

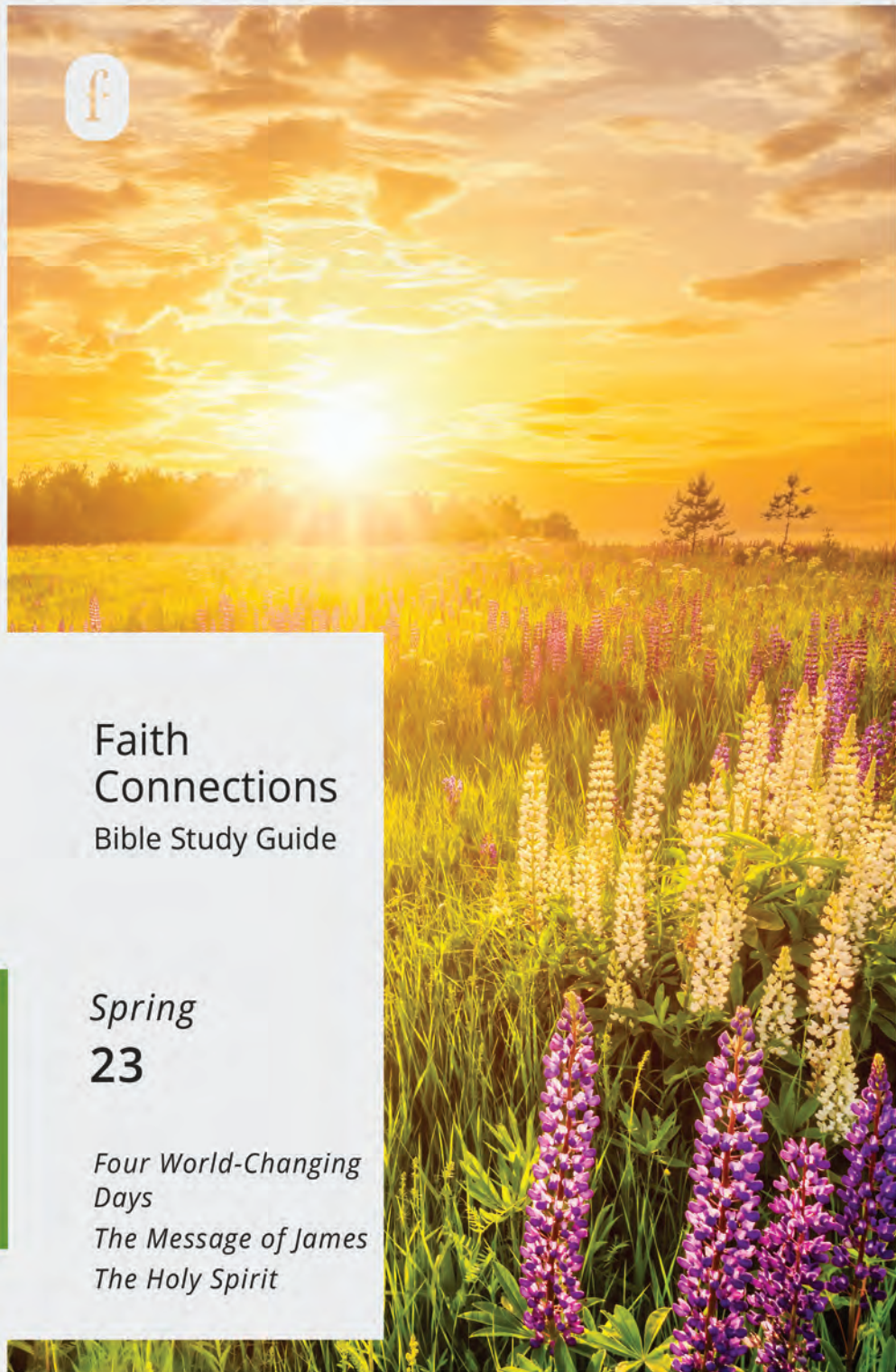


Faith Connections

Bible Study Guide

Spring
23

*Four World-Changing
Days
The Message of James
The Holy Spirit*



Bible Study Guide

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Spring 2023
Volume 46, Number 3

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Perspectives

Relationships

One of the greatest treasures people can possess is a meaningful relationship with another. I am not talking about a superficial relationship, but one that is built to last. What are the keys to a valuable relationship? First, there is the trust factor. You can put your faith in each other regardless of the circumstance. Second, each of you has the other's best interest in mind. Both of you would never intentionally do anything that would harm or hurt the other. Third, both of you are willing to go the extra mile for the other. The decision to go above and beyond the call of duty is never in question. Finally, the most important key is that the relationship is built on a foundation of (authentic and selfless) love. Love is the key!

In the first unit of this quarter we will examine the Passion Week to discover the relationship Jesus was sent to establish with us through His life, death, and resurrection. God loved the world so much that He sent His Son, Jesus, to die and rise again so that victory over sin and death is possible for those who place their faith in Him. That is, Jesus lived, died, and rose again so that people could be brought into a right relationship with God. That is the message of Easter. That is the good news of the gospel!

God not only wants us to be in a right relationship with Him, He also wants us to be in right relationship with others. This means allowing the Holy Spirit to guide us in the things we say and do. This means seeing others as God does and loving others as Christ would. Although we cannot control the thoughts, words, and actions of others, we can allow God's Spirit to guide our thoughts, words, and actions so that we are being Christlike in all our relationships.

Throughout this quarter, consider what it means to be in a right relationship with God, as well as, think about what it means to "live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ" (Ephesians 5:2, NLT) in your relationship with others.

May God bless you as you study His Word this quarter!

MIKE WONCH

Editor

March

5

CELEBRATING PASSOVER

Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper as the symbol of a new covenant God was making with humanity.

THE WORD

MARK
14:12-26

On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

¹³So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. ¹⁴Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'

¹⁵He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there."

¹⁶The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

¹⁷When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. ¹⁸While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me."

¹⁹They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, "Surely you don't mean me?"

²⁰"It is one of the Twelve," he replied, "one who dips bread into the bowl with me. ²¹The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."

²²While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body."

²³Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it.

KEY VERSE

²⁴“**This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,” he said to them.** ²⁵“Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

²⁶When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

ENGAGE THE WORD**PREPARATION FOR PASSOVER****Mark 14:12-16**

The passage begins with Mark's reference to the Festival of Unleavened Bread and the custom of sacrificing the Passover lamb. This was not only a historical marker of time, but also a literary foreshadowing of the impending death of Jesus.

The disciples seemed to be worried about the necessity of preparing for the Passover celebration. Taking the initiative, they asked Jesus about the necessary preparations. If they were anxious about the preparations, they did not need to be. As always in Mark's gospel, Jesus was ready, prepared, and in control.

After the triumphal entry and Jesus' clearing of the temple (Mark 11:1-19), the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders had reached a boiling point. Previously, Mark pointed out the chief priests and teachers of the law were conspiring a way to kill Jesus (Mark 11:18). As a result, Jesus' instructions for the preparation of the Passover reflected careful and thoughtful planning. Jesus sent two of His disciples to Jerusalem with instructions resembling coded messages and secret arrangements. Arriving in the city, they found things just as Jesus had told them, and they prepared the Passover as He had commanded.

PREDICTION OF BETRAYAL**Mark 14:17-21**

In the evening of the Passover, Jesus shared the Passover meal with His disciples. The sharing of food had more significance for Jews than merely a social gathering. Covenants were typically sealed with a

Did You Know?

The Lord's Supper is traditionally referred to as the "Eucharist," which is derived from Mark 14:23 where Jesus "gave thanks" (Greek: *eucharistēsas*) before He passed around the cup.

meal (for instance, Abimelech and Isaac, Genesis 26:26-31; Laban and Jacob, Genesis 31:51-54). During the meal, Jesus made a shocking announcement: "One of you is going to betray me" (v. 18). To betray the one who had shared his bread was a grievous offence, and the disciples were saddened and alarmed.

The incredible shock of the disciples was reflected in their individual responses to Jesus as they each asked, "Surely you don't mean me?" Mark did not specifically identify Judas in this passage as the offender. However, his notation that the disciples asked this question "one by one" revealed the blatant and deceptive lies of Judas who faked his own innocence even while planning the details of the betrayal.

Jesus confirmed that His betrayer was one of the Twelve who "dips bread into the bowl with me." This phrase is an allusion to Psalm 41:9 and the righteous sufferer, whom the psalmist confidently assured that God would vindicate and exalt (41:10-13). Jesus' words in verse 21 explicitly connected the Son of Man (Jesus' favorite self-designation) with the one who suffers unjustly for righteousness. The concept of a "suffering Messiah" did not match any of the Jewish expectations, and yet Jesus affirmed that His suffering was foretold in Scripture. Although the events of Jesus' passion that were soon to unfold would be painful and horrifying, Jesus reassured His disciples that His betrayal would not impede God's plan, but would actually be used to accomplish God's salvational purposes. Nonetheless, the betrayer was fully responsible and culpable for his willing participation in this hideous double-cross.

THE LORD'S SUPPER **Mark 14:22-26**

In the Passover meal, bread is broken and wine is consumed as essential parts of the Jewish people's celebration of God's deliverance of them from Egypt and His covenant with them as His favored people. At Jesus' Passover celebration with His disciples, He explicitly connected the elements of this meal to His

Think About It

John referred specifically to at least three different Passovers Jesus celebrated in Jerusalem. By contrast, Matthew, Mark, and Luke only mention the one Passover when Jesus was arrested, tried, crucified, and resurrected.

imminent suffering and death, as well as to the new covenant He was establishing with them.

At some time during the supper, Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to His disciples. It is interesting to note these very same verbs—took, gave thanks, broke, and gave (to His disciples)—were used in the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 (Mark 6:41) and the 4,000 (Mark 8:6). Here, though, Jesus identified the bread with the words, “This is my body.” Jesus identified himself in a profound way with the broken bread, and He invited His followers to join Him in eating the bread.

He also took the cup, gave thanks, gave it to His disciples, and they all drank from the one cup. Mark’s language emphasized the intimate and significant participation of the disciples in Jesus’ actions of eating and drinking. Jesus explained, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.” We cannot overlook the fact Jesus uttered these words during a Passover meal that commemorated Israel’s deliverance from bondage and God’s covenant with the Jewish people. Now, on the eve of His horrific death and glorious resurrection, Jesus used these elements to forever mark His coming death and resurrection as a deliverance from sin and death, as well as the establishment of a new covenant of God’s grace and favor on all who believe and follow Jesus. The supper that began on such a sad note ended with a note of glorious victory as Jesus anticipated the celebration of the coming kingdom of God after His resurrection.

REFLECT Take time to consider the way Jesus established a new covenant of God’s grace and favor on all who believe.

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March

12

PREPARING FOR THE CROSS

Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane is an example of surrender to God's will for all believers to follow.

THE WORD

MARK 14:32-50 They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." ³³He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. ³⁴"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."

KEY VERSE

³⁵Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. ³⁶**"Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."**

³⁷Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Simon," he said to Peter, "are you asleep? Couldn't you keep watch for one hour?" ³⁸Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

³⁹Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. ⁴⁰When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him.

⁴¹Returning the third time, he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. ⁴²Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

⁴³Just as he was speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared. With him was a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders.

⁴⁴Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard." ⁴⁵Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. ⁴⁶The men

seized Jesus and arrested him. ⁴⁷Then one of those standing near drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

⁴⁸“Am I leading a rebellion,” said Jesus, “that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? ⁴⁹Every day I was with you, teaching in the temple courts, and you did not arrest me. But the Scripture must be fulfilled.” ⁵⁰Then everyone deserted him and fled.

ENGAGE THE WORD

PRAYER AND SURRENDER

Mark 14:32-36

Leaving the upper room where they had celebrated the Passover meal together, Jesus took His disciples to Gethsemane in order to pray. On two other occasions in Mark’s gospel, Jesus had selected Peter, James, and John to accompany Him during a special moment. This “inner group of three disciples” was given the opportunity to witness Jesus’ life-giving power when He raised Jairus’ daughter back to life (5:37-43), and they also watched in wonder as Jesus was transformed in glory on the Mount of Transfiguration (9:2-9). Now Jesus brought them along to watch and support Him as He agonized in prayer during the longest and most difficult night of His life. Jesus’ victory over sin and death would be won through His resurrection; His victory over anxiety and fear were won in Gethsemane that night through His prayers.

Mark candidly displayed Jesus’ anxiety and distress. Jesus told His three companions that He was grieved with sorrow to the point of death. Jesus’ humanity is on full display in these anxious moments as He faced the pain and fear of impending torture and death. But as the beloved Son of God, Jesus also carried the heavy burden of experiencing disjunction from His Father as He would bear the sins of the world. Thus, in the fullness of both His humanity and divinity, Jesus experienced the overwhelming significance and depth of the trial He faced.

Asking His friends to keep watch with Him in prayer, Jesus went a little further, fell to the ground,

Did You Know?

Matthew, Mark, and Luke referred to the place where Jesus agonized in prayer as “Gethsemane.” Only John’s gospel referred to Gethsemane as the “Garden” of Gethsemane.

and prayed that God would spare Him from this hour. The very personal title “Abba, Father” revealed the intimacy of this prayer. This was not a prayer of disobedience. Since “everything is possible” for God, Jesus knew that God had the power to take the cup of suffering and death away from Him. But most importantly, Jesus wanted God’s will to be done. In this honest prayer, in the moment of His deepest anxiety and fear, Jesus sharply distinguished between His will and the will of the Father. And in prayer, He resigned himself to the accomplishment of the Father’s will, regardless of the decision’s painful consequences. Jesus modeled for all time that the essence of being a Christian is to face difficult situations while choosing to do God’s will.

WILLING SPIRIT, WEAK FLESH

Mark 14:37-42

When Jesus came back to the disciples, He found them sleeping. To Peter, who just moments before had declared that he would never fall away, Jesus asked, “Could you not watch and pray for just one hour?” The key to overcoming times of “weak flesh” is not found in boastful claims or confident expressions of faith, but in watchful prayer.

Jesus left the disciples two more times in Gethsemane to pray and align His will with the will of the Father. Each time He returned to find His three trusted companions sleeping instead of praying. The third time He declared, “Enough! The hour has come.”

Then Jesus said to them, “Rise! Let us go!” These words demonstrated that He had prayed through to victory and the acceptance of God’s will. As His betrayer drew near, Jesus would not try to escape His captors or to fight back with violence. His will was conformed to God’s will.

BETRAYAL AND ARREST OF JESUS

Mark 14:43-50

Whereas the previous verses depicted Jesus’ struggle and victory over anxiety and fear through prayer,

Think About It

“Cup” can refer to suffering and death (Mark 10:38), but it can also refer to God’s wrathful judgment on sin (Isaiah 51:17). By drinking the “cup,” Jesus innocently experienced both death and the judgmental penalty for the sins of others.

Mark now described the pathetic performance of Jesus’ disciples in this crucial moment of arrest. First, the leader of the arresting mob is Judas, whom Mark explicitly identified as one of the 12 disciples. Just as Jesus foretold, one of His very own chosen disciples betrayed Him. With painful irony, Judas addressed Jesus with the title “Rabbi,” which was an esteemed name for a respected teacher. Furthermore, Judas greeted Jesus with a kiss, which was often a sign of warm affection between a disciple and his teacher. With brazen hypocrisy, Judas denigrated these gestures of love and respect into signs of betrayal and death.

When the arresting mob seized and arrested Jesus, one of Jesus’ followers drew his sword and sliced off the ear of the high priest’s servant. Although Mark did not identify the offender, John’s gospel identified him as Peter.

Jesus quickly stopped the fighting. He rebuked the cowardly timing of His accusers, who were too frightened of the crowds to arrest Jesus while He was teaching openly in the temple courts. Instead, the religious leaders sent a violent and armed mob in the dead of night to do their dirty work.

Jesus’ earlier prediction to the disciples that “you will all fall away” (14:27) was then fulfilled. All Jesus’ disciples abandoned Him and ran away. But Jesus did not resist. With calm submission to God, Jesus surrendered himself to His captors, thereby setting into motion the fulfillment of Scripture’s promise of God’s salvation for all who believe.

REFLECT

If you are experiencing a “weakened flesh” in an area of your life, take it to God in prayer.

DANIEL G. POWERS

March

19

TRAGIC FAILURE OF LOYALTY

When failure happens, it need not be final.

THE WORD

MARK
14:27-31

You will all fall away,” Jesus told them, “for it is written: “‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’
²⁸But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.”
²⁹Peter declared, “Even if all fall away, I will not.”
³⁰“Truly I tell you,” Jesus answered, “today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times.”
³¹But Peter insisted emphatically, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” And all the others said the same.

66-72

⁶⁶While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came by. ⁶⁷When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him.

“You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus,” she said.

⁶⁸But he denied it. “I don’t know or understand what you’re talking about,” he said, and went out into the entryway.

⁶⁹When the servant girl saw him there, she said again to those standing around, “This fellow is one of them.” ⁷⁰Again he denied it.

After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, “Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.”

⁷¹He began to call down curses, and he swore to them, “I don’t know this man you’re talking about.”

KEY VERSE

⁷²Immediately the rooster crowd the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: “Before the rooster crows twice you will disown me three times.” And he broke down and wept.

ENGAGE THE WORD

PREDICTIONS OF ABANDONMENT AND DISOWNING

Mark 14:27-31

After the Last Supper, Jesus led His disciples toward Gethsemane. The disciples were undoubtedly shaken up by Jesus' earlier announcement that one of them would betray Him. Now Jesus jolted them by predicting that they would all abandon Him and fall away. Quoting Zechariah 13:7, Jesus declared that the disciples would scatter and forsake Him just as sheep scatter when their shepherd is struck down.

With indignant self-righteousness, Peter confidently proclaimed that, even if all the rest of Jesus' followers would fall away, he would stand loyal and faithful to Jesus. Peter's impetuous pride came into full view in this moment. Apparently, Peter had no difficulty in accepting the Lord's word that the other disciples would fall away, but he vehemently denied any possibility of his own failure or disloyalty to Jesus. Unfortunately, bold affirmations of fidelity are no guarantee for faithfulness. The disheartening lesson for today is that anyone can stumble and fall on the path of following Christ. The good news is that failure does not need to be final.

Jesus knew that Peter would deny Him. Indeed, Jesus told Peter he would disown Jesus three times before the rooster crowed twice in the early morning. Peter emphatically refused to accept what Jesus said to him. He insisted that, even if it meant his own death, he would never disown Jesus. Mark added that all the other disciples joined Peter in saying the same thing.

In the midst of this shocking announcement of the failure and abandonment of the disciples and Peter, the reassuring promise and hope of verse 28 was probably overlooked by most of the disciples. Despite the failure and abandonment of the disciples, and despite the impending arrest, suffering, and even death of Jesus, this would not be the last word. Jesus promised His disciples that after He had risen, He would go ahead of them into Galilee. The reality of failure can often seem to destroy and darken every prospect of

Did You Know?

Early Christian tradition claims that Mark's main source for his gospel was Simon Peter himself. If this is true, Mark's story of Peter's denial is actually Peter's own story.

PETER'S THREEFOLD DENIAL

hope or restoration. Even though the disciples certainly did not understand Him in that moment, Jesus did not only foretell their failure, but He also foretold His ultimate victory: Jesus would arise and gather them to himself again.

Mark 14:66-72

Despite Peter's adamant reassurance and pledge of loyalty, the fulfillment of Jesus' solemn prediction of His denial did not take long to unfold. Mark carefully portrayed Peter's denials as taking place simultaneously with Jesus' trial before the Jewish ruling council. While Jesus was being accused and challenged by the powerful high priest and the council, Peter was accused and challenged by the priest's powerless female servant. Likewise, while Jesus stood firm and fast under the penetrating scrutiny of the blood-thirsty Jewish authorities, Peter crumbled and collapsed under the slightest weight of pressure and accusation. The contrasts Mark portrayed between Jesus and Peter were vivid and deliberate.

To Peter's credit, the narrative of his denial began in the courtyard near the location of Jesus' trial. Even though the other disciples had run away, Peter continued to follow Jesus, albeit at a distance. In rapid succession, however, Peter disclaimed and denied any knowledge or relationship with Jesus three times. Notably, the denials grew more adamant and emphatic each time Peter was confronted.

The priest's slave girl issued the first two challenges. Looking closely at Peter's face, she accused Peter derisively of association with "that Nazarene Jesus." Peter strongly denied any knowledge or understanding of what she said, and he quickly moved away from the light of the fire into the entryway. Seeing Peter a little later in the entryway, the girl repeated her accusation against Peter to those who were standing close by. Peter again denied any association with Jesus.

Shortly thereafter, the tensions escalated as now

Think About It

Peter's threefold denial corresponds with his threefold failure to watch and pray with Jesus in Gethsemane (Mark 14:34-41). Victory over temptation is often gained beforehand in our persistent prayer life.

the other bystanders in the courtyard began to accuse Peter of affiliation with Jesus, since Peter was also from the region of Galilee. Undoubtedly, Peter's Galilean accent betrayed his birthplace and background to his accusers. Peter's third denial in verse 71 is as vehement as his pledge of loyalty was in verse 31. With loud and heated curses, Peter swore that he did not know Jesus.

The verb "call down curses" in verse 71 does not have an object in the Greek text. It can be translated in two different ways. It may mean that Peter denied Jesus under oath and called down curses on himself if he was lying, or it may mean that Peter actually pronounced a curse on Jesus. In later years, when Christians faced official persecution from the Romans, cursing Christ was considered proof positive that a person was not a Christian. Regardless of the translation, the failure and fall of Peter were abysmal and complete.

No sooner were the words of denial and solemn curses out of Peter's mouth than the rooster crowed the second time. Jesus' prophetic words were proven true to the very letter. When Peter recognized the magnitude of his failure, he broke down and wept bitterly. Self-awareness and brokenness are often the beginning of growth and restoration.

Even though the passage for this week ends at this tragic place, by the grace of God the story was not over. Jesus was prepared to deal with the damage of displaced loyalty and even blatant denial because His love knew no limits. Our best intentions and faithfulness to Christ may sometimes waver and even fail, but our failure does not need to be final. We have the blessed assurance that the love and grace of Jesus never fail!

REFLECT **T**ake time to thank God for His mercy and grace.

DANIEL G. POWERS

March

26

WHAT WILL YOU DECIDE ABOUT JESUS?

*Every person must make a choice to either accept
or reject Jesus Christ.*

THE WORD

MARK
14:60-64

Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, “Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?” ⁶¹But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer.

Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?”

⁶²“I am,” said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

⁶³The high priest tore his clothes. “Why do we need any more witnesses?” he asked. ⁶⁴“You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?”

15:2-15

²“Are you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate.

“You have said so,” Jesus replied.

³The chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴So again Pilate asked him, “Aren’t you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.”

⁵But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.

⁶Now it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested. ⁷A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. ⁸The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did.

⁹“Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate, ¹⁰knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had

handed Jesus over to him. ¹¹But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead.

KEY VERSE

¹²**“What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?” Pilate asked them.**

¹³“Crucify him!” they shouted.

¹⁴“Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate.

But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!”

¹⁵Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

ENGAGE THE WORD

FALSE ACCUSATION OF BLASPHEMY

Mark 14:60-64

In the previous verses, the leaders brought false witnesses to incriminate Jesus. The use of false witnesses revealed this trial was actually about the claim that Jesus was the Son of God and not about any supposed illegal behavior of Jesus. Even though their false accusations did not agree, the high priest summoned Jesus to defend himself against the charges. Jesus silently refused to respond.

Throughout Mark’s gospel, Jesus was hesitant to speak plainly about His identity as the Messiah. He even prevented the evil spirits whom He cast out from proclaiming His identity as the “Holy One of God” (2:24). As the council paraded a lineup of false witnesses against Him, Jesus did not defend himself. Jesus’ silence is sometimes difficult to understand. Perhaps He did not want to dignify their false accusations with a reply. Or perhaps He understood any response would be futile because His accusers were already determined to put Him to death (14:55). Mark most likely noted Jesus’ silence as a fulfillment of Scripture (see Isaiah 53:7, “As a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.”).

When the high priest directly asked Jesus if He was the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus ended His silence with the clear affirmation, “I am.” Jesus often spoke of himself with the mysterious title “Son of Man.” After affirming His identity, Jesus declared, “And you will see

Did You Know?

The phrase “Son of the Blessed One” means “Son of God.”

The Jews often avoided the name of God in order to avoid breaking the third commandment (taking God’s name in vain).

ACCUSATIONS AND SILENCE

the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (v. 62). Jesus’ words combined a messianic passage from Psalm 110 with an apocalyptic passage of judgment from Daniel 7. His words prophesied a coming time when the roles would be reversed so that those who were now judging would be judged. For the high priest, this was the last straw. On a trumped up charge of blasphemy, the council and the high priest judged Him worthy of death.

Mark 15:2-5

Roman law forbade local councils from carrying out the death penalty. Therefore, they brought Jesus to Pilate, the Roman military governor over Judea, for trial and questioning. As Jesus appeared before Pilate bound by chains and bloodied by His own Jewish compatriots, Pilate sarcastically asked, “Are you the king of the Jews?” The question itself was serious because the Romans viewed any claim of kingship as a crime against the sovereign authority of Rome. But the circumstances were pathetically ridiculous since the Jews themselves were the ones who had rejected and condemned Jesus.

Much to Pilate’s surprise, Jesus responded with a noncommittal answer similar to something like, “Whatever you say.” Even when the chief priests piled more unfounded accusations against Him, Jesus remained silent. Pilate called Jesus to defend himself against His accusers, but Jesus refused. Once again, Jesus’ silence is difficult to explain except perhaps as a fulfillment of Scripture. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus did not speak again until He was on the cross in 15:34.

CHOICE OF JESUS OR BARABBAS

Mark 15:6-15

Mark noted that the crowd asked Pilate to release a prisoner, as was the custom at such a festival like Passover. Pilate knew it was out of envy and self-interest that the chief priests had arrested and charged

Think About It

By exchanging Barabbas for Jesus, the Jewish religious leaders rejected Jesus, the true Son of the Father, and replaced Him with Barabbas, whose name means literally “a son of a father.”

Jesus (v. 10). He undoubtedly viewed the prisoner release as the perfect opportunity to defuse the situation, gain the favor of the crowd, and release Jesus, who was obviously innocent of any wrongdoing.

This was where the infamous criminal Barabbas entered the picture. One needs to recognize the significant irony present in this tragic account. Whereas Jesus was falsely accused as a rebel who was vying for Jewish kingship, Barabbas was a renowned political revolutionary who was guilty of murder in his attempts to challenge and overthrow the Roman authority. Likewise, the chief priests accused and condemned Jesus for claiming He was the Son of God the Father while they sought the release of Barabbas, whose name literally means “a son of a father.” Being quick to condemn the innocent Jesus for crimes He never committed, they were equally as quick to exonerate the guilty Barabbas for crimes he had assuredly committed. Anticipating Pilate’s offer to release a prisoner during the festival, the chief priests stirred up the crowd to demand Barabbas’ release while also demanding Jesus’ death.

Pilate tried to reason with the crowd by challenging them to identify any crime Jesus committed, but they only shouted all the louder for Jesus to be crucified. The verdict of the crowd, at the instigation of the Jewish religious leaders, was a travesty of justice, baseless, and without merit. Based on peer pressure alone, they rejected and condemned Jesus without even knowing or considering Him. Similarly, Pilate condemned Jesus merely out of the selfish desire to satisfy the crowd and gain their favor. Therefore, he released Barabbas, had Jesus beaten, and handed Jesus over to be crucified.

REFLECT Who is Jesus and what have you decided about Him?

April

2

CHRIST CRUCIFIED

Every element associated with the death of Jesus provides insight into our Lord's identity, mission, and significance.

THE WORD

MARK
15:21-39

A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. ²²They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”). ²³Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. ²⁴And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.

²⁵It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. ²⁶The written notice of the charge against him read: the king of the jews.

²⁷They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left. ^[28] ²⁹Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, “So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, ³⁰come down from the cross and save yourself!” ³¹In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! ³²Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

³³At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”).

³⁵When some of those standing near heard this, they said, “Listen, he’s calling Elijah.”

³⁶Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a

staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to take him down,” he said.

³⁷With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

³⁸The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

KEY VERSE ³⁹**And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, saw how he died, he said, “Surely this man was the Son of God!”**

ENGAGE THE WORD

CRUCIFIED AS KING OF THE JEWS

Mark 15:21-27

Normally, those condemned to death by crucifixion would carry their own cross (or the crossbeam) to the site of their death. Mark did not explain why Jesus could not carry His cross, but the reason was undoubtedly connected to the brutal beating inflicted on Him by the soldiers (15:19). Little is known about Simon of Cyrene, who was forced to carry Jesus’ cross. Nonetheless, his role is a powerful example of the moment in every believer’s life when the cross of Jesus becomes our cross, which we must take up to follow Him (Mark 8:34-38).

Myrrh mixed with wine was sometimes used to dull pain, but the addition of myrrh would make the wine virtually undrinkable. The offer of undrinkable mixture to still Jesus’ great thirst was probably another form of sadistic mockery aimed at Jesus. But Jesus refused to drink. At the Last Supper, Jesus declared He would not drink from the fruit of the vine until He would drink it again in the kingdom of God (14:25). Here in His own valley of the shadow of death, Jesus was determined to remain fully conscious as He accepted His suffering for the sake of all humanity.

Executioners often took the clothes and other sparse belongings of their victims, sometimes casting lots to determine who would receive them. Mark undoubtedly recognized this detail as a fulfillment of Psalm 22:18. Psalm 22 has been recognized as portraying a vivid picture of suffering that is remarkably similar to Jesus’ own suffering. Mark alluded to this psalm again in verse 20 (Psalm 22:7) and in verse 34 (Psalm 22:1).

Did You Know?

It was 9 AM, the third hour, when Jesus was crucified (v. 25). At high noon, the sixth hour (v. 33) an unusual darkness covered the land, as prophesied (Amos 8:9). It was 3 PM, the ninth hour (v. 34), which was the Jewish hour of prayer, when Jesus expressed His agony and quoted from Psalm 22 in prayer.

MOCKING INSULTS

THIS MAN WAS THE SON OF GOD!

As was customary, Jesus' supposed crime was written on a placard and attached to the cross: "The king of the Jews." Pilate undoubtedly created this message as an ironic insult to the Jewish leaders who had coerced him into executing Jesus. For the Christian, however, no truer words have ever been written. Crucified between two criminals, Jesus was "numbered with the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12).

Mark 15:29-32

The bystanders hurled insults at Jesus, shaking their heads in contempt. The taunts and mocking echoed the words of Psalm 22:7. Scornfully, the crowd challenged Jesus to come down from the cross and save himself. Similarly, the Jewish religious leaders mocked Jesus, saying, "He saved others but He can't save himself." With contempt they called Him "Messiah" and "king of Israel," and they, too, challenged Him to come down from the cross that they might see and believe.

The derision of the bystanders was deeply ironic for Mark. Their mocking words testified to an incredible truth far beyond their comprehension. Jesus' death was a "ransom" for others (10:45), and in order to save others He must not and could not save himself. As humiliation, indignity, and insult were piled upon Jesus, the true Messiah and King of Israel endured the derision with resolution, endurance, and determination. After all, Jesus had taught His followers to "take up" the cross, not to "come down" from one. In obedience and submission to God's plan for the salvation of others, Jesus did not turn away from the cross.

Mark 15:33-39

At noon, darkness covered the land, coinciding with the last three hours of Jesus' suffering. The prophet Amos had written, "'In that day,' declares the Sovereign Lord, 'I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight'" (8:9). Amos' "day of the Lord" was a day of judgment against those who per-

Think About It

While it would appear that God's power and purposes were frustrated by the death of His Son Jesus, the ironic reality is that God's power and purposes were indelibly displayed and eternally established through the obedience of the Son to the Father. On that fateful day, Jesus became the Mediator of salvation to all who would believe in Him.

verted justice (Amos 5:18-24), an idea that Mark could easily apply to the circumstances of Jesus' death.

At the height of His pain, Jesus exclaimed, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Some interpret this as a reflection of Jesus' intense suffering, while others view it as an expression of His full identification with sinful humanity and the Father's abandonment of Him. Others point to Jesus' exclamation as a quotation from Psalm 22:1, which begins with forsaken anguish, but ends in vindication (vv. 22-31). Thus, Jesus' agonized cry in the midst of His suffering might reflect a confident trust that His suffering and death would be ultimately vindicated by God the Father. There is undoubtedly an element of truth reflected in each of these suggestions. Jesus' agonized cry reflected the intense suffering and dreadfulness caused by His full identification with sinful humanity, but it also reflected His confident hope of His Father's vindication. With a final loud cry, Jesus took His last breath and He died.

With two short emphatic sentences, Mark summed up the incredible result of Jesus' death. First, the temple curtain that separated the holy place from the holy of holies was torn from top to bottom. This was undeniably an act of God, whose presence was now relocated in the crucified and soon-to-be risen Christ. The presence of God would no longer be contained and hidden in the temple.

Second, the centurion declared that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. This declaration is the ultimate climax of Mark's entire gospel. Salvation would no longer be determined by membership in the bloodline of the Jews through Abraham. Instead, salvation would be offered to anyone—even a Roman centurion!—who believed in Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus' work was finished.

REFLECT Take time to think about the message of the cross.

CHRIST ALIVE

April

9

In the resurrection, Jesus Christ achieved victory over sin and death.

THE WORD

MARK 15:42-47

It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, ⁴³Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. ⁴⁴Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. ⁴⁵When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. ⁴⁶So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. ⁴⁷Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.

16:1-8

¹When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. ²Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb ³and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"

⁴But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

KEY VERSE

⁶"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

⁸Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

ENGAGE THE WORD

THE BURIAL OF JESUS

Mark 15:42-47

Mark narrated the burial of Jesus with simple and unembellished details that underscore the certainty of His death. Death by crucifixion often stretched out over several days as the victim would slowly deteriorate, dehydrate, and bleed out on the cross. The Romans often left a decaying body on a cross as a warning and deterrent against other potential rebels against the state. But Jewish custom required burial before sunset to prevent pollution of the land (Deuteronomy 21:23).

Jesus' death occurred in the afternoon, only hours before sunset and the beginning of the Sabbath. Typically, family or friends requested the body for burial, but Jesus' family and friends had abandoned Him.

Mark observed that it was Preparation Day, the day before the Sabbath, to emphasize the hasty preparations that surrounded the burial of Jesus. This reference could also be a subtle foreshadowing that God was preparing a resurrection that would radically transform the significance of Jesus' death.

A pious Jew named Joseph asked Pilate for Jesus' body for burial. Little is known about Joseph's background or motivation, but he was possibly a secret follower of Jesus since Mark noted he was "waiting for the kingdom of God." Since death by crucifixion was usually a lengthy affair, Pilate expressed surprise to hear that Jesus had already died. When the Roman centurion confirmed the death of Jesus, Pilate released the body to Joseph, who quickly took down the body, wrapped it in linen cloth, and placed it in a stone crypt that had been cut into the rock. He rolled a large stone in front of the opening of the tomb to protect the body from wild animals or intruders. Mark recorded that two women watched (literally, "were

Did You Know?

To seal a tomb, a flat, rounded stone was placed in a sloping channel dug at the base of the entrance. The stone could be rolled easily down the slope across the entrance, but would require several people to remove.

WHO WILL ROLL THE STONE AWAY?

watching”) these events take place, and they saw where Jesus was buried.

Mark was very careful to note that Jesus was really dead: Joseph announced it, Pilate researched it, the centurion verified it, and the women watched it happen.

Mark 16:1-4

The women followers of Jesus played a surprisingly prominent role at the end of Mark’s gospel. Their significance is all the more unexpected because Mark never mentioned anything about women followers of Jesus earlier in his gospel. Nonetheless, when Jesus’ family and all His disciples had abandoned Him, these female followers became the first eyewitnesses of the foundational Christian belief that “Jesus died ... was buried . . . and was raised” (1 Corinthians 15:3).

After the Sabbath, a group of three women—Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome—bought spices to anoint Jesus’ body. The hasty timing of Jesus’ death and burial before the beginning of the Sabbath at sunset had prevented them from making the arrangements earlier. As they made their way to the tomb after sunrise on that first Easter Sunday morning, their thoughts were occupied with the dilemma of removing the stone that blocked the entrance to the tomb. Despite Jesus’ repeated prophecies that He would die and be raised again on the third day (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34), this expectation was nowhere in their thoughts. Instead, they worried about the stone that sealed the grave.

As often happens, the things people worry about the most never actually materialize. When the women approached the tomb and looked up at the entrance, they saw that the large stone had already been rolled away. Mark did not identify specifically who or how the stone had been moved, but the passive voice (“had been moved”) in Scripture is often used as a “divine passive” to describe an act of God. Indeed, what

Think About It

Mark's report of women as prime witnesses of Jesus' resurrection oddly attests to the reliability of his account. Since women were considered unreliable witnesses, Mark would hardly have invented them as his primary source.

JESUS HAS RISEN!

man (or in this case, "women") could not do, God did: He rolled the stone away!

Mark 16:5-8

Since the entrance to the tomb was open, the women went inside to anoint Jesus' body. But the body was not there. Instead, they saw a "young man dressed in a white robe" sitting just to the right of where the body had lain. The reference to the white robe agrees with Matthew's account that this was an angel with clothes that were "white as snow" (Matthew 28:3). As one might expect, the women were greatly alarmed, probably as much from the absence of the body as from the presence of the angelic young man.

After calming their fears, the white-clad messenger delivered three important truths that continue to encourage and inspire followers of Jesus even today. First, Jesus is risen! He is not in the grave. The tomb is empty, and Jesus is alive! Second, Jesus has gone ahead of you. Not only did He go ahead of them into Galilee (14:28), where He would meet His disciples, but He goes ahead of every believer as a divine "Way maker" through life towards heaven. Third, you will see Him again. This promise must have ignited the fires of hope in the hearts of the disciples. Specifically, the disciples saw the resurrected Jesus in Galilee, just as the angel said. But the day is also coming when all creation will see the resurrected Jesus when He returns in glory and honor. This promise of seeing Jesus again continues to prompt hope and faith that we too will meet our Lord in the future. This is because Jesus is risen; He is risen indeed!

REFLECT **T**hink about what "He is risen; He is risen indeed!" means to you.

DANIEL G. POWERS

April
16

FAITH AND GOOD WORKS

*The word of truth that gives us new life
also guides us in living that new life.*

THE WORD

JAMES
1:17-27

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

¹⁹My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. ²¹Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

KEY VERSE

²²Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

²⁶Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

2:14-18

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does noth-

ing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

¹⁸But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds.

ENGAGE THE WORD

THE GOD WHO LAVISHES LOVE

James 1:17-18

James begins this section of Scripture with a glorious truth (1:17): The fountain of goodness and grace is the God who lavishes His love on us. One implication of this verse is that wherever we see good around the world, God’s fingerprints are evident. James is writing to people who are enduring trials. He is counteracting the idea that God is the source of the temptations. Rather than tempting us, God paves the path toward success in every moment of decision.

James indicates that God’s character never changes. We grow up expecting that people change. James reminds his readers that God “does not change like shifting shadows” (1:17b). The character of God reminds us that He will always be faithful. James also points out that, “He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created” (1:18). God renews us in the midst of life “through the word of truth” and intends us to be evidence of His goodness and grace (see **Did You Know?**).

LISTEN!

James 1:19-21

James begins this passage with startling language, “Take note.” So the gravity of this message is not missed, the reader is reminded that it matters that we listen. The message is clear: God’s people are eager to listen and slow to speak. It is easy to be planning the response to a comment before it is finished. However, people who are born by the word of truth are humble, and listening to others is an act of humble faith and respect. When we listen, we live out the truth that the

Did You Know?

We understand the “word of truth” as the gospel message (Ephesians 1:13; Colossians 1:5; 2 Timothy 2:15). We encounter the good news of the gospel, respond to it, and apply its message to our lives. This is God’s free gift offered to us and we reap its benefits when we willingly accept it.

DOERS OF THE WORD

person speaking is made in the image of God. The longer I follow God and His Word, the more I make sure I fully understand a person before I respond.

James calls his readers to see that we should not only be slow to speak but also slow to anger. Such an emotion reflects fear more than strength. Anger spills out of a heart that is lost and anxious in the midst of discussion. A heart born by the word of truth does not need to be defensive or abrasive. James reminds the reader that “human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires” (1:20). The word of truth has nothing to do with the weakness denoted with anger. Sordidness and wickedness accompany anger, according to James. Therefore, he counsels his readers to greet anger with meekness. Such a response may seem counter-intuitive, but the implanted word of truth has the power to transform anger into grace.

James 1:22-25

The heart of the passage comes clearly into focus in this section. God calls all who profess His name to be doers of the Word. Doing is an active word, and hearing is more passive. A key word needs to be unpacked here: deception. Those that merely listen are deceiving themselves, according to James. Such people hear but quickly forget. It is as if they look in the mirror with no more depth than a casual glance. They look but do not really see. Whether they are pleased or disquieted, the message dies moments later. It means little and ends up nowhere. James adds, “But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do” (1:25). Jesus calls individuals to drop their nets and follow Him immediately. He is not interested in those that assign anything of higher priority than the call to follow. When we see ourselves in the light of the perfect law, freedom comes into focus.

Think About It

The Greek language has several words for anger. One of those words means a sudden burst of emotional anger arising from frustration. Another word means something like indignation, the word used for anger in this passage. It also means a deep and persistent rage. This word can refer to God's wrath toward sin. When James uses this in relation to human beings, it means selfish resentment. The anger that is inconsistent with righteousness is this self-centered resistance to God's truth.

CONTROL THE TONGUE

James 1:26-27

James extends his argument in verses 26-27 when he links religion with our speech. Those who follow Jesus must get control of their tongues. Words have the power to bless and to curse. James reminds his readers that we render religion worthless when we reject the will of God to transform our thoughts and words. For those who are earnestly seeking to serve God, faith is not merely an internal possession, but a passion to care for others and live a pure life.

FAITH AND ACTION

James 2:14-18

James connects faith and action, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them?" (2:14). Later, he writes, "In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead" (2:17). This calls to mind the material flow between grace and character. Grace is not a cloak that hides our sin from God for the sake of Christ. Some might describe this as an alien righteousness precariously resting upon us. The Wesleyan-Holiness tradition joins the best lights of the Christian tradition to embrace transformational righteousness. We are changed from the inside out. We are not saved to continue in sin. Rather, we are healed of sin's diseases. In light of our spiritual transformation, our actions (deeds) become an expression of our faith.

REFLECT

In what ways can you be a doer of the Word this week?

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April

23

THE PROBLEM WITH PARTIALITY

Christians are not to show favoritism.

THE WORD

JAMES
2:1-13

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. ²Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. ³If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,” ⁴have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

⁵Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? ⁷Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong?

KEY VERSES

⁸If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. ⁹But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. ¹¹For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

¹²Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, ¹³because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Loving God and neighbor expresses a profound truth regarding faith. Last week we noted that grace renders us responsible for reflecting the great gift of salvation to others. God's gift to us becomes a gift to those who cross our path. This week, we will look at another significant passage of scripture in our attempt to understand our Christian faith and practice.

James seeks to address the implications that flow from faith in "our glorious Lord" (2:1b). This move further affirms that our faith puts us to work; it is an active faith. Faith is an enfleshed intention to accept the gift of salvation and extend the same gift to those who are hungry or thirsty, both spiritually and physically. When Jesus walked the earth, He touched the untouchable and marginalized. He recognized men and women that society ignored. The message of James in this passage gestures toward an authentic faith expressed through inclusive grace. The first service held by Phineas Bresee, the founding personality of the Church of the Nazarene, was in a rescue mission. Working on behalf of the poor embodies a vital faith as well as holiness theology.

FAVORITISM INCONSISTENT WITH FAITH

James 2:1-7

James affirms in this great passage that favoritism is inconsistent with a vital faith. He writes, "My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism" (2:1). This reveals a deep disconnect among those in the church between their faith and life. Wesley often asked, "How is it with your soul today?" to members of his small groups. We also understand that faith is not merely an abstract intention to believe. Rather, it is a strong commitment to being what we believe. Gold rings and fine clothes should never translate to priority in the church. This practice of preference based on status in life is repugnant to James and contradictory to the gospel.

Did You Know?

James had good reason to question the rich (2:6). In Israel and throughout the Roman Empire, the rich were exploiting the poor. Roman society was divided into classes, and the higher classes had a favored status throughout the empire. In fact, Roman laws favored the rich and penalties prescribed by the laws were tougher on the lower class.

James further states: "Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?" (2:5). This does not exalt poverty in any way; however, it does recognize that God often finds the poor more receptive. Fine clothes in and of themselves do not bar a person from the kingdom. Admittance into the kingdom comes to those who, in true repentance, humble themselves at the cross, whatever the social class. Jesus was born in a manger to a poor family. He understood at eye level hunger and sickness. Those who lavish themselves with unnecessary things might find it more difficult to understand the plight of the poor and thereby miss the good news of the gospel. When the privileged in life wield power at the expense of the poor, they dishonor God.

Wesley was systematically driven away from every parish in the Church of England because he attracted the margins of society to his services which made the wealthy uncomfortable. Because of this, he began preaching in the field with great success. While God can use anyone no matter their social and economic status, the more receptive group is often the poor. It is important to note that just as it is essential for the rich not to exclude the poor, the poor must not assume priority over the rich. It is always a matter of a receptive heart.

LAW AND LOVE

James 2:8-13

The fascination with the law by the Pharisees did not exclude them from the ultimate law of love. James writes, "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers" (2:8-9). The insight shared here reaches to the intention of the law itself. It is just as wrong to juxtapose law and love because love is both the genesis and fulfillment of the

Think About It

What happens when Christians act out their faith in deeds of goodness just as their Master did? The result is a heart filled with that merciful spirit that will act with compassion.

law. When we love our neighbor, we catch the spirit of the law itself. An essential unity emerges here. James writes, “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment” (2:10-13). Ultimately, loving our neighbor opens our life to Spirit-engendered liberty. We become what God intends when we truly love our neighbor in worship of God. It opens up the mercy of God for us. God lavishes His love upon us, and until we extend that same mercy to our neighbor, we do not fully understand it.

This passage of scripture raises a significant insight into the Christian faith. This insight underwrites what we talked about last week in that grace calls us to a responsible life. Here the same point is made by affirming that partiality based on social status betrays our faith.

Wesley was a very well-educated person with an appointment at Oxford University. He had every reason to distance himself from the poverty and desperation of the common person. Yet, he pursued them and served them until the very end of his life. Holiness refuses to surrender to an ethereal and abstract faith. Rather, a clear-headed assessment of sin joins with a sense of the power of grace. The division and strife of our world would be immensely and positively transformed by a vision of our equal status at the foot of the cross.

REFLECT How might showing no favoritism or preference in our relationships witness to the power of the Christian faith?

HENRY SPAULDING, II

April

30

FAITH AND GOOD WORDS

*Our speech needs to be brought
under the control of Christ.*

THE WORD

JAMES
3:1-12

Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

²We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

³When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.

⁵Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.

⁶The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

⁷All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, ⁸but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

KEY VERSES

⁹With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness.

¹⁰Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. ¹¹Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹²My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

17-18

¹⁷But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good

fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

ENGAGE THE WORD

God blesses us with minds and, for the most part, the capacity to speak. James is aware that our ability to speak is a powerful gift that can become a blessing or a curse.

TEACHERS

James 3:1-5

James begins with a stark warning, “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (v. 1). I can remember the words of my professors over the years. Their voices echo in my mind as I reflect on the issues presented to me. Even as I embrace another conclusion occasionally, the voices remain. Teachers are a gift, but they carry a special burden to be careful in the way they use their voice. It is a good reminder of the serious responsibility and accountability placed upon those who teach.

James continues his exhortation, “We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check” (v. 2). This is a powerful image. We all make mistakes, and the place where we are most likely to make a mistake is in speech. Many times, a word slips out before we know it. James uses strong metaphors to get at the issue. He refers to “bits into the mouths of horses” and “rudders” for a ship. The idea seems to be that small parts control large objects (i.e., horses and ships). He closes the paragraph with a clear conclusion, “Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark” (v. 5). If we are not careful, our words have a way of controlling our lives. Therefore, discipline is required not only of those who teach, but anyone who seeks to embody holiness.

Did You Know?

The use of the word “hell” in 3:6b underscores a vivid image in the mind of those who read this book. It refers immediately to a ditch or valley outside the city walls where garbage burned. Because it continually burned, the smoke served as a reminder of judgment. The association made by James provides a visible image of the uncontrolled tongue.

DANGER AND BLESSING OF SPEECH

WISDOM FROM ABOVE

James 3:6-12

The message of this passage builds strong support for the danger and the blessing of speech. Our words can start wars, but they also can bring peace. James offers a bleak view of the tongue, “The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (v. 6). It is exceedingly difficult to tame the tongue. James refers to the tongue as “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (3:8b). My mother often told me that sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. This was conventional wisdom, but I have found that bones often heal before the bruises on our soul caused by words. Of course, there is a deeper message contained here.

The doctrinal and moral convictions of the Christian faith are treasures for those who follow Christ. Understanding requires maturity in the face of all the temptations to speak or act precipitously. James adds, “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be” (vv. 9-10). Can falsehood and division emerge from a heart made new in Christ? How likely is it for brackish to emerge from freshwater? Can a fig tree yield olives or a grapevine figs? The answer is obvious, no! Words matter because they are an outside revelation of the inside condition of the heart.

James 3:17-18

The full impact of this passage comes into focus at the end of the chapter. James writes, “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere” (v. 17). This is in complete contrast to boastful earthly, unspiritual, and devilish ambitions. This brings our minds back

Think About It

The church needs people who love God and others; who will avoid petty quarreling and slander; who can control their speech; and who will seek God's wisdom so that the church can partake of the harvest of righteousness and peace.

around to speech. These verses are reminiscent of the passage in Galatians where Paul contrasts the fruit of the Spirit with works of the flesh. We talk about exercising wisdom a good deal in the church. If we are not careful, these times can be fraught with the temptation to set the forest ablaze (v. 5). However, when our minds embrace the wisdom from above, our words will reflect “a harvest of righteousness.”

John Wesley writes, “And the principle productive of this righteousness is sown, like good seed, in the peace of a believer’s mind, and brings forth a plentiful harvest of happiness (which is the proper fruit of righteousness) for them that make peace—That labour to promote this pure and holy peace among (human-kind)” (*Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, 865).

The Wesleyan-Holiness tradition finds its passion in the way grace heals sin’s diseases. We understand that all who follow find forgiveness in Christ by faith through grace for our transgressions. All theological traditions understand the importance of living a redeemed life, but the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition provides a faithful path by which to address these doctrinal convictions so we might address character. This is a theology of transformation.

James concludes with a wonderful description of wisdom from above and disciplined speech, “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness” (vv. 17-18). This is because wisdom from above calls us to reflect on our citizenship in another kingdom.

REFLECT How do our words bless or condemn others? How does our speech embody wisdom?

HENRY SPAULDING, II

May

7

FAITH AND GOD'S PROVIDENCE

God's providential blessings thrive in our lives when we are engaged in good works that honor both God's mission as well as God's character.

THE WORD

JAMES
4:4-17

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. ⁵Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? ⁶But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble."

⁷Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

¹¹Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. ¹²There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

¹³Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." ¹⁴Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵**Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."** ¹⁶As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.

KEY VERSE

ENGAGE THE WORD

DESIRES INTO VIRTUES

God calls us and enables us for a new life in Christ. With Jesus, we are able to live a different and better life. The prevailing theme of Christian faith is that submission to God opens up a completely new world to us.

James 4:4-12

The first verses of chapter 4 frame the words of this passage. James begins his analysis by examining desire (4:1). James chooses “desires” (or cravings) to express his astonishment. It is an extreme term that connotes an irrational need. It is highly important that James suggests that these cravings are at the root of conflicts and disputes. James goes on to write, “You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God” (4:2). He means to convey that once our desires become cravings, they can take us to a place we never imagined.

James asks a penetrating question, “You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (4:4). The world constantly seeks to shape our lives and push us into its mold. This happens through words, images, and ideas. It may seem “natural” for many to find the allure of the secular compelling, but it is a wide path that leads to destruction.

James writes, “Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us” (4:5)? These worldly voices screaming at us only get our attention when we forget the depth of God’s love for us. The promise comes through clearly, “But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble’” (4:6). There is grace sufficient to conquer the pull of the world in our life. James’ answer rings through the ages, “Submit yourselves, then, to

Did You Know?

The expression “double-minded” or “double-souled” might be illuminated by thinking in terms of synonymous parallelism. Therefore, it opens a way to understand sin as the futile attempt to satisfy both the world and God.

God” (4:7a). God provides the resources we need to avoid evil and embrace good. This is the joy of the gospel. It is holiness in succinct form—submit to God.

Fundamentally, evil is a lack not only of good but also of God. Because evil desires drain life from the world, resistance is both advisable and essential for wholeness. James writes, “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up” (4:10). God provides the remedy for our cravings by cleansing and purifying our hearts. Our Heavenly Father reorients our desires toward something that fulfills and heals sin’s diseases.

Judgment is especially destructive when it arises from disoriented desires. We all make judgments every day. I make a judgment when pulling out into traffic. How fast is the car traveling? The traffic signal turns yellow. Can I get through the intersection before the light turns red? Or when reading, I determine the strength of the argument and the persuasiveness of the conclusion the author makes. James writes, “Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it” (4:11). This presents an intriguing observation. Those who judge assume a position above the law. James reminds his readers that assuming such a position makes us pretend to be lawgivers. Making sweeping pronouncements places us in a place where we do not belong. When our desires are undisciplined, we tend to judge and dismiss others. When we judge our neighbor, we cannot love them. When we submit to God, we understand that God alone is in a position to render judgment because God is sovereign.

SANCTIFIED LOVE

James 4:13-17

This entire section of Scripture explores the meaning of sanctified love. Thomas Aquinas defines love

Think About It

When we submit to God in humility, our hands become the hands of Christ, untainted by selfish motivation; our hearts become pure because they are no longer divided between the law of love and the law of self.

as willing the good for the other. God wills the good for all creation. The drama of salvation displays the passion that God has for humankind. We express our submission to God by the way we think about the future. James writes, "Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (4:13-14). The ultimate act of craving is to think that the future is purely up to me. "My truth/way" can suggest a level of autonomy that upon reflection is foolish. We are not a choice or even a series of choices. Our life is a continuous reception of God's gift of love. This orients us to the future with a settled peace that the One who loves us most is guiding us. The sort of life defined by submission begins to understand that our desires should be conformed to the ever-new grace of God. Instead of "I will do such and such," we learn to say, "If God wills it, I will do such and such."

The Wesleyan-Holiness tradition affirms that God can direct our desires to the point that the power of sin is subverted. We do not need to live from one craving to another. Our freedom does not need to become bondage. God in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, helps us conquer the unruly desires of life.

REFLECT **H**ow does a firm belief in the providential care of God enable us to embrace the stress and challenges of life with hope?

HENRY SPAULDING, II

May

14

ENDURANCE AND THE SECOND COMING

*In light of Christ's return, the Christian community
must remain missional.*

THE WORD

JAMES
5:7-20

KEY VERSE

Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. **⁸You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.** ⁹Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

¹⁰Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

¹²Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple “Yes” or “No.” Otherwise you will be condemned.

¹³Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

¹⁷Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

¹⁹My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, ²⁰remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

ENGAGE THE WORD

PATIENCE!

James 5:7-12

James writes, “Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains” (5:7). Why does the farmer wait? Perhaps he/she has confidence in the faithfulness of the process because he/she knows that God is at work.

James continues, “You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near” (5:8). Patience is grace! The entire Christian life depends upon patient grace. It is patient because the passage of time requires it. It is grace because of the promise of the presence of the Holy Spirit and the testimony of Scripture.

Jesus is coming again! This means that our entire life is seasoned by the knowledge and hope that the presence of God frames the future and, therefore, the present. It is a dire mistake to think the second coming is about looking out the window toward the eastern sky. While it is that, it is about how today unfolds in the providence of God.

James reminds his readers, “Don’t grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door” (5:9)! When we lose the frame of patient grace, it is easy to turn upon one another. Impatience arises at the point of the despair that often accompanies faithlessness.

On the other hand, patience reveals a calm embrace of the future as grace. Patient grace guards against the presumption of the future as a projection of our achievement. The point James seems to be making is that when we take our eyes off life in Christ,

Did You Know?

The word used for facing suffering in verse 10 appears only here in the New Testament. Its meaning ranges from disappointment to more extreme challenges that require the best we have to endure them.

we look at others with disdain instead of objects of God's redeeming love. The future is not our work; it is God's call. James makes a sober plea, "Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple 'Yes' or 'No.' Otherwise you will be condemned" (5:12). We do not need to swear at all because our faith is in the Lordship of Christ. When we are able to do this, we stand in the company of those who walk with the same blessed hope!

Patient grace enables us to endure: "Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy" (5:10-11). By any measure, people these days are fragile. It may be the pace of life or the many voices calling out to us as our life unfolds, but all the same, endurance may seem out of reach. Only when patient grace prevails can we follow the advice of James.

PRAYER AND PATIENT GRACE

James 5:13-20

Prayer is a practice near and dear to patient grace. James writes, "And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (5:15-16a). We practice patient hope by praying. Put another way, prayer is what people with patient hope do in times of stress and disappointment. Why is this so? Prayer names the reality of God in the midst of the storm as a sign of hope. The gospel tells us that God entered history to fight the battle we could never win in order to deliver us. James reminds his readers, "The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective" (5:16b). What makes the prayer of the righteous powerful and

Think About It

Jürgen Moltmann, an important theologian, reminds us that hope is rarely for the victor. Rather, it is for the poor and defeated. Because we know that Jesus is coming again, we can endure whatever challenges we face.

effective? Patient grace. Those who confidently know Christ are powerful to the extent that they lean into the “amazing grace” of God.

Patient grace opens life to the transcendent reality of God. For too many in our time, it is all up to us. I build my life, marriage, career, family, and future based on my rationality and persistence. This is the point where James has a word for us: “Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops” (5:17-18). Elijah was just a man, but he prayed. Patient grace fills our imagination with the possibilities of a world that is always more than we can see.

When suffering comes, we endure by the patient grace of a people made new in Christ. The Holy Spirit empowers those who follow Christ to embody patient grace that endures. Christians face the challenges presented in life, but they do not necessarily need to defeat us. James reminds us that Jesus is coming. There is an end to all of this if we endure in patient grace. At this point, patient grace comes clearly into view.

REFLECT **P**ray, asking God to help you develop patience in the face of suffering.

HENRY SPAULDING, II

May

21

WHO IS THE HOLY SPIRIT?

Jesus promises His presence, both now and forever.

THE WORD

JOHN
14:15-27

If you love me, keep my commands. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— ¹⁷the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. ¹⁸I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. ²¹Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.”

²²Then Judas (not Judas Iscariot) said, “But, Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?”

²³Jesus replied, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. ²⁴Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.

KEY VERSE

²⁵“All this I have spoken while still with you. ²⁶**But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.** ²⁷Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Jesus told the disciples that He was leaving them, and they were stunned and scared. He was going back to heaven to the Father. With Him gone, what were they going to do? What was going to happen to them? How would they thrive without a leader, a master teacher, like Jesus? We will see how He comforted them with three promises.

JESUS PROMISES THE SPIRIT

John 14:15-19

The promise of the Spirit goes back at least 500 years before Jesus to the prophet Ezekiel: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.... And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (36:26-27). This encouraged the Jews of that day that God had not left them forever in exile in Babylon and would relate to them in a deeper way than through human kings, prophets, laws, and regulations. A new heart, a new human spirit, and the Holy Spirit would mean a new day of holy behavior unknown from Adam and Eve until then. Jesus’ promise of the Holy Spirit was the fulfillment of the promise of the Father centuries ago. That’s why Jesus emphasizes obedience and connects it to the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth (John 14:15-17, 21, 23-24). The Holy Spirit’s role is to lead Christians into holy living; this is a major part of the gospel. The good news is that God has saved us to sanctify us!

JESUS PROMISES INTIMACY

John 14:20-24

Another connection Jesus makes is between obedience and love. Those who obey Jesus are those who love Him. Also, to those who love Him, Jesus gives the promise of intimacy: “You will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you” (John 14:20). Ever since Adam and Eve lost true intimacy with God and each other due to their sin, all people (whether knowingly or not) have longed for intimacy with God and with each other. John, the disciple, built

Did You Know?

The word “Advocate” (Greek: *parakletos*; English: “paraklaytos”) can also be translated comforter, counselor, intercessor. Jesus used the adjective, “another,” not to mean “different,” but to assure His disciples that the Holy Spirit is another counselor exactly like Jesus.

on this later in his first epistle: “So that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). With the Holy Spirit resident in each believer, God’s love, joy, peace, friendship, companionship, warnings, forgiveness, strength, assurance, encouragement, and so on all became available to the Christian mind and spirit. This is the natural outflow of the ministry of Jesus, the next step after the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples, brought direct fellowship between God and His people in a way never before.

God created us as relational beings. During the COVID-19 pandemic came protocols of handwashing, mask-wearing, and physical distancing. Staying at home rather than going to the store, restaurant, school, or the office for over a year led to painful feelings of separation. God desires that we be in close relationship with Him. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, we can draw near to God (James 4:8) and experience intimacy with Him (John 15:4-6). God also desires that we exhibit Christlikeness in our relationship with others (family, friends, co-workers, and so on). Through the Holy Spirit true intimacy with others is made possible. What a joy!

JESUS PROMISES TEACHING

John 14:25-27

Jesus is known as the master teacher. He knew His audience and used examples from agriculture and powerful stories to communicate truths about God, humans, and salvation. He taught the multitude about the kingdom of God and ran circles around the self-exalted teachers of Israel, the scribes, and Pharisees. Also, His disciples benefitted by living, eating, and ministering every day for three years with Him. He answered their questions and even questioned them as a teaching method. Imagine how great it would be to hear revelation from Jesus himself any day of the week!

Think About It

The world system cannot accept the Holy Spirit because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. We Christians, however, have the Holy Spirit in us (v.17). God himself makes His home in us!

Even better, a greater opportunity is ours today within us through the Holy Spirit! “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit,...will teach you all things and remind you of everything that I have said to you” (John 14:26). Notice that the role of the Holy Spirit is not to speak His own words (John 14:10, 25), but to remind us of Jesus’ words and lead us into all the truth (John 16:13-15). On top of that, the presence of the Holy Spirit is ours forever (John 14:16)!

One of my favorite public high school English teachers put up on the classroom bulletin board a single phrase: “Everything costs.” That so struck me as a huge truth in so few words. I have never forgotten it from over 40 years ago. A single thought can change our lives. When Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all the truth, we learn from both Spirit-anointed words of Scripture and from the Spirit’s truth received into our very spirit, soul, and body. The Spirit and the Bible always agree, so what a privilege for us to experience Him!

The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is crucial to the Christian life. Through abiding in each Christian through the Holy Spirit, Jesus can do more than if He stayed on earth in human form. Jesus promises 1) His followers holiness through the enablement of the Holy Spirit, 2) Spirit-enabled intimacy between God and the believer, and 3) the truth from God through the Holy Spirit’s teaching.

REFLECT Do you feel Jesus’ presence and hear Him through the Holy Spirit?

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PENTECOST

May
28

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit empowers the believer for holy living and obedient service.

THE WORD

ACTS 2:1-4

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ²Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

17-18

¹⁷“In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.

¹⁸Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

38-39

KEY VERSE

³⁸**Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.** ³⁹The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

10:44-48

⁴⁴While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. ⁴⁶For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, ⁴⁷“Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as

we have.” ⁴⁸So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

ENGAGE THE WORD

After Jesus ascended back to heaven, the disciples and other followers of Jesus obeyed His instructions and waited and prayed together for 10 days. All of sudden, the most amazing experience of the Holy Spirit overwhelmed them and changed them forever. We will make three observations about that day and what we can learn from it.

Acts 2:1-4

The promise of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on all people (Joel 2:28) was realized in the historical event of Pentecost. Ten days earlier, on the day He went back to heaven, Jesus told His disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit, “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:4b-5).

THE EXPERIENCE WAS HISTORIC

In the Old Testament days, God’s Spirit anointed specific leaders for a mission (Moses, Samson, Saul, David, Solomon, the prophets), but it was only the few, not the whole Israelite nation. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit (the Advocate) would be sent (John 16:13-14); not only would the Holy Spirit come, but those who received the Holy Spirit would receive power (Acts 1:8). This promise was fulfilled at Pentecost. From that day until now, God’s Spirit has been poured out on all those (Acts 15:8-9) who will open their hearts by faith to the Holy Spirit’s working in their lives.

At Pentecost the goal of the gospel was accomplished—forgiveness, adoption into the family of God, and receiving the power from on high to enable consistent obedience to God’s Word and mission through the Holy Spirit. Since this historic event, believers have been experiencing God’s transforming work of

Did You Know?

“Pentecost” (Greek, *pente-coste*; English: “petaykostay”) means fiftieth. The Jewish festival which celebrated the Law of God 50 days after the Passover. God sent the Holy Spirit on this day to make whole-hearted, consistent obedience possible.

THE EXPERIENCE WAS COMMUNAL

THE EXPERIENCE WAS PERSONAL

holiness in their lives through the last 2,000 years of church history.

Acts 2:17-18, 38-39

This happened in a community of 120 in the upper room and turned the church into a much larger community. Since all of the group of believers received the Holy Spirit, this points to the new community of God. No one is left out. Further, to celebrate Pentecost (occurring 50 days after Passover), a huge annual number of Jews and Jewish converts had traveled from other towns and nations. The disciples witnessed to these people during this event. Some who did not understand this event accused the disciples of being drunk because they spoke in languages not their own to the crowds.

Then Peter announced to the visitors that they were not drunk. This event was God’s plan all along for the last days, to pour out His Spirit on all people. He quoted the prophet Joel about this event (Acts 2:17-18, 21). Peter’s point was that this was a miracle from God through Jesus, the Messiah: “God has raised this Jesus to life.... Exalted to the right hand of God, He has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you see and hear” (Acts 2:32-33). As a result, about 3,000 people believed in Jesus and joined the new community of God (Acts 2:41)! This is one of the roles of the Holy Spirit, to save and sanctify and bring believers together into the new community!

Acts 10:44-48

After Pentecost, as Peter preached to a large gathering of Gentiles at Cornelius’ house, the Holy Spirit came upon everyone (each person) who heard the message.

Peter explained to the Jerusalem visitors (2:38-39) once they were convicted in their hearts that Jesus was the true Messiah, they needed to “repent and be baptized” in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgive-

Think About It

The word, “baptize” (Greek, *baptizo*, English: “baptidzo”) means to overwhelm or immerse. This means to be totally drowned in the Holy Spirit. This had never happened corporately among God’s people before Pentecost.

ness of their sins. Then they would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The implication is that the crowd consisted of Jews and Jewish converts that needed to be saved. We see that those both in Jerusalem and Caesarea (in the house of Cornelius, Acts 10:44-48) decided to believe individually in Jesus, and the Holy Spirit came upon them all. From this point forward, their lives would never be the same.

At Pentecost God poured His Holy Spirit out on those who were open and receptive to the Holy Spirit’s infilling. Every generation from the early church until today has testified to God’s call to holy living and empowerment by His Spirit to transform their lives into the likeness of Christ. The work of the Holy Spirit transforms us both in a moment and over our lifetime. But this transformational work is not a one-way relationship. Our love and dedication for God moves us to fully surrender our lives to Him—dying out to self-control and self-centeredness.

Romans 12:1-2 says, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” As we daily commit ourselves to God, God through the Holy Spirit transforms us into Christlikeness.

REFLECT Have you experienced the infilling of the Holy Spirit?

JOSEPH AUGELLO

Key Verse Memory

Committing God's Word to memory is an important goal for Christians of every age. To assist you in this worthy objective, we have suggested three key verses for memorization. Select one verse to memorize each month or memorize one verse of your choosing for the quarter.

Key verses for Spring 2023:

James 1:22

James 5:8b

Acts 2:38

COMING NEXT QUARTER

SUMMER 2023

Unit 1: Holy Living

This unit explores what it truly means to live a life growing each day in Christlikeness.

Unit 2: Hard Sayings of the Old Testament

When reading the Old Testament, we sometimes encounter passages that seem confusing. In this unit, we will look closer at issues that challenge our understanding of God and Scripture.

Unit 3: Titus and Philemon

This unit looks at two letters of Paul. We will examine the letter Paul sent Titus, instructing him about faith and conduct. We will also examine the letter Paul sent to Philemon and the members of the church at Colossae.



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