! Why don’t you flex your Messiah muscles and get us out of this mess?!” The other thief had a different reaction. This thief was aware of his own sinfulness and the reality of God’s judgment. Not only was his humble attitude his first step toward salvation but it’s the first step of every wayward sinner toward Christ. We won’t see our need to have faith in Christ without a keen awareness of our sinfulness before a Holy God. In Jesus’ first public sermon, he dealt with this very issue. Jesus said, “God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs” (Matthew 5:3 NLT2).

### REFLECTION

Why do you think God is drawn toward the humble rather than the proud? When have you felt the heaviness and hopelessness of sin in your life? How has Jesus helped you escape the guilt that was weighing you down?

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## PRAISE

The penitent thief was fully aware of the holiness and wrath of God toward sin. He was also aware of something else amazing about God. God himself wants to shelter us from His own wrath! On the cross, we see both the guilt of man and the grace of God. Today, praise Him for the shelter of grace we have through Jesus.

MONDAY, MARCH 2

## NO ORDINARY MAN

*Luke 23:41 (NLT2)*

*"...but this man hasn't done anything wrong."*

The penitent thief on the cross knew why he was being crucified. He was a criminal. He was found guilty of his crimes. "But Jesus?" he thought. "Why is he treated with such cruelty?" Turning to the arrogant thief on the other cross, he shouts, "This man hasn't done anything wrong!" Those within earshot of his words would be surprised at his words. "What man could claim to be perfect?" The penitent thief claimed what others who had been around Jesus also came to believe. Jesus was more than a man; He was the perfect Son of God in human flesh. Pilate could find no fault in his words (Luke 23:4-22). The Roman centurion saw an innocent man crucified (Luke 23:47). God the Father saw Jesus and was "well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Jesus' closest friends and followers did not find any evil in his actions (1 Peter 2:22; 1 John 3:5). Jesus was no ordinary man. If Jesus had sinned once, he would have been unworthy to carry our sins. He would have been accountable for his own guilt. The good news is that Jesus was the perfect Son of God who became the perfect sacrifice for our sins. "For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:21 NLT2).

### REFLECTION

Why is it important to you that Jesus become a man and experienced the same kinds of temptations and trials that you experience, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:14-16)? What current struggle do you need Jesus to help you get through right now? Write a prayer to Him in the space below.

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# PRAISE

Jesus is the only one qualified to carry your sins and be your perfect sacrifice. Thank Jesus today for living a sinless life, despite the many temptations he faced. Thank Him for dying for your sins on the cross once and for all.

TUESDAY, MARCH 3

## REMEMBER ME

*Luke 23:42 (NLT2)*

***Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.”***

Time was running out. The penitent thief only had a few hours left. The blood was draining from his body. Each breath was getting more and more difficult. In a word, he was desperate. He turns to Jesus and makes a simple but audacious request: “Remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” His words are filled with insight into what it means to experience salvation. First, let’s think about the things that he didn’t bring before Jesus. He didn’t bring his list of year-end tax-deductible charitable contributions. Nor did he talk about how much better he was in comparison to other criminals. And he didn’t hand Jesus a list of all the hip churches he had attended. Instead, he brought one thing before Jesus. This thing caused Jesus to take notice and offer him a place in heaven. He brought the only thing he could bring – his faith. He believed that Jesus was a King over a kingdom not of this world. He believed that the grace of Jesus could cover his sins. He had faith that Jesus could do for him what he couldn’t do for himself. Simple words of faith uttered from a place of deep desperation. As a result, one man’s eternity changed forever.

## REFLECTION

Why do you think our faith is what pleases God more than anything else? If you don’t pray for big things often, what is holding you back? What are some simple but audacious requests you need to ask Jesus for today?



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4

## TODAY

*Luke 23:43 (NLT2)*

*And Jesus replied, "I assure you, today..."*

When the sun rose that Good Friday, the penitent thief was looking at his last day on earth. For him, "today" meant death and condemnation. Little did he know that in a few short hours, "today" would hold a very different meaning. The thief found hope in the most hopeless place imaginable in his day – the Roman crucifixion site. Dying next to him was the One who held the keys to death, hell, AND heaven. What he received that day was the promise of an immediate entrance into heaven after death. The Apostle Paul was convinced of this reality. "We would rather be away from these earthly bodies, for then we will be at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8 NLT2). Jesus made no mention of purgatory or soul sleep. The promise that Jesus gave in that instant had a time stamp on it: "Today." The thief began his last day on earth with no prospect of pardon or hope. In a few agonizing hours, he would take his last breath. Because of his faith and Jesus' offer of grace, hope crashed the party that despair was throwing on the thief's behalf. Today, through faith in Jesus, you have that same hope. The moment you close your eyes in this world, you will open your eyes in the next. Who will be the first in line to see you? The One who would rather die than spend eternity without you.

## REFLECTION

Why do you think Jesus doesn't require that we go through purgatory or intermediate training before entering heaven? What does Jesus' offer of immediate entrance into heaven after we die say about God's grace and desire to be with us?



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# PRAISE

Praise God for His amazing grace through Jesus. Thank Him for giving us immediate access into His presence the moment we take our last breath on earth.

THURSDAY, MARCH 5

## YOU WILL

*Luke 23:43 (NLT2)*

*And Jesus replied, "I assure you, today you will..."*

Jesus didn't mince words. He didn't have to mull it over first. When the penitent thief asked Jesus to remember him in His kingdom, Jesus didn't want him to wonder or worry. Without hesitation, the conquering King assured him, "You will be with me today in paradise." There was no might, maybe, or possibly. Jesus wanted him to know that his place in heaven was secure. In fact, John, one of Jesus' closest friends, wanted us to have this same assurance. In his account of Jesus' life, he plainly stated: "I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13 NLT2). The former murderer and persecutor of Christ-followers, the Apostle Paul, had this assurance. "I know the one in whom I trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until the day of his return" (2 Timothy 1:12 NLT2). On the cross that day, Jesus looked to be in no position to guarantee anyone entrance into anything. Yet, that's what He did for this thief. And, that's what He can do for you.

## REFLECTION

What about Jesus' promise to the penitent thief encourages you the most? How would you respond to someone who wants to know about the assurance you have that you'll go to heaven when you die? What would you share with this person about how they could have the same assurance?

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## PRAISE

Take a moment to praise Jesus for His ability to deliver on the promise of heaven for you. Thank Him for the assurance that the Holy Spirit brings to our hearts when we have placed our faith in Him.

FRIDAY, MARCH 6

## BE WITH ME

*Luke 23:43 (NLT2)*  
*“you will be with me”*

Jesus' greatest desire in that moment wasn't to call down the armies of heaven to rescue Him. Nor was it to give a lecture about the consequences of sin. Instead, the overriding desire in His heart was for this desperate criminal to be with Him in heaven. Jesus didn't have many breaths left to describe what heaven would be like. So, he boiled it down to its bare essence: “you will be with me.” Don't speed by these words or you'll miss the point. Salvation is a relationship. It begins here on earth and continues throughout eternity. Knowing Jesus begins with an invitation by the Holy Spirit at the door of our heart. To the lukewarm church at Laodicea and to all sinners, Jesus beckons: “Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends” (Revelation 3:20 NLT2). Being a Christ-follower does not primarily mean that you follow a certain set of values or that you perform good deeds. Yes, those things are important, but any lost person can do those things. Jesus wants to be your best friend. He wants to hear from you. He wants you to listen and obey His voice. He wants you to trust Him with your life. The reason that God created you and sent Jesus to die for you was that He wanted a relationship with you.

### REFLECTION

What habits in your life indicate that you are seeking a relationship with Jesus? What might need to change about your approach to following Christ that could make it more personal?

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## PRAISE

As you spend time with your best friend Jesus today, take some time to praise Him for being that faithful friend who sticks closer than a brother. Thank Him for being your constant companion and source of strength and joy.

SATURDAY, MARCH 7 &  
SUNDAY, MARCH 8

## PARADISE

*Luke 23:43 (NLT2)*  
*“in paradise”*

What the thief heard from Jesus may have sounded like something out of a dream. Jesus wanted him to know it was anything but a dream. Jesus told him about a real place where they would reunite that day. Jesus called it “paradise.” This was a Greek term that used throughout the Greek translation of the Old Testament as “garden.” In Genesis it referred to the original paradise, the Garden of Eden, a place of beauty, joy, and rest. To the Jews it meant the place where the righteous would live in eternal bliss and rest. What was once corrupted by Adam and Eve’s sin would be restored. The Bible tells us there will be reunion (1 Thess. 4:17-18), rewards (Luke 6:35), responsibilities (Luke 16:10-11), rest (Revelation 14:13), and rejoicing (Revelation 19:5-6). But most important of all, in Paradise, there you will find Jesus, the One who gave His all and paid it all for you. What did the thief do to deserve a place in paradise? Absolutely nothing except to repent and believe in the One who was dying next to him ... and for him.

## REFLECTION

What are some of the things you are looking forward to about heaven? Who are some of the believers already in heaven that you are looking forward to reuniting with? How would you describe heaven to someone who doesn’t know Christ?



MONDAY, MARCH 9

## BETTER TOGETHER

*John 19:25 (NLT2)*

*Standing near the cross were Jesus' mother, and his mother's sister, Mary (the wife of Clopas), and Mary Magdalene.*

In yesterday's message, we studied the loving words Jesus spoke from the cross to His mother. Mary didn't come to the place of her son's crucifixion alone. Jesus' mother arrived at Golgotha in a small group of women. They watched Jesus suffer in excruciating pain together. They watched Jesus struggle for his next breath together. They cried together. They grieved together. The mention of these other women accompanying Mary shouldn't be lost on us. By including these women in the story, God is sending us a message. We are better together. This is the same message God sent to us through Solomon. "Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble. Likewise, two people lying close together can keep each other warm. But how can one be warm alone? A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken" (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 NLT2). In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul details our need for community by comparing the church and its members to a body. "If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad" (1 Corinthians 12:26 NLT2). Only in regular contact with ordinary, imperfect believers can we learn real fellowship and experience the deep connection God intends for us. This is why Dogwood has LifeGroups. If you haven't found a place to belong and grow, check out which groups are available and find a group that is right for you.



## REFLECTION

Make a list of challenges when it comes to joining a small group community of Christ followers. Now, make a list of the benefits. In your estimation, why is it worth the extra effort of making small group involvement a priority in your life?

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## PRAISE

List up to three friends who you would feel comfortable calling at 3:00 AM if you were experiencing a crisis. In your prayer time, pray for these friends and thank God for bringing them into your life. Thank Him for what they mean to you.

TUESDAY, MARCH 10

## TRUE FRIEND

*John 19:26 (NLT2)*

*When Jesus saw his mother standing there beside the disciple he loved.*

Simon Peter made a valiant but misguided effort to defend Jesus by wielding his sword in the garden. After Jesus was arrested, he went to Annas' courtyard while Jesus was interrogated inside. But, when confronted by a servant girl, he adamantly denied knowing Jesus (he did so two more times). By daybreak, it wasn't just Peter who had left Jesus. All the disciples had gone into hiding except for one – John. At the cross, we find John standing near Jesus giving whatever emotional support he could offer. In John's gospel, he calls himself "the one that Jesus loved." Jesus loved all the disciples, including Judas, but John was especially close. Of the twelve, one betrayed Jesus and ten ran away for fear of arrest. John was the last man standing. He was a true friend who lived out the adage, "A true friend walks in when everyone else is walking out." In a crisis, a true friend is the first one to arrive and the last one to leave. True friends are there for each other. They want the best for each other. This Easter, you can be a true friend to someone who doesn't have a church home or know Jesus personally. Think and pray about who you could invite to attend Dogwood's Easter services in April.

## REFLECTION

What are the qualities of a true friend that are important to you? How have you exhibited one of the qualities recently? What is one way you can demonstrate one of these qualities to someone this week? With Jesus? What might need to change about your approach to following Christ that could make it more personal?

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## PRAISE

Give praise to Jesus for being that true friend who won't run out when the going gets tough. What are some ways that Jesus is a true friend to you? Thank Him for being that faithful friend who will never leave you nor forsake you.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11

## LOVE NOTICES

*John 19:26 (NLT2)*  
*When Jesus saw his mother...*

Would you have blamed Jesus if He didn't notice who was standing nearby? His mind is weary from a night without sleep. His eyes are filled with blood and sweat. In the middle of His pain, Jesus locks eyes with his mom and sees the pain in her eyes. He knows that she will need care after He is gone. This wasn't the only time that Jesus stopped abruptly to notice someone. The crowds were pressing in, and the disciples were pushing people away. A woman who had been suffering for twelve years touched his cloak and finds healing. After sensing the power come out of Him, Jesus stopped and asked who touched Him. Was He angry because touching the woman would have made Him ritually unclean? Was He frustrated? Nope. He was interested. He wanted to know the woman's name. But more than her name, He wanted to hear her story. All of it. "She came shaking with fear and knelt down in front of Jesus. Then she told him the whole story" (Mark 5:33 CEV). After seeing her faith and hearing her heart, He decides to call her "Daughter" (Mark 5:34 CEV). To Jesus, she was now family. In a matter of minutes, Jesus restored her dignity and forever changed her destiny. Why? Because love notices.

## REFLECTION

Which loved one in your life deserves more of your focused attention? What steps do you need to take to ensure that you hear what they are saying and notice what they are feeling? Also, think about those you interact with daily that you may not know well. What is one thing you can do to ensure that you notice the people God puts in your path?



THURSDAY, MARCH 12

## FAMILY FIRST

*Exodus 20:12 (NLT2)*

***Honor your father and mother. Then you will live a long, full life in the land the LORD your God is giving you.***

God entrusted Jesus with the most important task in history. Jesus is busy paying for the sins of the world, yet He takes time for His mom. While the weight of the world's sin was on His shoulders, His family was on His mind. Jesus sees his mother in pain and grieving, so he asks John to take care of her needs for the remaining days of her life. If Jesus can make His earthly family a priority while dying on the cross, we have no excuse for not prioritizing our family. Honoring parents is a priority found in the ten commandments (Exodus 20:12) and is also reiterated in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus. "Honor your father and mother" (Ephesians 6:2 NLT2). There is no time limit attached to this command. This not only applies to our childhood but our adult years as well. Despite the clear directive of Scripture, some followers of Christ were neglecting the basic needs of their families. The Apostle Paul addressed the problem in no uncertain terms. "But those who won't care for their relatives, especially those in their own household, have denied the true faith. Such people are worse than unbelievers" (1 Timothy 5:8 NLT2). For the follower of Christ, this value is crystal clear: family comes first.

### REFLECTION

What are some ways that children honor their parents? What are some ways that adults can honor their aging parents? Make a list of some ways that you can put your family first this week.



FRIDAY, MARCH 13

## SERVE THROUGH YOUR PAIN

**Acts 20:35 (NLT2)**

***“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”***

In giving His life for us, Jesus endured tremendous physical and emotional pain because of the joy it would bring. “Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God’s throne” (Hebrews 12:2 NLT2). In God’s economy, giving and serving are always linked to joy. The Apostle Paul endured many trials in his missionary journeys. Despite difficult circumstances, he served and gave because of the joy it brought. In the face of intense trials, notice what Paul does and what Paul has. “We serve God whether people honor us or despise us, whether they slander us or praise us... Our hearts ache, but we always have joy. We are poor, but we give spiritual riches to others” (2 Corinthians 6:8-10 NLT2). Despite his circumstances, Paul served and gave. And as a result, he always had joy. Jesus told His disciples that “it is more blessed (happy) to give than to receive.” Selfishness is the primary joy stealer that followers of Christ will battle. Start living for yourself, without regard for others, and watch your joy evaporate. Get the attention off yourself, start serving others, and watch your joy flourish. If you are having a bad day, lend a helping hand. If you are stressed, ask someone how they are doing. Serve your way through adversity and come out the other side with joy. Jesus did it, and so can you.

### REFLECTION

How has giving brought you more joy than receiving? What current difficulties are trying to steal your joy? What are some activities you can do this week to help you shift your focus off self and onto helping others?



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## PRAISE

Praise God for being a God of joy who wants to share His joy with His children. Thank Him for the joy that He brings regardless of the difficult circumstances you may be facing.

SATURDAY, MARCH 14 &  
SUNDAY, MARCH 15

# THE MINISTRY OF PRESENCE

*John 19:27 (NLT2)*

*And from then on this disciple took her into his home.*

Jesus knew that His mother was a widow facing much uncertainty about the days ahead. In Jesus' culture, a widow's best hope for security would be her son's ability to provide for her. Society did not provide for them, and the law did not let them inherit her husband's estate. So, they had to depend on hand-outs and were objects of pity. When He told Mary that John would be her son, a huge burden lifted from her shoulders. John didn't sign up to bring a hot meal over to her house one night. This was bigger. In John's words, "from then on this disciple took her into his home." John provided for Mary's material needs, but most of all, he gave her companionship. Mary would need someone to remind her of the words Jesus said, and the miracles Jesus did. She would want someone to go with her to the empty tomb and tell her all the promises Jesus made. Mary would be like a mom to John, and John would be like a son to Mary. In bringing her into his home for the rest of her life, John gave Mary the best gift of all - his presence. Even when he couldn't find the right words to say, his presence said it all.

## REFLECTION

Can you think of a time when someone's presence meant a lot to you during a difficult time? Can you remember what they said or just that they were there with you? Who do you know that is going through an especially difficult time? How can you exercise the ministry of presence in their life this week?



MONDAY, MARCH 16

## MY GOD IS HOLY

*Habakkuk 1:13 (NLT2)*

*But you are pure and cannot stand the sight of evil.*

Yesterday we continued our study of the words Jesus from the cross. Between noon and 3pm, the land was darkened, and silence pervaded the scene. Then, Jesus broke His silence and shouted, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" To understand what happened during those three hours, we need to understand two big concepts: the holiness of God and the ugliness of sin. Today, let's consider God's holiness. In Revelation 4:8, the angels address God as "Holy, holy, holy." The holiness of God means that God is distinct, separate, and in a class by Himself. God is perfect and without corruption. Habakkuk tells us that God is pure and cannot stand the sight of evil. Because God is holy, He hates evil. And because He is a just God, He will always punish evil. The Apostle Paul provides a warning. "He will pour out his anger and wrath on those who live for themselves, who refuse to obey the truth and instead live lives of wickedness. There will be trouble and calamity for everyone who keeps on doing what is evil" (Romans 2:8-9 NLT2). Because of our sinful nature, God knew we could not escape His punishment. We also see in Scripture that God is love. In love, He sent Jesus on a mission to save us from our sin and bring us into a relationship with Himself. That is, indeed, good news!

### REFLECTION

Are you intentional about putting away everything that is displeasing to God and living a holy life? What do you need to change in your life this week in order to live a godly life?

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## PRAISE

According to Isaiah 57:15 (ESV), God is holy and wants to dwell with the humble. Tell God how thankful you are that, in His holiness, He still has compassion for the contrite in spirit.

***For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite."***

TUESDAY, MARCH 17

## MY SIN IS UGLY

*John 3:20 (NLT2)*

***All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed.***

Have you ever woken up in the morning feeling pretty good about yourself only to change your mind after looking in the mirror? When the lights are on, all the imperfections, wrinkles and messy hair can't be hidden. Sin is like this. When we go against God and His commands, our first instinct is often to cover it up. This is nothing new. When Adam and Eve sinned for the first time, they immediately tried to hide from God. The truth is, we don't want our sins brought to light because sin is ugly. If you are following Jesus, you will make some people very uncomfortable. Jesus said: "All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed" (John 3:20 NLT2). Take one look at the cross, and the ugliness of sin is evident. Jesus took the sin of the world, and it was not a pretty picture. He "was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed" (Isaiah 53:4-5 NLT2). When the light of God's holiness shines on sin, there is no way to hide how ugly it is. On the cross, Jesus didn't run and hide. He carried our sin for the world to see.

### REFLECTION

When has sin brought something ugly into your life? How could the daily habit of confessing your sins to the Lord keep the claws of sin from digging into your life?

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## PRAISE

In Romans 5:8, Paul said, "But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." Praise God for being so loving and gracious. Thank Him for sending Jesus to die for you even though He knew every sin you would commit.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 18

## MY PUNISHMENT IS TAKEN

*1 John 2:2 (NLT2)*

***He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world.***

During those six hours on the cross, Jesus paid for our sins. The Apostle Paul tells us that sin always requires death as its payment. “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23 NLT2). The Apostle John tells says that Jesus atoned for our sins through His death (1 John 2:2). The word atonement means payment or compensation for a wrong committed. In other words, Jesus satisfied the payment for our sins. The story of one motorist from Plano, Texas may help illuminate the point. Hayden Carlo, 25, was pulled over by Plano police because he had an expired registration. He said he told the police officer that he was struggling financially. He said he had to choose between updating his registration and feeding his kids. Carlo told the officer that he didn’t have an excuse for the expired registration but that he couldn’t afford to pay it. After a few minutes, the officer came back to the driver’s window and handed Carlo a citation for his expired registration. But when Carlo unfolded the paper, he saw a crisp \$100 bill. This was more than enough to renew his expired registration and pay for his citation. The police officer generously paid for the debt the driver couldn’t. And that is what Jesus did for us. Except Jesus didn’t pay our debt with money. He paid with His life.

### REFLECTION

In John 2:2, why do you think John adds “not only for our sins but the sins of all the world”? Why do you think some Christ followers are tempted to sit back and enjoy their forgiveness without sharing God’s concern for the whole world? Write the name of someone you can share how you came to know Jesus.



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## PRAISE

God created you with the knowledge that you would never be able to pay the debt owed for your sin. Before you were born, God had already provided payment to satisfy that debt through His Son. Offer a prayer of gratitude to the Lord for paying what you would never be able to pay on your own.

THURSDAY, MARCH 19

# HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS IS GIVEN

*Romans 5:17 (NLT2)*

***But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ.***

Salvation is not just about what is removed (the penalty for our sins), it's also about what is received (the righteousness of Christ). Our new and permanent possession is the "gift of righteousness" (Romans 5:17 NLT2). Not only does God forgive our sin, but He gives us what we could never get on our own. Lou Johnson, a 1965 World Series hero for the Los Angeles Dodgers, tried for thirty years to recover the championship ring he had lost to drug dealers in 1971. Drug and alcohol abuse cost him everything from that magical season, including his uniform, glove, and the bat he used to hit the winning home run in the deciding game. When Dodger president Bob Graziano learned that Johnson's World Series ring was about to be auctioned on the Internet, he immediately bought the ring for \$3,457 and gave it to Johnson, sixty-six, who has been drug-free for years and a Dodger community relations employee. He did for Johnson what Johnson could not do for himself. And that is the heart of your Father towards you.

## REFLECTION

What keeps Christ-followers from believing they are righteous? How do you think God feels about you? Do you consider yourself as righteous? What are some ways you can remind yourself this week that God sees you as righteous?



FRIDAY, MARCH 20

## MY RESPONSE IS TO TRUST

*Romans 3:22 (NLT2)*

***We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are.***

One night a house caught fire, and a young boy was forced to flee to the roof. The father stood on the ground below, with outstretched arms, calling to his son, "Jump! I'll catch you." He knew the boy had to jump to save his life. All the boy could see was flame, smoke, and blackness. As you can imagine, he was afraid to leave the roof. His father kept yelling: "Jump! I will catch you." Placing your faith in Jesus is like this. Trusting Jesus isn't blind faith. It's responding to a voice that calls you to trust. His voice may not be audible, but it is undeniable. Jesus said, "No one can come to me, unless the Father who sent me makes them want to come" (John 6:44 CEV). When the Spirit draws you and woos you towards Christ, you get a glimpse of the Father's love and grace. But trusting Jesus is scary. The prospect of dying to your self-controlled life feels uncomfortable and unnatural. Part of the Spirit's work is to convince you that staying where you are will only lead to death. When you say yes to Jesus, you leap into the life you were always meant to live.

### REFLECTION

How has your faith in Jesus benefitted you and your family? What fears keep you from trusting Jesus more? Give those fears to the Lord in prayer today and ask for greater faith in those areas of your life.



SATURDAY, MARCH 21 &  
SUNDAY, MARCH 22

## MY ROLE IS TO SHARE

**1 Peter 3:15 (CEV)**

***Honor Christ and let him be the Lord of your life. Always be ready to give an answer when someone asks you about your hope.***

In his book *The Crisis in the University*, Walter Moberly notes the failure of evangelicals to penetrate university campuses with the gospel. To the Christian community he writes, "If one-tenth of what you believe is true, you ought to be ten times as excited as you are." Seminary professor Howard Hendricks notes: "It's a rare soul who is interested in embracing a faith that doesn't move the person trying to share it." Are you living a life that attracts others? Do others see in you a life filled with hope and joy? Sharing Christ with others is something that Christ-followers know they should do. But more than that, it's something they should want to do. According to the Apostle Peter, you should live with a sense of "readiness." Being ready to share is more than memorizing scripture verses (which is a good thing). It also means that you are so full of joy that you want to share it with someone.

### REFLECTION

Are you excited about helping others find a relationship with Christ? If not, why not? Ask God to return the joy of telling others about how they can begin a relationship with Jesus. Who will you invite to one of Dogwood's Easter services? Ask God to give you the courage to invite them.

# NOTES/JOURNAL

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## PRAISE

Jesus assured His followers they would not be left on their own as witnesses. “But the Holy Spirit will come upon you and give you power. Then you will tell everyone about me in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and everywhere in the world” (Acts 1:8 CEV). Give praise to God for His constant presence and power when you share with someone about Jesus.

MONDAY, MARCH 23

# THE HUMANITY OF JESUS

*John 1:14 (CEV)*

***The Word became a human being and lived here with us. We saw his true glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father.***

In yesterday's message, we looked at the significance of Jesus' words, "I am thirsty." This week, we will take a closer look at this idea of thirst and its implications for us. As we begin, the most apparent truth we glean from Jesus' thirst is that He was fully human. As Christ-followers, we believe that Jesus is the Son of God. His divine identity never changed while He lived on earth. "For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body" (Colossians 2:9 NLT2). The Bible teaches that He was also fully man. He experienced life on earth as we do. He was tired and slept. He was sad and cried. He experienced pain and suffering. He made friends and was betrayed by a friend. He was born and then experienced death. He was homeless at the end of His life and never married. He took care of His widowed mother. He got hungry and was thirsty. Jesus gets it. Better yet, He gets you. He isn't a God who can't relate. "Jesus understands every weakness of ours because he was tempted in every way that we are. But he did not sin! Therefore, whenever we are in need, we should come bravely before the throne of our merciful God. There we will be treated with undeserved kindness, and we will find help" (Hebrews 4:14-16 CEV). Who else knows what you need more than Him? Bring Him your needs today.

## REFLECTION

How often do you bring your needs to God in prayer? What keeps you from praying more? What is one change you can bring to your prayer life this week to make it a greater priority?





TUESDAY, MARCH 24

## A CUP OF COLD WATER

*Matthew 25:37-40 (ESV)*

***Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'***

Thirteen-year-old Natalie Gilbert won a contest to sing the national anthem at an NBA playoff game. During her rendition of the National Anthem, in front of 20,000 fans and a television audience, she forgot the words. The fearful look in her eyes reflected the fact that she could not remember the words and did not know what to do. At that moment, Maurice Cheeks, the coach of the Portland team, moved over to Gilbert, put his arm around her, and helped her finish the song. The coach came alongside the frightened girl and helped her in her time of need. Jesus always took time to help individuals in their time of need, even when the crowds pressed in around Him. When teaching His followers about the importance of serving, Jesus said one cup of cold water given to the thirsty was significant. On the cross, Jesus experienced extreme thirst and knew how vital a cup of cold water would be to the thirsty. When you meet the smallest need, Jesus says you are serving Him. In Matthew 25, Jesus also mentions feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, giving aid to the sick, and visiting the prisoner. What are these acts describing? Jesus' list describes acts of mercy that you can do every day. These acts do not depend on wealth, ability, or intelligence; they are simple acts freely given and freely received. No exceptional "talent" is needed. Serving is doing what for others what you would want someone to do for you. It's not the size of the cup but the size of your heart that matters.

## REFLECTION

Are you overwhelmed by all the pain and suffering in the world? In your city? In your neighborhood? What role should the church play in meeting these needs? What needs in your community burden you the most? What can you do to help one person today?

## NOTES/JOURNAL

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## PRAISE

The Psalmists writes: “The LORD is there to rescue all who are discouraged and have given up hope” (Psalm 34:18 CEV). When you are discouraged and want to give up, God is there to help and meet your needs. Give thanks to your Father for meeting your needs especially when you are discouraged and have lost hope.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25

## SERVING MY ENEMIES

*Proverbs 25:21 (NLT2)*

*If your enemies are hungry, give them food to eat. If they are thirsty, give them water to drink.*

When Jesus was offered a sponge with vinegar by His enemies, it wasn't because they felt remorse. The soldiers gave it to those dying on the cross to help keep them quiet. When we serve our enemies with a kind heart, we show them the love of Jesus. Serving your enemies not only protects your heart from bitterness, but it also has the potential to win them to the Lord. After Jim Elliot and four other missionaries were killed by Huaorani tribesmen in 1956, no one expected what happened next. Jim's wife, Elisabeth, their young daughter, and another missionary's sister willingly chose to make their home among the very people who killed their loved ones. They spent several years living in the Huaorani community, learning their language, and translating the Bible for them. These women's testimony of forgiveness and kindness convinced the Huaorani of God's love for them, and many received Jesus as their Savior. In your life, who do you most want to avoid during your week? The person who came to mind is the one you most need to serve by showing the kindness of Jesus today.

### REFLECTION

How did Jesus live out the command to love one's enemies? Who would you consider your enemy today? Those who overlook or mistreat you? Those who cut you off in traffic? What will you do today to show God's love to those who you would deem an "enemy"?



THURSDAY, MARCH 26

# HE DIDN'T WANT YOU TO DOUBT

*John 19:28 (NLT2)*

*Jesus knew that his mission was now finished, and to fulfill Scripture he said, "I am thirsty."*

At the surface, Jesus' words, "I thirst," John tells us, lead to the fulfillment of Scripture. What Scripture did Jesus fulfill by making this statement? Most scholars think it is Psalm 69:21 (HCSB) "For my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." When he said He was thirsty and was offered wine vinegar, Jesus was pointing us back to this verse from Psalm 69. He was saying, "Look, what I'm doing now was written centuries ago. It is part of God's plan that was set in place long before now." The Old Testament, written hundreds of years before Jesus' birth, contains over 300 prophecies that Jesus fulfilled through His life, death, and resurrection. Mathematically speaking, the odds of anyone fulfilling this amount of prophecy are staggering. Mathematicians put it this way: the odds of one person fulfilling eight prophecies is 1 in 100,000,000,000,000,000. Jesus fulfilled over 300 prophecies. Why did Jesus go to such effort to fulfill prophecies? Why did He use His last few breaths on earth to fulfill one final prophecy? Because He knew you would doubt. He knew you would walk through dark days, and doubt would call your name. He wanted you to know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, He was the Son of God dying on the cross for you. He wanted you to know that even on the darkest day in history, He was thinking of you.

## REFLECTION

Has there been a dark valley in your life that caused you to doubt God's goodness and presence? What are the top three reasons why you believe that Jesus was the Son of God? Are there any doubts about Jesus that you need a Pastor or mature believer to help you overcome?



FRIDAY, MARCH 27

## BROKEN CISTERNS

*Jeremiah 2:13 (NLT2)*

***For my people have done two evil things: They have abandoned me—the fountain of living water. And they have dug for themselves cracked cisterns that can hold no water at all!***

Jesus' thirst on the cross showed us that He was human. We all thirst. It's part of the human experience. But deeper than physical thirst, there is a soul thirst in each person. Everyone is searching to satisfy their soul with that which will bring love, acceptance, significance, and purpose. The prophet Jeremiah brought judgment on Israel with God's very own words: "My people have done two evil things: They have abandoned me—the fountain of living water. And they have dug for themselves cracked cisterns that can hold no water at all!" (Jeremiah 2:13 NLT2). In Bible lands, a cistern was an artificial reservoir which was dug in the earth or hewn in the rock for the collection and storage of water. Cisterns were very important in the land of Israel because of the long dry season and the relatively few natural springs. But a broken cistern was practically worthless. Cracked rock or crumbling masonry could hold only a small quantity of dirty water, or no water at all. Collecting and storing water in a broken cistern was not smart or effective. Instead of having endless supply of water, Israel chose to satisfy their soul thirst with idols that were unsatisfying and worthless. In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis said, "Human history is the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy." What will history say about you?

### REFLECTION

Where do you go to get your love, acceptance, significance, and purpose needs met? From your experience, what are some broken cisterns you have tried that have failed to quench your deepest thirsts? Why is Jesus more satisfying than these broken cisterns?



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## PRAISE

Jesus said that the one who drinks from Him will never thirst (John 4:14). Thank Jesus for sending His Spirit to live inside you to satisfy the deepest longings of your heart.

SATURDAY MARCH 28 &  
SUNDAY, MARCH 29

## NEVER DEPLETED

*John 7:37-38 (NLT2)*

***On the last day, the climax of the festival, Jesus stood and shouted to the crowds, “Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, ‘Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.’”***

According to a New York Times article, Mexico City has sunk 30 feet in the past century. “So much water has been pumped out from the aquifer beneath (the city) to satisfy 18 million residents that the ground is collapsing at a stunning rate.” The aquifers are replenished with water at a rate that is half the rate that water is extracted from them. Something similar can happen to Christ-followers. You can give so much to others that you lose your spiritual zeal if you don’t stay replenished. Has your journey with the Lord detoured into a desert? If so, the solution is within you. Jesus wants you to know how to stay replenished and be full of zeal in your service for Him. In John 7:37-38, He painted a picture of abundant supply—not a trickle but rivers of living water produced by the Holy Spirit. If you find yourself in a desert, look no further than the Spirit who was given to you the moment you trusted Christ. The solution? Drink from Him. How? Slow down. Listen to His promptings, not ignore them. Depend on His power in prayer. Obey what He’s already told you to do in Scripture. Let Him remind you of your identity in Christ. Give Him every anxious thought. Trust Him, and you’ll never thirst again.

### REFLECTION

When have you experienced a dry season in your spiritual journey? What do you think caused it? Are you currently in one now? Based on today’s devotion, what are some steps you can take immediately to access the living water within you?

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## PRAISE

Thank God for giving you the Holy Spirit to help you stay refreshed and full of zeal in your journey with Him. Thank Him for the joy and peace that He brings. “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (Romans 15:13 ESV).

MONDAY, MARCH 30

## THE PERFECT SACRIFICE IS JESUS

*John 19:30 (NLT2)*

*When Jesus had tasted it, he said, "It is finished!" Then he bowed his head and released his spirit.*

In yesterday's message, we continued our study through the words of Jesus from the cross. After tasting the vinegar, Jesus shouted: "It is finished!" The term *Tetelestai* was used in several different ways in Jesus' day. Priests said this word when they found a lamb without blemish for sacrifice. On this occasion, the word meant "perfect" or "just what we need." The priests couldn't use an ordinary lamb. It had to be spotless and perfect. When Jesus shouted this term from the cross, He claimed to be the sinless lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice for us. When you donate blood at places like the Red Cross, the blood isn't immediately given to an awaiting patient at a nearby hospital. Lab workers test the blood for current or past infections, including the presence of viruses, such as HIV/AIDS, hepatitis B and C, and the West Nile virus. Workers also screen the blood for antibodies that can cause an adverse reaction in the recipient. A thorough system is in place to ensure impure or tainted blood is never given to those needing a life-saving blood transfusion. Because Jesus resisted every sinful temptation for 33 years, He was able to keep His blood pure and without blemish to save you. For three years, Peter witnessed the character of Jesus up close and personal. He was convinced that you are "redeemed...with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:19 ESV). None of us could serve as a substitute for others because of the sin in our lives. Only Christ, who was without the blemish or spot of sin, could offer Himself in your place.

### REFLECTION

What did Jesus endure throughout His life to ensure that His blood remained pure and without blemish? How much are you willing to endure to ensure you live a pure life now that you have been forgiven? What steps can you take this week to help you live a life free of sin?



TUESDAY, MARCH 31

## HIS PARDON MUST BE ACCEPTED

*Colossians 2:13-14 (ESV)*

***And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.***

***This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.***

When Jesus shouted, "It is finished!" He announced that the payment for sins was now complete. His death was sufficient payment for every sin we would ever commit. The word, Tetelestai, was an accounting term used to describe when a person's debt was paid in full. On the cross, Jesus paid the penalty for all our sins. However, this amazing offer to have our entire sin debt paid in full must be accepted before it is applied to our account. If someone gave you a check to pay off your mortgage, you would still owe the balance until you transferred the money to your mortgage company. If the check remained on your desk without ever being deposited, you would still have an outstanding debt. In 1830 George Wilson was convicted of robbing the U.S. Mail and was sentenced to be hanged. After public sentiment came in for mercy on this first-time offender, President Andrew Jackson issued a pardon for Wilson. But there was one problem. He refused to accept it. The matter went to Chief Justice Marshall of the Supreme Court. He concluded that Wilson would have to be executed. "A pardon is a slip of paper," wrote Marshall, "the value of which is determined by the acceptance of the person to be pardoned. If it is refused, it is no pardon. George Wilson must be hanged." In the same way, if we refuse to trust in the gracious gift of pardon that Jesus offered from the cross, we are still in debt to God for our sins. Have you accepted His complete and irrevocable pardon?

## REFLECTION

Do you ever struggle to believe that Jesus wiped out your sin debt? Why? What problems might arise in your life if you doubt that Jesus' death on the cross was sufficient payment for all your sins? How would you benefit from believing that you are completely forgiven?

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## PRAISE

Psalm 86:5 says, "O Lord, you are so good, so ready to forgive, so full of unfailing love for all who ask for your help" (NLT2). Thank God that He is full of love and ready to forgive those who ask. Thank Him for hearing your plea for forgiveness.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 1

## THE POWER OF SIN IS DEFEATED

***Romans 6:10 (NLT2)***

***When he died, he died once to break the power of sin. But now that he lives, he lives for the glory of God.***

When Jesus declared, "It is finished!" He proclaimed victory over the power of sin. The Greek word Tetelestai was an ancient battle cry shouted by the victor when the enemy was defeated. In Romans 5:17, the Apostle Paul said that because of Jesus' death on the cross, we "will live in triumph over sin" (NLT2). As a follower of Jesus, you have the power to defeat the pull of sin in your life. The following story pictures this new reality. A pirate ship ruled by a ruthless captain was defeated in battle by a British ship. Unlike the pirate ship, the British ship was under the leadership of a benevolent commander. When the battle was over, the commander told some of his trustworthy lieutenants to sail the pirate ship back to England. The pirate captain and his cronies were locked in a cage on the deck of the pirate ship. The remainder of the more agreeable pirates enlisted as British sailors. As these former pirates sailed back to England, they grew accustomed to a new kind of leadership. They gained a new sense of identity due to the kind and respectful treatment they received from their new officers. At one point, however, the caged pirate captain began shouting curses at his former crew, trying to intimidate them into submission once again. At first, the former pirates were visibly shaken, and a few of them even obeyed some of his orders. Eventually, however, they regained their composure as they realized that their former captain had no true power over them. He could only attempt to intimidate them, but he was no longer their true master. When Jesus becomes your new Commander, He enables you to say no to the power that sin had over you.



## REFLECTION

What habit(s) has God helped you change since becoming a follower of Christ? What are some areas in your life where you need the power of God to help you obey? Live up these areas to the Lord in prayer and ask for His wisdom and guidance.

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## PRAISE

In 1 Corinthians 10:13 (NLT2), the Apostle Paul wrote: "The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure." Thank God for being faithful to give you power to overcome sin. Thank Him that you can say no to every sin that knocks at your door.

THURSDAY, APRIL 2

## THE POWER OF DEATH IS DEFEATED

**Hebrews 2:14-15 (NLT2)**

***Because God's children are human beings—made of flesh and blood—the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying.***

When Jesus shouted, "It is finished!" He proclaimed victory over the power of death. As we saw in the devotional reading yesterday, the Greek word *Tetelestai* was an ancient battle cry shouted by the victor when the enemy was defeated. Jesus didn't set out to defeat physical death in our world. The Apostle Paul clarifies that "everyone dies because we all belong to Adam" 1 Corinthians 15:22 (NLT2). On the cross, Jesus defeated a much larger foe. Jesus defeated spiritual death. For those who follow Christ, their death will not result in their soul's separation from God for all eternity. Instead, the moment our eyes close in this world, we will instantly be at home with the Lord. Paul did not live in fear of death because he knew where he would be. "Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8 ESV). His approach to life was, "If I live, it will be for Christ, and if I die, I will gain even more" (Philippians 1:21 CEV). Imagine a student who is told to report to the school principal. Trembling, he approaches the principal's office, afraid that he might be punished. Too fearful of entering, he waits outside for a while. Then he sees another boy strolling in confidently—and walking out a few moments later, smiling. He asks the other boy, "Why are you so unafraid about entering the principal's office? And how could you come out so happily?" The boy looks at him and replies, "Because he's my father." When we trust Jesus, we will be like the second boy—we will no longer fear death. Although we will still die physically, God awaits us on the other side of death, and we do not need to fear his judgment anymore.

## REFLECTION

What is your greatest fear about death? What could it cost someone if they refuse to face the reality of death? In what way could you benefit from thinking more about life after death?

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## PRAISE

Jesus not only predicted His death but also His resurrection. “From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Matthew 16:21 ESV). Thank Jesus for conquering the grave so it wouldn’t have the last word in your life.

FRIDAY, APRIL 3

## THE DEVIL IS DEFEATED

***Colossians 2:14-15 (CEV)***

***God wiped out the charges that were against us for disobeying the Law of Moses. He took them away and nailed them to the cross. There Christ defeated all powers and forces. He let the whole world see them being led away as prisoners when he celebrated his victory.***

When Jesus announced, "It is finished!" He declared victory over the devil. As we saw in the devotional reading over the last two days, the Greek word Tetelestai was used as an ancient battle cry shouted by the victor when the enemy was defeated. Satan cannot steal away your salvation. As a follower of Jesus, your identity is unchangeable, your future is secure, and your righteousness is complete. When you understand that your enemy is already defeated, you'll have faith to overcome any and every challenge this world may bring. Several years ago, over 60,000 fans packed into Badger Stadium in Madison, Wisconsin, to cheer on their beloved football team get trounced by Michigan State. As the game went on, something odd happened. As the score became more and more lopsided, bursts of cheers came from the stands. Some people began to wonder why some people were cheering while their team was being crushed. What some of the downtrodden fans didn't realize was a bigger game was taking place seventy miles away from Badger stadium. Their pro baseball team, the Milwaukee Brewers, were beating the St. Louis Cardinals in game three of the World Series. Many of the Badger fans in the stands were listening to a different contest. They were responding to a greater battle besides what was happening right in front of their eyes. In many ways, this is like what it means to be a follower of Christ. You might be enduring horrible circumstances, and yet you have something to cheer about. A bigger battle has already been won for you. Since Satan can't use condemnation to threaten you, he cannot defeat you. Jesus conquered sin, death, and the devil, and the score wasn't close. Now that is something to cheer about

## REFLECTION

Though Satan is a defeated foe, he still seeks to draw us away from God, thwart the purposes of God, and cause division. What weapons has God given you to combat the lies of the enemy? How can you utilize these weapons on a regular basis to stand firm in your faith?

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## PRAISE

In Romans 8:28 (NLT2), Paul was confident that "God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them." Praise God for His sovereignty in your life and His ability to bring good out of every circumstance.

SATURDAY, APRIL 4 &  
SUNDAY, APRIL 5

## MY WORK IS UNFINISHED

*Acts 20:24 (CEV)*

***But I don't care what happens to me, as long as I finish the work that the Lord Jesus gave me to do. And that work is to tell the good news about God's great kindness.***

Jesus appeared in heaven just after his ascension and is giving a progress report on all that has happened while He was on earth. Moses is there and he asks Him, "Well Jesus, did you leave things in capable hands?" Jesus responds, "I did. I have left behind Mary and Martha and Peter and the other disciples." Moses said, "What if they fail?" Jesus said, "Well, I have established the Church and filled it with the Holy Spirit and they will carry on." And Moses said, "What if they fail?" Came the reply, "I have no other plan." Obviously, this is a fictitious account, but it shows the responsibility that we have as followers of Jesus. Before Jesus ascended to the Father, He commissioned His followers to carry the news of what He accomplished on the cross to the world. "Go and make followers of all people in the world" (Matthew 28:19-20 NCV). Every day, we can either draw people toward Jesus or push people away from Jesus. Be determined to be a light for Jesus in the dark places that God may place you this week.

### REFLECTION

How do you feel about the responsibility God has given you to carry out His mission? Do you feel qualified? If not, why not? Who will you invite this week to one of Dogwood Church's Easter services?

## NOTES/JOURNAL

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## PRAISE

When Jesus gave His followers the mission to go into the world to make other followers, He gave this amazing assurance: “I will be with you always, even until the end of this age” (Matthew 28:20 NCV). Thank Jesus for His constant presence to go with you as you fulfill the work that He has given you.

MONDAY, APRIL 6

## MY FATHER LOVES ME

*Psalm 103:13 (NLT2)*

*The LORD is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate to those who fear him.*

Yesterday, we turned our attention to the final words of Jesus from the cross: "Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!" (Luke 23:46 NLT2). As Jesus' life ends, He does not faint and become unconscious only to be revived later. Jesus died as a human being—voluntarily and sacrificially. That Jesus had a loud voice at all shows his tremendous will. In committing his spirit to the Father, Jesus died, fulfilling the words of Psalm 31:5 (NLT): "I entrust my spirit into your hand. Rescue me, LORD, for you are a faithful God." This week in our last week of devotions, we will learn about relating to God as our Father. Today, let's consider God's love. God is a caring Father who is compassionate towards His children. Look no further than the Apostle Paul to find someone who was transformed by the fatherly compassion of God. Paul was a murderous persecutor of Christ-followers before his conversion to Christ. Not only did God show Paul compassion by forgiving him, but He entrusted Paul with the privileged task of taking the message about Jesus to the rest of the world. Paul writes about the Father's love: "And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39 NLT2). Here's the thing. Yet God does not love us because we deserve it. He loves us in spite of what we have done. 1st John 4:10 (ESV) states, "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son." Because of what Jesus Christ has done for us, we know God always loves us.



## REFLECTION

What things does Paul lists in Romans 8:38-39 that won't separate him from God's love? Have any of these things ever caused you to doubt God's love for you? When life gets tough, what are some ways that you can stay reminded of God's love for you?

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## PRAISE

1st John 3:1 (NLT2) says, "See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!" Praise God for the love that He has lavished on you by calling you His child.

TUESDAY, APRIL 7

## MY FATHER CAN BE TRUSTED

*Psalm 56:3-4 (NLT2)*

***But when I am afraid, I will put my trust in you. I praise God for what he has promised. I trust in God, so why should I be afraid? What can mere mortals do to me?***

Jesus had just endured the crucifixion and the penalty for our sins. What we don't find is Jesus complaining or questioning the motives of His Father. What we see is trust. "I entrust my spirit." When teaching His followers about the Father, Jesus wanted them to know that God could be trusted as they faced intense persecution, even death: "Aren't two sparrows sold for only a penny? But your Father knows when any one of them falls to the ground. Even the hairs on your head are counted. So don't be afraid! You are worth much more than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:29-31 CEV). A family went to a lake for a vacation along a lake. A dad was working by the boathouse while his 12-year-old and 3-year-old were playing on the dock. The older brother was in charge of watching his younger brother but got distracted. Little Billy decided to check out the fishing boat at the end of the dock. Billy put his foot in the boat, but the boat shifted, and he fell in. The older brother screamed for help, and dad came running. He jumped in but couldn't find Billy. The dad took another gulp of air and went under again, feeling everywhere for his son. On his way up for another gulp of air, Billy's father felt Billy with his arms clinging tightly to the posts under the dock. He pried Billy loose and took him up for air. When everyone had calmed down, Billy's dad asked him why he was clinging to the post underwater. Billy replied, "I was just waiting for you, Dad, I was just waiting for you." The little boy trusted his dad, the same way we can trust our Heavenly Father, no matter the circumstance.

## REFLECTION

Can you think of a time when you or someone you know pushed past fear and took a bold step to follow Jesus? How did that event affect your faith? What do you fear right now? What is one practical thing you can do this week to remind yourself not to be afraid and trust in your Heavenly Father?

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## PRAISE

The prophet Isaiah said, “You will keep in perfect peace all who trust in you, all whose thoughts are fixed on you! Trust in the LORD always, for the LORD GOD is the eternal Rock” (Isaiah 26:3-4 NLT2). Praise God for being a solid foundation who brings peace when the storms of life come against you and your house.

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8

## THE FATHER IS ALWAYS AT WORK

***2 Corinthians 4:18 (CEV)***

***Things that are seen don't last forever, but things that are not seen are eternal. That's why we keep our minds on the things that cannot be seen.***

When Jesus gave His life, He entrusted the Father with His "spirit." Our spirit is that part of us that connects with God because God is spirit (John 4:24). The Apostle Paul notes that we are comprised of spirit, soul, and body (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Before we are born again, our spirit is dead. After we come to faith in Christ, our spirit is made alive. After our conversion, we can talk to God and hear from Him. Because God is spirit, He is working in a realm that we cannot see. The problem many of us face is that we tend to interpret reality in terms of the visual realm. If I can't see something, I assume it's not happening. But that's not the way God operates. An example is what happened behind the scenes in the days leading up to Paul's conversion. While followers of Christ were suffering under his ruthless persecution (Acts 8:1-3), God was preparing to transform him into a dynamic representative of Christ (9:15). Even though it may appear that nothing is happening, God is at work—behind the scenes, in the background, accomplishing His purpose. For the shooting of the movie, *Ben Hur*, Charleston Heston was training to drive a chariot. Heston was having trouble with the apparatus, so he confided in his director, William Wyler. He said, "I can barely stay on this thing. I can't win the race." Wyler told Heston, "Your job is to stay on it. It's my job to make sure you win." Our job is to simply stay in the chariot of obedience and leave the results to God.

## REFLECTION

How would your response to life's difficulties be different if you always remembered that God is working behind the scenes on your behalf? Ask God to help you trust that He is working behind the scenes in the circumstances where it seems there is no hope. Write your prayer in the space below.

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## PRAISE

In John 5:17 (NLT2), Jesus reminds us, "My Father is always working, and so am I." Praise God that He never sleeps or gets tired of working on your behalf to accomplish His purposes.

THURSDAY, APRIL 9

## PUT THE IMPOSSIBLE INTO HIS HANDS

*Jeremiah 32:17 (ESV)*

***Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm!  
Nothing is too hard for you.***

When Jesus entrusted His spirit to God, He entrusted Himself in His Father's "hands." There is no other place you would rather be than in the Father's hands. With His hands, He placed the stars in place and spun the earth on its axis. With His hands, He measures the span of the universe. With His hands, He created man out of dust. And your Father's hands are big enough to handle any impossible situation that comes into your life. To Abraham and Sarah, God asked, "Is anything too hard for God?" (Genesis 18:14 ESV). In Matthew 19:26 (ESV), Jesus said that with His Father "all things are possible." A little boy one day was trying to pick up a rock. He said, "Dad, it's too heavy." He said, "Son, you can do it." The boy strained and tried, but he said, "Dad, it's too heavy." The father insisted, "Son, you can do it." He tried again. "Dad, it's too heavy." He said, "Son, you're not using all your strength." "Dad, I am. I am. It's too heavy." "Son, you're not using all your strength." "Dad, why do you keep saying I'm not using all my strength? The rock is too heavy." "I know you're not using all your strength, because you haven't asked me to help yet." There is more strength available to you than what you have. So whatever the impossible situation is before you, place it in the powerful hands of your Heavenly Father, and trust Him.

### REFLECTION

Can you think of a time that God has done something humanly impossible in your life? Do you face a seemingly impossible situation in your life right now? Write a prayer to the Lord asking for His power to work in a challenging circumstance in your life.

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## PRAISE

To the church at Ephesus, Paul stated, “His power at work in us can do far more than we dare ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20 CEV). Thank the Lord for His might power available to you to accomplish more than what He has put on your heart.

FRIDAY, APRIL 10

## PUT MY WORRIES INTO HIS HANDS

*Matthew 6:25-26 (NLT2)*

***“That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life—whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn’t life more than food, and your body more than clothing? Look at the birds. They don’t plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren’t you far more valuable to him than they are?”***

In His last few moments alive, Jesus was not anxious for what was next. He had cast any anxieties into the Father’s capable hands. We can do the same. In fact, Jesus told His followers that if the Father could feed the birds and take care of their basic needs. He would be able to care for their needs even more. Worry is something that can paralyze us and dampen our faith. The Apostle Paul knew this, so he gave us the cure for worry: “Don’t worry about anything, but pray about everything. With thankful hearts offer up your prayers and requests to God. Then, because you belong to Christ Jesus, God will bless you with peace that no one can completely understand. And this peace will control the way you think and feel” (Philippians 4:6-7 CEV). Worry is simply prayers we say to ourselves. Instead, why don’t we pray to Someone who can do something about it? A man was in a hurry to catch an airplane. He ran, huffing and puffing, down toward his gate. He passed a guy who was dressed in a pilot’s uniform. The guy said to the breathless man, “Where are you in a hurry to?” “Oh,” the man said, “I am late for my plane. I don’t want to miss my plane.” He proceeded to tell the guy what flight he was hurrying to. The uniformed man reassured him, “Don’t be in a hurry; I am piloting that plane.” If the pilot is not hurried or anxious about the flight, then you won’t be either.

## REFLECTION

What are some things you’ve worried needlessly about? Are there any current worries that are robbing you joy and peace? Write a prayer that gives your worries to the Lord. Thank Him for the peace that He promises to bring into your mind and heart as you trust Him.





SATURDAY APRIL 11

## PUT MY SALVATION INTO HIS HANDS

*John 10:28-29 (NLT2)*

***I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one can snatch them away from me, for my Father has given them to me, and he is more powerful than anyone else. No one can snatch them from the Father's hand.***

The most valuable thing we can put into our Father's hands is our identity as His children. Jesus assured His followers that eternity is most secure in the hands of the Father. Jesus said emphatically, "No one can snatch them from the Father's hand." Once you become a child of God through faith in Jesus, you gain a Father who won't let you go. In one of the Superman movies, Superman saves a man from a burning building. He rescues him from the top floor and is carrying him to safety by flying through the skies. The man looks at Superman and then looks down to the ground. "I'm scared, Superman. Look how far down that is." Superman gives him a great answer. "If I delivered you from the burning fire, what makes you think I am going to drop you when I'm carrying you to safety?" If God has delivered you from the agony of hell, why would you think He will drop you before He safely puts you down in heaven? To his fellow Christ-followers, the Apostle Paul confidently states: "He will keep you strong to the end so that you will be free from all blame on the day when our Lord Jesus Christ returns" (1 Corinthians 1:8 NLT2). If God has begun His salvation work in you, He promises to bring you safely home with Him (Philippians 1:6).

## REFLECTION

Can you remember the moment you placed your faith in Jesus? What would you tell someone who wanted to know how to go to heaven? How confident are you that will go to heaven when you die? If you aren't 100% confident, would you be willing to talk with a mature believer or Pastor about your doubts?



















