Come Near to God

A Lenten Devotional Journey

by John Wasson

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Come Near to God

A Lenten Devotional Journey

This Devotional was created to accompany a sermon series at Our Savior Lutheran Church in McKinney, Texas during the Lenten season of 2010. The series addressed the practices of worship anchored in six core values, which were used to guide our congregation toward maturity as seekers and worshipers of God. These six core values state that Worship must be:

1. Christ-centered
2. Authentic
3. Passionate
4. Excellent
5. Submissive
6. Sacrifical

Worship is, first and foremost, to be *Christ-centered*. It is important that we deepen our living relationship with Jesus Himself, searching the Scriptures, spending time with Him in prayer, and learning to trust Him more fully in every area of life.

Worship must also be *Authentic.* God desires that we "come just as we are," to quote an old hymn; not putting on an façade, or striving to appear as we hope He desires us, but coming in the most honest state we can.

Our worship must be *Passionate.* We must not take God nor our relationship with Him lightly. He is not interested in occupying the margins of our lives, but rather to be at the center of our hopes, desires, and trust.

We must bring Worship to God with *Excellence.* The bible speaks often of honoring God by bringing Him our very best, as is appropriate to the majesty of His great name. In word and deed, we do all for God's glory.

Worship must be *Submissive.* We must come to God fully aware of our unworthiness of His love apart from Christ's sacrifice for us, and our need to treat all others as more important than ourselves. Worship must also produce in us a willingness to obey Him in all of life.

And finally, Worship is *Sacrificial.* We must we be willing to give up all for the sake of Christ, just as He gave Himself for us. The God of the Universe came to us as a loving Servant who sacrificed Himself for others.

As you embark on this journey of self-examination and quietness in His presence, may you encounter God in a life-transforming way.

John Wasson
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Introduction to Lent

Lent: Come Near to God

Day 1 – Ash Wednesday

"Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up." James 4:8-10 NIV

Lent has come, and we are offered an opportunity to "come near to God" again. As we observe the time of preparation when Jesus "steeled himself for the journey to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51 *The Message*), we can intentionally prepare ourselves for a journey of deeper worship of Christ.

The word "Lent" finds it root in an Anglo-Saxon word for "spring." The 40-day season of Lent is a time in which we seek to leave behind the old life and experience the new. This season has traditionally been a time of prayer, repentance, fasting, and self-denial. It has also been marked in Church history as a time when new believers were taught the fundamentals of the Christian Life, culminating in their Baptism on Easter Sunday.

As we enter Lent in our Ash Wednesday worship service, we will receive on our foreheads the ashes representing our sin and reminding us of the reality of our feeble and frail nature. Recognizing our sinfulness, we have the opportunity to come near to God, confess our sin, and deepen our worship of the risen Lord. As we journey through Lent we will seek to deepen our worship and become more intimately acquainted with the Savior.

Heart questions:

1. **What sins in my own life have caused separation from God?**
2. **What steps can I take to "come closer" to God?**
3. **In which ways may I experience "deeper worship"?**

Prayer: Dear Lord, I open myself to You. I admit my sin, which has caused my separation from You, and for which Jesus died. Forgive my sin, and allow me to come closer to You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Introduction to Lent

The Number 40

Day 2

"At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him." Mark 1:12-13 NIV

The number "40" has special significance throughout the Bible. Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days in special communion with God. For 40 years the Israelites wandered through the wilderness before reaching the Promised Land. And at the very beginning of His earthly ministry, Jesus entered the wilderness for a time of temptation and testing lasting 40 days. Going without food, water, or human companionship, Jesus would be strengthened in His dependence upon His heavenly Father.

Believers have often experienced Lent as a time of testing, of "going without," with the goal of experiencing greater intimacy with God and greater fruitfulness for the kingdom. We have a wonderful opportunity to seek God in a time during which we focus upon Him and allow Him to remove the distractions of life that can keep us from greater intimacy with Him. In doing so we can experience Him in a deeper and richer fashion, and it can mold us and shape us to better "do the good things he planned for us long ago" (Ephesians 2:10b, NLT).

May we embrace this time as we allow God to test us and challenge us to remove distractions in our lives, and to seek a deeper level of dependency upon Him; and may we grow in maturity and experience greater fruitfulness for His kingdom.

Heart questions:

1. **Which things in life distract me from total focus upon God?**
2. **In which things may God test me in these coming weeks?**
3. **In which ways may I depend on Christ more fully through temptation?**

Prayer: Dear God, I open myself to You, and ask that You will remove the distractions of my days. Allow me to more fully focus upon You and Your work in my life. May You strengthen me and prepare me for the good works You have planned for me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Introduction to Lent

Going Without

Day 3

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." Hebrews 12:1-2 NIV

In the early years of the church the practice of fasting was part and parcel with the observance of Lent. Through the centuries this practice has led to a modern observance commonly known as "giving up for Lent." In this practice one offers to abstain from something, particularly something important or commonly enjoyed, in order to loosen its hold upon their lives.

Minimizing distraction and offering to give up those things near and dear to us can be of great value, even if only for a season; and the impact on our lives of "going without" will be increased as we will shift our focus to our relationship with Christ. As an Anglican priest friend has said, "we give up for Lent so that we may 'lean into deeper closeness with Christ' in its absence." Ultimately, Our goal can be to experience a heightened sense of God's presence in our lives.

Above all, we must set aside whatever hinders us, and run to God. The season of Lent offers a wonderful opportunity to see God work in our lives.

Heart questions:

1. **Which things in my life distract me from God?**
2. **Which voices in my experience cover the voice of the Spirit?**
3. **What would deeper intimacy with Christ feel like in my life?**

Prayer: Dear Jesus, there are things in my life that keep me from experiencing Your presence. By Your Spirit reveal them to me, and allow me to turn from them, and run to great intimacy in You. In Your holy name, Amen.

Introduction to Lent

The Worship Journey

Day 4

"And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will accept. When you think of what he has done for you, is this too much to ask? Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is." Romans 12:1-2 NLT

We are each on a lifelong journey of worship. Throughout our days on earth we can experience an ever-deepening relationship with God as we respond to all He has done for us.

In these two verses in Romans, the apostle Paul gives us the reason, the means, and the goal for worship. We worship *because* of all that He has done for us. We worship *by giving* our entire selves, all that we are, to Him. And as we worship, God *transforms* us into new people who will then "know what God wants" us to do.

Throughout these next six weeks we will explore the biblical foundations of worship. True and heartfelt worship of God must be first, **Christ-centered**, then **authentic**, **passionate**, **excellent**, **submissive** to His will, and **sacrificial**. In this time we are invited to seek God fully, with the anticipation that He will transform us and reveal His will for our lives. Step out in this journey of faith.

Heart questions:

1. **How well do I know Jesus Christ, the object of my worship?**
2. **How sincere and authentic is my worship?**
3. **Am I truly passionate about knowing and serving Him?**
4. **Am I committed to excellence, bringing Him my very best?**
5. **Am I willing to submit my life to Him and to His will?**
6. **Do I choose to sacrifice in order to more fully love Him?**

Prayer: Lord, I embark on this Lenten journey of worship in order that I may more fully know, love, and serve You. In Your holy name, Amen.

Christ-Centered Worship

All Things Hold Together

Day 5

"For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities— all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Colossians 1:16-17 ESV

As we continue our Lenten journey, we are mindful that our worship must be first and foremost Christ-centered. Worship that is directed to a vague, mysterious God is not true worship, for it is through Christ alone that we are able to worship the Father. And so we must take in Christ in all His glory, and let that view inform our worship.

Take a moment to look around at the wonder of creation. Gaze upon the majesty of the night sky; consider the beauty of trees, of wildlife, of wind and rain. Take in the sun's heat, and study the intricacy of a single snowflake. God created it all, and Christ was there. Colossians tells us that it was by Him, through Him, and for Him that all things were created, and hold together. The stars and planets keep their courses because of Him.

Consider also the complex and fragile creations we call our bodies: they must be sustained by a constant heartbeat, an exacting temperature. When injured, they strive to heal to their original shape and form. And Christ holds them together as well. He is indeed the "glue" which connects, sustains, empowers, heals, and gives life all around us. He is "All-in-all."

Heart questions:

1. **Do I take time to consider the amazing creation around me, and ponder how it is held together?**
2. **Am I grateful for life, breath, heartbeat, things without which I would cease to exist?**
3. **How does this view of Christ (as the means and object of all creation) change the way I worship Him?**

Prayer: Dear Jesus, You were there when the worlds were created, and it is only by You that they hold together. You give me life and breath, and I am grateful. In Your holy name, Amen.

Christ-Centered Worship

Show Us the Father

Day 6

Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied." Jesus replied, "Philip, don't you even yet know who I am, even after all the time I have been with you? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father! So why are you asking to see him? Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I say are not my own, but my Father who lives in me does his work through me." John 14:8-10 NLT

Jesus had just told His followers that He was the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and that no one could come to the Father except through Him. He finished by saying, "From now on you know him and have seen him." But these words, sadly, did not seem to register with Philip; and, if we're honest with ourselves, at times neither do they with us.

How often are we confused as to what God is truly like? How often do we question His love for us, His guidance in our lives, or His faithfulness in doing what His Word tells us He will do? And yet we need look no further than Jesus, for in Christ "all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9 NIV).

To know God better, to truly worship Him and draw nearer to Him, we must look to Jesus. Read the accounts of His life, study His words, and watch His actions. See how He utilized His time on earth. Observe how He lovingly treated those who were hurting, lost, or distracted. And notice His enduring patience with all of His children, including you and me.

Heart questions:

1. **What can I learn about God from the actions of Jesus?**
2. **What do the words that Jesus said tell me about His Father?**
3. **Have I truly taken time to "intimately acquaint myself" with the Savior?**

Prayer: Dear Father, Your Word tells me that all the fullness of the Godhead is in Your Son Jesus, and that I need look no further than Him to know You more fully. May I devote myself to knowing Jesus in all of life. In His holy Name, Amen.

Christ-Centered Worship

Daily Bread and More

Day 7

Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven. "For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world." Then they said to Him, "Lord, always give us this bread." Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst." John 6:32-35 NASB

What do we truly need to live? In the Lord's Prayer we ask God to "Give us this day, our daily bread." The apostle Paul writes to Timothy, "if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content." (1 Timothy 6:8 ESV). In our daily lives we are reminded that it is in the simplest of God's gifts to us through which we are able to find earthly contentment.

And yet even these cannot sustain us eternally; though we seek to take care of our bodies, in time they will fail us and eventually fade away. We are confronted with our own mortality, and know that we cannot live forever.

But as Jesus said during His temptation in the wilderness, man does not (and cannot) live by bread alone. It is only by partaking of the Bread out of Heaven that we can truly see God and taste life eternal. Our earthly needs are a sign of our incompleteness and loneliness apart from God's life-giving Bread of Life—His Son, Jesus.

Heart questions:

1. **Am I grateful everyday for the necessities of earthly life?**
2. **Do I recognize that, ultimately, this life isn't satisfying, and that I am seeking "something more"?**
3. **Can I trust that Jesus is all I need for this life and life eternal?**

Prayer: Dear God, thank You for meeting my daily needs of hunger, thirst, and rest. But I know that these earthly needs are only a temporary sign of my deepest need to be with You, which can only be met in Your Son Jesus, the Bread of Life. In His name I pray, Amen.

Christ-Centered Worship

The Good Shepherd

Day 8

"I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. The Father loves me because I lay down my life that I may have it back again."
John 10:14-15, 17 NLT

Because most of us are far-removed from the agrarian culture of the Bible, it is easy to miss the references Jesus made to farming in general, and to herding sheep in particular. And yet the Bible is full of references to a lifestyle that, in His day, was known by nearly everyone.

Sheep are commonly understood to be fearful and untrusting. They sleep standing up to avoid the sudden attack of an enemy. They can be stubborn, and often must be prodded to do even what is best for them. So it is a wonder that a shepherd is able to gain the trust of his sheep, and over time allow his voice to represent to them comfort, safety, and health.

Among God's promises to us in Psalm 23 are freedom from want, peace, restoration, guidance, lack of fear, comfort, goodness, mercy, and the promise of dwelling with Him. These are what Jesus the Good Shepherd promises to us. If we hear His voice, we can follow Him, and trust Him for everything; He will not fail us.

Heart questions:

1. **Am I able to trust Jesus fully for everything I need—safety, comfort, protection, and peace?**
2. **Do I go to Him first in prayer when I am fearful, anxious, apprehensive, or frightened?**
3. **Can I seek Him and learn to trust Him more fully for each day of my future?**

Prayer: Dear Jesus, I admit that I don't always trust You to protect me and keep me safe. I admit that I am fearful at times. Lord, I want to trust in You more, and seek peace and safety only in You. In Your holy name I pray, Amen.

Christ-Centered Worship

Friend of Sinners

Day 9

"Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."
John 15:13-15 NIV

God created man for intimate fellowship with Himself. But over time this relationship had degenerated into fearful rule-following. The religious leaders in Jesus' day sought to separate themselves from sin and from sinners. Since they could not admit their own sin, theirs was a religion of isolation and exclusion.

Into this culture comes Jesus, not only proclaiming Himself equal to the God they worshiped, but actually eating with and befriending sinners! Recoiling at this subversive view of a holy God reaching out to fallen man, the leaders rejected Jesus' offer of love, mercy, and salvation.

Jesus befriended sinners. It was sinners whom He came to save, and it is only self-admitted sinners who may approach Him. We must be honest about our sin and disobedience, but in this honesty we may boldly approach the throne of grace, and embrace our Savior without fear, as in the words of the old hymn:

> *Can we find a friend so faithful*
> *who will all our sorrows share?*
> *Jesus knows our every weakness*
> *take it to the Lord in prayer.*

Heart questions:

1. **How often do I consider Jesus as friend?**
2. **How did Jesus relate to His friends in the Bible?**
3. **What promises did He make to them? And to me?**

Prayer: Dear Jesus, You have promised to be my friend, and to reach out in love to me. I accept Your gift of love, and I choose to obey You more fully in everything. In Your name I pray, Amen.

Christ-Centered Worship

Behold the Lamb

Day 10

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" John 1:29 NIV

John the Baptist lived a life marked by God from before birth. He would always be different than others, finding himself drawn to a lifestyle of solitude and seeking God. And at the proper time, he would utter these prophetic words, "Behold, the Lamb of God." For John knew in His heart that the promise of God, the deliverance of man from sin, would take place through the sacrifice of a perfect and spotless lamb, and that he was now seeing that Lamb before him—Jesus Himself.

The Old Testament practice of sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins is one we'll address in later devotionals. But as we explore Jesus as both the object and means of our worship, we must understand that it is because He did choose to sacrifice His own life for His friends that "God raised him to the heights of heaven" (Philippians 2:8b-9 NLT), and that this last choice in His life now gives us boldness to come to the Father through Him. It is through the cross of death that Jesus now promises us life.

Jesus is our Way, our Daily Bread, our Shepherd, our Friend, and our Sacrifice. He is All-in-all, and we may truly wonder at His greatness and majesty before us. And as we approach Easter may we glory not only in the cross, but also in the life in His resurrection.

Heart questions:

1. **What does Jesus' sacrifice reveal to me about the depth of my sin?**
2. **What emotion does the cross stir in me?**
3. **How does my view of Jesus' death influence my desire to live for Him more intently?**

Prayer: Dear Jesus, I pray that throughout Lent I may more deeply ponder your sacrifice on the cross, and that it will create in me a desire to obey You more fully. In Your holy name, Amen.

Authentic Worship

We Are Fully Known

Day 11

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD. Psalm 139:1-4 NIV

We were created for worship, to be in an intimate relationship with God and to know Him even as we are known by Him. Because of our sin, our awareness of Him has become clouded, while He is fully aware of all that is in us. He knows everything we think, say, and do. To God, each of us is an "open book."

And yet, even knowing this, we still make futile attempts to hide ourselves from God. In those times when we do not believe in His love for us, or trust in His goodness and faithfulness, we allow distance to creep in to our relationship. But the distance is all on our side—God always knows us fully.

God's desire is that we willingly allow Him into our deepest thoughts, come to him in all honesty and sincerity, and allow ourselves to be known by Him. And He is faithful; He will never leave us or forsake us due to anything we could do, but rather is completely gracious and longsuffering. He desires intimacy with us.

Heart questions:

1. **How often do I realize that God knows my every thought, even before I have it?**
2. **How does knowing that make me feel? What light does it shed on my daily life, my choices, and my plans?**
3. **What steps can I take to more fully be aware of His presence, and to open my heart to Him?**

Prayer: Dear God, as the psalmist says, You know me intimately. There is nothing I can hide from You. Lord, please draw me to Yourself and lead me to willingly open my heart to You more each day. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Authentic Worship

Sin, the Enemy of Worship

Day 12

The LORD accepted Abel and his offering, but he did not accept Cain and his offering. This made Cain very angry and dejected. "Why are you so angry?" the LORD asked him. "Why do you look so dejected? You will be accepted if you respond in the right way. But if you refuse to respond correctly, then watch out! Sin is waiting to attack and destroy you, and you must subdue it."
Genesis 4:4a-7 NLT

In the beginning man was created to worship God and have unhindered fellowship with Him. But when sin entered the world, it broke the relationship with God, and impaired man's opportunity to worship. Sin is the enemy of worship.

When Cain approached God, God's response was not the one for which Cain had hoped. As a result, he grew angry, and withdrew himself from God. God, in His love and care for Cain, offered him the opportunity to restore fellowship and communion, warning that sin was nearby, threatening to take control of Cain.

In those times when God seems far away, or somehow unloving or disapproving of our worship, sin is waiting to attack and destroy us. It is important that we recognize the danger of broken fellowship with God, and choose to "respond in the right way" by drawing near to Him in obedience. It is our choice to worship or to withdraw.

Heart questions:

1. **Have I felt distance from God, and withdrawn myself from Him?**
2. **When that has happened, how did I feel? What did I do as a result?**
3. **Do I truly believe that God will always welcome me in worship, even in those times when I feel distant from Him?**

Prayer: Dear Father, I do not always come to You in worship, but at times I allow distance to come between us and threaten our intimacy. Lord, protect me from the sin of separation and allow me to worship You more fully. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Authentic Worship

In the Presence of God's Holiness

Day 13

I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." Isaiah 6:1a, 5 NASB

The prophet Isaiah saw a holy God in all His glory, surrounded by angels who called out "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty." And in this one instant Isaiah became painfully aware of his own sin, and the sin of his nation Israel. He saw himself as "a man of unclean lips."

At times we can see ourselves as more righteous and holy than we actually are. We can "go through all the motions" of living the Christian life, praying to God, confessing our faith in Him, and striving to obey Him in all things. But at certain times God allows us a larger glimpse of His holiness and majesty; it is then, in those moments of spiritual clarity, that we will see ourselves in a more revealing light.

True, authentic worship in the presence of a holy God can make us uncomfortable; it can call us to honesty concerning our true nature and our tendency toward self-destruction. But in God's presence we also find love, forgiveness and healing. In our honest worship God restores us, and fits us for the kingdom work He has created us to do.

Heart questions:

1. **Have I ever had an "Isaiah 6" moment where I felt God's penetrating holiness and saw my own sin clearly?**
2. **How did I respond?**
3. **Am I willing to worship a holy God, knowing that I may not like what God's light of holiness shows me about myself?**

Prayer: Dear Holy God, I desire to be in Your presence. But Your radiant light can cause me to see myself for who I truly am. Lord, I desire to grow in my worship; please move my heart to seek You fully and completely, allowing You to heal me and cause me to grow. In the holy name of Jesus I pray, Amen.

Authentic Worship

God Seeks True Worshipers

Day 14

Jesus replied, "Believe me, the time is coming when it will no longer matter whether you worship the Father here or in Jerusalem…the time is coming and is already here when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for anyone who will worship him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." John 4:21-24 NLT

This story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well is rich in references to authentic worship. In a brief meeting He engages the woman in conversation, showing His knowledge of her life. Feeling a bit vulnerable, she sidesteps His questions and instead engages Him in a theological discussion about worship practices. But Jesus, cutting through the superficial and delving to the heart of the matter, tells her that the Father seeks those who will worship Him *in spirit and truth.*

This story can resonate with us in many ways. First (as in the Isaiah 6 passage) we see that being in God's presence forces an honest look at ourselves. We can also admit our tendency to engage in discussions about the mechanics of worship (where, when, by what means). Most significantly we learn that God seeks truth-loving worshipers who honestly desire to know Him for who He is, and are willing to leave behind their preconceived notions about worship.

Unlike Cain in our Genesis passage, the Samaritan woman did choose to worship, and began to spread the good news about Jesus.

Heart questions:

1. **Do I allow myself to get caught up in the details of worship practice, while missing the Savior standing before me?**
2. **Am I willing to allow God to know me fully? Or do I try to change the subject to avoid transparency with Him?**
3. **What does it mean to worship "in sprit and truth"?**

Prayer: Dear Jesus, please keep me from being caught up in the details of religious practice; allow me to seek You honestly, and to worship You in spirit and in truth. In Your great name I pray, Amen.

Authentic Worship

Better Than Others?

Day 15

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God." Luke 18:10-14 NIV

Two men enter the temple: one, an acknowledged sinner, the other a teacher of the Law of God, a "righteous" man, who parades his good works before the Lord, then thanks God that he is not like other men (particularly the sinner next to Him). By contrast, the sinner doesn't feel worthy even to look upward, but asks only for God's mercy. Jesus tells His followers that it will be the sinner, not the righteous man, who will be justified by God. Jesus continues by saying that "he who exalts himself will be humbled."

Comparisons are dangerous, and we must avoid at all costs the temptation to look down on those who do not appear as spiritual as ourselves. God looks on the heart, not the outward appearance (1 Samuel 16:7). And as we approach God in authentic worship, we must be honest about the relative value of our good works before God: we are brought near to Him by His mercy and forgiveness, not our own works.

An authentic worshiper will not compare himself to others, but will look only to Jesus for mercy and redemption; this too is worshiping in spirit and truth.

Heart questions:

1. **Do I compare myself spiritually to others?**
2. **Do I do make such comparisons even while worshiping?**
3. **Do I confuse my own "good works" with God's grace and forgiveness?**

Prayer: Dear Lord, I pray that You will keep me humble, and not allow spiritual pride to creep into my life—and especially into my worship. May I seek You from a humble heart. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Authentic Worship

Authentic Worship Speaks

Day 16

But if some unbelieving outsiders walk in on a service where people are speaking out God's truth, the plain words will bring them up against the truth and probe their hearts. Before you know it, they're going to be on their faces before God, recognizing that God is among you. 1 Corinthians 14:24-25 The Message

True worship of God is authentic. In order to worship God in spirit and truth, we must come to Him in with honesty about ourselves and our sinful state, and recognize His holiness and majesty. And when we do, God lifts us and restores us.

But authentic worship can speak to outside observers as well. The apostle Paul writes to the Corinthian believers that their authentic, truthful worship would have an effect on those unbelievers in their midst. In various translations of verse 24 they will be "convicted and called to account," "convinced by all that they are a sinner," and "condemned" by what they say. What great responsibility is laid upon our corporate, public expressions of worship!

Worship can be a powerful force of evangelism, used by God to move the heart of the unrepentant sinner toward conviction and reconciliation in Christ. Though worship is directed at God alone, it can also have a profound effect on us, and on those around us, and call them closer to the Savior.

Heart questions:

1. **Do I take seriously the call God's Word places upon our times of corporate worship?**
2. **Do I fully realize the profound effect that authentic worship can have on an unbelieving observer?**
3. **Do we strive to "speak out God's truth" in all aspects of our expressions of corporate worship?**

Prayer: Dear God, I realize that our times of worship do not go unwatched by the surrounding world, and that You can use worship to move the hearts of those You are seeking. Please deepen our expressions of worship to greater honesty and truth. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Passionate Worship

Worship in All Seasons

Day 17

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods. Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.
Psalm 95:1-3,6 NIV

The Psalms are a virtual storehouse of worship expression. The emotions expressed range from exceeding joy to heartfelt sorrow, from passionate devotion to mournful cries for deliverance. The Psalms provide a pattern for a life of worship that is grounded in God and who He is, regardless of the situations in which we find ourselves.

Psalm 95 describes just a few of the ways in which we can honor God. We are instructed to sing to the Lord, and to shout joyfully. (When was the last time You shouted out to God in a worship service?) We are to come with thanksgiving, and to sing Psalms of praise to Him. We are also instructed to worship and bow down, and to kneel before the LORD our Maker in reverent submission.

Worship is rooted and grounded as we pause and think on all that God has done for us. We can look back on our lives and see His hand over us (even in those times we did not feel it). We can see His plan having unfolded over the months and years. We are encouraged when we come to God in the joyful times as well as the sorrowful, for He is our God, and He desires our presence regardless of our state of mind or heart.

Heart questions:

1. **Do I feel free to approach God, no matter what state I'm in?**
2. **Am I more likely to approach Him when I feel things are going well, or when I feel more need for His help and care?**
3. **What can I learn from the Psalms regarding my freedom to approach God with every emotion?**

Prayer: Dear God, teach me to come to You with everything that is in me, knowing that You are my God and that You desire my worship at all times, no matter how or what I feel. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Passionate Worship

Misplaced Passion

Day 18

A man named Simon had been a sorcerer there for many years, claiming to be someone great. When Simon saw that the Holy Spirit was given when the apostles placed their hands upon people's heads, he offered money to buy this power. "Let me have this power, too," he exclaimed, "so that when I lay my hands on people, they will receive the Holy Spirit!" But Peter replied, "May your money perish with you for thinking God's gift can be bought!" Acts 8:9, 18-20 NLT

In Acts chapter 8 we read the story of Simon the sorcerer, a man many referred to as "the great power of God" (Acts 8:10 NASB). But when he witnesses the miraculous works Peter and John were performing by the power of God, Simon decides that these would be nice abilities to add to his arsenal, and offers money to acquire them. But Peter rebukes him, telling him to turn from his wickedness and pray to the Lord.

It is tempting to fall into the trap of desiring the benefits of worship without having a heart for the true God Himself. We can come to worship and be swept up in the passionate emotion of the music, the warmth of friendship and fellowship, or the excitement of change and growth in our lives, and yet miss the very presence of the Lord.

As wonderful as these benefits are, they are only by-products of the true desired goal of worship—a passionate and real encounter with the Creator of the universe. We must always seek Him with all our hearts, and not settle merely for the benefits of that encounter. We must be passionate for Him alone, and not just for what our relationship with Him brings us.

Heart questions:

1. **What brings me to worship of God? What am I looking for?**
2. **How do I know I have encountered the living God?**
3. **Have I sought the gifts and benefits of worship, while failing to actually encounter God Himself?**

Prayer: Dear Father, forgive me for those times that I come into worship with a passion only for the benefits of knowing You. Instead, please purify my passion for You alone, that I might seek You with all my heart. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Passionate Worship

Unbridled Joy

Day 19

David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom into the city of David with gladness. And David was dancing before the LORD with all his might, and David was wearing a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel were bringing up the ark of the LORD with shouting and the sound of the trumpet. 2 Samuel 6:12b, 14-15 NASB

King David had just retaken Jerusalem and defeated the Philistines, and now was carrying the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem. In this great celebration, the king begins to dance; and not simply dance, but *with all his might.* David did not hide his great joy and his love for the God of Israel.

David's celebration was not appreciated by everyone; his wife Michal was "filled with contempt" (v. 16) for him, and rebuked him, sarcastically remarking how "distinguished" he looked dancing before the servants. But David would not be restrained, informing her that he was dancing before the Lord.

It is easy to be overly concerned with our appearance in worship. Though we may be moved to great emotion and conviction, we can often hold back in order to act in a more dignified, "distinguished" manner. In those times it is critical to remember that our worship is for God alone; we sing, dance, shout and celebrate for an "audience of One." He is worthy of every expression we can bring; He is the source and the object of all our joy.

Heart questions:

1. **Have I ever felt incredible joy to be in the presence of God in worship? Has that joy spilled out in visible celebration?**
2. **Have I concerned myself too much with what others may think of me?**
3. **Do I believe that God desires my honest and heartfelt expressions of worship?**

Prayer: Dear Holy God, I do not want to hold back; You are worthy of my best and most passionate praise and worship, and I desire to bring it to You. Teach me to think only of You as I worship, for it is You alone that I seek. In Your holy name I pray, Amen.

Passionate Worship

Relentless Pursuit

Day 20

And there was a woman in the crowd who had had a hemorrhage for twelve years. She had heard about Jesus, so she came up behind him through the crowd and touched the fringe of his robe. For she thought to herself, "If I can just touch his clothing, I will be healed." Mark 5:25, 27-28 NLT

The stories of miraculous healing by the Messiah were circulating throughout the Holy Land. Wherever Jesus traveled, crowds pressed in on Him, in hopes of a healing touch for themselves and for others. Into the throng enters a woman who has been plagued by a disease for twelve years, one which no physician's skill nor amount of money could heal.

She doesn't demand an audience with Jesus, but simply desires a touch of His robe, fully believing in His power to heal her and make her whole. And a complete healing rewards her faith. Though marginalized by society and by her infirmity, she breaks through and encounters Jesus in worship.

The Bible is filled with stories of people who traveled great distances, suffered hardship and opposition, and experienced pain, suffering and discouragement, all in the attempt to catch a glimpse, feel a touch, or hear a word from the Son of God. Their lives are characterized by relentless pursuit of the Holy God, and in their pursuit they find the object of their love and worship, and are changed by the encounter.

Heart questions:

1. **Is it relatively "easy" for me to worship God?**
2. **Do I take the accessibility of Jesus for granted?**
3. **How would my life experience be different if I had no hope, no chance of healing, or no promise of restoration, except by an encounter with Jesus? How would I order my life differently?**

Prayer: Dear Jesus, I admit that I take for granted the ease and convenience with which I can approach You. Dear Lord, create in me a passion to seek You will everything that is in me, for You alone are the source of life, health, and hope. In Your great name, Amen.

Passionate Worship

Who Will You Worship?

Day 21

Because you have not served the LORD your God with joy and enthusiasm for the abundant benefits you have received, you will serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you. You will be left hungry, thirsty, naked, and lacking in everything. They will oppress you harshly until you are destroyed.
Deuteronomy 28:47-48a NLT

In the latter days of Israel's preparation for their journey into the Promised Land, God is reminding them that He alone is their God. He first lists the many blessings to come over their lives through obedience, including blessings over their cities, their fields, their children, and their crops. He promises them victory over their enemies, and He tells them that they will be known by all the nations as His holy people.

At this point God once again instructs them concerning the consequences of worshiping anyone other than the true God. He admonishes them, warning that if they do not worship Him with joy and enthusiasm, they will serve their enemies, and ultimately be left with nothing.

Since we are created for worship, our choice is not *whether* we will worship, but only *whom* we will worship. If we do not worship the holy God, than we will worship someone, or something, else. Choosing to worship another will not fulfill us, but leave us empty, lacking in all things.

Heart questions:

1. **Am I aware when I am not worshiping God joyfully for the abundance in my life?**
2. **Which things in my life competes with God for my worship?**
3. **Which "enemies" do I risk serving by not worshiping and serving the living God?**

Prayer: Dear Lord, You are the true source of every benefit in my life. May I always worship You and serve You with joyful enthusiasm, and never desire to serve another. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Passionate Worship

Lukewarm Worship

Day 22

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. Revelation 3:15-16, 19-20 NIV

In this letter to the church at Laodicea, God is clear that lack of passion on their part will lead to their destruction. Later in the passage, in a verse commonly misapplied to evangelism and belief, God tells us that is when we truly and passionately desire Him that he will come in and share a meal with us, fellowship with us, and build a relationship that grows in intimacy and familiarity.

God desires our worship. But He is not interested in lukewarm, noncommittal expressions. When we worship out of habit, or with rote repetition of sayings and phrases that come not from a heart but from old patterns, we do not honor God. He does not receive our words or phrases, our prayers, or our songs unless they are the honest expression of a deep, heartfelt passion to know Him more and to serve Him in everything.

This is the worship God seeks—authentic and passionate expression of love for a Savior who gave everything for us. May we respond by giving to Him everything from the deepest place in our hearts.

Heart questions:

1. **Have I ever caught myself "going through the motions" of worship? What did I hope to accomplish when that happened?**
2. **Why do I sometimes feel no passion or intensity for God?**
3. **How do I respond when I realize that I am being neither hot nor cold for God?**

Prayer: Dear God, forgive me for those times in which I don't bring my deepest passion for You. Forgive me for lifeless and meaningless repetition of words and songs. Light the fire of passionate pursuit for You in all of my life. In the name of Jesus and for His sake, Amen.

Excellent Worship

Worthy of God's Excellence

Day 23

And now because of my devotion to the Temple of my God, I am giving all of my own private treasures of gold and silver to help in the construction. This is in addition to the building materials I have already collected for his holy Temple. 1 Chronicles 29:3 NLT

We have noted earlier in this devotional journey that worship begins with and focuses upon the greatness of God Himself, rooted and grounded in His Son Jesus. And we need look no further than to King David, the man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22), to see how that focus manifests itself. Late in his life God has revealed to David he will not build God's temple, but rather his son Solomon. Still, David, desiring to build the house of his God, gives the very best of his personal wealth in order to adequately prepare for its construction.

David led worship not only in word and song, but also by example. He knew that everything he possessed came from God, and that God owned it all; it was his joy and delight to give back to God from his very best. David also knew that as king and leader over Israel his words and commands would be put to the test by the people of Israel, so he set an example. David's true desire was that the finished temple would not only allow the nation to experience the presence of God's holiness, but also would be a source of light for the watching world. David's offering of excellence honored the excellence of his God.

Heart questions:

1. **Can it be said of me that I truly seek after God's own heart?**
2. **Am I fully aware of, and grateful for, everything that God alone has given to me?**
3. **Does the excellence of my offering match my gratitude?**

Prayer: Dear God, everything I have comes from You. You alone are worthy of my praise and adoration. May I always give You the very best of what I have, and of what I am. In Your holy name I pray, Amen.

Excellent Worship

Our Very Best

Day 24

As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. "I tell you the truth," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on." Luke 21:1-4 NIV

A noted contemporary worship leader has defined excellence as "doing the best with whatever we have." Two things are implicit here: first, that we do our very best (and nothing less), and second, that we do it with whatever God has given us (not with what we wish we had, or see that others have). Thus is the playing field leveled, and it is not those with much who most honor God, but rather those who give all of what they have.

The widow steps up and gives her offering alongside the weightier gifts of the wealthy. And Jesus commends her, stating that she has truly given "the most." What is significant is that this occurs within the context of Jesus' condemnation of those who, desiring to appear religious, "devour widows' houses" in their attempts at godliness. Yet the lowly widow offers God her best out of her meager possessions.

Rather than focus upon what she didn't have, she looked at her own life and gave to God in a manner worthy of His calling, knowing that He is trustworthy and worthy of her greatest worship. And for this Jesus honors her.

Heart questions:

1. **Do I offer God out of my surplus, "what I won't miss"? Or do I truly offer Him all that I have, even that which I feel I need?**
2. **Giving everything we have to live on is costly—am I willing to trust God for the necessities of life after doing so?**
3. **Do I concern myself with my appearance of spirituality before others, or am I most concerned with honoring God?**

Prayer: Dear Father, it is easy to neglect giving You the very best of what I have and what I am, while going through the motions of religious fervor. Please convict me, and call me to deeper worship and trust. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

Excellent Worship

Preparing for Excellence in Worship

Day 25

David also ordered the Levite leaders to appoint a choir of Levites who were singers and musicians to sing joyful songs to the accompaniment of lyres, harps, and cymbals. Kenaniah, the head Levite, was chosen as the choir leader because of his skill. 1 Chronicles 15:16, 22 NLT

What kind of corporate worship does God desire from His people? Do we merely come with whatever is at hand, without regard to preparation? Or is there a way in which we might deepen our times of worship in community? In this passage David appointed a worship team to lead the people in songs of joy to God. He named Kenaniah, the "music director" (vs 22, The Message), skilled at instruction, to lead this team.

Worship is more comprehensive than mere singing; yet the Bible has much to say concerning our public praise and worship. Much has been written in our day about the place for skill and giftedness in worship leading. The Bible does address calling and gifting of each person relative to our serving God, and from this passage it would seem that God desired excellence in singing and worship. To that end He gifted and called Kenaniah and the Levites to lead.

We must do all we can to make our praise excellent, for God is worthy. As we are led in worship by those God has gifted, we should each take the time and effort to deepen our own worship of God; and as we lead others in worship, we must constantly prepare ourselves and our communities to bring excellence in each offering of praise, in accordance with God's worth and majesty.

Heart questions:

1. **Do I take my expressions of worship casually? Or do I take the time to prepare for corporate worship?**
2. **How can I better prepare myself for worship?**
3. **How does God desire to deepen my own offering of praise?**

Prayer: Dear Holy God, I desire to bring You my very best. Whether I lead or am led, please move me to be prepared to bring You my very best. To Your glory I pray, Amen.

Excellent Worship

The Cost of True Worship

Day 26

Araunah said, "Why has my lord the king come to his servant?" And David said, "To buy the threshing floor from you, in order to build an altar to the LORD, that the plague may be held back from the people." Araunah said to David, "Let my lord the king take and offer up what is good in his sight." "No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price, for I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God which cost me nothing." 2 Chronicles 21:21-22a, 24 NASB

A plague has overtaken the nation of Israel, sent by God as a judgment for the sin of David. When he is convicted of his sin, he turns to God, and is instructed to erect an altar to God in order to avert the plague. David offers to purchase the threshing floor of Araunah, a Jebusite, but Araunah instead offers it to David for free. David's response reveals for us a key truth concerning worship—that David would not give offerings to God which cost him nothing.

The theme of "cost" is highlighted repeatedly in any study of worship, and is appropriate as we consider the ultimate cost of God's own Son. It is a truth we will return to again as we approach Holy Week. But as we look at this passage, we see the character of a true worshiper: though David has sinned and caused God's wrath, he returns to worship, and chooses once again to bring God an offering of value. David sees the connection between the cost of his offering and the worth of God Almighty.

Heart questions:

1. **What does my worship "cost" me?**
2. **Do I take shortcuts in worship, giving less than my best of my time, my gifts, and my affections for God?**
3. **When I sin and return to God, am I content to merely reconnect and then move on, or do I fully appreciate the worth of the One to whom I return?**

Prayer: Dear God, just as David refused to bring an offering that was easily obtained, may I not take an easy course in coming to You, but rather desire to bring only the best offering, as is fitting for Your glory. In Your great name, Amen.

Excellent Worship

The Excellence of Love

Day 27

And now I will show you the most excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:2 NIV

Paul has described the gifts of the Spirit in the context of a spiritually healthy community for the church at Corinth. And in the midst of his discussion he interjects this phrase: "the most excellent way." While discussing prophecy, healing, and miracles, Paul shows the Corinthian church that a life of worship is most fully demonstrated by godly love for others.

We will fall short if we apply ourselves only to practices of outward worship while neglecting our inner life. It was for this that Jesus continually rebuked the Pharisees—choosing religious expression over true hearts of worship. Our words, our songs, and our prayers will accomplish little if those expressions don't work their way outward into the rest of life.

Excellence in our worship, to honor an excellent God, must by nature manifest itself in the "most excellent way"—an outpouring of our love of God to others. This is worship lived out at the highest level: offering ourselves to God, and then living out that worship in daily life.

Heart questions:

1. **Do I focus upon the more visible acts of worship while neglecting the way of love?**
2. **What would my treatment of others tell them about the God I worship?**
3. **What would I most like to see God change in my inner life?**

Prayer: Dear God, all of my whole life belongs to You, and I know that I am called to live out the life of love toward those whom You love. May I honor You with all of my life and lead others to worship by my love and sacrifice for them in Your name. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

Excellent Worship

The Best You Can Be

Day 28

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. 1 Peter 2:9 NASB

As the apostle Peter instructs believers in holy living he calls us all to remember the source, the object, and the reason for our worship: that God has called us out of darkness into marvelous light. Because of this, there is a high calling on our lives, a great standard of faith and practice that speaks of God to the world. In this passage we are admonished to keep our conduct among outsiders honorable, that they too may glorify God in the last day.

The word translated here as "excellencies" is rich in meaning; in various translations it is offered as "virtues" or "goodness." Our calling is to proclaim the virtues of God, and we do it by holy and excellent living. Our lives are not our own, and they ultimately point others not to ourselves, but to the God we worship. For this reason we must live lives of virtue and goodness, and just as our love for others in the 1 Corinthians 13 passage will affect the lives of those we meet, our conduct in all of life will tell them about the excellencies of a God that they too can know, love and worship. We are called to be "the best we can be" so that we may speak the truth of God's excellence.

Heart questions:

1. **When I worship God, do I meditate upon His excellence, goodness, and virtues?**
2. **Does my worship show my gratitude for being brought by God from darkness into light?**
3. **Do I desire to live a life of virtue and goodness that God can use to draw others to Himself in worship?**

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You for bringing me out of darkness and into Your light. For this I worship You with all gratitude. I pray that my life will reflect Your goodness, and that You can use my life to draw others into worship. In Your excellent name I pray, Amen.

Submissive Worship

Truly Submissive

Day 29

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." Matthew 16:24 NASB

As our Lenten Worship journey continues along to road to the cross of Christ, we are reminded that one core element in true, biblical worship is that of submissiveness. The willingness to submit to Christ's lordship is at the root of a right relationship with Him; conversely, it is precisely a lack of this crucial element that leads us in the opposite direction: focus upon self, unwillingness to follow the commands of Christ, and lack of trust in the One who made us and who redeems us.

In the Matthew passage above, Jesus had commended Peter for his verbal confession that He was indeed "the Christ, the Son of Man." But when the teaching turns to Christ's impending sacrifice and death upon the cross, Peter is quick to challenge Him, and is rebuked, as Jesus tells him that he is not setting his mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.

One goal in worship is to align ourselves with God's intention, His plan, and His will for our lives; and then to dedicate ourselves to being used by Him to make them a reality in the world around us. By submitting ourselves to Him we are truly "setting our minds on the things of God," and He will not disappoint us.

Heart questions:

1. **Do I ever simply tell God that I desire to know and do His will?**
2. **When I realize that God's plan for my life doesn't seem to match my own desires, how do I respond?**
3. **What walls do I put up that keep me from submitting my will to that of Christ?**

Prayer: Dear Jesus, You are the way, the truth, and the life, and I desire to know and obey You in all things. May I humbly serve You more completely each day. In Your great name I pray, Amen.

Submissive Worship

Grace for the Humble

Day 30

All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.
1 Peter 5:5a-6 NIV

If a submissive will is a core ingredient in true worship, than humility is at the heart of submission. One who possesses such humility is a blessing to everyone he meets, for he does not push his own agenda, but seeks the best for others. In the book of Romans Paul describes this attitude as sober judgment—not "thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought" (Romans 12:3 ESV).

In the family of God we are called to constantly put others ahead of ourselves, and desire God's best for them. God calls us to a high standard, saying that we should be "clothed" in humility—that we should "wear" a submissive and willing spirit as though it were our apparel, so that when others look at us they see our love and care for them.

As Christ, the head of the church, sets the example for humble servanthood, we are called to the same virtue—to seek the best in others, and for others, for God's glory. When we do that, we are accomplishing God's will, and as He promises He will reward us with grace "in due time." We don't need to jockey for control or advantage over others—He is in complete control of the universe, and He invites us into His plans.

Heart questions:

1. **In what ways do I struggle with humility toward others?**
2. **How do I respond when I feel that another has "gotten ahead" while I have gone unnoticed?**
3. **In what areas may God most want to teach me humility and submissiveness—to His will, and to the desires of others?**

Prayer: Dear God, the struggle for control, notoriety, and advantage are all too real in my own experience of life. I pray that You will work in my heart, and build in me a desire to see others succeed. May I trust You more completely with my own life and destiny, for Your hand is mighty. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Submissive Worship

A Lifestyle of Submission

Day 31

But the man fell down before the king and begged him, 'Oh, sir, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.' Then the king was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt. But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment. Matthew 18:26-28 NLT

In this story we are told that a man is called to account before the king for his debts; having no means to pay, he does the right thing, falling down in submission to the will of the king and imploring him for patience. The king responds in pity, and forgives the man everything.

Unfortunately the man's experience of humble petition ceases the moment he is out from under the obligation of his debt, and he immediately demands repayment from those who owe him, acting harshly and without mercy. His submission only lasted while he was in need, but did not extend to others. The man's humility was shallow and did not extend past his own experience.

True submission to God will extend out into every area of our lives. Just as we submit ourselves to Him and place ourselves at His mercy, He requires that we do the same when we find ourselves in the position of power over others. As the man in the passage did not return mercy for mercy, his king called him back, and sentenced him until he could repay his debt.

Heart questions:

1. **How has God shown me mercy for my debt of sin? What response does that mercy produce in me?**
2. **When I find others at my mercy, how do I respond?**
3. **What does my treatment of others tell them about God's treatment of me?**

Prayer: Dear Holy God, You have shown me such great mercy; but I confess that I have not always responded in mercy toward others. May your mercy move me toward humble and merciful treatment of others, for Your name's sake. By Your Spirit, Amen.

Submissive Worship

Worship and Humility

Day 32

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Eph 5:19-21 NIV

In the fifth chapter of his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul instructs us in the ways of showing love to others. He asks us to be imitators of God, and to walk in love as Christ loved us, and gave Himself up for us. Once again the great submission and humility of Christ is our example and motivation for holy and humble living.

Paul continues with some principles of corporate worship—singing songs, making melodies in our hearts, and being thankful. And in the midst of teaching us about worship, he calls us to submit ourselves to others. As in our previous passage, Christ's example, God's mercy, and our gratitude move us to show those same qualities to others; by doing so we enhance and strengthen our expressions of worship with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Submitting to others is a key element in true worship. Our worship does not honor God if we immediately turn and demand our due in life, or trample the needs of others. True worshipers never forget the example and sacrifice of the Savior, but instead allow it to inform and enliven every aspect of their treatment of others. May we do so as well, for this too is worshiping in spirit and truth, and is the kind of worship that God deserves.

Heart questions:

1. **When I think of Christ's life, sacrifice, and death, what is my response?**
2. **When I worship with others, am I aware of their needs and wants, and am I willing to be used by God to help them?**
3. **How would my life change if I were able to truly submit to my brothers and sisters in Christ? How would God be honored?**

Prayer: Dear Jesus, teach me to submit myself to others as You did. May my love for others reveal Your great love for me and for them, and may they see You more clearly. In Your name and for Your glory, Amen.

Submissive Worship

Strength Through Humility

Day 33

He gives us more and more strength to stand against such evil desires. As the Scriptures say, "God sets himself against the proud, but he shows favor to the humble." So humble yourselves before God. Resist the Devil, and he will flee from you. Draw close to God, and God will draw close to you. When you bow down before the Lord and admit your dependence on him, he will lift you up and give you honor. James 4:6-8a, 10 NLT

When we are threatened with the temptations of life, our first response is often to fight "strength with strength." But as is often the case in holy living, our response should instead be to submit to God, as He opposes the show of strength, but rewards the admission of weakness and need of mercy.

As did Peter in an earlier passage, James quotes Proverbs to emphasize that it is only through humble submission that we are drawn near to God, and by which He draws near to us. God desires to hear the words, "I need You, Lord." And as in the passage in 1st Peter, He rewards us with grace: grace to stand against sin, grace to grow in God's favor, and grace to live the abundant life Jesus has promised to us.

Each day offers us a new opportunity to draw near to God, and admit our dependence upon Him. May this be the first thing we do—to bow down in worship, dependence, and honor of the One for whom we were created to worship.

Heart questions:

1. **When I feel the onslaught of temptation, to whom do I turn?**
2. **What does it mean for me to "draw near to God"?**
3. **How does being honored by God differ from being honored by men?**

Prayer: Dear God, You alone can protect me from the evil one. Your Word tells me that You are opposed to strength, but reward humility. May I submit to You and allow You to lift me up in life. In Your holy name, I pray, Amen.

Submissive Worship

The Supreme Example

Day 34

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Philippians 2:4-8 NIV

In this passage we see the Bible's truest description of humility—that the very Jesus we worship gives His own life for us, that we may be reconciled to His Father. As in other passages, Paul instructs us by way of Christ's example, in order to produce in us the fruit of righteousness that gives God glory.

In all of Christ's teaching on submission and humility, the thread of the story leading Him to Calvary gives weight and substance to His words. He does not ask us to do anything He has not already done; He does not require of us humility that he is unwilling to take on Himself.

The ultimate contrast in the biblical narrative is fulfilled in the verses that follow: that God will exalt Christ, and that every person from every period in history will one day bow down in worship, declaring Him Lord of all. This is why we were created, and is the goal of life on earth: to give Jesus the honor He deserves.

Heart questions:

1. **Do I notice the contrast between the glory Jesus could have clung to, and the humble state into which He emptied Himself?**
2. **Knowing the depths to which Christ descended in order to claim me, what is my response to Paul's call to have the same attitude in myself?**
3. **Am I truly willing to place others ahead of myself?**

Prayer: Heavenly Father, Jesus gave everything for me. May I have this same attitude in myself, that I may bring glory to Your name and honor Jesus' great sacrifice. In His name I pray, Amen.

Sacrificial Worship

The Costly Sacrifice

Day 35

During supper, a woman came in with a beautiful jar of expensive perfume and poured it over his head. The disciples were indignant when they saw this. "What a waste of money," they said. "She could have sold it for a fortune and given the money to the poor." But Jesus replied, "Why berate her for doing such a good thing to me?" Matthew 26:7-10 NLT

In this final week of our Lenten devotional, the cross of Calvary looms larger than ever, and we are drawn to the final, and perhaps a most fundamental ingredient in true Biblical worship: sacrifice. As we look to the coming sacrifice of Christ, we see stories of the lives of those in Scripture who counted all as loss in order to truly enter into worship.

In this Matthew passage, we see a woman offer a costly sacrifice to Jesus. Without hesitation she pours it on His head. Those with Jesus are indignant, grumbling about the cost of what was lost. But the Lord reminds them that this act is done out of love for Him, calling it "such a good thing." In addition, He credits her act as an offering of preparation for His coming death and burial.

It is tempting to cling to those things for which we have great fondness, and yet compared to a true encounter with God Himself, they will quickly fade into insignificance. This woman understood worship, and was aware of the greatness of the gift who sat before her. Her sacrifice was appropriate to the gift of God; and Jesus honors her before those with Him.

Heart questions:

1. **To which things may I be unduly attached?**
2. **Would I consider sacrificing those things for a true encounter with Jesus?**
3. **How do I value Jesus amidst the things of "value" in my life?**

Prayer: Dear Jesus, I confess that I can show great attachment to the things in my life, drawn to their earthly value. May I grow in my appreciation for the value of knowing You. In Your holy name, Amen.

Sacrificial Worship

You Lack One Thing

Day 36

A certain ruler asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him,* "You know the commandments.*" "All these I have kept since I was a boy," he said. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth. Luke 18:18, 20a, 21-23 NIV

The parable of the rich ruler appears in three of the gospels. And in each telling the story is clear: a man of great means who has sought to live a life of faith and devotion is told that he lacks "one thing." This one thing, however, proves to be more than he can bear, and he departs with great sadness.

It is a reminder to us all that our obedience to the commandments, even a life centered upon God Himself, will not lead us to true worship when the accomplishments and fortunes of our lives are too costly to sacrifice in the name of total devotion to Christ. Jesus invited this man personally to follow Him, and promised a reward in heaven, but it wasn't enough. In reality, it dismantled everything that he had lived for in his entire life. At the point of decision, he truly went away empty-handed.

Though every blessing is ultimately from God, we must nonetheless be faithful at the point of Christ's calling, when He says to us, "will you give up what you have so that you may have Me fully?" It is a significant choice, and one not asked of everyone equally; yet it can be the "one thing" that prevents us from coming to Him completely.

Heart questions:

1. **What kind of life have I lived before God?**
2. **Were Jesus to speak directly to me as He did the rich ruler, how would I respond?**
3. **Am I willing to offer up the good things in my life for a more abundant relationship with Christ?**

Prayer: Dear God, I desire to worship You completely. Please show me where the things I have accumulated might prevent me from truly encountering You in worship. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Sacrificial Worship

Our God Saves

Day 37

"O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. But even if he doesn't, Your Majesty can be sure that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up." Daniel 3:15b-18 NLT

This Old Testament passage offers another perspective on the sacrificial element of Biblical worship. The prophet Daniel and his good friends from the tribe of Judah have been elevated to positions of authority within the Babylonian empire, but this promotion will come at a cost: bowing to a god other than the one true God of Israel. When they refuse, they are threatened with certain death.

What is noteworthy about their response is not only that they believed fully that God could save them from death, but that even if God wouldn't save them they would still honor Him with uncompromising worship. The story has a dramatic ending with God delivering them, but their test of devotion stands: they chose to worship God even in the absence of earthly deliverance.

The Bible tells us of many who offered their lives as sacrifice to God, dying "in faith but without receiving the promises" (Hebrews 11:13a NASB). Their sacrificial faith provides great inspiration for us when we are discouraged in the absence of earthly reward or assurance. May our communion with God grow, so that we can truly worship Him without the promise of reward.

Heart questions:

1. **What statement does the faith of Daniel's friends make to those who opposed them?**
2. **If God called me to sacrifice my life without promise of reward, how might I respond?**
3. **Have I considered that such a call could happen in my own life?**

Prayer: Dear Holy God, I have faith in You, and yet I know that for the most part that faith has not been tested. If I am called to sacrifice as those in the Bible, may I be found faithful. In Your holy name, Amen.

Sacrificial Worship

I Consider Everything a Loss

Day 38 – Maundy Thursday

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more. But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. Philippians 3:4a, 7-8 NLT

The transformation of the life of the apostle Paul, from unyielding Pharisee to sacrificial worshiper of Jesus, is nothing short of remarkable. From early in his life Paul was destined for religious and social prominence. Through his heritage and training he was groomed for greatness of reputation both socially and spiritually. But after a singular encounter with Jesus, he now considers "everything a loss" compared to true worship.

Throughout Paul's life we see a man gradually stripped of all this world values—he goes from wealth to poverty, from comfort to isolation and danger, from the respect of others to their scorn and punishment. Paul truly offered his life to be "poured out like a drink offering to complete the sacrifice" (Phil. 2:17 NLT) for the faith of those for whom he took spiritual responsibility. His sacrifice was an act of worship, not only for his own life but for his followers as well.

This is true sacrifice in Paul's mind—to be willing to count all as loss in exchange for intimate relationship with Jesus Himself. And Paul's life stood as a testament to this truth.

Heart questions:

1. **What things in my life and heritage could cause me pride?**
2. **What does my life tell others about their need for Christ in their lives?**
3. **Am I willing to sacrifice that others may worship Him more fully?**

Prayer: Dear Jesus, we are inspired by Paul's life, and see the great cost of all that was dear to him exchanged for the surpassing value of knowing You. May we see our lives in this way—that You are worth more than all that we have been, are, and will become. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Sacrificial Worship

Your Only Son

Day 39 – Good Friday

After all this, God tested Abraham. God said, "Abraham!" "Yes?" answered Abraham. "I'm listening." He said, "Take your dear son Isaac whom you love and go to the land of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I'll point out to you." Genesis 22:1-2 The Message

The sacrificial element of worship is introduced early in Scripture, in this story in the life of Abraham. That God would require Abraham to sacrifice his only son to God is amazing; it is even more so that Abraham complies so readily.

Though having lived a lifetime without offspring, Abraham has been promised by God that he will be the father of a multitude, an entire nation of God-fearing people. And at an old age God's promise comes true through the birth of his son Isaac. But then God asks Abraham to do the one thing that would threaten the fulfillment of that promise: to sacrifice the son through whom those descendants were to come.

This passage is particularly appropriate on this Good Friday, when we will see God give His own Son, the Son whom He loves and in whom He is well-pleased, as a sacrificial offering for us. God does not ask Abraham for something that God Himself is not also willing to give. In this way Abraham is given a glimpse of the heart of the God he worships, and Abraham's sacrificial worship is a sober reminder to us all of the ultimate sacrifice of the Father on our behalf.

Heart questions:

1. **What must Abraham have felt when God asked this of him?**
2. **If God were to ask this of me, how would I respond?**
3. **Have I fully pondered the great sacrifice of the God of the universe on my behalf? How does it affect my worship?**

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, You offered the deepest and dearest sacrifice of all—that of Your only Son. I cannot comprehend such a sacrifice, but I worship You in gratitude and wonder. In the name of Your holy Son, given for me, Amen.

Sacrificial Worship

The Dark Night

Day 40

Joseph bought a long sheet of linen cloth, and taking Jesus' body down from the cross, he wrapped it in the cloth and laid it in a tomb that had been carved out of the rock. Then he rolled a stone in front of the entrance. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where Jesus' body was laid. The next evening, when the Sabbath ended, Mary Magdalene and Salome and Mary the mother of James went out and purchased burial spices to put on Jesus' body.
Mark 15:46-16:1 NLT

And so our Lenten journey comes to its conclusion, the last dark night of the Passion of Christ. Jesus' disciples, His family, and His admirers have seen His remarkable life end in a display of horrible violence. They have seen their hopes dashed upon the rocks of Roman execution, and their fears are now fully realized in the knowledge that Jesus, having uttered His last, is gone.

It can be enlightening for us when reading Scripture to "put ourselves into the story." Here we can try to imagine what Jesus' followers might have experienced on this darkest of nights. What were their fears? Their regrets? Did they think back on all the times of great joy and love with their Savior and Friend? Or were they painfully reminded of those times when they didn't understand, appreciate, or value the gift of His presence in their lives? Would they lose hope completely? Would sadness and grief cripple any effort to continue living their lives? And what of His promises—could they continue to believe in the abundant life He promised them?

We stand at the entrance to the tomb. We see the soldiers stand guard. We are crushed under the weight of realization that our friend is gone. We sense the finality of the events of that dreadful day. The dark of night covers us, and we are beaten, defeated, and left with nothing.

Nothing, save the morning.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, we wait. We have seen Your Son die. We know He has been buried, and the tomb closed. We pray that You will not forget us, but deliver us in our time of greatest need and weakest faith. And so we wait on You. Amen.