

# *Redemption's Thread*

**A LENTEN READING PLAN AND PRAYER GUIDE**

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## When God Draws Near

Life is messy. Dishes have to be done over and over. Laundry keeps piling up. Furniture needs dusting and floors need vacuuming. Babies need diapers and toddlers spill juice. Children bicker and tweens roll eyes. Spouses disagree. Exhausted and worn thin from emotions spilled over and giving pieces of ourselves to everyone in our lives, we often find ourselves drained, empty.

We cry out for help or sleep or both ... and we run on the inside from the demands and needs and pressures. As hard as we try to do this momma/wife/homemaker thing, there's always something we didn't get done or need to do again. Sometimes it all feels hopeless ... and we begin to think, "Why bother?"

Life is messy ... literally. But spiritually our lives are messy as well. We can probably all relate to Paul's cry of frustration, I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. (Romans 7:19 NLT)

We struggle and strain in this battle of flesh against spirit. Time and again we find ourselves in desperate need of help, aware of all the ways we flail and fall and fail. We need something more than lists of rules and pages of expectations. We can't even manage to check off all the "good girl boxes" on the list. The expectations of others (and ourselves!) about what "good" looks like leave us aware of every misstep and mistake.

We need something more—something different, something better. We need more than rules. We need a Redeemer, a Rescuer.

I love this from *The Jesus Storybook Bible*,

Before they left the Garden, God whispered a promise to Adam and Eve: "It will not always be so! I will come to rescue you!" ... And he would. One day, God himself would come.<sup>1</sup>

God saw our need for redemption, sees our need for His presence. He promised Israel and He promises us as well, "But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Fear not for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1 ESV)

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<sup>1</sup> Lloyd-Jones, Sally, *The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007, 2009), 36.

Our God is not a faraway God, a character in a fairy tale. He sees our needs and He meets them. From clothing the lilies to healing the sick, He is not detached from our physical needs. As much as He delights in meeting each need of our flesh, He is far more generous in meeting the needs of our spirit.

He draws near in the midst of our great need. He draws near with the whispered truth of His love. He draws near with the hope-filled promise of our redemption. When God draws near, He meets our greatest need: redemption.

As we enter this season of preparation for Easter, I hope you will be encouraged by the promise of redemption, the assurance that God does indeed draw near.

Over the next few weeks, we will trace the thread of hope, of redemption, from one end of our Bibles to the other. My prayer is that as you open His Word, you will be reminded of His heart, His love, His sacrifice for you.

And, above all, I hope you find that redemption's thread is woven deep into your life.

Prayerfully,

*Teri Lynne*

## Notes about Lent

Lent is about nurturing a posture that holds all things lightly, that ensures our passions are subject to us and not the other way around ... Lent cleanses the palate so we can taste life more fully.<sup>2</sup>

About 18 years ago, I began practicing Lent. In the beginning it was just an exercise in self-discipline with a side of spirituality. I gave up red meat one year, a favorite television show another.

But over time, I discovered the deeper lessons of this practice of longer self-denial. The ways those things I desire can control me became quite evident when I tried to give them up.

Lent, historically, is a season of fasting. Practiced for centuries by Catholics and Protestants alike, it has not (until recent years) been a part of the typical evangelical experience.

Over the past ten years or so, participation in Lent has increased among the evangelical church. Lent, the intentional discipline of self-denial and fasting, is radically different from our consumer and consumption-driven culture. And maybe that's exactly why we need it most.

The forty days of Lent are patterned after Christ's own forty days of fasting in the desert. When we practice Lent, we are inviting God to give us our own desert experience, a new awareness of our frailty, our vulnerability.

Perhaps you want to do more than read these passages. Maybe you have felt the pull toward a fast of your own. But you aren't sure what that means or looks like or even what to give up. Here are a few thoughts to help you.

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<sup>2</sup> Pennoyer, Greg, *God For Us: Rediscovering the Meaning of Lent and Easter* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, ©2014), x

1. **What you give up is important, yes. But this isn't just about giving something up, it's about replacing it with something better.** For example, if you decide to give up sweets for Lent, your goal isn't just to prove you can do it, it's to understand how your desire for sweets controls you and to invite God into that space, giving Him that control. So when you crave something sweet, you pray that God will reveal His sweetness to you, for example.
2. **Fasting, during Lent or otherwise, is the best way to find out what controls you.** If you aren't sure what to fast from, a good place to begin your consideration is something you think you can't live without. Maybe it's social media or a television show. Perhaps it's that good cup of coffee on the way to work or even a long bath at night. What are some things that consume your thoughts? Those are places where God may be revealing a need for you to seek Him first.
3. **While Lent traditionally is about giving something up, you may also find it a good opportunity to pick something up.** For example, maybe you have been wanting to be a better encourager in your home. Use the next forty days to be intentional about speaking words of affirmation to your family members. Spend time each day asking God to reveal to you what to say and to whom.
4. **The most important thing to remember is this—Lent is about growing in your knowledge of and relationship to Christ.** Sure giving up chocolate might be a great way to help you lose weight and you might not eat any for the next forty days. But that doesn't mean you are practicing Lent. Lenten fasts are purposeful and intentional spiritually. Keep your eyes focused on Him and what He would have you do.

Practicing Lent has changed me. It's given me a keener insight into what places my mind need refocusing on the Lord, what areas of heart need cleansing, and what parts of my life need purging so I can continue to grow.

There is no biblical mandate for Lent. It is, however, a practice used by countless believers over the centuries to help shift their focus and prepare their hearts for the joy of Easter celebration.

It's been a gift to me, and it might be to you.

## Important Lenten Dates for 2019

### **March 6 – Ash Wednesday (first day of Lent)**

Often marked by a special service and the imposition of ashes, Ash Wednesday is a call to remember the certainty and inevitability of death ... which serves to make the hope of Easter and Resurrection all the more significant. This day marks a season focused on our need for and practice of repentance.

### **April 13 – Lazarus Saturday**

Jesus' resurrection of Lazarus and his later return to Bethany to visit Lazarus, Marth, and Mary are the last recorded events before His final journey to Jerusalem. This day is used to remind us of the miracle to come, a glimpse of Easter's glory as we begin the heavy remembrances of Holy Week.

## **Holy Week**

### **April 14 – Palm Sunday**

A celebratory reminder that Jesus is the King is diminished by the growing awareness of what is coming. In many churches, the palms used to celebrate Palm Sunday are then saved and burned to create the ashes used the following year for Ash Wednesday services.

### **April 18 – Maundy Thursday**

Remembrance of the Last Supper and the institution of communion. This last supper Christ shared with His disciples was a Passover meal, a time of remembering and celebrating God's deliverance of people from the bondage of Egypt. Now, through His body and blood, we experience deliverance from the bondage of sin.

### **April 19 – Good Friday**

A solemn day of fasting and quiet reflection and remembrance of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. It can be tempting to rush past this day in our haste to get to the celebration of Easter but we mustn't turn away from the cross because it makes us uncomfortable. We need to stay there, wrestling through the reality of what it means.

### **April 20 – Holy Saturday or Silent Saturday**

We tend to fill Saturday with egg hunts and gatherings. But Tenebrae actually originated as a service to fill this day and remind us, again, of the violence and darkness of that day on Calvary.

### **April 21 – Easter or Resurrection Sunday**

This is the most important day of the year for us as believers. Without the resurrection, our hope would be in a dead man in a tomb. Our faith no different from that of any other religion. But Christ! And in His resurrection death is defeated and eternal life is ours through Him.



## March 6: Creation's Promise

Read: Genesis 1

Reflect:

We were created in His image (verse 27), patterned after the Creator. He didn't need. The angels were there with Him in heaven, offering a continual anthem of worship to the One who is holy, holy, holy.

So why make us? Why create man from dust and woman from a rib? And, why give us the freedom to choose our own way?

He knew the hurt was coming, the betrayal was imminent. He knew the enemy would slither into our hearts and minds and offer us empty promises of something better than the perfection of Eden, better than the harmony of unbroken relationship with the Creator. He knew.

He knew our fall was on the way. He created us knowing we would choose empty over full, broken over whole, sin over obedience.

And yet He created us anyway. In His image. He made us the pinnacle of all creation—man and woman, human. Oh so human.

Respond:

Holy Creator, it's an awesome, awful thing for us to read this start of our story, this perfect beginning. Awesome because of You. Awful because we know what is coming. And yet, even here, in the echoes of Creation, the whisper of hope, the desire for us to be with You.

## March 7: No Shame

Read: Genesis 2

Reflect:

It's right there at the very end of this chapter. A sentence we can never fully comprehend or grasp.

“Both the man and his wife were naked, yet felt no shame.” (Genesis 2:24 CSB)

When was the last time you felt shame? The last time you did something and immediately knew the sting of regret? The last words you uttered that left you desperate for a way to pull them back?

Shame is a part of our lives now.

But Adam and Eve felt no shame in their nakedness. Not just their physical lack of covering ... they had no shame in their emotions, relationships, thoughts. No shame.

Can you imagine it?

Respond:

Lord, even the idea of no shame in our lives is unfathomable. Our whole being is marked with .moments full of regret for our words, our actions, and, if we're really honest, our thoughts and feelings. But You don't leave us here in the middle of our shameful mess. You reach down and offer us something more, something pure.

## March 8: God's Will

Read: Genesis

Reflect:

Eden must have been amazing. A sight we can't begin to comprehend. Perfection right here on earth. Oh we talk about seeing heaven on earth, but what we see is always marred, always blurred by the reality of brokenness and sin.

And God, waiting to walk with Adam and Eve in the coolness of Eden's evening. He knew the sacrifice would be necessary. He called out to them. He met them where they were. And He shed the first blood to meet their need for covering.

It's beautiful, really. The provision there in the garments made of skin is greater promise. Blood would be shed. A sacrifice would be made.

But there in those garments made of sin was the redemptive promise. Just a hint of what was coming. Not garments made of sin but God Himself wrapped in skin.

Can you feel it? Creation's promise of redemption?

Respond:

Heavenly Father just as you provided the covering for Adam and Eve, You provide the covering for me. Today, wrap in the wonder of redemption, the gift of salvation.

## March 11: Provided Lamb

Read: Genesis 22

Reflect:

As a mother, I find my insides wrecked by this account in Scripture. Waiting years and years for a baby, giving up hope, and hearing the promise of God that a son would come. Sarah laughed, remember? (Genesis 18:11-12) But can you even begin to imagine how her mocking laughter became tears of joy when she held baby Isaac?

I wonder if she knew what Abraham was doing. She was a strong (bossy?) woman. The very idea of her sitting on her stool, measuring out grain or spinning thread while Abraham prepared to offer their son, HER son, as a sacrifice is hard to imagine. She couldn't have known. Abraham surely did not share what God had asked of him.

The weight of God's request certainly weighed heavy on Abraham's heart. And yet, even when Isaac asked about the lamb to sacrifice, Abraham trusted the God who had always been faithful.

"God Himself will provide a lamb, my son," Abraham said (verse 8). Even now as I type those words, tears well up in my eyes. God Himself will provide a lamb. God will provide Himself a lamb.

And so He did for Abraham. And so He did for us.

Respond:

You are our Provider in every way, the One who meets every need. The One who has met our greatest need. Today, I praise You, Lord, for the Lamb.

## March 12: I Am

Read: Exodus 3

Reflect:

When Moses, who saw a bush on fire yet not consumed, chosen by God to deliver the Hebrews from the bondage of Egyptian slavery, wondered how to answer the question of Whom had sent him. God told him this:

“I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you” (verse 14).

I am who I am – incomprehensible, the eternal and infinite nature of God. Scripture begins with “In the beginning God ...” (Genesis 1:1) and John’s Revelation reveals Jesus’ own words, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Revelation 22:13).

God is. Which leaves me, like Moses, incredibly aware that I am not.

God is holy and pure. I am wretched and sinful. God is perfect and blameless. I am weak and frail. God is. I am not.

Five simple words to sum up the entire purpose of the redemptive story – God is. I am not.

Respond:

You are holy, God. Today I find myself deeply aware of my own unworthiness. I take off my shoes and worship You in the holiness of Your presence.

## March 13: Passover Bread

Read: Exodus 12

Reflect:

I had the privilege to attend a Passover Seder several years ago. As we participated in the centuries' old readings and tasted the bitter herbs, I was captivated by the traditions. But one part of the evening is etched in my memory.

A pouch with three pockets called the Matzah Tosh holds three pieces of matzah (unleavened bread). During the ceremony Jews have practiced for thousands of years, the middle piece, the afikomen, is taken out. It's broken and wrapped in a white napkin, hidden from view. After a short time, it is brought back.

As the middle piece was returned, we were reminded of Jesus' place as the Son in the middle of the Trinity. Jesus, who was broken, wrapped, buried, and then raised again – brought back.

I sat there with tears streaming down my face as the plan of God was revealed not just in the Passover Lamb He commanded; but also, in a rabbinic tradition, crafted by those who anticipated Messiah's coming.

The redemption story carved into Hebrew history and breathed into life for all of us. Yes, Jesus is the Passover Lamb but He is also the Bread of life (John 6:51). Both offered so we can live.

Respond:

Today, God, as I go about the mundane and routine tasks that make up most of my life, cause me to see glimpses of You. Cultivate in me a heart of gratitude for You, the very Bread of life.

## March 14: Scarlet Cord

Read: Joshua 2

Reflect:

It's a familiar story. We remember it from Sunday school. The spies go into the Promised Land and encounter Rahab, a prostitute. She hides them and helps them escape but only after they promise to spare her and her family when they take over Jericho.

The spies agree and the scarlet cord hangs outside her window, a reminder of the promise of her salvation. A scarlet cord. We don't use the word scarlet very often. We usually say red.

Red. The color of salvation.

The red cord that hung is a hint of the bleeding man who will one day hang on a cross. Our redemption, like Rahab's requires faith. Rahab had to take action on her belief that she could be rescued.

Rahab is mentioned three times in the New Testament. Once, in Matthew 1 in the genealogy of Christ. Imagine that, a prostitute was one of only five women included in the Scriptural recounting of Christ's lineage. The other two times, in Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:15, her faith is commended.

Oh that we may have faith like Rahab's — faith that believes in the redemptive promise and takes action to live it out.

Respond:

You are the God who saved us, but You are also the One who continues to save us. May I have the faith of Rahab and act boldly in accordance to our confident belief in Who You are.

## March 15: Kinsman Redeemer

Read: Ruth 4

Reflect:

Ruth knew what it meant to be a foreigner. She'd given up the opportunity to go back to her old life with her parents and instead chose to travel to a new place, a town where she would be the outcast. If anyone knew about needing rescue, it had to be Ruth.

And there was Boaz, the kinsman redeemer. He chose to claim his title as redeemer, though he didn't have to do so. Another was ahead of him in line, so to speak. But Boaz saw the possibility in Ruth. Maybe because his own mother Rahab had also been a foreigner, he had a special tenderness toward the outcasts and ones who didn't belong.

When he removed his sandal to "seal the deal," the townspeople offered him a blessing, a prayer for descendants like those of Perez (whose parents were Judah and Tamar and that's another story worth reading in Genesis 38).

And so it happened, one day a child was born who was a descendant of Tamar and Judah, of Rahab and Salmon, and of Ruth and Boaz. You know His story very well. He is our true Kinsman Redeemer.

Respond:

Jesus, You are that child of promise, the One who became the fulfillment of the kinsman redeemer promise. You are the descendant of Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, Bathsheba, and son of Mary. Today, Lord, I am amazed by the way You use us in all our brokenness for Your glory.



## March 18: Promised Kingdom

Read: 2 Samuel 7

Reflect:

David wanted to build the Temple for God. In fact, he was desperate to do it. But God refused him the honor, offering it instead to his son Solomon. But here in the midst of God's denial of David's request, we find another glimpse of God's redemptive plan:

When your time comes and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up after you your descendant, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. — 2 Samuel 7:12-13

David could only see the present, but God was looking into the future. He knew the time would come when David's descendant (remember that genealogy in Matthew?) would reign forever.

God's promise to David wasn't about an earthly throne, this promise was eternal.

The redemption story was woven into every stitch of the Jewish faith fabric, from Abraham to Jacob to David. They had long awaited this coming kingdom, though their expectation was far different from the reality God had planned.

But still they watched and waited for the promise revealed. I wonder, how many of us are watching, anxious for the day when Jesus returns?

Respond:

Lord, today, will You fill me with wonder at Your coming? Cause me to recognize anew the beauty of Your humble birth. Give me a deep longing for the day when You will return to bring the promised kingdom.

## March 19: Needed Mediator

Read: Job 9

Reflect:

If you've never spent time really digging into Job's story, be prepared to come face-to-face with the reality of your own sin and lack of understanding of God and His power.

Job's response to Bildad in Job 9 is a powerful stop on our journey through the redemptive story. In a beautiful piece of Scripture, Job says of himself and God, "If only there was a mediator who could bring us together, but there is none" (verse 33 NLT).

If only there was a mediator ... how's that for the story of redemption spelled out in front of us? If only there was someone who could intercede before God on our behalf.

Job said, "If only." But we, who live on this side of the redemption story, realize the truth of Paul's writing to young Timothy:

For there is one God and one mediator between God and humanity, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, a testimony at the proper time. 1 Timothy 2:5

Job said, "If only." But we have the Mediator, the Son of God, who has reconciled God and man. Oh the joy of knowing the fullness of God's redemptive plan—and living in the fullness Christ has brought to us.

Respond:

Jesus, You are our Mediator, the Reconciler of God and man. My prayer today is to live in the great joy of the redemptive story. Fill my heart with gladness, for You are my Redeemer!

## March 20: Great Provider

Read: Psalm 23

Reflect:

We all want something or some things. While there is nothing inherently wrong with our desires, the Psalmist reminds us of a simple truth:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Psalm 23:1 KJV

Does this mean we can't wish for that new lens for our camera or enough matching forks for everyone? Of course not! David reminds us of something higher. We have a God who meets our every need. I love the way the NLT renders that same verse:

The Lord is my shepherd; I have everything I need. Psalm 23:1 NLT

When you look around your home, your life, do you realize you have everything you need? We collect coats and blankets for those without cover. We donate food for those without meals. We send money around the world to build school and dig wells to benefit communities we will never visit.

Friend, we really do have everything we need, given from the gracious hand of God, our Provider. Perhaps today you need to slow your pace and spend some time expressing your gratitude.

Respond:

Jehovah-Jireh, the Lord who provides, today I simply say thank you. Thank you for the abundance in my life. Create in me grateful and generous heart to use what You have given me to give to others.

## March 21: Personal Refuge

Read: Psalm 62

Reflect:

On Christmas Eve 2006, my husband was desperately sick. So sick in fact, he was unable to help assemble the gifts we'd purchased for our six-year-old daughter. Thankfully, we had wonderful friends who pitched in to put together art easels and Barbie™ stagecoaches.

We had no idea that Christmas morning that within a month, Scott would be on life support, the doctors unsure if he would survive. Just a few days after we celebrated our most low-key Christmas ever, I found myself in an ICU room with my precious husband laying there in an induced coma while we waited to see what would happen next.

One night, I was uncharacteristically without a Bible in my purse. All I had was the little red journal where I recorded the verses I was memorizing. In a dark hospital room, I turned to these words:

I wait quietly before God, for my hope is in Him ... Pour out your heart to Him, for God is our refuge. Psalm 62:5,8 NLT

Tears pouring down my face, I learned a whole new truth about this God who draws near, this God who redeems: He is my only hope, my only refuge.

Perhaps you know someone who is facing a hard situation. Maybe that someone is you. Know this, no matter what the situation, no matter what the hurt or sorrow, this God, our Redeemer, draws near.

Respond:

You, O God, are my comfort in the midst of life's storms. You are my ever-present help, my refuge in the sea of uncertainty. Today I'm laying down my fears, my worries, and my broken heart and dreams. I choose to sit quietly before You, my refuge.

## March 22: Safe Passage

Read: Isaiah 35

Reflect:

We realize the inherent dangers of travel, the unexpected issues that can arise. We know there are risks when we climb into the car or board the plane. But the truth is, life here on earth is always risky.

As long as we are sojourners on this dusty Earth, the reality of sin and brokenness are with us. But God promises a day will come when we can walk safely, with no fear.

Isaiah speaks of the Highway of Holiness (verse 8), a place on the redeemed will travel (verse 9). He says,

And the redeemed of the Lord will return and come to Zion with singing, crowned with unending joy. Joy and gladness will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee. Isaiah 35:10

These days of sorrow and fear, of tragedy and loss, of destruction and death, they are not forever. The promise of redemption is also a promise of safe passage to a land God has prepared for us, where there will be no more tears (Revelation 21:4).

As we move toward Easter, let us remember we who are redeemed have safe passage into eternal redemption. We will stand in His presence, the One who paid the price in our stead, and we will worship and praise Him forever.

Respond:

What an awesome promise, God, the assurance of safe passage into Your presence! Today, give me an eternal perspective; fill me with a longing for the countless ages I will spend in Your presence, singing the song of the redeemed.

## March 25: Freedom's Hope

Read: Isaiah 42

Reflect:

Jesus was God's chosen, the Promised One who would bring justice to the nations but also be gentle. Jesus would not crush the weak, but He would fulfill His mission to bring truth and righteousness to all the world.

Isaiah prophesied of God's character revealed in the Messiah. I love verse seven:

You will open the eyes of the blind and free the captives from prison. You will release those who sit in dark dungeons. Isaiah 42:7 NLT

Do you ever feel like you are captive and bound? We can face the mundane cycle of wash, dry, dirty, and repeat. We fix meals and broken toys. We fasten buttons on coats and loosen knots in shoelaces. We build routines and schedules and then strive to live within their boundaries.

Sometimes, we need our eyes opened to the wonder of God's word in us, around us, and through us. We have been freed from the prison of our lostness to live in the fullness of God's abundance.

We live in freedom's hope. The story of redemption is also a story of recovery. God has recovered for us the abundance and joy we could never have reached on our own. Today, won't you live in it?

Respond:

Lord, cause me to see with unblinded eyes, to notice the beauty around me and to dwell in the freedom and hope of light, Your light. Today, grace me with eyes to see past the temporary struggle of routine and glimpse the eternal story of redemption.

## March 26: Righteous Branch

Read: Jeremiah 33

Reflect:

The Israelites' story is a hard one to read. God's chosen people who never seemed satisfied with His provision for them, never content in serving Him alone. Always thinking someone else had something more, something better.

Sounds a little familiar, doesn't it?

If we're honest, part of the reason we feel tension when we read the history of the Hebrews with God is that we see ourselves in their cycle of rebellion, discipline, and restoration.

We're all too easily swayed by the things of this world. But just as God kept His covenant with them so also we know He will keep the covenant He has made with us.

Take some time to read verses 14 through 16 again. Notice that God's promise to the Israelites is also His promise to us — to fulfill the promise He has spoken. What was that promise? The Righteous Branch (verse 15) is Jesus, our redemption.

And in our salvation, we can boldly declare, "The Lord is our Righteousness" (verse 16).

Respond:

Father, thank You for making the way for us, for keeping Your promises, for sending Your Son to be our righteousness. May I live today celebrating the goodness and greatness of Who You are.

## March 27: New Hearts

Read: Ezekiel 36

Reflect:

We've reached the halfway point in our journey toward Easter. Three weeks ago we began by reading of creation, the moment when God shaped man in His image and breathed life into him.

Today, we look at a passage reminding us of God's faithfulness in spite of our unfaithfulness. We wander from Him and He draws us back. We break the covenant and He restores the relationship.

The Israelites, like us, had rebelled against God. They had defiled the land He had so graciously given Him. They'd pursued other gods and lived in blatant disregard for His instructions to them.

And yet, He keeps His word, His covenant, His promises. Not because they were worthy. They weren't. But for His name, for His renown, He would "demonstrate His holiness" through them (verse 23).

Yes, they would experience His discipline. They would know the results of their sin. But He would restore them, cleanse them, renew them.

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will place my Spirit within you ..." Ezekiel 36: 26-27a

And that promise, friend, extends to us as well. When we believe in Him, confess the name of His Son as our Savior and Lord, we receive His Spirit and our hearts are made new.

Respond:

Holy God, we could never earn or deserve the faithfulness You give us. Today, I pray for a deep awareness of the way You have changed my heart from stone to flesh and a passion to know You and Your love even more.



## March 28: Torn Hearts

Read: Joel 2

Reflect:

What happens when those new hearts we receive at salvation get distracted?  
When we find ourselves forgetting our first love?

We're so much more like the Israelites than we like to admit. Just like them, we look with longing at the things of the world and wonder if God will care or notice if we move Him down a notch or two in priorities. We begin to worship the created rather than the Creator.

Joel wrote to a people who had lost sight of the goodness of God, the faithfulness of God, the kindness of God, the mercy of God. They'd lived for themselves and pursued their own passions.

The Lord wanted more than their rituals and traditions and obligations. And He was prepared to show them the fullness of His wrath as a result of their disobedience. But He still loved them.

Even now—this is the Lord's declaration—turn to me with all your heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Tear your hearts, not just your clothes, and return to the Lord your God. Joel 2:12-13a

Maybe you've wandered a little bit lately. Maybe your heart isn't as devoted as it once was. There's an answer—let your heart be torn by your sin. Return to Him, knowing He will restore that heart of flesh within you.

Respond:

Help me, Lord, know the depths of my sin. Give me courage to rend my heart before You, trusting Your forgiveness and Your faithfulness to cleanse and restore me.

## March 29: Promised Redemption

Read: Luke 1

Reflect:

One of my favorite Christmas traditions is reading the Gospel of Luke. I read one chapter each day between December 1 and Christmas Eve. Reading Mary's Magnificat and Zechariah's song of praise on December 1 is such a beautiful way for me to begin the Advent season.

When I read Zechariah's song, I find myself overwhelmed by the way the redemption story is woven into every thread of Scripture.

Blessed is the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and provided redemption for his people. Luke 1:68

Zechariah sang of a Baby not yet born, a child coming to reveal the hope of redemption. His song continues with a reminder of the Davidic lineage of Christ (verse 69) and the promise of rescue (verse 72).

Because of our God's merciful compassion, the dawn from on high will visit us to shine on those who live in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace (verses 78-79).

May Zechariah's song invite us to sing of our own redemption story ... and may it be a story we share, as he did, with all who will listen.

Respond:

Words fail me, Lord, when I think about the way You saved me, the redemption You have given me. Give me boldness to share that story with others.

## April 1: Messiah's Birth

Read: Luke 2

Reflect:

I love the shepherds in the Christmas story. They were just ordinary guys. They went out that night with their sheep just like they always did. They probably sat around the fire swapping stories of their children's antics. Maybe, at some point in the night, they began to talk of deeper things, of left-behind dreams or wives they'd buried.

Somehow, it's easier to talk of those more personal things in the darkness, isn't it? To share of broken hearts and long-forgotten hope seems less frightening when cannot see the faces of those with whom we share.

Those shepherds had no idea the extraordinary of heaven was about to crash into the ordinary of the hillside. "Suddenly, the angel of the Lord appeared to them ..."  
(Luke 2:9 NLT)

These most ordinary men were the first recipients of the extraordinary story of Redemption's birth. That night, and long before and ever since, God has chosen to use ordinary men, women, and children to share His extraordinary story of hope and redemption.

In His hands, our ordinary lives become the context of His extraordinary grace.

Respond:

Lord, I offer You my very simple life. It's all I have to give but it's all You have ever asked of me. All of me is all You want. You delight in making extraordinary from the ordinary.

## April 2: Laid Down Burdens

Read: Matthew 11

Reflect:

Life gets exhausting, doesn't it? The troubles and trials of life control our thoughts. The financial struggles, family discord, discarded dreams, broken hearts ... it's all there right in front of us.

We're burdened and tired. We're weary. Burdened down and in need of rest.

Jesus understood.

"Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."  
Matthew 11:28

Good news for the mommas who are tired from all the demands of children and home and work. Good news for the widows who go to bed alone, missing the warmth of the husband with whom she has shared her whole life. Good news for the woman caring for a sick husband or parent or child and wonders how she will survive another moment.

Good news for all of us.

He will give us rest.

Respond:

Jesus, You have promised us rest from the burdens of this world. Today, I lay down the weight I've been carrying. I need the rest only You can give.

## April 3: Future Hope

Read: John 11

Reflect:

Remember Martha? Of Mary and Martha fame? She always gets such a bad rap. But here, after her brother Lazarus had died, she has this beautiful conversation with Jesus where He assures her of our future hope.

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me, even if he dies, will live. John 11:25

We've all experienced the grief that comes with losing someone we love. Yet, when our loved ones have known the salvation of Christ, we have this confidence: We will see them again.

That's the hope of the redemption story—there's more than this life! There is more than loss and grief and sorrow and heartbreak. There is hope, the promise of Christ that He has prepared a place for us (John 14:2).

Our redemption story is not only here on earth, it's an eternal story! We have this hope, an anchor for our souls (Hebrews 6:19), in the midst of life's storms. And we can say with the same confidence as Martha, "You are the Messiah."

Respond:

Great Giver of all hope, thank You! For You are the resurrection and the life and in You we know that though we die, we will live again. Today I thank You for the confidence I have in Your plan for my future.

## April 4: Serving Love

Read: John 13

Reflect:

Can you imagine how the disciples felt when Jesus washed their feet? What a humbling experience to have someone serve you in that way. Jesus said we are to serve others like that.

While we were in Georgia, our pastor washed the feet of several people in our church. As he did, he shared with each of them how their humble service had impacted our church family. As he tenderly poured warm water over their feet and carefully dried them, he prayed for them and thanked the Lord for the example each one was to him and to all of us.

After the service, I spoke with Mrs. Nora, one of those honored. She was in tears and explained how unworthy she was. She listed off several people who had done “bigger” things and explained her own service in these words, “I just do what I can with what I have. That’s all. It’s nothing special.”

Oh, Mrs. Nora, I have to disagree! It’s something very special. What would happen if we all adopted her attitude about serving others:

I do what I can with what I have.

What do you have? Maybe you write notes of encouragement or bake homemade bread or hold fussy babies. Maybe you love students or fix leaky faucets or are quick with hugs. Will you use what you have to do what you can?

Respond:

Lord, teach me to serve well. Open my heart and grant me a willingness to give and use what I have to do what I can. Guard me from thinking what I have is for anything less than Your kingdom’s glory.

## April 5: Picked Up Cross

Read: Luke 9

Reflect:

“It’s my cross to bear.”

We use that phrase so flippantly. The cross isn’t something small, something casual. The cross of Christ was heavy. It was torturous.

Jesus told the disciples, ““If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:21 NLT). He wasn’t them an easy road, wasn’t using hyperbole.

The truth is, most of us never get past the first phrase —give up your own way. We want credit, recognition, affirmation, acknowledgement. But the truth is, before we can pick up the cross, we have to lay our price down. We never draw attention to the burden we bear, the suffering we face, the cross we carry.

Carrying the cross is heavy, hard work. It’s rooted in laying down our dreams and our plans, our desires and our goals, and choosing instead to live in relentless pursuit of His kingdom. Carrying the cross means we use all our efforts, all our attention, all our focus on pointing others toward Him.

The redemption story centers on the cross. The foundation of our faith is Jesus becoming the sacrifice. And when we are called by His name, our part in the story requires bearing the cross He assigns us.

Picking up the cross will never be the easy way, but it will always be the way we come closest to God.

Respond:

Father, today as I do the tasks assigned me, may I point to You and not me. Loosen the hold pride and selfishness have on my heart and tighten the bond between You and me.

## April 8: Willing Ransom

Read: Mark 10

Reflect:

One year as we were traveling during the holidays, we stopped at a hotel to spend the night. It was late and both Scott and I were exhausted. We took our daughter, then about five, to the room and told her to wait there while we finished unloading the car.

As we quickly made our way back to the room, we realized she was gone. In that moment the greatest fear I had a smother gripped my heart—that someone had taken my daughter. We searched high and low for her, calling out her name in the darkness, desperate to find her and wondering how she could have disappeared when we were right there near her the whole time.

In those moments, I assure you, I would have paid whatever ransom asked to have our girl back. There was no price too high for her safe return.

Our heavenly Father feels that same way about us. He'd pay any ransom necessary to have us back in relationship with Him. No price is too high for our redemption. In fact, He paid the greatest price, gave the largest ransom imaginable: His own Son. Jesus knew that's why He came in flesh:

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Mark 10:45

He was the ransom for all the sin of every one of us. His life, the price for our redemption.

We did find our girl. She'd gone to the car to get her blanket. She assured us she was never lost because she could see us the whole time. ☺

Respond:

I have no words for the price You paid for my sin. No way to express the fullness of my gratitude for the ransom and for my redemption. Today I pray my life is evidence of my deep thankfulness.



## April 9: Sin's Price

Read: Luke 23

Reflect:

And so it was the Son of God was crucified. Raised up like the snake on Moses' staff for all to see and for redemption's plan to be fulfilled (John 3:14-15). The price for our sin was paid. Our debt was cancelled. The ransom received.

We call this day of Christ's crucifixion Good Friday. Far too often we are guilty of overlooking this dark day, the day when it appeared to all of earth that death had won. Just as we skip over the season of Advent, exchanging the call to prepare for His coming through confession and repentance for an easier, lighter experience of opening boxes and drawers for small treats or special activities, so we also skip over Good Friday, looking ahead to pretty dresses and stirring melodies and Easter morning revelry.

But at what cost? What happens to our faith, to our understanding of the story of redemption when we never force ourselves to look at the darkness and despair of our lives outside of Christ?

It's far easier to celebrate a baby in a manger and an empty tomb than it is to come face-to-face with a bloody sacrifice hanging naked and battered on a cross.

But the manger and the tomb only have meaning through the lens of the cross. Without Jesus' death, the manger story is simply a sweet tale of a poor family on a cold night. Without the cross's sacrifice and Jesus' death, the empty tomb would never be.

The cross is the symbol of our redemption. It's where the perfect Lamb was slain to pay the final price for our sin. Don't skip the cross in your haste to the empty tomb.

Respond:

Lord, open my eyes to the necessity of the cross. Forgive me for taking lightly the price You paid for my sin.

## April 10: Willing Sacrifice

Read: Matthew 26

Reflect:

The Last Supper, the final Passover Jesus spent with His disciples. I wonder how He felt knowing His time with them had come to an end. Knowing one would betray, one would deny Him, and all would desert Him.

He joined the rag-tag group of men He'd chosen in the upper room that night. As they recited the centuries-old words of the Passover tradition, they ate the familiar foods and drank the customary wine. I wonder if any of them sensed something was different. I wonder if any of them had any idea what was really ahead.

He had told them before He would be killed. Even that night, He revealed what lay ahead.

For this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Matthew 26:28

Jesus wasn't like the Passover lambs they knew from their experience. He wasn't caught and slaughtered while crying out. No, Jesus walked willingly into the courts of the high priest, of Pilate, and of Herod. He stood there with all power to stop the beatings and the mocking. He remained on the cross though angels could have rescued Him.

His sacrifice was willing, chosen, and intentional. He knew His purpose and He was prepared to follow the Father's plan for redemption, even at great personal cost.

I often realize I know nothing of true sacrifice. Jesus knew the fullness of sacrifice. And He gave Himself willingly.

Respond:

Lord, that You would willingly give Your life for my redemption is beyond me. I cannot fathom the depths of Your love. Reveal Yourself to me anew, that I may rejoice once again in the greatness of Your love.

## April 11: Only Way

Read: John 14

Reflect:

The story of redemption has only one true sacrifice: Jesus. From the beginning of the story in Eden, Jesus' role was certain—to crush the head of the serpent.

Jesus is the only way to our redemption. His death and resurrection are the only path to our salvation. When He said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me” (verse 16), He meant it.

In this age where tolerance is the highest value and the idea of only one way to know God is ridiculed and even reprimanded, we often find it difficult to share the redemption story.

We don't want to make others feel bad or be called narrow minded. But we cannot let our fears keep us from sharing the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He IS the only way. And this is life and death. Eternity DOES hang in the balance. TODAY is the day of salvation.

For the sake of those we love, for the sake of those Christ loves, for the truth that simply says,

This is how much God loved the world: He gave His Son, His one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in Him, anyone can have whole and lasting life. John 3:16 MSG

Do you believe that? Do you believe that God sent His Son, the only way for our redemption, our reconciliation with Him? If so, who will you tell?

Respond:

Lord, give me strength today to share the gospel. Fill me with boldness and longing to tell others the promise of redemption made true in Jesus Christ.

## April 12: New Life

Read: Romans 6

Reflect:

I imagine Saturday was a long day for those women who had watched Jesus' crucifixion. Undoubtedly Sunday morning couldn't come soon enough for them to get to the tomb and finish anointing His body.

I think about Mary Magdalene and her encounter with Jesus in the garden that day. How she didn't recognize Him until He spoke her name. So like us, isn't it? To fail to see Him at work until He hits us with the proverbial two-by-four.

The resurrection story is full of wonder and beauty and joy of a promise fulfilled. The perfect sacrifice had been given. Sin's debt was paid on Friday. But lie, eternal life, THAT was fulfilled on Sunday. Our promise of new life, eternal life, is real because of the empty tomb.

Paul wrote to the church at Rome,

... just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life. Romans 6:4b

New life. Redemption doesn't just pay our debt; redemption offers us hope, promise, newness of life.

To the church at Corinth, Paul said it this way,

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come! 2 Corinthians 5:17

New life has come. What a glorious promise!

Respond:

Is there greater cause for praise than the simple truth that, in You, I am made new? Thank You, Jesus, for new life!

## April 15: Promised Return

Read: Acts 1

Reflect:

Jesus left the disciples standing on the Mount of Olives. He promised them power and the Holy Spirit and told them to go and spread the message of Good News.

And then He was gone. The angels spoke to the disciples,

“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you have seen him going into heaven.” Acts 1:11

What promise, that just as He went, He will return.

Zechariah prophesied of this second coming of Christ centuries before,

On that day his feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east. The Mount of Olives will be split in half from east to west, forming a huge valley, so that half the mountain will move to the north and half to the south. Zechariah 14:4

Jesus IS coming back! And when He does, He will place His feet on the Mount of Olives, just as they were when He left.

Oh friend, there is such hope in this redemption story! Because our redemption is eternal. He will return and all striving will cease, and all heartache will end.

He keeps every promise. And He WILL return.

Respond:

Lord, sometimes I get consumed by the daily happenings here on this troubled old earth. I lose sight too easily of the redemption story and the promise of Your return. Today, keep my heart stayed on the promise I have of Your return.

## April 16: Firstborn of Creation

Read: Colossians 1

Reflect:

Over the next few days, I invite you to meditate on the Scriptures. Spend time in prayer. Take note of the truths you see about who God is. Observe the ways only He could provide our redemption. In the space provided, make notes or write out your prayer.

Today, spend some time contemplating verses 15 through 20 in particular, making note of what we understand about the person of Christ. And write out verse 22.

Respond:

You are the firstborn of creation, the One who holds it all together. Today, Jesus, open my eyes to the wonder that through Your blood shed on the cross, I have been reconciled to the Father.

## April 17: Highest Name

Read: Philippians 2

Reflect:

Reflect on the verses below. Circle any words that reveal truths about Christ's character. Underline any parts that speak of our redemption and the price He paid. Spend time in prayer, acknowledging Who He is and who you are not.

Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus,

who, existing in the form of God,  
did not consider equality with God  
as something to be exploited.  
Instead he emptied himself  
by assuming the form of a servant,  
taking on the likeness of humanity.  
And when he had come as a man,  
he humbled himself by becoming obedient  
to the point of death—  
even to death on a cross.  
For this reason God highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee will bow—  
in heaven and on earth  
and under the earth—  
and every tongue will confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father

Philippians 2:5-11

Respond:

Jesus, today all I can do is bow at Your name. Fill my heart with praise and adoration for the gift of salvation that only came through Your obedience.

## April 18: Made New

Read: Revelation 21

Reflect:

We're spending the last two days of our Lenten journey in Revelation. Today, we'll read Revelation 21. I encourage you to focus on verses one through seven. Make note of what they tell you about what is to come, the promise of our redemption isn't just here and now. Spend time today reflecting on the heartache in this world, the brokenness. Think about the poverty, the illness, the isolation, the war, the natural disasters, the oppression ... it won't be easy, and it won't be comfortable. But it's necessary for us to grasp the depth of our need for redemption in order to truly understand the beauty of what Christ did. Every particle of this earth, every cell inside every one of our bodies is warped by the result of sin.

But one day, it will all be made new.

Respond:

It's hard to spend time thinking about all the ways our world is broken and ravaged by sin. We want to avoid seeing it and focus on what is comfortable and easy. Lord, give me courage to see this world for what it truly is so I can begin to understand the gift of what You've given.



## April 19: Come, Lord Jesus!

Read: Revelation 22

Reflect:

We've reached the end of our readings together. It's Good Friday . a time for reflection and contemplation of the sacrifice of Christ. A time for us to be aware of our own personal depravity. We don't like to think of ourselves that way, do we? But we must. Because if we could ever do enough, be enough, on our own, we wouldn't need Jesus. But we can't, we aren't ... and we do.

Today, I invite you to spend time in personal reflection. Yesterday we considered the darkness in our world. But today, turn inward, consider the sin in your own heart. Be honest with yourself and remember the Lord already knows. Make space for the Holy Spirit to peel back the layers of your heart and reveal any hidden sin. Use Psalm 139:23-24 or Psalm 51 as a basis for your prayer.

This isn't an easy practice ... and it can and probably should extend into time tomorrow as well. But here's why it matters, when we gather on Sunday morning, Easter morning, Resurrection morning, to celebrate the risen Lord, don't you want your heart to be pure before Him? Don't you want to worship unhindered by sin and shame?

Do the hard work of confession and repentance now so you can proclaim with joy and peace the words of John, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Respond:

Lord, as You were pierced, pierce me. Cut open the bonds of sin and shame in my life. Just as Your death broke the chains of death, give me courage to confess to break the strongholds in my life. Convict me, cleanse me, and fill me again with the joy of my salvation.