

to:lent@wtandw.org.uk

when:2016-02-10 06:02 GMT

## Day 1

### Genesis 3:1-13

The snake was sneakier than any of the other wild animals that the LORD God had made. One day it came to the woman and asked, Did God tell you not to eat fruit from any tree in the garden?

The woman answered, God said we could eat fruit from any tree in the garden, except the one in the middle. He told us not to eat fruit from that tree or even to touch it. If we do, we will die.

No, you won't! the snake replied. God understands what will happen on the day you eat fruit from that tree. You will see what you have done, and you will know the difference between right and wrong, just as God does.

The woman stared at the fruit. It looked beautiful and tasty. She wanted the wisdom that it would give her, and she ate some of the fruit. Her husband was there with her, so she gave some to him, and he ate it too.

Right away they saw what they had done, and they realized they were naked. Then they sewed fig leaves together to make something to cover themselves.

Late in the afternoon a breeze began to blow, and the man and woman heard the LORD God walking in the garden. They were frightened and hid behind some trees. The LORD called out to the man and asked, Where are you? The man answered, I was naked, and when I heard you walking through the garden, I was frightened and hid!

How did you know you were naked? God asked. Did you eat any fruit from that tree in the middle of the garden? It was the woman you put here with me, the man said. She gave me some of the fruit, and I ate it. The LORD God then asked the woman, What have you done? The snake tricked me, she answered. And I ate some of that fruit.

The study of God's mercy starts at the beginning, of course. Adam and Eve were given a beautiful place to live. If they'd kept their eyes on God everything would have been fine. But it didn't turn out like that. The sneaky snake was in the garden. It slithered up to Eve and we all know what happened next.

Now God's command seemed so simple, so black and white – eat anything you like, but don't eat of the tree in the middle of the garden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When the snake tempted Eve (and Adam, too) she gave in to her desire to be equal with God.

God ousts the man and the woman from the Garden. No mercy. No second chance for them. They have blown it.

**Did God know that the snake was in the garden?**

**Did Adam and Eve really have a chance against the snake?**

**Did God actually show no mercy at all?**

***Father God, when I look at my human nature I see the DNA of Adam and Eve, but in this created body there is a reflection of your image. Thank you for the Second Adam. Amen.***

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## Day 2

### Exodus 33:19

The LORD answered: All right. I am the LORD, and I show mercy and kindness to anyone I choose.

Adam and Eve's punishment was harsh. Did you feel that they might have been given a second chance? We would like God to think the way we think – it makes it easier for us, then, and saves us from having to struggle with the mysterious ways of God. I expect we may do that more often than we care to imagine.

This attitude is often expressed by someone struggling to believe in God (or struggling not to) who asks why a God of love should allow children to suffer, or a beloved aunt to die in pain, or horrific wars to start.

God puts it simply in the verse above. He is the dispenser of mercy, and He alone. He will choose to have mercy on whom He chooses. He reserves this right. I struggle with it, and I'm sure you do. But we have to go along with it.

**What are the things about God that you find hard to accept?**

**Have you brought them before God to ask Him yourself?**

***Father God, if you were human it'd all be so much simpler – you'd think like us and we could agree with you. But you are God and not man, the Holy One in our midst. Your ways are not our ways. Teach me your ways, O Lord. Amen.***

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## Day 3

### Genesis 18:19-33

The LORD said, Abraham, I have heard that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah are doing all kinds of evil things. Now I am going down to see for myself if those people really are that bad. If they aren't, I want to know about it.

The [destroying angels] turned and started toward Sodom. But the LORD stayed with Abraham, who asked, LORD, when you destroy the evil people, are you also going to destroy those who are good? Wouldn't you spare the city if there are only fifty good people in it? You surely wouldn't let them be killed when you destroy the evil ones. You are the judge of all the earth, and you do what is right.

The LORD replied, If I find fifty good people in Sodom, I will save the city to keep them from being killed. Abraham answered, I am nothing more than the dust of the earth. Please forgive me, LORD, for daring to speak to you like this. But suppose there are only forty-five good people in Sodom. Would you still wipe out the whole city? If I find forty-five good people, the LORD replied, I won't destroy the city.

Abraham dares to put a case before God. He does not present his case with any righteousness on his part. He simply asks God whether he would still carry out his intentions if he found fifty good people in that city.

Abraham may be moved by compassion for others to seek the staying of God's hand, but at no point does Abraham tell God what is right or wrong or what God should or should not do— Abraham does not have that authority.

Would you dare do what Abraham did next? Read on in the chapter to find out what that was

**If you had the power to completely destroy Raqqa (Daesh HQ), would you do it?**

**Did Abraham persuade God, or was God allowing (or waiting for) Abraham to voice his thoughts?**

***Father God, I am amazed at the Abraham's humanity and your readiness to be persuaded. Lord, in your mercy, hear again the prayers I bring to you for this world. In Jesus' name. Amen.***

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## Day 4

### Deuteronomy 4:25-32

One day the LORD said to Moses, Cut two flat stones like the first ones I made, and I will write on them the same commandments that were on the two you broke. Be ready tomorrow morning to come up Mount Sinai and meet me at the top.

No one is to come with you or to be on the mountain at all. Don't even let the sheep and cattle graze at the foot of the mountain. So Moses cut two flat stones like the first ones, and early the next morning he carried them to the top of Mount Sinai, just as the LORD had commanded.

The LORD God came down in a cloud and stood beside Moses there on the mountain. God spoke his holy name, the LORD. Then he passed in front of Moses and called out, I am the LORD God. I am merciful and very patient with my people. I show great love, and I can be trusted. I keep my promises to my people forever, but I also punish anyone who sins. When people sin, I punish them and their children, and also their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Moses quickly bowed down to the ground and worshipped the LORD.

Did you check out the rest of Genesis 18 yesterday? Would you have dared do what Abraham did?

God is preparing Moses to meet with him on the mountain. Holy God is not prepared to have any other living creature set foot on that mountain when he meets with Moses – there'll be no mercy for them, that's for sure.

Moses takes two heavy stone tablets to the top of the mountain. It may have taken a day or two to get up there but when he arrives God is there and He pronounces his name (compare with Exodus 34), which is not like any name we know. We may know of names with descriptions such as Ethelred the Unready, Ming the Merciless or Good Queen Bess, but God's name is a description of who He is. He is God the LORD, the merciful and long-suffering, the loving and trustworthy, and much, much more. Did you notice how high God places his quality of mercy in the list?

Do not be confused by that part of God's name which covers mercy, and that part which covers punishment for sin. Is God's name (and therefore who God is) a contradiction? How can a merciful God also be one who punishes sin? Well, you can't show mercy if you can't punish. God reserves his right to punish sin but He is also open to the one who cries out for mercy.

**Do you believe God to be trustworthy?**

**Can we pray for God to be merciful to those who are not "good"?**

***Father God, I confess to calling you by short and rather familiar names. Today I want to come before you, the LORD God, the merciful and patient, loving and trustworthy, true to your promises and harsh on sin and sinfulness. On my pride, my disobedience, my faithlessness, my indifference to others and falsity, Lord, have mercy. Amen.***

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## Day 5

### Deuteronomy 4:25-32

Soon you will cross the Jordan River and settle down in the land. Then in the years to come, you will have children, and they will give you grandchildren.

After many years, you might lose your sense of right and wrong and make idols, even though the LORD your God hates them. So I am giving you fair warning today, and I call the earth and the sky as witnesses.

If you ever make idols, the LORD will be angry, and you won't have long to live, because the LORD will let you be wiped out. Only a few of you will survive, and the LORD will force you to leave the land and will scatter you among the nations. There you will have to worship gods made of wood and stone, and these are nothing but idols that can't see or hear or eat or smell.

In all of your troubles, you may finally decide that you want to worship only the LORD. And if you turn back to him and obey him completely, he will again be your God. The LORD your God will have mercy--he won't destroy you or desert you. The LORD will remember his promise, and he will keep the agreement he made with your ancestors.

When the LORD your God brought you out of Egypt, you saw how he fought for you and showed his great power by performing terrifying miracles. You became his people, and at Mount Sinai you heard him talking to you out of fiery flames. And yet you are still alive! Has anything like this ever happened since the time God created humans? No matter where you go or who you ask, you will get the same answer. No one has ever heard of another god even trying to do such things as the LORD your God has done for you.

The Israelites are about to leave the wilderness after forty years of wandering. Forty years stands for a generation and more of Israelites. Many had been born in the wilderness. Quite a few who came out of Egypt had not survived to this point – the wilderness was their final resting place.

God knows what his people are like. He warns them that they may slip away from His laws and fall prey to foreign nations. They will lose their privilege to worship and then, one day, they will long for God once more and he will have mercy on them and once more become their God.

This narrative is seen time and time again in the story of God's people. God has mercy on his people. The Israelites got what they deserved, and God could have abandoned them completely. But God showed mercy – he reviewed their sentence and chose leniency.

**If God knew that people might fall away why didn't he stop them?**

**Was God operating a survival of the fittest policy in thinning down the nation?**

***Father God, there is none like you. Call my heart to worship you day by day by day. Amen.***

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## Day 6

### Joshua 6:15-21

On the seventh day, the army got up at daybreak. They marched slowly around Jericho the same as they had done for the past six days, except on this day they went around seven times. Then the priests blew the trumpets, and Joshua yelled: Get ready to shout! The LORD will let you capture this town. But you must destroy it and everything in it, to show that it now belongs to the LORD.

...

The silver and gold and everything made of bronze and iron belong to the LORD and must be put in his treasury. Be careful to follow these instructions, because if you see something you want and take it, the LORD will destroy Israel. And it will be all your fault.

The priests blew their trumpets again, and the soldiers shouted as loud as they could. The walls of Jericho fell flat. Then the soldiers rushed up the hill, went straight into the town, and captured it. They killed everyone, men and women, young and old, everyone except Rahab and the others in her house. They even killed every cow, sheep, and donkey.

...

The Israelites took the silver and gold and the things made of bronze and iron and put them with the rest of the treasure that was kept at the Lord's house. Finally, they set fire to Jericho and everything in it.

We probably feel a little uncomfortable when God appears to encourage bloody acts. When we hear of the blowing up of ancient world heritage sites like Palmyra we might now feel a little queasy at Joshua having fit the battle of Jericho.

God is clear. Jericho and everything in belongs to God. God has promised the whole land to his people Israel. Jericho's time is up. They are to be obliterated, In some instances God commands that the enemy is obliterated, right down to the last donkey.

This is hard stuff to comprehend, let alone to stomach.

But God owns it and God is claiming it. The treasure of Jericho will go to the Lord's house and the city will be razed. No mercy. Some have offered answers to the question of why God allowed this to happen, but they tend to assume that the dwellers in Jericho must have been bad, and so they deserved to be annihilated. It's possible, but we're not told that explicitly.

If we read further, we discover that one of the Israelites stole a fine robe from the plunder. Check out his fate.

#### Can we ignore Old Testament content like the above?

***Father God, your command to Joshua is harsh to my sensibilities. But my ways and my sense of right are not necessarily your ways and your sense of right. Help me better to understand your ways and righteousness. Amen.***

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## Day 7

### Deuteronomy 13:12-18

After the LORD your God gives you towns to live in, you may hear a rumour about one of the towns. You may hear that some worthless people have talked everyone there into worshipping other gods, even though these gods had never done anything for them.

You must carefully find out if the rumour is true. Then if the people of that town have actually done such a disgusting thing in your own country, you must take your swords and kill every one of them, and their livestock too.

Gather all the possessions of the people who lived there, and pile them up in the marketplace, without keeping anything for yourself. Set the pile and the whole town on fire, and don't ever rebuild the town.

The whole town will be a sacrifice to the LORD your God. Then he won't be angry any more, and he will have mercy on you and make you successful, just as he promised your ancestors. That's why you must do what the LORD your God says is right. I am giving you his laws and teachings today, and you must obey them.

God is a jealous God, and he reserves his right. "©God. All rights reserved." If in his nation there is a cancer that could spread and infect others then that cancer must be removed. Again we may find this difficult when some extremist religions carry out ethnic and/or religious cleansing.

God's command, however, is more strict than terrorising. If the nation is to be kept pure then impurities must be removed. Our humane and liberal thinking can be commendable in many cases, but we have thought shallow thoughts if we do not feel along with God the anger, the disgust, the sting of arrogant disobedience brought by those of his people who decide that other Gods are more powerful and loving than Him.

A cancer has to be removed completely lest it spread. It is true that livestock, possessions or clothes do not have worship choices, but we may remind ourselves that everything we have belongs to God and we are called to give to Him of what He has given us.

God cannot be merciful where he is not worshipped.

**Is there room for manoeuvre on that last sentence?**

**How might our lives become tainted by untrue worship?**

***Father God, I want to worship you and you alone. Shine your light on that in me which looks to false gods and idols. Amen.***

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## Day 8

### 2 Samuel 16:5-13

David was near the town of Bahurim when a man came out and started cursing him. The man was Shimei the son of Gera, and he was one of Saul's distant relatives. He threw stones at David, at his soldiers, and at everyone else, including the bodyguards who walked on each side of David.

Shimei was yelling at David, Get out of here, you murderer! You good-for-nothing, the LORD is paying you back for killing so many in Saul's family. You stole his kingdom, but now the LORD has given it to your son Absalom. You're a murderer, and that's why you're in such big trouble!

David is king but his son Absalom is plotting to take his throne. Absalom has managed to get Israel on his side against David. David escapes. Shimei comes from Saul's family, and he appears intent on seeing his clan on the throne. It's a complex story. Notwithstanding that, Shimei is bang out of order and has attacked the king of Israel.

So, if you were King David, would you have Shimei killed?

Abishai said, Your Majesty, this man is as useless as a dead dog! He shouldn't be allowed to curse you. Let me go over and chop off his head. David replied, What will I ever do with you and your brother Joab? If Shimei is cursing me because the LORD has told him to, then who are you to tell him to stop?

Then David said to Abishai and all his soldiers: My own son is trying to kill me! Why shouldn't this man from the tribe of Benjamin want me dead even more? Let him curse all he wants. Maybe the LORD did tell him to curse me. But if the LORD hears these curses and sees the trouble I'm in, maybe he will have pity on me instead. David and the others went on down the road. Shimei went along the hillside by the road, cursing and throwing rocks and dirt at them.

David first places the incident in the context of other threats, then at Shimei's motives and wonders whether God set Shimei up. It's amazing that David even thinks this because he does not appear to have done anything wrong. Yet he is more than aware that his position as king is by divine appointment alone. If God wishes to curse David then David will humbly accept the curse. If God wishes to honour David then David will humbly accept the honour. He understands about God's mercy and he exercises something similar towards Shimei. We'll see how the story develops tomorrow and we will come back to David to fill in some background later.

**Why did David have such family problems?**

**Has God ever blighted you with an accuser? Why (not)?**

***Father God, it's possible that you could or have sent others to teach, rebuke or challenge me. Let me see it that context only. Amen.***

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## Day 9

### 2 Samuel 19:15-23

David .. had gone as far as the Jordan River when he met the people of Judah. They had gathered at Gilgal and had come to help him cross the river.

Shimei the son of Gera was there with them. He had hurried from Bahurim to meet David. Shimei was from the tribe of Benjamin, and a thousand others from Benjamin had come with him. Ziba, the chief servant of Saul's family, also came to the Jordan River. He and his fifteen sons and twenty servants waded across to meet David. Then they brought David's family and servants back across the river, and they did everything he wanted them to do.

Shimei crossed the Jordan River and bowed down in front of David. He said, Your Majesty, I beg you not to punish me! Please, forget what I did when you were leaving Jerusalem. Don't even think about it. I know I was wrong. That's why I wanted to be the first one from the northern tribes to meet you.

But Abishai shouted, You should be killed for cursing the LORD's chosen king! David said, Abishai, what will I ever do with you and your brother Joab? Is it your job to tell me who has done wrong? I've been made king of all Israel today, and no one will be put to death! Then David promised Shimei that he would not be killed.

Absalom is defeated and dies. David once more is established in the eyes of Israel as king. Shimei is in the frying pan. Would you have had him arrested once you got back to Jerusalem, and dealt with?

Shimei puts himself in the advance party of greeters and he wades across the river Jordan to where David is. "You murderer!" is now "Your majesty". Shimei's plea is to ask David for mercy, for David has the right to punish him. Abishai the accuser is still clucking at David, but he is squashed and Shimei is shown mercy.

Shimei's plea is that David would forget what had happened. Too many Christians love to remember the sins perpetrated against them under the false impression that they can claim perpetual grievance toward the perpetrator and/or pity from everyone else. We obviously can't mindfully forget things in such a way that we can no longer remember them – it's a bit of a paradox – but we can discount them and lay them aside when we consider the person. The saddest thing to hear from someone who has been hurt by another is "I'll never forgive that person", as that attitude stokes the grief.

**Do you hide like Adam and Eve or do you present yourself like Shimei?**

**Who needs your forgiveness?**

***Father God, you refuse to remember past sins that you have forgiven – they are no longer part of my account with you. I want to keep my account short and debit-free, so give me the heart of Shimei. Amen.***

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## Day 10

### 1 Kings 21:17-29

The LORD said to Elijah the prophet, King Ahab of Israel is in Naboth's vineyard right now, taking it over. Go tell him that I say, 'Ahab, you murdered Naboth and took his property. And so, in the very spot where dogs licked up Naboth's blood, they will lick up your blood.'

When Elijah found him, Ahab said, So, my enemy, you found me at last. Elijah answered: Yes, I did! Ahab, you have managed to do everything the LORD hates. Now you will be punished. You and every man and boy in your family will die, whether slave or free. Your whole family will be wiped out, just like the families of King Jeroboam and King Baasha.

You've made the LORD very angry by sinning and causing the Israelites to sin. And as for Jezebel, dogs will eat her body there in Jezreel. Dogs will also eat the bodies of your relatives who die in town, and vultures will eat the bodies of those who die in the country.

When Ahab heard this, he tore his clothes and wore sackcloth day and night. He was depressed and refused to eat.

Some time later, the LORD said, Elijah, do you see how sorry Ahab is for what he did? I won't punish his family while he is still alive. I'll wait until his son is king.

No one was more determined than Ahab to disobey the LORD. And Jezebel encouraged him. Worst of all, he had worshipped idols, just as the Amorites had done before the LORD forced them out of the land and gave it to Israel.

Ahab and Jezebel were just the most awful people. Why did God not obliterate them straight away? Elijah would have had an easier time *and* be free from depression (the depths of 1 Kings 19 after the heights of 1 Kings 18 – go on - read it!).

Elijah had many tussles with Ahab, but this time Ahab is seriously affected by the message God brings him through Elijah. Elijah pronounces God's punishment on him and his wife, but God's punishment is deferred. God is slow to anger, and even angered will not always carry out his punishment immediately. The same went for the Ninevites - remember the eponymous Jonah? (always wanted to use that word!) but more than any other it was God's own people who angered God. Prophet after prophet issued the same warning and time and time again God's people ignored them. Just how long will God put up with this?

Ahab's punishment for the killing the vineyard owner was extensive. It would affect his whole family, his household, his line. His wife will die a scandalous death involving dirty dogs and unclean vultures. And Ahab will get it, too.

Ahab realises he has it coming, or he realises how his sin really does affect his wider family, perhaps including some who were not that bad at all (unlikely, though, as they would most likely have taken part themselves in the abominable practices of Baal worship).

God suspends the sentence for the sake of Ahab. Ahab gets mercy. However, the sentence still stands on everyone else. Ahab soon drops the sackcloth, however.

**Why did God put up with King Ahab for so long (22 years)?**

**Should a full set of sackcloth robes hang in readiness in every church vestry?**

**Is ashing on Ash Wednesday a substitute for sackcloth?**

***Father God, you are patient and long-suffering with me. May I never take this as licence to sin. Amen.***

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## Day 11

### 1 Chronicles 21:1-17

Satan decided to cause trouble for Israel by making David think it was a good idea to find out how many people there were in Israel and Judah. David told Joab and the army commanders, Count everyone in Israel, from the town of Beersheba in the south all the way north to Dan. Then I will know how many people can serve in my army.

...[His commander Joab tries unsuccessfully to counsel against the action]

David's order to count the people made God angry, and he punished Israel. David prayed, I am your servant. But what I did was stupid and terribly wrong. Please forgive me.

The LORD said to Gad, one of David's prophets, Tell David that I will punish him in one of three ways. But he will have to choose which one it will be. Gad went to David and told him: You must choose how the LORD will punish you: Will there be three years when the land won't grow enough food for its people? Or will your enemies constantly defeat you for three months? Or will the LORD send a horrible disease to strike your land for three days? Think about it and decide, because I have to give your answer to God who sent me.

David was miserable and said, It's a terrible choice to make! But the LORD is kind, and I'd rather have him punish me than for anyone else to do it.

So the LORD sent a horrible disease on Israel, and seventy thousand Israelites died. Then he sent an angel to destroy the city of Jerusalem. But just as the angel was about to do that, the LORD felt sorry for all the suffering he had caused the people, and he told the angel, Stop! They have suffered enough.

... David saw the LORD's angel in the air, holding a sword over Jerusalem. He and the leaders of Israel, who were all wearing sackcloth, bowed with their faces to the ground, and David prayed, It's my fault! I sinned by ordering the people to be counted. They have done nothing wrong--they are innocent sheep.

LORD God, please punish me and my family. Don't let the disease wipe out your people.

David gets above himself and thinks it a good idea to plan ahead for army numbers. David's commander tries to persuade David against the idea. God abhors the project and gives David a choice of punishments. They are all horrible, and I suppose part of the punishment is to have to choose one.

It's important to understand that our God is not fickle or capricious – it is hard to believe this, given that what's happened so far sounds a bit arbitrary. Perhaps we should begin to understand how certain actions might insult God. David has taken upon himself the planning of his army resources. What use is that if God is not on their side? How many times will David have already seen that his men won impossible battles when God was in charge?

God is very, very angry that David has done this. Satan knew it was bad, but David fell for the ruse and saw fit to take God's provision into his own hands. Wise people warned him against this action, but David's determination was not diffused.

God's punishment as selected by David is carried out. Just as a child caught smoking might be given the whole packet to smoke (not recommended these days) David is taught a lesson by being given the responsibility of selecting the punishment. How do you like it now, David?

God carries out the punishment but relents after carrying some of it out because he is grieved by the pain that the people have suffered. His mercy comes from a heart of compassion that will not (at least yet) let Jerusalem be destroyed.

**Is there anything I like to control that I have taken away from God?**

**Could our Church ever be at fault with God for presumptuous behaviour?**

**Could the Church today do with prophets?**

***Father God, I return to you all that is yours, and I humbly place myself under the shadow of your wings for your protection, guidance and provision. Amen.***

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## Day 12

### Ezra 9:1-7

Later the Jewish leaders came to me and said: Many Israelites, including priests and Levites, are living just like the people around them. They are even guilty of some of the horrible sins of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. Some Israelite men have married foreign women and have let their sons do the same thing. Our own officials and leaders were the first to commit this disgusting sin, and now God's holy people are mixed with foreigners.

This news made me so angry that I ripped my clothes and tore hair from my head and beard. Then I just sat in shock until time for the evening sacrifice. Many of our people were greatly concerned and gathered around me, because the God of Israel had warned us to stay away from foreigners. At the time of the evening sacrifice, I was still sitting there in sorrow with my clothes all torn.

So I got down on my knees, then lifted my arms, and prayed: I am much too ashamed to face you, LORD God. Our sins and our guilt have swept over us like a flood that reaches up to the heavens. Since the time of our ancestors, all of us have sinned. That's why we, our kings, and our priests have often been defeated by other kings. They have killed some of us and made slaves of others; they have taken our possessions and made us ashamed, just as we are today.

Ezra is horrified that even priests of God have been intermarrying with women of the surrounding nations. Of course in today's Church we welcome all nations. Ezra is not acting as a racist as we understand it today - God's people were not just some ethnic group that He picked out of a hat. This was the nation into whom he would eventually send his Son. Ezra might not know all that, but he knew that what the priests and others were doing was wrong, and that such behaviour would bring God's anger pouring down on them.

Ezra is innocent, but it is he who tears his clothes and expresses his shame on what "we" have done. He realises that the success of the nation is directly connected to the purity of the nation. If men who have been set aside to maintain the true rituals and worship of God have been marrying women from other nations who follow detestable practices and have themselves fallen into those practices themselves, then this is trouble looming.

Ezra prays a prayer of penitence.

**Do you share the blame when your Church gets things wrong?**

**Do you whine about your Church or do you pray for your Church?**

***Father God, like Ezra I want to be aware that you desire and demand pure worship and holy living from all those who proclaim Christ. Let me never be satisfied with anything less. Amen.***

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## Day 13

### Ezra 9:8-15

But for now, LORD God, you have shown great kindness to us. You made us truly happy by letting some of us settle in this sacred place and by helping us in our time of slavery. We are slaves, but you have never turned your back on us.

You love us, and because of you, the kings of Persia have helped us. It's as though you have given us new life! You let us rebuild your temple and live safely in Judah and Jerusalem.

Our God, what can we say now? Even after all this, we have disobeyed the commands that were given to us by your servants the prophets. They said the land you are giving us is full of sinful and wicked people, who never stop doing disgusting things. And we were warned not to let our daughters and sons marry their sons and daughters. Your prophets also told us never to help those foreigners or even let them live in peace.

You wanted us to become strong and to enjoy the good things in the land, then someday to leave it to our children forever. You punished us because of our terrible sins.

But you did not punish us nearly as much as we deserve, and you have brought some of us back home. Why should we disobey your commands again by letting our sons and daughters marry these foreigners who do such disgusting things? That would make you angry enough to destroy us all!

LORD God of Israel, you have been more than fair by letting a few of us survive. But once again, our sins have made us ashamed to face you.

Ezra's prayer is one of great hope and trust in what God has planned for his people. He praises God's faithfulness to his people even when it is not reciprocated. Again the warning that God gave (Day 5 again) is still valid.

We might struggle with God's warning when it comes to living in peace with our neighbours, especially when we look at Israel today. I do.

Ezra speaks of God's mercy for, in Ezra's view, God has not punished his people as much as they deserve to be punished. That might seem an odd sort of mercy, but it is mercy – the people have been spared the full punishment due to them. If you read on (go on!), you will see that there is a point of decision that the people must face. They had come back to the ruined city of Jerusalem and had been involved in its rebuilding, by kind permission of the kings of Persia, where they had been in exile. Why had they been in exile? You can guess.

**Can the Church today ever go through periods of "exile"?**

**Can my local Church ever go through periods of "exile"?**

***Father God, like Ezra I want to be ready not only to weep for the failures of my Church but also to be part of whatever it takes to reconstruct. Amen.***

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## Day 14

### 2 Samuel 11:2-17

Late one afternoon, David got up from a nap and was walking around on the flat roof of his palace. A beautiful young woman was down below in her courtyard, bathing as her religion required. David happened to see her, and he sent one of his servants to find out who she was. The servant came back and told David, "Her name is Bathsheba. She is the daughter of Eliam, and she is the wife of Uriah the Hittite."

David sent some messengers to bring her to his palace. She came to him, and he slept with her. Then she returned home. But later, when she found out that she was going to have a baby, she sent someone to David with this message: "I'm pregnant!"

David sent a message to Joab: "Send Uriah the Hittite to me." Joab sent Uriah to David's palace, and David asked him, "Is Joab well? How is the army doing? And how about the war?" Then David told Uriah, "Go home and clean up." Uriah left the king's palace, and David had dinner sent to Uriah's house. But Uriah didn't go home. Instead, he slept outside the entrance to the royal palace, where the king's guards slept.

..

David wrote a letter and told Uriah to deliver it to Joab. The letter said: "Put Uriah on the front line where the fighting is the worst. Then pull the troops back from him, so that he will be wounded and die." Joab had been carefully watching the city of Rabbah, and he put Uriah in a place where he knew there were some of the enemy's best soldiers. When the men of the city came out, they fought and killed some of David's soldiers--Uriah the Hittite was one of them.

King David commits adultery with another man's wife and she becomes pregnant. In the dotted gap in the narrative above David tries again but unsuccessfully to get her husband Uriah, who is out on service with the army, to go home and sleep with her so that that the child would be thought of as Uriah's, and David's sin might be covered up.

Uriah, faithful to his army commission, refuses to go to his wife while his comrades are out in action. Uriah's loyalty to duty and the service of his king is rewarded by David sending him to the front line to be slaughtered. The unwitting Uriah is handed his own death sentence in the letter he carries back to the front line. David thinks he has covered up his tracks. Now that Uriah had been killed in battle David would be able to marry Bathsheba and all would be sorted.

Not so – God was watching. We'll read more tomorrow.

**Does the thought that God watches you constantly fill you with joy or discomfort?**

***Father God, remind me when I think I'm sorting things out my way that you are ever watching. Remind me, too, that you watch so that you might guard me rather than accuse me. Amen.***

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## Day 15

### 2 Samuel 11:27-12:13

Then after the time for mourning was over, David sent someone to bring her to the palace. She became David's wife, and they had a son.

The LORD was angry at what David had done, and he sent Nathan the prophet to tell this story to David:

A rich man and a poor man lived in the same town. The rich man owned a lot of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had only one little lamb that he had bought and raised. The lamb became a pet for him and his children. He even let it eat from his plate and drink from his cup and sleep on his lap. The lamb was like one of his own children.

One day someone came to visit the rich man, but the rich man didn't want to kill any of his own sheep or cattle and serve it to the visitor. So he stole the poor man's little lamb and served it instead.

David was furious with the rich man and said to Nathan, "I swear by the living LORD that the man who did this deserves to die! And because he didn't have any pity on the poor man, he will have to pay four times what the lamb was worth."

Then Nathan told David: You are that rich man!

Now listen to what the LORD God of Israel says to you: "I chose you to be the king of Israel. I kept you safe from Saul and even gave you his house and his wives. I let you rule Israel and Judah, and if that had not been enough, I would have given you much more.

Why did you disobey me and do such a horrible thing? You murdered Uriah the Hittite by having the Ammonites kill him, so you could take his wife.

"Because you wouldn't obey me and took Uriah's wife for yourself, your family will never live in peace. Someone from your own family will cause you a lot of trouble, and I will take your wives and give them to another man before your very eyes. He will go to bed with them while everyone looks on. What you did was in secret, but I will do this in the open for everyone in Israel to see."

David said, "I have disobeyed the LORD." "Yes, you have!" Nathan answered. "You showed you didn't care what the LORD wanted. He has forgiven you, and you won't die. But your newborn son will."

David is caught out. When he said that the rich man in the story should die David had condemned himself. When Nathan said "You are that man", David realised that God saw him as David saw the rich man – someone deserving of death. Condemnation from his own mouth.

In David's eagerness to cover up the sinful action he thought only of himself. Bathsheba had been violated, and she had lost the husband she loved. The innocent Uriah had been slaughtered. Joab the army officer had been unwittingly involved and sullied by what he had been commanded to do. Oh, what a tangled web!

David has a cartload of punishment coming to him. Just pause a moment and think of King David's line, and who was born into it, in royal David's city. Do you ever wonder why God chose the Jews?

The promises came true – we read earlier about David's Son Absalom, who attempted to take the throne from David. With family like that who needs in-laws?

**What little tricks do we employ to cover up our sin or to justify it?**

**Would you be happy for a Nathan to come to visit you?**

***Father God, you see it all, and that is what I want to accept as encouragement rather than condemnation. I cannot hide, except under the shadow of your wings; I cannot run, except into your loving arms. Amen.***

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## Day 16

### 2 Samuel 12:15-24

Then Nathan went back home. The LORD made David's young son very sick. So David went without eating to show his sorrow, and he begged God to make the boy well. David would not sleep on his bed, but spent each night lying on the floor. His officials stood beside him and tried to talk him into getting up. But he would not get up or eat with them.

After the child had been sick for seven days, he died, but the officials were afraid to tell David. They said to each other, "Even when the boy was alive, David wouldn't listen to us. How can we tell him his son is dead? He might do something terrible!"

David noticed his servants whispering, and he knew the boy was dead. "Did my son die?" he asked his servants. "Yes, he did," they answered. David got up off the floor; he took a bath, combed his hair, and dressed.

He went into the LORD's tent and worshipped, then he went back home.

God had waited until the son was born before sending Nathan, but his anger was no less ardent than when David had first committed the sin. We as humans might be angry at something but the anger fades over time (car drivers will understand what I mean), but have you noticed that this does not seem to apply to guilt? If your sin is not confessed and repented of then God is the same God of the same anger until you repent.

David loses the son of his sinful liaison. Should God have forgiven the sin that David confessed, and let the child live? That would be a nice conclusion, wouldn't it? Why let the child suffer and die?

We can become so emotionally righteous at times, letting feelings get in the way of seeing things clearly. Of course, it was a tragedy that the child was not allowed to live. But it's up to God, who alone decides on these things. Remember that God has a plan for Israel, and that does not include in this instance (there have been some very unusual relationships in the story of the royal line of Israel) the issue of this sinful relationship.

While the child was ill David was distraught. Perhaps as an act of penitence he refused food and slept on the floor. It did not work. God took the child, but he allowed David to live.

David does not sit in the ashes of mourning, however. He knew that the outcome was God's decision and while he may have acted in a penitent way while the child lived, now was the time to continue. He goes to the Lord's tent and worships God.

**Was the child innocent (remember the second commandment)?**

**How do we place the taking of a young child in the context of God's love?**

***Father God, you know when a sparrow falls to the ground, and are not heartless or without sorrow at the loss or destruction of what You have made. Teach me your ways, that I may come to see your creation and your plans as You see them. Amen.***

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## Day 17

### Psalm 51:1-8

(For the music leader. A psalm by David when the prophet Nathan came to him after David had been with Bathsheba.)

You are kind, God! Please have pity on me. You are always merciful! Please wipe away my sins. Wash me clean from all of my sin and guilt. I know about my sins, and I cannot forget my terrible guilt.

You are really the one I have sinned against; I have disobeyed you and have done wrong. So it is right and fair for you to correct and punish me.

I have sinned and done wrong since the day I was born. But you want complete honesty, so teach me true wisdom. Wash me with hyssop until I am clean and whiter than snow. Let me be happy and joyful! You crushed my bones, now let them celebrate.

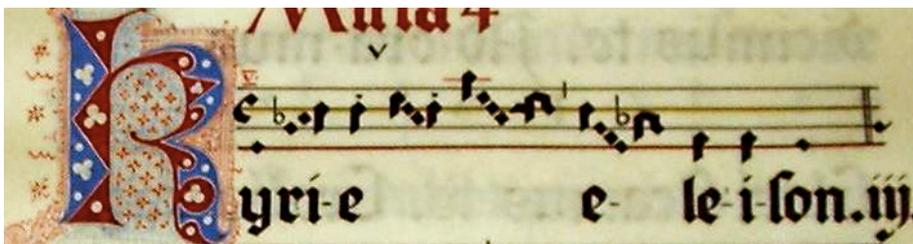
My heart melts as I read these words of David's. The little shepherd boy who was anointed as king by Samuel, who suffered Saul's attacks and even lived among the Philistines for a time, who loved Jonathan as a brother and wept over his death, who became king after Saul's death – is this the one who wrote these words?

Did David try to justify himself before God? Did he try to point out his redeeming features as part of his defence? Did he ask God to take into consideration his good works of service, his generous offerings of money and treasure? Did he apportion blame to anyone else? No – he admits his guilt and lays himself just as he is before God and pleads for God's mercy.

An appeal to God's mercy is the last station before you hit the buffers. You stand in the Supreme Court of Courts, before the Maker and Judge of All. You have absolutely no defence against a just and true charge. The sentence is right, just and fair. No-one can speak in your defence as you already know that you are guilty. No mitigation can be offered as the sin was committed from your own free-will actions.

You are crushed. You stand with head hung low, arms dropped to your side and your only plea is "Lord, have mercy".

Read the words above in that light, and see how the great king David expresses it for us. If ever you think you would never stoop as low in sin as David then read Matthew 5, verses 27 and 28. The rest of this psalm tomorrow.



**Can we become whiter than snow? How?**

**For what and upon what are we saying or singing "Lord, have mercy" in our Communion service?**

***Father God, I would come close to You, but it is only by your greatest mercy revealed in my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, and under his covering that I may even start to approach You. Amen.***

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## Day 18

### Psalm 51:9-19

Turn your eyes from my sin and cover my guilt. Create pure thoughts in me and make me faithful again. Don't chase me away from you or take your Holy Spirit away from me.

Make me as happy as you did when you saved me; make me want to obey! I will teach sinners your Law, and they will return to you. Keep me from any deadly sin. Only you can save me! Then I will shout and sing about your power to save.

Help me to speak, and I will praise you, Lord. Offerings and sacrifices are not what you want.

The way to please you is to feel sorrow deep in our hearts. This is the kind of sacrifice you won't refuse. Please be willing, Lord, to help the city of Zion and to rebuild its walls. Then you will be pleased with the proper sacrifices, and we will offer bulls on your altar once again.

God cannot look at sin, he's God. David is not asking God to overlook his sin, but to forgive and cover his sins and the guilt that they bring about. David seeks God's kindness and favour for a spiritual spring-clean.

David remembers the joy of his first experiences of God. He sets this as a benchmark against which to compare his current state. It's not only when you're floored by sin that you will lose that joy, but also when your walk with God is not as close as it once was. Always seek to find that joy and closeness. If you never experienced such a state in your Christian life, then earnestly seek it and expect to find it.

David is aware of the great truth that while God has set up a regime of sacrifice for sin, from food offered to animals slaughtered, what he really desires is our broken hearts.

**Are you as happy now as when you first knew Christ's redeeming love?**

**Does your heart break with sorrow for your sin and its consequences?**

**Does answering yes to both questions above create a contradiction?**

***Father God, you cannot look on us in our sinful state, but You have given us Jesus Christ, in whom we may approach you. I come to you in Jesus, and I pray that you make me more and more like him. I am prepared for hyssop and cleansing. Amen.***

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## Day 19

### Psalm 57:1-11

(For the music leader. To the tune "Don't Destroy." A special psalm by David when he was in the cave while running from Saul.)

God Most High, have pity on me! Have mercy. I run to you for safety. In the shadow of your wings, I seek protection till danger dies down. I pray to you, my protector. You will send help from heaven and save me, but you will bring trouble on my attackers.

You are faithful, and you can be trusted. I live among lions, who gobble down people! They have spears and arrows instead of teeth, and they have sharp swords instead of tongues.

May you, my God, be honoured above the heavens; may your glory be seen everywhere on earth.

Enemies set traps for my feet and struck me down. They dug a pit in my path, but fell in it themselves.

I am faithful to you, and you trust me. I will sing and play music for you, my God. I feel wide awake! I will wake up my harp and wake up the sun. I will praise you, Lord, for everyone to hear, and I will sing hymns to you in every nation. Your love reaches higher than the heavens; your loyalty extends beyond the clouds. May you, my God, be honoured above the heavens; may your glory be seen everywhere on earth.

We go back to the time before David was king. David had a torrid time with Saul. Saul was intensely jealous of David, and David had to protect himself from Saul. This is a prayer from a cave. David is asking God to save him from Saul's attacks.

Do you notice how confident this young man is of what God will do for him? In this instance David has done nothing wrong and he is appealing to God for mercy, for God to intervene to protect him and to confound his attackers. He knows that one day he will be king, and that it is God who will make this happen.

Even though David is in danger from Saul's army, is holed up in a cave, has little in the way of weaponry and is vastly outnumbered, he simply lays all of this before God with an unquenchable faith that God will by his mercy protect him. God is David's only hope, and David trusts in God, the One who can have though h

There's little fear or misery or depression in this psalm from the cave (though Psalm 142, another "cave" psalm, is a little quieter). It rocks with joy and faithfulness.

#### **Can you remember where you placed God when you had your last crisis?**

***Father God, I praise and worship you in whatever situation I find myself. I trust in your faithfulness to me and ask for your mercy when things get tough.***

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## Day 20

### Psalm 103:1-12

(By David.)

With all my heart I praise the LORD, and with all that I am I praise his holy name! With all my heart I praise the LORD! I will never forget how kind he has been.

The LORD forgives our sins, heals us when we are sick, and protects us from death. His kindness and love are a crown on our heads. Each day that we live, he provides for our needs and gives us the strength of a young eagle.

For all who are mistreated, the LORD brings justice. He taught his Law to Moses and showed all Israel what he could do.

The LORD is merciful! He is kind and patient, and his love never fails. The LORD won't always be angry and point out our sins; he doesn't punish us as our sins deserve.

How great is God's love for all who worship him? Greater than the distance between heaven and earth! How far has the LORD taken our sins from us? Farther than the distance from east to west!

There are many more psalms we could study on the topic. This one is simply a positive explosion of confidence and trust in God.

David has more than once angered God to the extent that lives were lost, yet this psalm has both freshness and wisdom. Remember that though David says that God will not always be angry it does depend on the sinner coming to God in sorrow for what she or he has done and seeking mercy, that God might relent.

David knows about God's kindness, and about forgiven sin, healing (his playing soothed Saul's mind) and close encounters with death. He knows that God provided for him when he was in trouble. He knows about God's Law.

David certainly knows about God's mercy. Why does David bang on about sin so much? Because he knows the unutterable joy of sins forgiven.

I might be bold to suggest when sin is forgiven its awfulness actually becomes more real to us. We know that God will not remember our sins, of course, but we can still talk about what sin does to us as a reminder.

When we hide sin from God (we can't, of course, but we may try to ) or avoid facing up to it we deceive ourselves and others (through deception, guilt, lies, pretence) and we break our relationship with God. It doesn't go away and it is awful. When I come to God for his forgiveness He does not lightly magic that sin away as if it did not matter. Sin matters to God, and there is a price for sin that has to be paid. Sin comes at a cost, and David had to pay up more than once for that forgiveness. For me the cost was borne 2000 years ago by one who paid the price. When you are forgiven you know the relief it brings and how what you thought was something you could manage is in reality deadly dangerous.

**Can you challenge yourself to make this your psalm as well and say it out loud before God?**

**Are you truly and wholly forgiven?**

***Father God, give me the praising heart of David. Amen, and amen.***

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## Day 21

### Lamentations 3:1-26

I have suffered much because God was angry. He chased me into a dark place, where no light could enter.

..

God has turned my life sour. He made me eat gravel and rubbed me in the dirt. I cannot find peace or remember happiness. I tell myself, I am finished! I can't count on the LORD to do anything for me. Just thinking of my troubles and my lonely wandering makes me miserable. That's all I ever think about, and I am depressed.

Then I remember something that fills me with hope. The LORD's kindness never fails! If he had not been merciful, we would have been destroyed. The LORD can always be trusted to show mercy each morning.

Deep in my heart I say, The LORD is all I need; I can depend on him! The LORD is kind to everyone who trusts and obeys him. It is good to wait patiently for the LORD to save us.

We may at some time in our lives have felt the way the writer of Lamentations feels – life is miserable and God is nowhere to be seen. All is miserable. Depression triggers depression. It could be health, family, finance, work, friends, even church!

At times like this we can easily disappear into ourselves. We stop looking outwards and all we can see is our own miserable condition – no-one could possibly understand our troubles or suffer like we're suffering. If you've ever been there you may remember the endless churning of your mind as you go through scenarios of questioning, accusing, self-justification, hurting, anger, bitterness, emptiness, and loneliness.

The writer, however, is describing his condition as being deserved. God has placed him here. For this writer there is a time of trouble that must be endured. But not alone. God may punish or withdraw his favour, but that does not stop him loving us.

In both situations the truth is still the same - "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning." "New every morning is the love our waking and uprising prove." "Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father. Morning by morning new mercies I see".

You have to trust those words!

**Where do you turn when things turn bad?**

**What makes a good hymn?**

***Father God, I want to wake up each new morning, whatever I may have to face that day, with those words on my lips and in my heart. Your steadfast love never ceases. Your mercies never end. Great is your faithfulness. Amen.***

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## Day 22

### Joel 2:1-19

Sound the trumpet on Zion, the LORD's sacred hill. Warn everyone to tremble! The judgement day of the LORD is coming soon. It will be dark and gloomy with storm clouds overhead.

Troops will cover the mountains like thunderclouds. No army this powerful has ever been gathered before or will ever be again. Fiery flames surround them; no one escapes. Before they invaded, the land was like Eden; now only a desert remains.

...

The LORD God leads this army of countless troops, and they obey his commands. The day of his judgment is so terrible that no one can stand it. The LORD said: It isn't too late. You can still return to me with all your heart.

Start crying and mourning! Go without eating. Don't rip your clothes to show your sorrow. Instead, turn back to me with broken hearts. I am merciful, kind, and caring. I don't easily lose my temper, and I don't like to punish. I am the LORD your God.

Perhaps I will change my mind and treat you with mercy. Then you will be blessed with enough grain and wine for offering sacrifices to me. Sound the trumpet on Zion! Call the people together. Show your sorrow by going without food.

Make sure that everyone is fit to worship me. Bring adults, children, babies, and even bring newlyweds from their festivities. Tell my servants, the priests, to cry inside the temple and to offer this prayer near the altar: Save your people, LORD God! Don't let foreign nations make jokes about us. Don't let them laugh and ask, 'Where is your God?'

You may by now have got the impression that God's people Israel are a bunch of ne'er-do-wells. Why did God choose such a bunch of disobedient, arrogant and unfaithful people such as these? Probably because they're like anybody else, and we are like them.

God speaks through Joel, warning of an impending day of judgement for Israel. That day will be terrible, but God has already supplied the opportunity for his people to avoid it. He does not desire punishment but if his people are unrepentant he cannot break his promise.

God requires a broken heart from his people. He's not interested in ritually torn clothes. It's as if God is saying, "Do it, and see if I do not exercise mercy". God always reserves his mercy, however. It is not on tap. It is His by sovereign right, and His alone to dispense. God is not soft. But with mercy comes blessing, because mercy is not just about withholding due retribution. With mercy comes restoration, a fresh start, blessing and favour.

A prayer is prescribed. Read it a few times over and assimilate what God considers to be important.

**Is there a place for weeping in our church?**

**What do you yearn to see our church become?**

**How would you re-write the priest's prayer for today?**

***Father God, when the church I'm in falls short of what You call us to be may we know how to fall before you and weep. Touch our hearts with sorrow for what we have failed to become, and in your mercy renew us as Christ's body in our neighbourhood. Amen.***

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## Day 23

### Micah 6:1-16

What offering should I bring when I bow down to worship the LORD God Most High? Should I try to please him by sacrificing calves a year old? Will thousands of sheep or rivers of olive oil make God satisfied with me? Should I sacrifice to the LORD my first-born child as payment for my terrible sins?

The LORD God has told us what is right and what he demands: See that justice is done, let mercy be your first concern, and humbly obey your God.

You may know this as “do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God”. In Christ we have unprecedented access to Father God, something that even Moses, Aaron, Elijah and David did not have. We are the bride of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. We are his body and he is the head. He is our access to Father God. Every time we pray to Father God we pray through Jesus – there is no other way.

If we feel that our guilt is such that it can only be assuaged through sacrifice or self-denial then we are still limping along on our old feet of clay instead of walking with Jesus.

In him we may take on his Holy Spirit to enable us to be like Christ to our world. For the people of Israel it was a struggle that had ritual at its base and a distant, cloudy view of the throne of grace. In Christ, simply by walking with him (not just following in his footsteps) we will be where he is, and will start to think as he thinks, and grow into his justice, his mercy and his humility. In Christ we cannot fail, for when we are in him the world sees him and not me.



**Where can our church make a difference for justice?**

**Where in our society can our church promote mercy?**

**Does your church walk humbly with Jesus at all times?**

***Father God, teach me about justice, mercy and humble walking as I take to the road with my Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.***

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## Day 24

### Luke 1:39-50

A short time later Mary hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea. She went into Zechariah's home, where she greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, her baby moved within her. The Holy Spirit came upon Elizabeth.

Then in a loud voice she said to Mary: God has blessed you more than any other woman! He has also blessed the child you will have. Why should the mother of my Lord come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, my baby became happy and moved within me. The Lord has blessed you because you believed that he will keep his promise.

Mary said: With all my heart I praise the Lord, and I am glad because of God my Saviour. He cares for me, his humble servant. From now on, all people will say God has blessed me.

God All-Powerful has done great things for me, and his name is holy. He always shows mercy to everyone who worships him.

Mary was not a scholar, and she may have not even been literate. However, when she came to visit her relative Elizabeth, herself miraculously pregnant, though not as miraculously pregnant as Mary, she burst forth in the wonderful statement of faith, hope and trust that we read above.

Elizabeth was inspired by the Holy Spirit to recognise the baby Mary was carrying. John jiggled. Mary's response to Elizabeth shows inspired wisdom. She tells of God's care and the blessing He has given her.

Then she talks about God's mercy. "And his mercy is on all those that fear/worship him". There are different translations. The Greek word is fear, but fear can mean other than fright. It can mean cautious or deferential respect, and that could be a description of worship to the Jews.

That God All-powerful should choose a simple girl to become the bearer of his Son is too amazing to comprehend fully. But that's what He did.

#### **Is Christian worship a conduit of God's mercy?**

#### **Am I aware of what God has chosen me for?**

***Father God, you did not choose me for my brains, my looks, my skills, my strength or my wisdom, because you will make of me what you want me to be. Give me the humility to accept that your ways are higher than mine. Amen.***

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when:2016-03-09 06:02 GMT

## Day 25

### Luke 1:51-56

The Lord has used his powerful arm to scatter those who are proud. He drags strong rulers from their thrones and puts humble people in places of power. God gives the hungry good things to eat, and sends the rich away with nothing.

He helps his servant Israel and is always merciful to his people. The Lord made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his family forever!

Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months. Then she went back home.

Mary's words continue. She is aware of the history of her people. At this point in history of God's people things had been very quiet for a long time. There'd been no prophetic warnings or great victories. The nation was still limp from the great divide and many years of exile. The temple furnishings and holy objects were long gone. The nation had lost its edge and was now subject to yet another foreign power.

Even after 400 years of mediocrity as a nation Mary can still say that God is powerful and that he helps his people Israel, that he is still a God of mercy. She stands firm on the promises of God.

**How long would you wait for God to fulfil a promise?**

**If God drags down the strong rulers does he then want weak rulers?**

**Is your understanding of God confined to your experience rather than his promises?**

***Father, I rejoice with Mary that you upset established orders to bring justice and that you are merciful. I pray that you continue to do this in my time. Amen.***

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## Day 26

### Leviticus 24:10-23

Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri from the tribe of Dan, had married an Egyptian, and they had a son. One day their son got into a fight with an Israelite man in camp and cursed the name of the LORD.

So the young man was dragged off to Moses, who had him guarded while everyone waited for the LORD to tell them what to do.

Finally, the LORD said to Moses: This man has cursed me! Take him outside the camp and have the witnesses lay their hands on his head. Then command the whole community of Israel to stone him to death. And warn the others that everyone else who curses me will die in the same way, whether they are Israelites by birth or foreigners living among you.

Death is also the penalty for murder, but the killing of an animal that belongs to someone else requires only that the animal be replaced. Personal injuries to others must be dealt with in keeping with the crime-- a broken bone for a broken bone, an eye for an eye, or a tooth for a tooth.

It's possible to pay the owner for an animal that has been killed, but death is the penalty for murder.

I am the LORD your God, and I demand equal justice both for you Israelites and for those foreigners who live among you.

God demands a high price from the person who curses him. There is no higher price than death. If that seems harsh then consider what a terrible thing it is to curse God. The young man in the passage above was cursing God – he was speaking in a derogatory way that affronted God's name and his holiness. That's not on, and the man was duly punished.

God lays out some basic rules. Someone maliciously injures you, then you do the same back to them – “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”. It's a rule system for simple people. Remember that behind it is God's demand for justice for all. We'll look later at how Jesus builds on this for Kingdom people.

We hear plenty of bad language around us in the street, down the pub, at a football match, on the bus and in the media. Some is no more than poor or crude language, but some is abusive of God's name. Should we warn the perpetrators of God's displeasure?

I do sense that secularist attacks on Christianity are growing in confidence and in vitriol, and more than once I have heard or read views from atheists that attack God, which is a dangerously odd thing for any atheist to do. Should we fight back?

**Should the CofE have tweeted a call for prayers for Professor Dawkins (who recently suffered a stroke)?**

**Is it right to maintain the law of blasphemy in this country?**

***Father God, your justice is applied evenly to all people. When we seek justice let us not be seeking revenge. Amen.***

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when:2016-03-11 06:02 GMT

## Day 27

### Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on the side of a mountain and sat down. Jesus' disciples gathered around him, and he taught them:

God blesses those people who depend only on him. They belong to the kingdom of heaven!

God blesses those people who grieve. They will find comfort! God blesses those people who are humble. The earth will belong to them!

God blesses those people who want to obey him more than to eat or drink. They will be given what they want!

God blesses those people who are merciful. They will be treated with mercy! God blesses those people whose hearts are pure. They will see him!

God blesses those people who make peace. They will be called his children!

God blesses those people who are treated badly for doing right. They belong to the kingdom of heaven.

God will bless you when people insult you, mistreat you, and tell all kinds of evil lies about you because of me. Be happy and excited! You will have a great reward in heaven. People did these same things to the prophets who lived long ago.

So, if you desire mercy then be merciful yourself. Being merciful to another is holding back on what is due to that person for hurting you. An eye for an eye is a just retribution, as is a tooth for a tooth. But two blind eyes do not make a seeing one, or two missing teeth a molar. We live in the New Testament, and Jesus tells us that there is a better way for those who live in him.

So, where is mercy exercised? In the police traffic officer who stops you for speeding, and then gives you a warning rather than a ticket. In the bus driver who holds the bus while you run up to catch it. In the shopkeeper who lets you in when they're closing. I'm sure you can think of plenty more moments of mercy. Are you grateful for them, or did you just expect them?

Now, the merciful get blessed. I like the translation "God blesses.." more than "Happy are.." and "Blessed are.." – one is wishy-washy and the other sounds like a description rather than a reward. "God blesses.." is positive and active. For every drop of mercy you express God will bless you.

**Are you going to bless the next person who shows you mercy?**

**Will you also seek forgiveness for calling the one who doesn't a jobsworth?**

***Father God, I have the authority to show mercy when someone else is in my debt. You have the authority to bless me, so bless me, and bless me tangibly, as I show mercy. Amen.***

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## Day 28

### Matthew 5:38-39

You know that you have been taught, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I tell you not to try to get even with a person who has done something to you. When someone slaps your right cheek, turn and let that person slap your other cheek.

Mercy gets turned on its head by Jesus. You think you know what you have to do and then Jesus goes and complicates it. So, if someone wrongs you to the value of a slap on the face, don't just do mercy. Taking him or her to the elders and saying, "I refuse to claim the retribution due to me. I refuse to slap your face" is not enough! Jesus tells us to forget all that and go for the jugular - offer your assailant the other cheek as well!

The cheek of it!

Is this nonsense? I don't think so – Jesus also said "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." He is not teaching submissiveness but rather something quite powerful. Offering the other cheek puts the assailant on the wrong foot. You are refusing to play their game of upsetting you, and you are challenging the perpetrator to see if they can in cold blood repeat what was done in anger. I cannot predict the outcome of this with certainty, but to respond with the same does not deal with the root of the issue.

To bless someone who persecutes you is to disarm them with love.

**Could you invite someone who is hostile to you to dinner?**

**Could you give up your right to retaliate?**

***Father God, you gave us your Son, who deserved no enemies, and whose back was whipped and hands and feet nailed to a cross for my sinfulness. Amazing love, how can it be that Thou, my God, should die for me? As I ponder this, challenge me to share that same love with others. In his name, Amen.***

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## Day 29

### Proverbs 25:21-22

If your enemies are hungry, give them something to eat. And if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. This will be the same as piling burning coals on their heads. And the LORD will reward you.

The writer of Proverbs, after reminding us that singing to someone in deep sorrow is like pouring vinegar into an open cut, tells us in the following verse how to wrong-foot your enemy with kindness. Offering food to a hungry enemy is a wonderful ploy – if the enemy is hungry they'll find it difficult not to accept the offer of food, and certainly if they are thirsty (in a dry and dusty land) they'll have great difficulty in not being grateful for your gift of water.

Where then, does that leave the enemy? Having surrendered some of their enmity to you by accepting your hospitality, it is difficult for him/her to consider you as the enemy you were previously considered to be. How should he now behave towards you? Having burning coals on your head is a wonderful description of the churning going on inside that person.

You have now shown mercy to someone who would not want to feed or water you. You can't help but feel good about that. And the Lord will reward you.

Too many everlasting feuds in our world are stoked by the expectation of hurt people on either side that the other side must make the first move towards reconciliation. This is sinful, and you should be in no doubt that if you have ever placed another person on hold because you consider your hurt greater than theirs, then you must make the first move – the Bible says so. Your feelings, your hurt do not measure up to the pain and punishment of sin that you laid on Jesus Christ when he suffered and died for you.

**Is there someone who needs your mercy?**

**Have you ever said, "I can't forgive that person" of anyone?"**

***Father God, I am purchased by the precious blood of my Saviour Jesus, who suffered and died for my sin. He took all my blame, and lifted the sentence from me. I scarce can take it in, that you should give him up for me. Thank you for his gift of eternal life. Heap coals on my head where I am unforgiving. In his name. Amen.***

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## Day 30

### Matthew 9:9-13

As Jesus was leaving, he saw a tax collector named Matthew sitting at the place for paying taxes. Jesus said to him, Come with me. Matthew got up and went with him.

Later, Jesus and his disciples were having dinner at Matthew's house. Many tax collectors and other sinners were also there.

Some Pharisees asked Jesus' disciples, Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and other sinners? Jesus heard them and answered, Healthy people don't need a doctor, but sick people do.

Go and learn what the Scriptures mean when they say, 'Instead of offering sacrifices to me, I want you to be merciful to others.' I didn't come to invite good people to be my followers. I came to invite sinners.

The Pharisees didn't like it when Jesus upset their cosy spirituality. Of course, "tax collectors and other sinners" (what a lovely description – perhaps HMRC would like to adopt it as their strapline) were among the low types you shouldn't be seen with. So Jesus goes to Matthew's house and enjoys a meal with a unholy alliance of tax collectors, and other sinners.

Here were people who needed to hear the message of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. They were highly unpopular, and may have been excluded from synagogue meetings or Temple worship. The Pharisees avoided them, but Jesus goes to Matthew's house and eats with them. They were sinners, and Jesus comes to them. Now that's mercy – they didn't merit it and by the Law they should have been shunned. Jesus refuses to exercise his right to shun them as well (think of the woman at the well – John 4).

What an opportunity to preach the Gospel message! Good food, and company eager to hear what Jesus has to say. Here are people who may feel that they have no worth as people, rich though they are. Here are hearts that need to be turned, with fat wallets and treasure that could be used for good and not selfish purposes.

Don't get too heavy on the Pharisees. They just didn't get it. Some did, but the majority of them were hard of heart and felt threatened by Jesus.

**How many "sinners" have you dined with recently?**

**Who do you cross the road (or sit in a different pew) to avoid?**

**What opportunities has God given you to meet with "sinners"?**

***Father God, it's easy to stay with the holy people in a safe place, but I know that to grow my faith in you I have to exercise it in the world. Take me out to those who need to hear the Good News of Jesus. In his name. Amen.***

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## Day 31

### Matthew 6:9-15

You should pray like this:

Our Father in heaven, help us to honour your name.

Come and set up your kingdom, so that everyone on earth will obey you, as you are obeyed in heaven.

Give us our food for today.

Forgive us for doing wrong, as we forgive others.

Keep us from being tempted and protect us from evil.

Jesus takes us a step further. Forgiveness is one step on from mercy. When you are merciful to someone, you abstain from giving them their due just punishment or retribution. When you forgive someone, you treat them as if they had never done wrong to you.

The action of forgiveness wipes the slate clean. You wipe your remembrance clean. Let's not pretend that we can actually "forget", but we can refuse to take something back into account once it has been forgiven—we discount it (totally, not just by 20% or even 95%!) If we do recount something forgiven we have not forgiven and we dishonour ourselves before God.

Forgiving someone is not easy. Let no-one tell you it is. But Jesus calls us to be forgiving people. Always remember that your capacity to forgive is based on the measure that you yourself have been forgiven. "We love, because He first loved us" can be extended to "We forgive, because he first forgave us". To forgive someone means that you are prepared to deal with and discount the pain/stress/anger/hurt/disappointment/betrayal/abuse/hate/lies/back-stabbing/gossip/etc that the person may have subjected you to. It's easy to come out with lines such as "I can't forgive", where we hold on to the pain, or "I'll forgive, but I'll never forget/have nothing more to do with that person" – in this case you haven't forgiven at all.

**If you forgive others for the wrongs they do to you, your Father in heaven will forgive you. But if you don't forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.**

God calls out for a forgiving heart in us. As I have been forgiven, so I should forgive. How else will I know the Father's forgiving heart unless I do likewise? Jesus even forgave people who did not even realise their sin. We should remember that we probably harbour sins that we, too, haven't yet realised. If God were to reveal everything to us at once we'd be floored.

Some people describe Christian life as a journey. I see it as a developing understanding of who Jesus is and who I am in Jesus. That process of development and growth may involve stripping away layers of dirt and grime and softening my hard shell of pride in order to make me a place where Christ may be revealed. We may see a rusted chassis and a boot lid in a shed and be thinking of hiring a skip but a car restorer may recognise the heap differently, envisioning the gleaming and purring Aston Martin DB4 restored and ready for action.

**Has anyone known your total forgiveness?**

**Are you sure that you are totally forgiven by God?**

**Is there something you feel you still cannot bring before God?**

**What does God see in you, a DB4 or a 2CV?**

***Father God, you are all-knowing, but I choose to ignore this when I give in to the desire to sin. Forgive my pride, and remind me that when I turn to you in repentance that the price has been paid already by Christ Jesus, and that You will run to embrace me and bring me home. Amen.***

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## Day 32

### Matthew 18:23-35

This story will show you what the kingdom of heaven is like: One day a king decided to call in his officials and ask them to give an account of what they owed him. As he was doing this, one official was brought in who owed him fifty million silver coins. But he didn't have any money to pay what he owed.

The king ordered him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all he owned, in order to pay the debt. The official got down on his knees and began begging, Have pity on me, and I will pay you every penny I owe!

The king felt sorry for him and let him go free. He even told the official that he did not have to pay back the money.

As the official was leaving, he happened to meet another official, who owed him a hundred silver coins. So he grabbed the man by the throat. He started choking him and said, Pay me what you owe! The man got down on his knees and began begging, Have pity on me, and I will pay you back.

But the first official refused to have pity. Instead, he went and had the other official put in jail until he could pay what he owed.

When some other officials found out what had happened, they felt sorry for the man who had been put in jail. Then they told the king what had happened.

The king called the first official back in and said, You're an evil man! When you begged for mercy, I said you did not have to pay back a penny. Don't you think you should show pity to someone else, as I did to you? The king was so angry that he ordered the official to be tortured until he could pay back everything he owed.

That is how my Father in heaven will treat you, if you don't forgive each of my followers with all your heart.

You need to read the last line in the story in order to see what this parable is about. It's not a morality tale or an Aesop fable – it's far more than that. If we've heard it at Sunday School and have never thought any more about it since then we'll miss the harsh truth that it carries. It's about who God is. It says that if we do not reflect God's forgiveness to us in the way we treat others then we can expect God to withdraw his forgiveness to us.

Because the story is told in primary colours we might forget that it's a parable about us and our relationship with God. It's easy to think that we'd not get into the sort of debt the official found himself in, or that our debts would reach out to endanger the well-being of those we love. And we certainly wouldn't be throwing our debtors into jail. For "debt" substitute the word "sin". For "jail" use the term "unforgiveness". Now re-read the story, placing yourself as the first official.

In the story there is mercy –the official is spared slavery. Slavery was the outcome if you were drowning in debt. You paid with the only thing you had left - your freedom. There was also forgiveness – the debt itself was cancelled. The king's coffers were left hungry. It's no exaggeration on the part of Jesus to say that the debt was worth 50 million ("a myriad") silver coins. It's a serious exaggeration on our part if we think that's too high.

**What is the true cost of sin?**

**Is the first official me, or someone else?**

***Father God, you delight in showing mercy, and mercy triumphs over judgement. When I stand before you in judgement, facing the punishment I deserve, I know that Jesus took this for me, and that my debt is paid. I come to your open arms. Amen.***

<https://youtu.be/hQu-VctDAwA>

You delight in showing mercy  
and mercy triumphs over judgement

My past embraced  
My sin forgiven  
I'm blameless in your sight  
My history rewritten

Oh love, great love  
Fear cannot be found in you  
And there will never be a day  
You're uncertain of the ones you choose

So I will wake and spend my days  
Loving the one who has raised me up  
From death to life, from wrong to right  
You're making all things beautiful.

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## Day 33

### Luke 18:9-14

Jesus told a story to some people who thought they were better than others and who looked down on everyone else: Two men went into the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee stood over by himself and prayed, God, I thank you that I am not greedy, dishonest, and unfaithful in marriage like other people. And I am really glad that I am not like that tax collector over there. I go without eating for two days a week, and I give you one tenth of all I earn.

The tax collector stood off at a distance and did not think he was good enough even to look up toward heaven. He was so sorry for what he had done that he pounded his chest and prayed, God, have mercy on me! I am such a sinner.

Then Jesus said, When the two men went home, it was the tax collector and not the Pharisee who was pleasing to God. If you put yourself above others, you will be put down. But if you humble yourself, you will be honoured.

We love to knock the Pharisees. They just don't get it, do they? But do you think Jesus was telling this parable just for the Pharisees to hear? Surely he told them straight to their faces what he thought of them?! This Pharisee could be anyone who considers himself/herself to be closer to God than others by virtue of their religious observance.

For "Pharisee" substitute "self-righteous Christian". Some people seek to get closer to God by standing on the backs of others. And, looking in the other direction, if there's a cushion of "bad" people underneath, then at least they'll go down to the pit first. Phew! I'm glad I'm not a Methodist!\*

Self-righteousness tricks us into thinking we have some special access to Father God. There is only One Way (John 14:1-6).

As for the tax collector, he was aware of his sinful nature. He did not, he could not, clothe himself in his religious works. He realised that before God he was condemned, and he sought mercy. While he went home closer to God, the challenge for him was to change his ways in order to stay right with God.

\* Other denominations may be substituted, of course. I overheard this conversation between two elderly ladies minding somebody else's business at a wedding some years ago – "She's Church of England," said the first. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," said the second.

**What value does religious clothing or denomination have before God?**

**What makes me justified before God?**

**Do I no longer need God's mercy?**

***Father God, I want to come before you with a broken and contrite heart, for that you do not despise. You do not want to hear of my good works - eternity itself is too short for me to sing first the full praises of Jesus my Saviour. Have mercy on me, for his sake. Amen.***

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## Day 34

### Romans 9:10-24

Don't forget what happened to the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah. Even before they were born or had done anything good or bad, the Lord told Rebekah that her older son would serve the younger one.

The Lord said this to show that he makes his own choices and that it wasn't because of anything either of them had done. That's why the Scriptures say that the Lord liked Jacob more than Esau.

Are we saying that God is unfair? Certainly not! The Lord told Moses that he has pity and mercy on anyone he wants to. Everything then depends on God's mercy and not on what people want or do.

In the Scriptures the Lord says to Pharaoh of Egypt, I let you become king, so that I could show you my power and be praised by all people on earth. Everything depends on what God decides to do, and he can either have pity on people or make them stubborn.

Someone may ask, How can God blame us, if he makes us behave in the way he wants us to? But, my friend, I ask, Who do you think you are to question God? Does the clay have the right to ask the potter why he shaped it the way he did? Doesn't a potter have the right to make a fancy bowl and a plain bowl out of the same lump of clay?

God wanted to show his anger and reveal his power against everyone who deserved to be destroyed. But instead, he patiently put up with them. He did this by showing how glorious he is when he has pity on the people he has chosen to share in his glory. Whether Jews or Gentiles, we are those chosen ones,

There's no easy answer to some of the questions we want to ask about the nature of God - our human nature pushes us to reconcile questions with answers, but when it comes to the sovereignty of God there are no answers. God spoke through Isaiah: My thoughts are not your thoughts, my ways are not your ways. If we trust God to know what's best then we have to allow Him to do things that do not fit with our human understanding. To our human understanding God is manifestly unfair in favouring Jacob over Esau. Did Esau get a raw deal? Would Jesus have followed in the line of Esau rather than Jacob?

Is God unfair when he acts in mercy on people who deserve to be punished? Is he crazy when he forgives sins? God is who God is, and there's an end to it. We struggle with this, and we may struggle until glory, but we may not reject who God is or re-form Him into a god that we like.

Paul's answer to a reasonable question about God controlling our behaviour and then blaming us is blunt. Pharaoh's heart against the Israelites was hard, and he gets the plagues. God hardened it a bit more before the final plagues. Was that fair? Did God set Pharaoh up so that He could perform the act of bringing his people out through the Red Sea, an act that God never failed to remind his people of? Is God being boastful? I'll say, of course not, as deference before God is a good position to take until we do understand.

In response to those who are seeking or who challenge our faith we do not have all the answers. This is not failure on our part - we are still growing and developing, and an answer may or may not be forthcoming. Rather, we should look not to what people want God to be but to who He is. He is the Lord, the Lord, the merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness.

**Should we stop trying to reason with God?**

**Did Esau get a raw deal? (read Genesis 33)**

**Are there questions you still require an answer to? Who you gonna call?**

*Father God, there are things I do not understand, and I confess that I have held You responsible for stuff in my life. I am convinced that nothing can separate me from your love in Christ Jesus, but in case I am not then I ask you to reveal the truth of your love to me in the One who took all my blame and shame to the cross and died for me. Amen.*

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## Day 35

### Romans 11:25-31

My friends, I don't want you Gentiles to be too proud of yourselves. So I will explain the mystery of what has happened to the people of Israel. Some of them have become stubborn, and they will stay like that until the complete number of you Gentiles has come in.

..

The people of Israel are treated as God's enemies, so that the good news can come to you Gentiles. But they are still the chosen ones, and God loves them because of their famous ancestors. God doesn't take back the gifts he has given or forget about the people he has chosen.

At one time you Gentiles rejected God. But now Israel has rejected God, and you have been shown mercy. And because of the mercy shown to you, they will also be shown mercy.

Paul tackles some difficult stuff, and I am grateful to God for his wisdom and intellect. The question of Israel is a horny one, and Christians today fall into camps over Israel and its status. Much of this has to do with Israel's place in salvation history.

Jesus came as a Jew to minister to his people. After Jesus there came apostles like Peter and Paul, who were commissioned by God in his mercy to step outside of the Jewish faith to evangelise Gentiles and to confer a new status on them. Peter says to his Gentile readers in 1 Peter 2:10:

**Once you were nobody. Now you are God's people. At one time no one had mercy on you. Now God has been merciful to you.**

Paul the consummate Jew understands that his people had rejected their Messiah. God, however, has not rejected Israel, and He still loves his chosen people, but God's mercy will still come to Israel because of his mercy on us.

The place of Israel may seem rather theological, but it is important. You only have to look at its recent history since being re-created as a state in 1948. The nation of Israel sits uneasily in its territory. We are called to [pray for the peace of Jerusalem](#). Click the link and pray.

**Can you be God's people by yourself?**

**Does the stability of the Middle East have any connection with God's plan?**

***Father God, it is by your mercy that I have become part of a chosen people. Show me what you have chosen me for so that I may give myself totally in response. Amen.***

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when:2016-03-22 06:02 GMT

## Day 36

### 1 Timothy 1:8-16

We know that the Law is good, if it is used in the right way. We also understand that it wasn't given to control people who please God, but to control lawbreakers, criminals, godless people, and sinners.

..

It is for anything else that opposes the correct teaching of the good news that the glorious and wonderful God has given me.

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord. He has given me the strength for my work because he knew that he could trust me. I used to say terrible and insulting things about him, and I was cruel. But he had mercy on me because I didn't know what I was doing, and I had not yet put my faith in him.

Christ Jesus our Lord was very kind to me. He has greatly blessed my life with faith and love just like his own. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. This saying is true, and it can be trusted. I was the worst sinner of all! But since I was worse than anyone else, God had mercy on me and let me be an example of the endless patience of Christ Jesus. He did this so that others would put their faith in Christ and have eternal life.

Paul is understood by many to be the writer of this letter. He explains that the Law (think The 10 Commandments, though it is more than that) was given to people who had no compass of their own. It was given in order to put a ring fence around all that God hated.

The Good News of Jesus Christ brings to us a new way of living, one that is no longer dependent on the Law, but on Jesus. Paul understood this well, because he went through that transition. His life was doomed under the Law, but God was merciful and brought him to life in Christ.

We shouldn't think that our life experiences don't mirror Paul's because we never went through such a dramatic conversion as he had. They do. Like Paul, before we acknowledged Jesus as Lord, before we had that personal encounter with the risen and glorified Lord, we were still under the Law, and, being under the Law, we stand condemned. For those who grew up in Christian homes that covering protective veil can only take you to the point where you have to stand on your own feet. Only when you bring yourself personally to Jesus Christ to confess your total sinfulness and unworthiness and to invite him into your heart as Lord and Saviour can he enter in. Can you learn these words (from Rock of Ages)? Read, cover, repeat, check,...

Not the labour of my hands  
Can fulfil Thy law's demands;  
Could my zeal no respite know,  
Could my tears forever flow,  
All for sin could not atone;  
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Nothing in my hand I bring,  
Simply to Thy cross I cling;  
Naked, come to Thee for dress;  
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;  
Foul, I to the fountain fly;  
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

**Is Jesus still waiting at your door?**

**Are you aware of the mercy that saved you from destruction?**

**Do you believe and trust the saying Paul quotes?**

***Father God, I cannot stand in my religious finery and impress you as the Pharisee in that parable, for I am the one who calls for your mercy and forgiveness. I cling to the cross of Jesus. Wash me, and I shall be clean. Wash me in my Saviour's blood, and I shall know total and lasting cleansing. Amen.***

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## Day 37

### Ephesians 2:1-10

In the past you were dead because you sinned and fought against God. You followed the ways of this world and obeyed the devil. He rules the world, and his spirit has power over everyone who doesn't obey God.

Once we were also ruled by the selfish desires of our bodies and minds. We had made God angry, and we were going to be punished like everyone else. But God was merciful! We were dead because of our sins, but God loved us so much that he made us alive with Christ, and God's wonderful kindness is what saves you.

God raised us from death to life with Christ Jesus, and he has given us a place beside Christ in heaven. God did this so that in the future world he could show how truly good and kind he is to us because of what Christ Jesus has done.

You were saved by faith in God, who treats us much better than we deserve. This is God's gift to you, and not anything you have done on your own. It isn't something you have earned, so there is nothing you can brag about. God planned for us to do good things and to live as he has always wanted us to live. That's why he sent Christ to make us what we are.

Paul reminds his readers that before they became Christians they were subject to the power of Satan – this takes us back to Day 1, to the fall of Adam and Eve. The world may have developed, but people who do not know Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour are still where Adam and Eve were after they were banished.

Many Christians still struggle to believe that what God in his mercy and grace offers us through Christ Jesus is a free gift - we want to pay for it, and stand on our own account before God. That in itself is a total rejection of the gift! The only way we can stand before God is on account of Jesus. There is nothing in my miserable being that can of itself please God. He loves this person of clay and wants to shower mercy and grace on him. I don't deserve mercy, I can't earn grace, I cannot plead anything except guilty in his court of law.

But for reasons I will only understand in glory God buried me with Jesus in death to my old life and raised me up with him into his new life. I was saved through faith alone. In Christ alone. I have a new life that will live beyond the grave, and there is a place for me in a most honoured position.

Could I lose all this? Do you have the fear, that when you draw close to your last breath, that you didn't do enough in life to merit eternity, that there are sins that will not get forgiven? If you do, then repent now of that fear. Now.

<https://youtu.be/8welVgKX8Qo>

**Did God know that Eve would fall for the snake's trick?**

**Is it true that those who do not follow Christ are condemned?**

**What place in heaven were you expecting?**

**Will we meet Adam and Eve in heaven?**

***Father God, my pride often gets in the way of accepting freely the gift you have lavished on me. My fears obscure the love that casts fears aside. I am a silly creature, and yet you love me to heaven. Lord Jesus, hold my hand, and I will walk with you wherever you take me. Amen.***

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## Day 38

### Titus 3:3-8

We used to be stupid, disobedient, and foolish, as well as slaves of all sorts of desires and pleasures. We were evil and jealous. Everyone hated us, and we hated everyone.

God our Saviour showed us how good and kind he is. He saved us because of his mercy, and not because of any good things that we have done.

God washed us by the power of the Holy Spirit. He gave us new birth and a fresh beginning. God sent Jesus Christ our Saviour to give us his Spirit. Jesus treated us much better than we deserve. He made us acceptable to God and gave us the hope of eternal life.

This message is certainly true. These teachings are useful and helpful for everyone. I want you to insist that the people follow them, so that all who have faith in God will be sure to do good deeds.

Do you believe it yet?! I, too, insist that you believe and trust these words. They are true.

Are you thinking that you could never have been described in the terms of the first paragraph above? If so, then you are probably still being disobedient. Yes, you may not have hated everyone, and there were probably some people who didn't hate you, but the essence of these words remains, and the destination for those living that way is death.

You may feel that God is being unfair in condemning people this way. There is a danger that our Gospel message gets watered down because of our own human concerns. This is not right. God has no mercy if anyone goes to heaven. God has no right to punish if the end is the same for all.

Rather than jump on the human response bandwagon let's believe what we read in the Bible and respond in two ways. Firstly to realise just what God has done in Jesus by saving us, and secondly to realise that we have a message of Good News that the world must hear and act with Father God's compassion for the lost to seek them.

#### **How well does my Church challenge and equip me to reach the lost?**

***Father God, your Son Jesus commissioned us to go out into the world. I accept that this is a daunting task, so I ask you to fill me afresh with your Holy Spirit and give me a breaking heart for the people I know who need to hear the message of Your mercy and grace in Christ Jesus. Amen.***

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## Day 39

### Mark 15:33-39

About noon the sky turned dark and stayed that way until around three o'clock. Then about that time Jesus shouted, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you deserted me?"

Some of the people standing there heard Jesus and said, "He is calling for Elijah." One of them ran and grabbed a sponge. After he had soaked it in wine, he put it on a stick and held it up to Jesus. He said, "Let's wait and see if Elijah will come and take him down!"

Jesus shouted and then died. At once the curtain in the temple tore in two from top to bottom. A Roman army officer was standing in front of Jesus. When the officer saw how Jesus died, he said, "This man really was the Son of God!"

Jesus cries out on the cross, but God is not listening. There is no mercy for this man. On day 1 of our reflections I said that God showed no mercy to Adam and Eve. He did, otherwise they'd have been destroyed, and all humanity with them. For Jesus there is no mercy, as Jesus had become the sacrifice for our sins, the once and for all payment that would finally release mankind from the Law of sin and death. But first, Jesus would have to become sin for us and die.

What God had planned from the beginning was a way of revealing his love. For those of us who wonder where this love is, let's look into the eyes of Jesus. Love so amazing. But let's get it right. Jesus died in obedience to Father God, so that we might through Jesus have access to Him. God sent His Son, the Son did not send himself.

Jesus experienced the last part alone. His disciples and his family and friends may have been there as he was led out on the road and as he died on the cross, but that last call of a human struggling to the point of desperation as he became sin for us and Father God looked away was endured in desolate isolation. Even the sunshine was withheld.

Let's remember that our time on earth is short – what will we experience in glory? Who will we share it with? Did you lead anyone to Jesus, so that they might share eternity along with you? Will your family, parents, children, be there? What about your friends and neighbours? Are there people you've given up on? Will they get to know God's mercy and his wonderful saving grace?

The officer got it half right. This man *is* the Son of God.

Devotional link for Good Friday: <https://youtu.be/Zhtk8S4YXws>

**Does your Good Friday devotion major on Jesus' desolation or the gift of his blood?**

**How good is your Good Friday?**

***Father God, You turned your eyes away from the cross for there the sin of the world was displayed in the body of the One who was sacrificed for it. I turn my eyes towards that place for there I received my salvation.***

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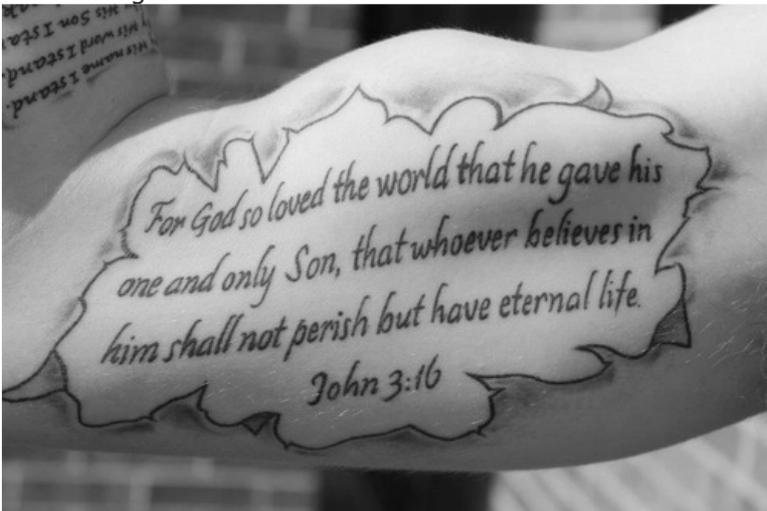
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## Day 40

### John 3:16-17

God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life and never really die. God did not send his Son into the world to condemn its people. He sent him to save them!

I'm sure we know these two verses well. They are probably the most publicised. I'm not sure if I'd wanted it tattooed on my arm, though. Not sure if I want it tattooed anywhere! I have met someone on Town Pastor duty who, after a long conversation about his journey through the hell of drugs, allowed us to see a life-size tattoo of the face of Jesus on his chest, saying that he was the only one who knew what terrors he'd been through.



Jesus bears marks, too. The marks of scourging and beating faded away on the risen Lord Jesus, but Thomas was invited to place his hand where the nails that held him to the cross had been. I believe those marks still adorn his body. The human pain and suffering that Jesus endured for me and you is still revealed in the perfect body.

Crown Him the Lord of love! Behold His hands and side,  
Rich wounds, yet visible above, in beauty glorified:  
No angel in the sky can fully bear that sight,  
But downward bends his burning eye at mysteries so bright!

Have a joyful smile with <https://youtu.be/INo42lyvszY>  
(I wouldn't take a piano there! And how did they get the tuba up there!)

**Does Christ's body, the Church, also bear those marks?**

**Does my local Church (and we are all accountable members) reveal the risen Lord Jesus is his dazzling glory to the eyes of the world?**

***Father God, we celebrate Easter tomorrow. We can celebrate it any day as we have a new life in Christ Jesus. Make me an Easter person in the life and work of my local Church. In the name of my Lord and Risen Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.***

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