



30 Days of Household Devotions

by Dr. Kari Vo

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GETTING STARTED WITH HOUSEHOLD DEVOTIONS

Do you want to grow closer to God? Would you like to learn how to share Jesus' love with others? Think about trying household devotions! They're a great way to grow individually and as a group of people who love the Lord.

WHAT ARE THEY?

Household devotions is the name we use for the habit some people have of coming together on a regular basis to pray and worship as a household. It is absolutely not limited to households with children; couples may do it, and so may roommates and many other household setups. This booklet will help you get started with household devotions, using a simple pattern that can work for almost anyone.

WHY HAVE THEM?

But why have household devotions at all? The best explanation I've heard of this came from a woman who has had a difficult life. She said, "Having this time allows us to acknowledge the God who's getting us through the day." That's the main reason, pure and simple—to have a short time when we can lift our eyes above the craziness of our daily lives to focus on the God who loves us and is with us to help us. It's a time to stop running and simply breathe for a while—to rest in God's presence—to remember once again that we are God's children through Jesus Christ our Savior.



WHAT DO THEY LOOK LIKE?

You might be wondering what household devotions look like in practice. Just so you can get an idea in your head of how easy this can be—the format my family uses is one I learned from my father-in-law in Vietnam. His version was very simple—a Bible reading and then a prayer time. That's all it was. We still do that in my family, and it takes between 5 and 15 minutes, depending on how long the reading is and how much we have to pray about. Occasionally a discussion breaks out, which takes a little longer. But it isn't hard, and it isn't time-consuming. In fact, it's simple enough that we can do it every day—though there are days we don't manage it, and that's okay, too.

WHO, WHEN, AND WHERE?

So how can you make household devotions part of your life? Start by thinking about the *who*, *when*, and *where* questions. Who would be involved? It's possible that some of your household will want to participate and others won't. That's fine. The ones who are interested can meet without pressuring anybody else.

Look for a time when everyone can be together for a short while—at least, most of the time. For many households, devotion time is early in the morning, before everyone leaves for work or school. Others make it the last thing they do before bed. And still others have household devotions at dinner time, while everyone is around the table. Try to pick a time that works best for your household physically and emotionally—a time when people aren't half-asleep, hungry, or cranky.

Where can you meet? This could be a bedroom, the household dinner table, or a spot in the living room. If you have a choice (you may not have), try to pick a spot that is fairly quiet and free from distractions. Do what you can, and don't worry that your time or place isn't perfect.

WHO SHOULD LEAD?

Different households have different ways of organizing their devotions. In some cases, people take turns leading different bits of the devotion time—one may read aloud, while another prays, and so forth. In other cases, one person takes the lead most or all of the time.

A SIMPLE FORMAT

Lutheran Hour Ministries has come up with a super-simple format that's already being used in a lot of households. It's based on the short Daily Devotions we put out, which you can access at www.lhm.org. This booklet includes 30 sample devotions which are already printed out for you.

- **Reading**

As you can see, each devotion includes a Bible reading, most of them very short. This directly relates to the text that follows it, which helps you think through what you've just read together and see some of the great stuff God is saying to us in that part of the Bible.

- **Prayer**

At the bottom of the reading is a simple prayer. You can have one person read it, or have the whole group say it together. You can also add additional prayers if you like.

- **Reflection Questions**

At the very bottom of the page are three questions which you can talk about together as a household. They are meant to move from very simple to a bit deeper. Everyone can contribute, but try not to pressure anyone into saying more than they're comfortable with. Some questions get very personal and people may be shy.

BARRIERS IN THE WAY

Sometimes it happens that you'd like to have household devotions, but there are barriers in the way. A common one is feeling inadequate—imagining that all the other households in your church are having household devotions and doing it much better and more faithfully than you. The short answer is, you're not, and they're not. We all struggle. God blesses us even in the middle of our struggles, and that's all that matters.

You may also worry about not having all the answers. What if someone asks a question you can't answer? Here are the magic words that save me in that situation: I say, "I'm sorry, I don't know." People respect honesty.

But it doesn't have to stop with "I don't know." Follow it up with these questions: "Who could we ask? How could we find out?" Even children will have ideas you can follow up, like "Let's ask the pastor," or "Let's Google it." If you find the answer, great! And if you don't, you can put it in the pile of things to ask God some day when you're with Him forever. You give people a wonderful gift when you show by your example that it's okay to have uncertainties and unknowns—and that you can still move forward in your life, trusting God.

There's one other question you could ask, and it's a question Jesus Himself used sometimes: "What do you think?" This is a great way to get a discussion going. Even if your household comes to no conclusions, that's okay. You are all practicing a great Christian skill—thinking about your faith and wrestling with God.

ADDING VARIETY

There are plenty of other ways to change up your devotion time, and you can learn about them by reading these two booklets by Mary Oldfield: *Helping Your Child Have a Relationship with God* and *Helping Your Child Grow Through Faith Conversations*. But I'd encourage you to start simply. Consider your household's needs, and ask God to give you wisdom and good ideas. He will!



DAY 2: RESPECT FOR THE SCRIPTURE?

And He (Jesus) came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as was His custom, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and He stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place ... And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:16-17, 21).

Do you respect the Bible? That's kind of an insulting question, isn't it? Not too many people would say no, especially people in the church.

Jesus certainly respected the Scriptures. Here we read that He was invited to preach in the synagogue in His home town. So He took the scroll of Isaiah, found His passage, and read it aloud to the group. Then He started preaching.

Here is God Himself, God in the flesh, preaching—and He starts by reading the Bible aloud. He doesn't say, "Well, I'm here Myself today, so I'll just speak directly and bypass the Scriptures—they're not necessary." No, He sets the example Himself by using the text and sticking to it. It's as if God said, "I value the Bible, and I won't even speak to you without using it. If I value it so much, you should do so, too."

When we stick to our favorite passages, it's easy to value the Bible. The people of Nazareth had no problem listening to Jesus read about helping the oppressed and setting captives free. It reminded them how much God cared about them.

But there was a problem when Jesus turned to other bits of the Bible. He mentioned the prophet Elijah, who helped a poor foreign widow, and the prophet Elisha, who healed a man from Syria. Suddenly the Bible lesson wasn't going so well anymore. What, the God of Israel, helping foreigners instead of His own people? Are we supposed to respect that?

They didn't. Instead, they tried to throw Jesus over a cliff.

Ultimately, they *wouldn't* respect the Bible. But Jesus did. And as He went on His way, He fulfilled every Old Testament promise about the Savior who would rescue us from sin and death. And now, risen from the dead, He continues to fulfill His promises. He saves everyone who trusts in Him and gives us eternal life.

Lord Holy Spirit, help me treasure the Bible and grow through it. Amen.

What piece of writing do you value the most, and why? (Don't count the Bible.)

What do you do when you find a part of the Bible that is hard for you to understand or accept?

What promise of God means the most to you right now?



DAY 1: LEANING ON THE WORD OF GOD

"And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. ... And Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time" (Luke 4:1, 12-13).

Testing. Nobody likes it. It's uncomfortable. It offers the possibility that you could fail. And the consequences—well, let's not think about those!

But we all know that testing comes along early in practically every important thing we do. Moses faced it the first time he went to tell Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go free. How nervous he must have been! Imagine having to go tell a hostile king that you've been hearing voices (well, one voice), and you have a message from God that the king isn't going to want to hear. Not fun. Dangerous, even. How do you keep your courage up in those circumstances?

Moses leaned pretty heavily on the Word of God that he had heard during the episode of the burning bush. He didn't try to come up with smart ideas on his own—just stuck to God's Word and passed it along. And we can see God's own Son Jesus doing the exact same thing in His own testing, during the 40 days He spent in the wilderness being tempted by the devil.

Think about that for a moment. Here is God Himself in the flesh being tempted by evil—and whenever He answers a temptation, He says only, "It is written ..." (or as we would say, "The Bible says ..."). As God, surely Jesus could have just made something up. He had the wisdom. But He didn't do that. He leaned on God's Word, the Scripture, and used that as His sole defense—just as Moses did. Why? Jesus did it for us. God gives us perfect wisdom and understanding in the Bible. When we are tested, there is no better place for us to find help and hope. Because that is where we find Jesus—and the Holy Spirit plants faith and hope in our hearts.

Lord Holy Spirit, help me to understand and trust the Bible—please teach me to hear Your voice. Amen.

When do you feel nervous?

What parts of the Bible do you know the best?

What is a first step you could take to get to know the Bible better?



DAY 3: IF YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD

The devil said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.” And Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone’” (Luke 4:3-4).

Note the devil’s taunt to Jesus in the wilderness. “If You are the Son of God,” he says, “command this stone to become bread ... throw Yourself down from here... if You are the Son of God.” Here is Satan questioning Jesus’ identity, trying to tap into whatever kernel of doubt might be there, or so he hopes, deep in Jesus’ psyche.

This didn’t faze Jesus. But all too often, it works perfectly well on us. Satan insinuates, “If you are a child of God ...” and adds a temptation. “If you are a child of God, why are you struggling with (name sin here)? You must not be a real Christian after all.” Indeed, sometimes he sinks so low he says, “If you are a child of God, He must not be very choosy about who’s in His family. Just look at you—who could ever want you?”

Against these attacks, we have the same protection Jesus used against the devil. “It is written ...” or in our everyday language, “God says in the Bible ...” Jesus turns straight to the Bible—to the Word of God. That, He knows, is sufficient for the devil’s attacks.

And we can do the same when the devil attacks us. “If you are a child of God?” Why, yes, that is exactly what God calls us: “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1 John 3:1).

We are God’s children because Jesus died and rose for us, and the Holy Spirit has given us faith in Jesus: “But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His Name, He gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12).

Now we live as children of God, and even in our darkest hours, God holds on to us: “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him” (Romans 8:16-17).

Dear Father, help me trust in Your Word and rejoice that You have made me Your child through Jesus. Amen.

What kinds of doubts does the devil like to use on you?

What part of the Bible gives you the most comfort?

What does it mean to you, that you are a child of God?

DAY 4: A PERSONAL QUESTION

And someone said to Him, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” And He said to them, “Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then He will answer you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.’ But He will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from Me, all you workers of evil’” (Luke 13:23-27)!

Have you noticed how Jesus rarely answers questions in the form people ask them? Here someone asks, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” That’s a question about numbers—a safe question, an “academic” question.

But Jesus reframes the question into a deeply personal one, saying, in effect, *forget about the numbers!* What about you? Are you going to be among the saved? That is the question you should be asking.”

Ouch! That’s probably more truth than we want. Then He describes people just like us whose relationship to Jesus remained theoretical far too long, until the door was shut, and the opportunity was lost. Then, finally, they ask to come in—and Jesus says He does not know where they come from. But that can’t be! they say. “We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.”

What a weird way to put it! They don’t say, “We ate and drank with You,” like friends sharing a table with Jesus; no, we had our own little dinner party while You were—what? standing by? Again, “You taught in our streets”—not in our homes, not in our families, but outside, along with the other street noise that meant nothing to us. How terrifying! They don’t know Jesus, and so He does not know them.

This doesn’t have to be us. This should *never* be us because the Holy Spirit has brought us to faith in Jesus, to hear His teaching in His own house. Jesus is not a theoretical “someday” Savior. He gives us new and everlasting life *today*. He calls and welcomes everyone who trusts Him.

Dear Jesus, draw me to You in truth and let Your Holy Spirit live in me. Amen.

Have you ever played Bible trivia? What were the questions like?

What does it mean, to really know someone?

How are you sure that Jesus is really yours and you are really His?





DAY 5: NO LASTING CITY

So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through His own blood. Therefore let us go to Him outside the camp and bear the reproach He endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come (Hebrews 13:12-14).

“Here we have no lasting city.” Oh, how true that is! For this is a time of grief and loss for many. The things we have trusted in—the things we have loved and served and placed our hopes in, sometimes for all our lives—seem to be falling apart. We are afraid. We grieve.

For some people, it is worry over our country—the land, the people, the institutions we love. We see evil things happening that we never could have imagined. Neighbor rises up against neighbor, and we find ourselves in conflict with the people we love. The foundations of the earth seem to be shaken. And as we pray, we are reminded that no nation endures forever.

Sometimes our worries are closer to home—at church or work. There may be church conflict—or the years-long loss of membership. No congregation endures forever. At work we may face job loss or transfer or even the expected but still difficult transition to retirement. No job lasts forever.

Hardest of all are the changes in our families. We lose people we love to death, divorce, or estrangement. Others move away. Children grow up and leave the nest—a good thing, but still hard. Even our families don’t last forever.

In the midst of all this, what can we hold on to? God tells us: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). Or as He says in another place, “Even to your old age I am He, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save” (Isaiah 46:4).

Jesus is the One we can cling to. He will not change. He is still the same Savior who laid down His life for us on the cross—the same Lord who took up His life again when He rose from the dead on the third day afterward. None of our losses catches Him by surprise. He will carry us through them all.

Lord of the everlasting city of God, help me to trust You with all my heart, and to look to You for everything I need. Amen.

What human things feel like they’ve “always been there” to you?

What human things feel like they are falling apart to you right now?

How do you find comfort and help in Jesus when you feel that way?

DAY 6: ASKING THE IMPOSSIBLE—AND GETTING IT

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus ... (Philemon 8-10a).

Philemon seems to have been a wealthy man with a house large enough for the local Christian church to meet in it. He also had slaves—including a young man named Onesimus who ran away, possibly stealing some money from Philemon at the same time. By some miracle, Onesimus wound up in contact with Paul, who was in prison for Jesus’ sake. Paul taught Onesimus about Jesus, and soon Onesimus was a believer. Then they agreed it was time for Onesimus to go home to face the music.

That had to be scary. What would Philemon do when Onesimus returned? Trusting in the Holy Spirit, Paul wrote this short letter for Onesimus to take back with him.

Paul explained how he loved Onesimus as his own child, and is now sending him home, asking Philemon to “receive him as you would receive me” (verse 17). What! Receive a runaway with the same welcome he would give to Paul himself? Yes, and Paul continues: “If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account ... I will repay it.” He even hints that Philemon should set Onesimus free: “This perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother” (verses 18, 15-16).

In this world, nobody forgives like that. Nobody takes in a runaway thief without punishment and then promotes him to the status of family!

But it looks like it happened. There are historical traces of an early bishop named Onesimus. If this is the same man, it looks likely that Philemon did what Paul asked—he forgave and loved Onesimus with the love of Jesus Christ.

How could this happen? The Holy Spirit softened Philemon’s heart to make him more like Jesus, who gave up His own life for His enemies. If Jesus can love like that, He can create His love in us as well. It’s never easy. But it is possible—because it is Jesus working.

Dear Lord Jesus, make me like You. Amen.

When did someone show you undeserved mercy or kindness?

What is one impossible conflict you would like to ask God for help in?

Write or say a prayer about that conflict, asking God to work in the hearts of the people involved.





DAY 7: COUNTING THE COST

(Jesus said) "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' ... So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:25-30, 33).

There was a marathon runner with cellulitis so bad he was hospitalized. Having crossed many finish lines, he was now unable to get to the bathroom unaided. All his great strength was not enough.

Jesus points us to a similar paradox when He warns us to count the cost of following Him. He mentions a man building a tower. The sensible man will consider the challenges he will face. We should do the same, Jesus says.

And yet, what *is* the cost of following Jesus? Here's what Jesus says: "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after Me ..." He says. Oh dear. "Whoever does not renounce all that he has ..." Oh my. "Whoever does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life ..." Okay, Lord, I give up. There's no way I can pay this price. If You wanted to convince me of that fact, You have succeeded.

It's at this point that I seem to hear Jesus saying, *All right, now that's an attitude I can work with.* "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26b).

The runner in the hospital had no strength—but he did have doctors, medicine, and parents who loved him. Together they helped him—to the bathroom, and to final healing. As sinners, we have no strength either—but we have Jesus. Though we carry our crosses, He does the heavy lifting. He has taken all of our sin, guilt, and shame to Calvary.

Jesus is our Savior and our help. We have counted the cost, understood our weakness, and know we are powerless. But He is strong beyond all things. He will gladly carry us, heal us, and make us His own—all because He loves us.

Dear Lord, I have nothing—but I have You. Thank You for giving me everything. Amen.

What qualities, strengths, or assets do you tend to rely on in your life?

In what kinds of situations do they let you down?

How does Jesus help you in those situations?

DAY 8: LOST AGAIN—FOUND AGAIN?

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins (James 5:19-20).

"It's been too many times; God can never forgive this time."
"I think he's beyond hope." "I don't even know if it's worth trying anymore." "I'm ready to give up."

Have you ever said or thought these words about another human being? Have you ever thought or said them about yourself?

If you have, it wouldn't be so surprising. Human beings have a limited amount of endurance. We lose hope when someone we love goes off the rails repeatedly. The fifth time we bail them out of jail—the tenth time we get them into rehab—the hundred-and-fifth time we have to argue with them about a really, really bad decision they're intent on making—we get tired. How can we help it? Sometimes we wonder if God isn't tired, too.

Against that, James says there is hope. The Holy Spirit says, "He *will* save. He *will* cover." God *will* show mercy and forgiveness the thousandth time, just as He did the hundredth, just as He did the first.

God keeps going. His patient love for us is beyond anything we can imagine or put limits on. He keeps searching for His lost and wandering sheep, again and again, if necessary. God still cares, still loves, still forgives.

You may have a lost sheep in your family: someone you love dearly but almost despair of ever seeing come home again. Or you may be the lost sheep yourself, and you want to come home, but you can't see how that could happen. It may be the first time you've been in this lost situation (though that's very unlikely). It may be the last time (though that's rather unlikely, too).

It doesn't matter. Jesus is calling you. He wants you home. He wants you safe—forgiven, protected, restored. He isn't going to stop looking for you or your loved one. He's still calling. And that's good news for everybody.

Father, thank You for Your patience and forgiving love. Please show that same love and endurance through me, and strengthen me. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

What was the hardest subject for you to master in school? How did it make you feel?

How does it make you feel, to know that God always wants you back?

Silently ask God to help you show the same love and patience to someone you have trouble with.





DAY 9: CUT IT OFF?

(Jesus said) "And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell" (Mark 9:45).

When I was young, I read these words of Jesus with horror. "Cut off a hand or foot?" I thought. "Tear out an eye? What's Jesus talking about!?"

Besides, I knew myself well enough to know that cutting off body parts wouldn't help. I would still find plenty of ways to sin. Sin goes deeper than that.

But when I got older, I found myself considering a possible relationship with a very attractive person who was also attracted to me. The catch? He was not a Christian. In fact, he was fascinated with the occult. It was clear my Christianity and his outlook on life would never mix. And I could not be sure that I would come out of such a relationship unscathed.

And so, I did what Jesus said. I cut it off. (And yes, it definitely hurt, and he had no idea why I suddenly backed away.) It was necessary. And based on things I found out years later, cutting that potential relationship off was beneficial. I doubt I could have stopped him from going into witchcraft and Satanism. But I think he could have stopped me from growing in my faith, from becoming a Christian adult, from finding the path God had for my life.

You, too, may have things that need to be cut off to preserve your life and your faith in Jesus. They may be obvious dangers like drug or alcohol abuse or a job where unethical behavior is condoned. But they may be less-obvious things like harmful gossip or slipshod money handling, creating debt for no good reason.

To all these things, Jesus tells us to "Cut it off. Run from the temptation—run to Me, and I will protect you." Jesus offers us peace, love, forgiveness, and true wholeness. He even offers to make us part of His own body—never to be cut off from God's presence. All these things He gives freely, if we will only trust Him. And He is trustworthy. For He is the One who died and rose again to make us God's people.

Lord Holy Spirit, You know what I need to cut from my life. Please take care of it; help me to bear it in Your love. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

How did you react to these words of Jesus when you first heard them?

If you are willing, tell about a time when God helped you to cut something dangerous out of your life.

When has God given you something better instead of the thing that had to go?

DAY 10: CHERISHING THE BIBLE

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

I have a copy of *The Living Bible*, which my parents gave me for Christmas as a child. It's the book where I first learned clearly about Jesus. It happened each night when I was supposed to be sleeping (sorry, Mom!). As a bookworm, I couldn't resist it.

I started at Genesis—not a good place, given all the genealogies and laws! It took me a year to get through Psalms, because I had no appreciation for poetry. Three years later I finished the whole thing. But somehow, before I left the Old Testament, I became a believer. When I got to the Gospels, I was well prepared to welcome Jesus; the prophets had already clued me in. A couple years later I was baptized.

Some people don't buy this. "A book could never do all that," they say, scoffing. "You're making it up." Well, no. The Word of God is alive, God-breathed, even *contagious*, if you will. Spend time with it, and you won't come back unchanged. Go to the Bible with a questioning heart, and see what happens.

Keep in mind that the Bible is a collection of books, with history, biography, romance, suspense, poetry, advice, letters, and so forth. Start anywhere you like. If something's confusing, ask someone for help (at church perhaps), or skip that bit and try a different book. Things will start coming together. And the Holy Spirit will definitely help you. Ask Him!

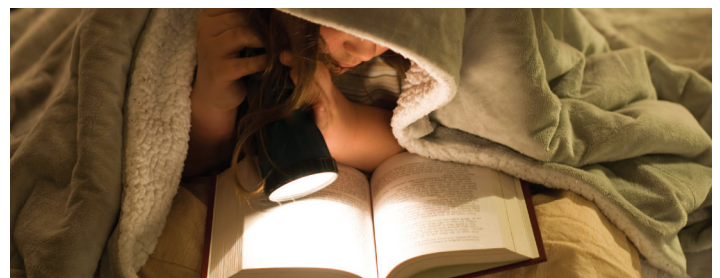
Jesus says, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My Word" (John 14:23a). The word for "keep" can be translated as "cherish, treasure, hold close to your heart." God gave us His Word to know Him and so the Holy Spirit could use it to draw us close to Jesus our Savior. This gift is ours to cherish, because it is the Word of the God we love.

Dear Lord, thank You for giving us Your Word so that we may know and love You. Amen.

Do you know anyone who keeps old love letters? Why do they keep them?

What letters, poetry, songs, or books do you cherish, and why?

How has God used the Bible to help you know Him better?





DAY 11: SPIRITUAL SURGERY

For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from His sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account (Hebrews 4:12-13).

Have you ever had surgery? It's a scary thing to contemplate—yielding up your body into the hands of doctors who will cut and extract and mend, all to make you better again. We fear pain. We fear unconsciousness.

And we fear the vulnerability that comes with surgery. Our lives are literally in the hands of the doctors. We cannot help ourselves. We are usually unclothed. We cannot even move or wake. We are wholly dependent on their care. And that is scary.

But of course, when necessary, we know surgery can make us better—can even save our lives. And so, we suffer vulnerability for the sake of the better life to come.

Here, the writer of Hebrews describes a vulnerability that comes when we realize we are in God's hands, and He knows everything about us. Now *that's* scary! And yet, we know it's good. Because He also knows where and when to apply the scalpel of His Word, the Bible, that sharp, two-edged instrument by which He works in our lives.

Sharper than a two-edged sword? That's also scary—unless you are facing surgery. Then a sharp blade is a blessing. It means the surgeon can take out only what needs taking out, and harm nothing else. Healing is quicker and less painful.

It is good for us to be in God's hands, vulnerable to Him. Because He loves us, His goal is always to make us as spiritually healthy as we can be—to fill us with the life the Holy Spirit gives to everyone who believes in Jesus. As God's children, on those occasions when surgery is called for—when some sin or evil is threatening to harm us—He will use the Scripture to heal us, removing the evil, and bringing fresh life again.

And if there is pain? He will be right there to comfort and strengthen us. How could He not, since Jesus gave up His own life in pain to save us all?

Dear Lord, keep me in Your hands. Strengthen and heal me by Your blessed Word. Amen.

Are you afraid of surgery? Why or why not?

How is trusting God sort of like surgery? Name at least one way.

If you are willing, share a time when God "operated" on your life to help you. What was the result?

DAY 12: STRANGE GIFTS

Peter began to say to Him, "See, we have left everything and followed You." Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for My sake and for the Gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life" (Mark 10:28-30).

This is a strange passage. At first glance, it sounds like the prosperity Gospel of preachers on TV, the ones who say, "Send me a hundred dollars, and you will see God return it to you a thousand times over!"

"Yeah, right," we say. And besides, who needs a hundred houses, or brothers or sisters, and so on?

Then Jesus slips in a divine joke: "with persecutions!" Persecutions, really? That's what we get to look forward to if we serve Jesus? Well, thanks a lot!

Funny it might be, but Jesus is very serious about what He's saying—both the *good* gifts and the persecutions. Daily Christians around the world face arrest, beatings, bombing, and death for their faith. Others of us face different suffering that is still real—trouble at work or in the family, missed opportunities, broken relationships on account of our faith.

God may even turn your life upside down by sending you any number of new brothers and sisters, all of them needing to know God's love through you. They will arrive together with all their belongings: children and parents and houses and land. And you get to help care for them all! Truly, you will have more family than you know what to do with—if you follow Jesus.

Because, of course, *this* is exactly what happened to Jesus. He left heaven to suffer persecution and death on a cross, and to rise again. Now He makes His home in our hearts. As for new family, well, Jesus has adopted several billion human beings as part of God's family, all needing His love and care. No wonder He can make this promise. He speaks from experience. It has happened to Him.

Dear Lord, You fulfill Your promises in strange and unexpected ways. Teach me to receive Your odd gifts with both patience and joy. Amen.

What gifts has God sent you that you find inconvenient or painful?

Have these gifts been a source of joy as well? How?

Tell a story about one time when God used you to shine His love onto someone who needed it.





DAY 13: MOVING IN

(Jesus said) “In that day you will ask nothing of Me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in My Name, He will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in My Name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full. I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father. In that day you will ask in My Name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father” (John 16:23-28).

When I married into the Vietnamese community, I had culture shock. For example, when I said to a Vietnamese friend, “Please make yourself at home”—well, they really did! They’d show up with bags of groceries and begin cooking. They went through the fridge and the silverware drawer. The meal was delicious; they even washed all my dishes.

But I couldn’t get over the boundary crossing. In my culture, “Make yourself at home” is a polite fiction. We don’t really expect our guests to start cooking. Our fridges and silverware drawers are sacrosanct. There is always a boundary—a “no-go” area that marks the difference between family members and guests.

I suspect we often think of God’s home that way. He declares in Baptism, “You are My children—make yourselves at home,” but we still behave like guests—only one step removed from outsiders. We are not “at home.” At least, we don’t really think so!

In contrast to this attitude, Jesus tells us we can go straight to the Father to ask for what we need in His Name—Jesus doesn’t even have to repeat our requests to Him! How can that be? Because “the Father Himself loves you,” Jesus promises in Baptism—we’re no longer guests, but children, and it’s okay to behave that way. Because of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, I can truly be “at home” with God the Father, no longer as a guest but a child—through His Son.

Dear Lord Jesus, teach me what it means to be God’s child. Amen.

When you are at home, what can you do that is different from when you are a guest?

How do you know if someone truly loves you?

How do we know that God the Father loves us?

DAY 14: CONFUSION

(Peter said ...) “One of these men must become with us a witness to His resurrection.” And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two You have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles (Acts 1:21-26).

I’m uneasy about the events in Acts 1. Oh, not Jesus’ ascension! But while His followers were waiting in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to come, they had a meeting to come up with a replacement twelfth disciple.

I’m not entirely sure they should have been doing this—especially before the Spirit came. Jesus told them to wait. As far as I know, He didn’t tell them to do anything about Judas’ vacancy! And Peter had a history of rushing things. So ...

But then, who am I to criticize the apostles? Maybe this is what God wanted. Peter did base his decision on Scripture (see Acts 1:16). The group did pray, and they did leave the final choice in God’s hands (via lot). So maybe ...

I can’t make up my mind. Neither can a lot of other Christians. But maybe that’s okay. Because God is still in charge, no matter what.

This is true in our own lives when we face a decision and don’t know what to do. We ask God to guide us, consulting the Bible and praying and talking with other Christians. We do the best we can. No matter what happens, God is still in charge.

Some things God never makes clear. But other things—the most important things—He makes crystal clear. It’s abundantly clear, however, that Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection were no mistake—that He did all of these things, knowingly and freely, according to God’s will, to save us. And no matter what mistakes we make, He will never let us go.

Dear Father, when I am confused and don’t know what to do, please guide me, forgiving my mistakes for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

When you don’t know what to do, how do you make decisions?

Does it comfort you to know that God is in control, no matter what?

When has God taken what looked like a mistake and used it for good in your life?





DAY 15: ONE IN LOVE

(Jesus said) "The glory that You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one even as We are one, I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that You sent Me and loved them even as You loved Me" (John 17:22-23).

John 17 is Jesus' last prayer for His disciples before His execution. Again, He repeats His concern that we should all be one. He even compares this oneness to the oneness of the Trinity. He is urgent about this oneness.

What is this oneness? Some people think it's about organization: "Wouldn't it be great if we didn't have denominations anymore, but instead there was one unified Christian church?" If that's the standard, Jesus' prayer was an epic fail. Others think it's about opinion: all Christians speaking with one voice on all issues. We fail at this, too.

So what was Jesus thinking? I don't know, but He seems to link it closely with love. He says our oneness will show the world that God sent Him and loved us even as He loved Christ. He asks that the Father's love for Jesus may be in us, too.

If I look at our oneness in terms of love, I am comforted. We get so many things wrong, but this is one thing we sometimes get right. I've seen it in action, and I bet you have, too.

Years ago, a refugee mother came to America with three children. Days later the mother died, leaving them alone in a strange country. The city, the county, and the refugee resettlement agency fought over her body—everyone trying to avoid the cost of final expenses.

Someone noticed on her paperwork she had been baptized in the Philippines; they called our church. When our pastor heard what was going on, he became angry. "She is ours," he said. "We will handle the burial—you all go away."

The Lutheran church claimed her body and cared for the orphans. A Christian funeral home director gave us a discounted price. The church paid for everything. Two or three Christian families of other denominations stepped forward to foster the children. (I think they were mostly Baptist.) They grew up and are doing well.

Sometimes, when it comes to the oneness of love, we get it right—by the grace and mercy of God.

Dear Father, help us to love one another and to become one as Jesus prayed. Amen.

Why do you think love was on Jesus' mind the night before He died?

When have you seen the church act with love and unity?

When has God worked through you to love someone unexpected?

DAY 16: THE SHEPHERD

After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them on ahead of Him, two by two, into every town and place where He Himself was about to go. And He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest. Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves" (Luke 10:1-3).

Jesus sends out seventy-two of His followers for the first time to tell others about the kingdom of God. Jesus gives them detailed instructions about how to behave—what to pack, where to stay, what to do when people oppose them. Then He says, "Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves."

You see, sheep are pretty helpless. They can't run very fast, and they're prone to foolish mishaps, leaving them unable to get up again without help. Compared to a sheep, a lamb is even more vulnerable.

This is how Jesus says we are to be—like sheep, like lambs. And the people we live and serve among? Well, humans can be like wolves: vicious, smart, fast, ruthless. It's not safe to be a lamb in the middle of wolves.

So why does Jesus tell us to be lambs? Surely, it would be smarter to defend ourselves, to take out our enemies before they take us out. But Jesus says no. We are to remain lambs in spite of the wolves.

Jesus is asking us to do the seemingly impossible—to trust Him in deadly circumstances. He promises to protect and strengthen us. We are in Jesus' hands. He says to us, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:27-28).

We can trust our Good Shepherd. He died to defend us from the wolves. He says, "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep" (John 10:11). Through Jesus' death and resurrection, He has made us safe in His flock forever.

Dear Lord, help me live as Your sheep today, trusting You to protect and save me from evil. Amen.

Have you ever been sent ahead to pave the way for something to follow (for example, a military or business mission)?

What do you think the disciples thought of the idea of being sent out as "lambs in the midst of wolves"?

How do you maintain your courage and focus when witnessing to others?





DAY 17: RECEIVING JESUS' GIFTS

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to His teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38-42).

When I was growing up, we had Thanksgiving at my grandmother's house. She would make a dozen pies, Southern green beans, mashed potatoes, stuffing, turkey, ham, hors d'oeuvres—the list went on and on. The meal was her pride and joy.

But as she got into her 80s, my family worried about the cooking toll on her. So my mother and I hatched a cunning plan. I would fly home and spend the night before the holiday with my grandmother. Then I would take over the heaviest chores that next morning under her direction.

No such luck. At six o'clock Thanksgiving morning I woke to hear grandma cooking. A long row of pies and side dishes made it clear she'd been at it for hours. She wasn't going to let us get the better of her!

It's easy to lose track of why we're working so hard. Martha surely wanted to honor Jesus with her gifts—the best she could produce. But in the midst of the chaos, she lost sight of her honored Guest! She missed the gifts He wanted to give to her: His peace, His teaching, His company.

Jesus' gifts come first. We receive them through Communion, Scripture, worship, preaching, Baptism, and prayer. We receive them through the care of other Christians. It's especially wonderful when we receive those gifts with our whole heart and attention—without worrying about what might go undone.

Jesus invites us to Himself: "Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28). Let's receive His good gift.

Dear Lord, please help me rest in You and receive the good gifts You want to give to me. Amen.

Do you ever feel preoccupied by things that aren't very important? How do you put things back into perspective?

Why was Martha so upset with Mary, specifically? Was it the workload or something else?

What good gifts is Jesus giving you this week?

DAY 18: WHAT WE ASK

(Jesus said) "And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened" (Luke 11:9-10).

What does Jesus mean when He tells us to ask, seek, and knock?

I ask this question as I sit at my desk, just after hanging up the phone. My sister is dying. She may die tonight. I know, oh, I know, what I would ask God for. And He knows, too. I've asked Him already, a million times. I cannot help asking. I know He loves her. But she is still dying, and my prayers seem to be getting a clear "No."

I'm still going to ask.

So what does Jesus mean? Clearly, it is not "Ask for anything and God will have to give it to you, exactly as you wish it, when you wish it, in the way you wish it." Jesus Himself heard that divine "No" when He prayed for the cup of suffering to pass Him by. It didn't pass Him. It won't pass me.

But as I push and pull at the text, prying, scrabbling, trying to get some sense out of His words, I see this. Everyone who asks, receives—maybe not the thing they ask for, not always, but they will receive *something*. And that something will be good: "What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?" (Luke 11:11)

I will not get what I am asking for—not unless an incredible miracle happens. And yet I will receive something—something good. My sister will receive something good. She is a child of God, a sinner redeemed by Jesus our Savior. He lay down His life for her. He will certainly give her life, and life that will last forever.

God will not give us something worse than what we ask for. We are trusting in Him.

Dear Lord, have mercy on us who are in great need, and answer our prayer in the best way—the way You will. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

How do you react when people ask something of you on the spur of the moment?

Do you think all who ask, seek, and knock receive answers they can comprehend from God?

How do we remain steadfast in our faith when we desperately need God's help, but nothing seems to be happening?





DAY 19: IT ISN'T FAIR!

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the Law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe (Romans 3:21-22a).

Years ago, there was a notorious murderer and cannibal in the news. While in prison, he claimed to have become a Christian believer. My grandmother was irked.

“He won’t be in heaven, will he? Not after what he did.”

I bit my lip. “Um, yes, he will,” I had to say. “If he really believes in Jesus, God will forgive him even for the horrible things he did.”

My grandmother was outraged. “But that’s not fair!”

And she was right. It wasn’t *fair* at all. How could God accept such a man? My grandmother had come right up against the most offensive thing about the Gospel of Jesus Christ—the fact that God will accept anybody, literally *anybody*, who trusts in Jesus Christ our Savior.

That is what St. Paul is talking about in the passage for today. He says, “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the Law ... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” “Apart from the Law,” he says. In other words, this righteousness has nothing to do with keeping the Ten Commandments. It all depends on Jesus.

We may be respectable. We may hold honored positions in the church or community. And yet, deep down inside, we know we are really *not* respectable people, not if others knew the truth about us. There are things we would be ashamed to have anyone find out. There are words we’ve spoken we try to forget—deeds we’ve done we hope never come to light. Why should God accept us?

That’s when God’s promise shines most brightly: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). God’s righteousness is available to everyone, even us—no matter what we’ve done. It isn’t fair. It’s much better than that. It’s *mercy*—through Jesus our Savior, who died on the cross for us, and who rose again to take away all our shame.

Dear Father, help me believe Your promise of forgiveness through Your Son Jesus Christ. In His Name. Amen.

Does it bother you that God is not fair?

Would you rather have justice or mercy for yourself? For others?

God forgives and blesses you on account of Jesus. How does that set you free?

DAY 20: VANITY OR MEANING?

It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. ... I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? (Ecclesiastes 1:13-14; 2:18-19a)

In Ecclesiastes, King Solomon turns his wisdom to considering human life “under the sun.” He is looking for meaning in life—some value to all the things people do. But Solomon is disappointed. No matter what, all people die, and their hard work goes for nothing. Someone else enjoys the fruit of their labor, and they themselves have nothing. He calls this vanity—meaninglessness—striving after wind.

Solomon has a point. We see it every day. Someone starts a business, only to see it vanish in a recession. Someone dedicates his life to his family—only to lose his wife and children to a horrible accident. Millions go to school, graduate, and look for work—but no suitable work is available.

“Vanity of vanities!” Solomon despairs (Ecclesiastes 1:2a). “Total meaninglessness!” Under the sun, nothing is eternally worthwhile; nothing makes a difference. Solomon has no good answer for this.

But God does. Against life’s meaninglessness, Jesus enters our world “under the sun” as a conquering King and Savior. He breaks the cycle of meaninglessness and calls us into God’s kingdom. He even breaks the power of death for us through His own death and resurrection.

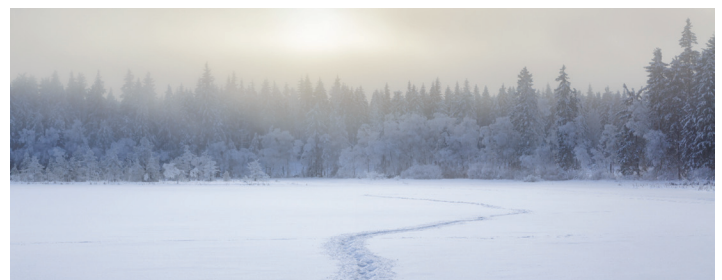
Now we have a future to look forward to. Paul writes, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. ... For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ... Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father ... For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (see 1 Corinthians 15:19-26).

Father, help me to hold fast to hope in Jesus Christ Your Son. Amen.

Is there anything good that comes from a pre-occupation with self?

Was Solomon wise to sense life as an ultimate futility?

We live in a culture that places a lot of weight on “self.” How do you keep from thinking of yourself as the center of the universe?





DAY 21: LONGING FOR HOME

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared for them a city (Hebrews 11:13-16).

Today's text deals with a paradox. We know we are *already* God's children, that He forgives our sins, gives us the Holy Spirit, helps us grow in the faith, and listens to our prayers. But we're also painfully aware that we are *not yet* home. As God's children, we still sin and act very much unlike our Father. We have the Holy Spirit; sometimes we listen to Him; many times we don't. We grow in our faith—but that growth is painful, slow, and sometimes completely invisible, at least to us.

Welcome to life "as strangers and exiles on the earth." We're people who don't belong. We get hung up on points of right and wrong that don't seem to faze anybody else. "Everybody's doing it," our friends say, eyebrows raised at the fuss we're making. But we can't forget our Lord Jesus who loves us, and we don't want to make Him unhappy.

God understands this and encourages us. He describes our faith-ancestors, Abraham, Sarah, and others. They didn't receive everything they were promised on earth—but looked forward to when God would keep His promises in Jesus Christ, who died and rose for us. They waited for a homeland—the kingdom of God, the new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (see 2 Peter 3:13).

That is what we're waiting for too—a place where we live as His people in love and innocence. We long for this—to come home from exile. In that city we'll live forever with our beloved Savior and with all the other people He has used us to bring to Himself. That's something to look forward to!

Dear Lord, stamp my heart as a citizen of Your country. Use me to bring others to trust in You. Amen.

Do you consider yourself a patient person? When's the last time you had to be really patient?

God has prepared us a city. What do you think that will be like?

What's your idea of heaven? Does it include everything you love here on earth?

DAY 22: TRUTH AND LIES

Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. They say continually to those who despise the Word of the LORD, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall come upon you.' ... I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in My council, then they would have proclaimed My Words to My people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their deeds" (Jeremiah 23:16-17, 21-22).

In Jeremiah's day, there were so-called "prophets" in Israel who claimed to speak the Word of God, but were actually making things up. They told people what they wanted to hear, saying everything would be fine—even for those who were doing evil.

"So what?" you may say. "We don't have false prophets today—not like that." Don't we? When was the last time you heard someone on TV or the internet making excuses for evil—for harming the poor or ignoring injustice or mistreating the powerless?

Or what about our friends and family? Do they correct us when we fall into gossip, badmouthing, disrespecting others, holding grudges, and refusing to forgive? Do we correct them?

What a mess! We need help. We need someone who can change our self-serving hearts into hearts that desire to live by the truth. Who can help us?

Jesus is our help. In a world filled with lies, Jesus is the fresh air of truth. He says, "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). He urges us, "Take My yoke upon you, and *learn from Me*" (Matthew 11:29a), and He promises, "If you abide in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32).

Jesus is trustworthy, and He has laid down His own life to save us. Let us trust Him and listen to His Word. He will never lead us astray.

Father, teach us to trust Jesus's Words and treasure them. Amen.

What do you do when you hear unfair or hurtful gossip about someone?

How do you recognize people you shouldn't trust?

Tell about a time when you trusted Jesus. How did it turn out for you?





DAY 23: FIRE AND DIVISION

(Jesus said,) "I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is My distress until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law" (Luke 12:49-53).

Years ago, I had emergency surgery to save my life and that of my unborn son. During the surgery they used cautery—the application of electricity to burn a body part to stop bleeding or cut tissue. It sounds horrifying—who would willingly choose to be burned? But it was worth it. I would have done anything to save my baby’s life. My son James lived, and was born healthy several months later.

In this passage, Jesus looks to the future, and what He’s describing to His disciples doesn’t sound good. “I came to cast fire on the earth.” “I have a baptism to be baptized with”—a reference to His death. And then the warning about bringing not peace, but division. What could possibly be worth the future pain He sees?

In Jesus’ eyes, one thing is worth all the pain. That one thing is you. You’re worth the painful baptism of death He knows He’ll undergo in the near future. You are worth the cross to Him.

You are worth division to Jesus. He is our Prince of Peace, yes—but He knows perfectly well that many people will refuse to receive Him. Families will be divided over Him. Parents and children will choose opposite sides. Marriages will fracture, and relationships will be strained to their breaking point. There will be pain.

You are worth all this to Jesus. This is how much He loves you—that He chose to risk all of this, and put Himself and us through it, so that you could be rescued and forgiven and made alive forevermore. Jesus has no regrets. Do you?

Dear Lord, hold me close to You when I suffer, because You know what it is like. Remind me of Your great love for me. Amen.

In coming to earth Jesus showed His love for us, but that love can also divide us. How so?

What is it about Jesus that gets people all riled up?

If people are cold to your outreach efforts, is your first impulse to “shake off the dust from your feet when you leave” them (see Matthew 10:14), or to try a different approach?

DAY 24: THE JOY OF THE LORD

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Nehemiah 8-10).

I have to admit there are some parts of the Bible I don’t like to read. They make me feel guilty. I recognize all my sins and guilt, and that isn’t a comfortable feeling at all.

The people in the passage above are in much the same boat. They are the Israelites who returned from exile. They know their own history—how they disobeyed God so often that He finally let their enemies carry them away to a foreign land for 70 years. Now they’re back home trying to rebuild, but it’s not easy.

Imagine what it’s like to stand in a city that looks like it’s been bombed. The temple has been burned; the city wall has been torn down. There are piles of loose stones everywhere as well as burned timber. Their houses need major work just to keep the rain out—and all this due to breaking God’s Law. No wonder the people are weeping when they hear the Scripture!

But Nehemiah and Ezra stop them. They say, “Don’t cry. Go home; eat good food, and drink sweet wine. Be happy and celebrate; the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

What’s this about? Simply that we should not stop with repentance. Sorrow over sin is necessary, but we need to go on to the next step—to receiving God’s mercy. Through Baptism into Jesus Christ our Savior, God has promised forgiveness for all our sins and reconciled us to Himself. We are not God’s enemies any longer. Jesus has taken our sins to His cross. We are alive to God in our risen Lord Jesus. It is right for us to celebrate and be happy; God has given us peace and joy with Him forever.

Dear Lord, help me to trust in Your forgiveness and be happy in Your love. Amen.

What parts of the Bible make you feel guilty?

What parts remind you of God’s love, mercy, and joy for you?

What can you do to keep remembering God’s forgiving love for you?





DAY 25: WHO, ME?

Then the LORD put out His hand and touched my mouth. And the LORD said to me, "Behold, I have put My words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jeremiah 1:9-10).

Poor Jeremiah! Imagine having God put such a responsibility on you: to be a prophet with the power to affect the fate of nations and kingdoms. It must have been terrifying. No wonder Jeremiah tried to get out of it by reminding God how young he was!

But God wasn't having that: "Do not say, 'I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the LORD" (Jeremiah 1:6-8).

We may not face the same pressures Jeremiah did, but we have our own. We might be parents or grandparents, caring for children. We might be teachers or mentors, responsible for students in our care. We might be employers or managers, affecting the livelihood of those under us.

Whatever the responsibility, it's common—and helpful!—for us to feel like Jeremiah, not enough for the task. We are right to feel this way, because it's true. We are not enough. We cannot, in ourselves, do the job God has put before us.

But see what God did: He touched Jeremiah's mouth, referring to the work Jeremiah would be doing as a prophet, and He said, "I appointed you ... I send you ... I am with you to deliver you." Jeremiah was not alone. We aren't alone, either. God has given us something even greater than our responsibilities—His own presence, guidance, and protection.

We are not alone. Jesus is with us. When He came to earth, the whole fate of the human race was riding on His shoulders. And on the cross, it came down to Him alone, at His weakest hour, bearing the sin and the grief and the weakness of us all so that through His death, we could be saved. He carried that responsibility perfectly. Now that He has risen from the dead and lives forever, He can surely help us with ours.

Dear Lord Jesus, help me with my responsibilities. Let it be You Yourself handling them through me. Amen.

When you don't feel strong enough to handle a responsibility, what do you do?

What is one time when God helped you with a difficult job or task?

How does it make you feel to know that Jesus will handle the responsibility through you?

DAY 26: TAKING THE SUFFERING

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up. ... Above Him stood the seraphim. ... And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD OF HOSTS; the whole earth is full of His glory!" ... And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" ... Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for" (Isaiah 6:1a, 2a, 3, 5-7).

Isaiah sees Jesus "high and lifted up," seated in the temple among the angels. (Yes, it is Jesus; John 12:41 makes it clear that Isaiah was seeing Jesus' glory.) The seraphim are crying out praises to God. The smoke of incense fills the temple.

Isaiah can't cope. He is overpowered by Jesus' glory and holiness—and the sheer contrast with Isaiah's own sin. So he cries out, "Woe is me! I am lost!" What else can he say to the holy God?

That's our trouble, too, isn't it? We lie, deceive, and bend the truth. We flatter, gossip, and backbite. Just like Isaiah, we have to cry out, "Woe is me!"

Yet God has mercy on us—just like He did with Isaiah. An angel flew to Isaiah with a burning coal from God's altar, and he touched it to Isaiah's lips, saying, "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

Do you notice something strange here? Isaiah's lips aren't burned. He isn't in pain—he isn't suffering at all. All he got was the forgiveness. So who took the suffering?

Our Lord Jesus Christ took that part. The burning coal came from God's altar, which pointed forward to Jesus' cross. On that altar Jesus offered Himself up for our sin, making Himself an atonement for us so that we would be made clean. His is the suffering; ours is the forgiveness.

See how much He loves us!

Lord Jesus, thank You for taking the suffering that belonged to us, and making us clean again. Amen.

Have you ever suffered so someone else could have a benefit?

Why would you choose to do that?

What does that tell you about how God feels about you?





DAY 27: LIVING WATER FOR OUR ROOTS

Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit. (Jeremiah 17:7-8).

In college, we played a prank on some friends. We found a giant tumbleweed about 12 feet across and shoved it in front of their apartment door, blocking it completely. They had to use the windows to get out. Fortunately, they were only three feet off the ground!

That prank was only possible because tumbleweeds live in places where rain is rare. They dry up and snap off their roots easily—and go tumbling away, rolling in the wind.

Tumbleweeds are the complete opposite of the trees the prophet Jeremiah talks about in this passage. Those trees never dry up. Their roots go deep into the soil, gathering water from the nearby stream. As long as the stream is there, the tree will stay green and bear fruit. The stream makes all the difference.

Jeremiah says that's what it's like for us who trust in the Lord. As long as we are rooted in the Lord, we are alive, well-watered, and fruitful. We are not tumbleweeds, doomed to blow away in the wind.

This doesn't mean we won't have difficult years. Even for a tree planted by a stream, there are hot summers and years of drought. For Christians, too, there are hard times. We face sickness and loss. We deal with painful family problems: lost jobs—legal problems—financial troubles. And yet the Lord is always with us, always giving us His life. On the surface it may look bleak; the action is all at the roots.

If times are difficult right now, let those roots go down and cling to the Lord Jesus. He understands what you are suffering. He will not leave you alone. He will strengthen you. For you He lay down His life at the cross—and then He rose from the dead three days later. If He loved you as much as that, He will surely see you through your troubles now.

Dear Lord Jesus, give me Your living water and make me to grow strong roots in You. Amen.

Did you ever try to dig up a deep-rooted tree or bush? What was that like?

What makes your spiritual roots grow deeper in the Lord?

When you are going through a spiritual dry spell, how do you cope?

DAY 28: EIGHT DAYS LATER

Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe." Eight days later, His disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you" (John 20:24-26).

The week after Easter must have been a doozy for the disciples. There they all were, still cooped up in a room in Jerusalem, with the doors locked for fear of arrest. Ten of them are euphoric—they've seen Jesus alive again! So have other people! God has done something wonderful!

And then there's the doubter, Thomas. He wasn't there when Jesus came the first Sunday. He can't believe Jesus is really alive again. He probably spends his time alternating between grief for Jesus, whom he thinks is still dead, and anger at the other disciples. Are they conspiring together to pull his leg? How can they possibly believe something so far-fetched?

I find it encouraging that the ten believers didn't throw out Thomas for being a stubborn wet blanket.

I have no idea why Jesus waited so long. He clearly knew Thomas was having trouble. And yet He waited eight days to deal with it. I have no idea why Jesus does the same thing today—why He allows some to struggle and doubt and fear, while others appear to be trusting, confident believers. Jesus clearly knows what's going on with us. But He doesn't show up—until the right time comes. We are left to endure, all the while crying out to Him.

But notice that even this early in the Christian church, there are those who struggle, and there are those who rejoice. The strong believers help those who stumble and struggle with their faith. The struggling continue to love and put up with those who are sometimes irritatingly happy. That is the way the church should function—with love, patience, and mercy, regardless of where we are at in our lives with Jesus.

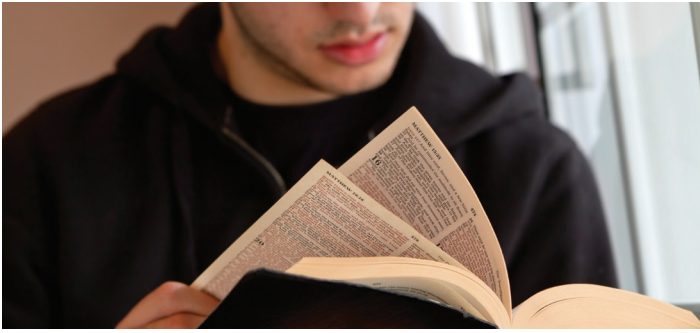
Lord Jesus, please help all of us—those who fear and doubt and those who love and support them. Amen.

When have you had trouble believing something other people told you?

How do you put up with people whose mood is completely the opposite of yours?

When has God used fellow Christians to show patience and kindness to you?





DAY 29: WHAT DO YOU SEE?

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:9-10)

I was discussing this Bible passage with a friend and she said, "It sounds like a really boring, long worship service to me." Looking at the text I could see what she meant. I didn't actually agree—it looks more to me like the "happily ever after" scene of God's great play, when all the actors reassemble on the stage to make their bows—but I can see why others might worry about it being boring.

I've heard this before about passages from Revelation. The description of the heavenly Jerusalem doesn't do much for me—too much gold, too many gems and pearls everywhere. I keep imagining the fierce glare that would come off such a construction. And the color mix! Too much for my eyes. But others find that it's a beautiful picture of the glory and beauty of God's kingdom.

And then, of course, there are the beasts with several heads and multiple horns, the living creatures with four faces. My son likes these, especially in the Lego illustrated version of the Bible. You probably have bits of Revelation that speak to you—and other bits that are just not your favorite, at least right now. The Holy Spirit uses God's Word—even the weird bits!—to bless each of us differently at different times.

One thing we can all agree on about Revelation: its focus on Jesus Christ, our Savior. "For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their Shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:17). This is what we need, every one of us. We need the One who suffered for our sake, who lay down His life on the cross, who rose from the grave three days later. He is our Shepherd through life and death. We can safely trust in Him to bring us to Himself. That is the message of Revelation, and we can all rejoice in that together.

Dear Father, keep us close to Your Son Jesus as His own people. Amen.

Have you read Revelation? What did you think of it?

What is the weirdest part of the Bible, in your opinion, and why?

How has God used the weird parts of the Bible to help or bless you?

DAY 30: WHY DOES GOD SAY NO?

And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the Word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the Gospel to them (Acts 16:6-10).

Why on earth would God forbid Paul and his companions to preach the Gospel in Asia or Bithynia? Though the forbidding wasn't permanent—later Paul's vision had them preaching in Macedonia—it does sound weird that God would forbid the Gospel to be preached anywhere. Why?

Maybe God knew the people weren't ready yet, or maybe there was a severe threat of persecution. Or maybe God simply wanted to get the group to Macedonia faster. We can guess, but we don't know.

And it's like that for us today in our lives, too. We may know a loved one who was baptized, confirmed, and appearing to be a strong Christian who has for years been far away from Jesus. We pray for them and hope for their return, but they seem farther away than ever. Surely God wants that person to return!

We are right in thinking God wants that person back in the faith. But the details of how God reaches out to people—these are things God has not told us. And it's hard to deal with. So what can we do? The same thing Paul and Silas and Timothy did—we can keep trying, all the while trusting God to show the way. Because He will.

We know that Jesus loves the people we care about, even more than we do. He died for them, after all. And we know that He will do everything possible for them to be His. He rose from the dead so that could happen. In the meantime, we can pray, hope, and hold ourselves ready to serve—however Jesus calls us.

Lord, please reach the people I love who are far from You, and bring them to Yourself. Amen.

When has God surprised you by something He has done or not done?

Pray for someone you care about who seems far away from Jesus right now. (You don't have to name names.)

What do you do when you are having a hard time trusting God?



KEEPING GOING WITH DAILY DEVOTIONS

Now that you have given household devotions a try, what do you think?

In what ways did you grow closer to God? How did others in your household grow closer to God? How did all of you grow closer to each other in the process?

While there are many ways to grow individually and as a group of people, the simple habit of daily reading God's Word, praying, and having a short discussion together has helped God's people around the world grow in their faith.

If you would like to make this a habit in your household

going forward, consider Lutheran Hour Ministries' Daily Devotions. These devotions are prepared to help strengthen and encourage your faith as you do the same for others.

You can have LHM's Daily Devotions delivered right to your inbox, listen to the audio devotional as a podcast, access them on your mobile device through a free app, or listen with Spotify, iHeart Radio, Alexa, or Google Home. For more information, simply visit lhm.org/dailydevotions.

Seasonal Devotions for Advent and Lent are also available in both English and Spanish. Perfect for personal reflection or to share with family, friends, and congregations, these seasonal meditations will help prepare you to celebrate the true meaning of these seasons.



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