

For My Sake

A LENTEN
JOURNAL *of*
REPENTANCE



INTRODUCTION

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Tradition holds that Jesus was scourged, or whipped, thirty-nine times before his crucifixion by the Roman soldiers. The Bible does not specify how many times he was whipped, and because the Roman soldiers were carrying out the punishment, we cannot be certain. But the Law in Deuteronomy prescribed forty lashes minus one for a guilty party (Deuteronomy 25:3), and the Apostle Paul himself says he was whipped with thirty-nine lashes several times during his ministry (2 Corinthians 11:24). As such, tradition has ascribed the same to Jesus.

As we considered the framework for this year's Lenten Devotional Guide, the story of Jesus's humiliation and beating laid heavy on us. And with Lent lasting forty days, the number of days began to align with the number of stripes that he may have received. From those thoughts arose the idea of a daily journal of repentance, with thirty-nine days of reflection on unique sins we find throughout the Bible.

This guide is entirely focused on repentance, which is the very heart of Lent. Each day's passage and reflection serve to examine our tendencies toward these specific sins, with guided questions to help us explore our own responses.

Then on the fortieth day, the last day of Lent, we celebrate the atoning work of the cross, the triumph of Jesus's resurrection, and the victory he gives over sin and death!

Our prayer is that each day's reflection would bring you a richer, more personal understanding of the great price that Jesus paid on our behalf. And that through each day's thread of hope, you would take courage and find joy in just how deeply he loves you.

"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21 ESV).

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In accordance with Lent, the dates of this guide skip Sundays.*

Bearing False Witness

February 22 2

Spotlight Passage

So [Jezebel] wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal, and she sent the letters to the elders and the leaders who lived with Naboth in his city. And she wrote in the letters, "Proclaim a fast, and set Naboth at the head of the people. And set two worthless men opposite him, and let them bring a charge against him, saying, 'You have cursed God and the king.' Then take him out and stone him to death." And the men of his city, the elders and the leaders who lived in his city, did as Jezebel had sent word to them. *1 Kings 21:8-11a ESV*

Reflection

King Ahab wished to have Naboth's vineyard for himself, and Jezebel saw fit to have Naboth killed on false pretenses so that Ahab could possess his land. The Lord calls us to walk in truth, to love others, even our enemies, as we would ourselves. This means honesty in all of our communications, whether at work, at home, to our children, to our church body, to everyone. Like Ahab soon learned, any short-term advantage we may gain by falsely testifying against another bears no eternal weight before God's holiness. It is a grave abomination to our Creator (Proverbs 6).

When am I most susceptible to bearing false witness against another?

What tools has God given me to tell the truth in all circumstances?

Candlelight Prayer

Father, remove from me any desire or temptation to testify falsely against another. Where I have made mistakes, let me own them and not deflect them onto anyone else. Give me courage to stand for truth, no matter the cost.

A Thread of Hope

But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.
Isaiah 40:31 ESV

Spotlight Passage

There he came to a cave and lodged in it. And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away." And he said, "Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire the sound of a low whisper. *1 Kings 19:9-12 ESV*

Reflection

Life as a believer does not shield us from having deep hurts in our lives. If we are not depending on the Spirit, the enemy uses our emotional injuries to embed toxic seeds of anger and bitterness deep in our souls. In Elijah, they resulted in despair. The only path back to spiritual wellness is to surrender the bitterness to Jesus who gives us the power to extend forgiveness and sow seeds of peace and healing.

Have I allowed the painful circumstances of my life to make me bitter or *better*?

Am I extending the same grace to others that I desire God to extend to me?

Candlelight Prayer

Lord, I confess that I have allowed my hurts to rule my emotions and allow seeds of bitterness to grow. I need your strength and your grace to let go of the pain. You've forgiven me of so much more than I hold against others, yet I've taken this grace for granted. I declare today that as I've accepted your balm of forgiveness, I will extend the same grace and forgiveness to others.

A Thread of Hope

Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. *Hebrews 12:14-15 NIV*

Spotlight Passage

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" *Exodus 32:1-4 ESV*

Reflection

Blasphemy is the distortion of God's holiness, of his uniqueness, in word or action. Here, the Israelites attributed the marvelous works of God in their exodus from Egypt to this golden calf, denigrating his majesty. While we may not actively speak against God or use his name irreverently, the Apostle Paul warns that the poor conduct of believers may cause *others* to blaspheme, casting a shadow over God's glory (Romans 2:24).

In what ways does my speech or my way of life blaspheme the name of God, or cause others to?

How can I better prepare myself each morning to ensure that I exalt God in all that I do and say?

Candlelight Prayer

Father, search me and know me. If there is anything in my life that is causing others to blaspheme your name, to not be able to see your glory clearly, reveal it to me. May my words and my actions exalt you always.

A Thread of Hope

Praise be to the Lord God, the God of Israel,
who alone does marvelous deeds.
Praise be to his glorious name forever;
may the whole earth be filled with his glory.
Amen and Amen.
Psalms 72:18-19 NIV

Spotlight Passage

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. *James 4:1-2 NIV*

Reflection

The root of many childhood sibling quarrels is covetousness – the desire for what someone else has that is not ours. Covetousness can be more subtle than a sibling spat; our eyes and hearts are often drawn to what others have, what seems just out of reach, what is desirable but off-limits or unattainable for one reason or another. Covetousness always leads to a lack of contentment.

What situations spur covetousness in my heart?

As I express repentance, how can I also express gratitude?

Candlelight Prayer

Father, forgive me for coveting. I look around and desire so much that is not mine. You have given me abundant blessings; please give me a thankful heart and help me be content.

A Thread of Hope

I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. *Philippians 4:12-13 NIV*

Spotlight Passage

The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me."

But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord. *Jonah 1:1-3 NIV*

Reflection

Loving parents patiently and consistently teach their children to obey. Still, kids struggle with their own selfish desires, and they aren't the only ones! In the same way, when we choose to go our own way instead of God's way, we uplift our own thinking and our own ideas above his. Somehow, we allow ourselves to think that we know better than the very One who fashioned the infinite expanse of the heavens.

What selfish desires do I struggle with most?

Am I currently avoiding obeying the Lord in something?

Candlelight Prayer

Father, I confess I am in a constant battle with my flesh and spirit. Please strengthen my willpower to resist any temptations. I ask that you give me ears to hear your voice clearly, a heart of obedience, and dependance on your Holy Spirit to strengthen me in my weakness.

A Thread of Hope

My son, do not forget my teaching,
but keep my commands in your heart...
Trust in the Lord with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your paths straight.
Proverbs 3:1, 5-6 NIV

Spotlight Passage

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. *1 Corinthians 1:10-17 ESV*

Reflection

The Apostle Paul's letters to the early churches showed them drifting into division, and not only among the Jewish and Gentile believers over the role of the Law in the Christian life, but also over preaching and leadership styles, as shown here in the church of Corinth. God – three Persons united in one Godhead, which we call the Trinity – is our example of perfect unity, and Jesus prayed for us to be unified as well. "The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me" (John 17:22-23).

How have I contributed towards divisiveness recently?

What steps can I take towards unity with my brothers and sisters in Christ?

Candlelight Prayer

Father, forgive me for my tendency to be divisive or critical in my speech. Help me recall the words of Jesus as he prayed that we would be unified, and not just for our benefit, but for the sake of the world.

A Thread of Hope

Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! *Psalms 133:1 ESV*

Evil Suspicions

March 1 8

Spotlight Passage

If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. *1 Timothy 6:3-5 ESV*

Reflection

To have evil suspicions is to suspect someone of wrongdoing or wrong motives with no clear proof that they are guilty of such. And while we are called to discern all situations with wisdom, we are also told to love always and to think the best of those before us. Be aware of evil suspicions as they arise in your thoughts. Balance your concerns with grace and truth.

Is there someone in my life whom I suspect of wrongdoing with no clear evidence? What is driving these thoughts about them?

What can I do to approach this situation with more Christlikeness?

Candlelight Prayer

Father, I can find myself giving into the temptation of evil suspicions of others, even those I love. Help me dwell on what is pure, what is lovely, what is noble and true, that my mind instead would overflow with your goodness and mercy.

A Thread of Hope

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. *1 Corinthians 13:4-7 ESV*

Spotlight Passage

When Saul realized that the Lord was with David and that his daughter Michal loved David, Saul became still more afraid of him, and he remained his enemy the rest of his days.

1 Samuel 18:28-29 NIV

Reflection

Why did Saul hate David so much? Because David was blessed by our omnipotent God who empowered him to be very successful in all he did. On the contrary, Saul was cursed by God because of the evil intentions of his heart as he succumbed to jealousy, rage and hatred. Rather than respond with vengeance, David instead chose to honor Saul with loyalty. He knew fighting evil with evil was not God's will – choosing grace was. He threw love at hate.

Is there someone with whom I am angry? Is envy allowing dark thoughts to take residence in my heart?

Where can I make a difference in choosing love over hate and grace over vengeance?

Candlelight Prayer

Father God, you are the Maker of the universe; nothing happens without your guiding hand. Help me see where I may be harboring ill thoughts, and grant me the courage to let go of the hurts, envy or anger driving this. Remind me that you orchestrate everything that happens in this world and "...that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them." (Romans 8:28 NLT). Forgive me of this hidden sin and replace it with your love, which covers a multitude of sin.

A Thread of Hope

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. *Romans 5:6-8 ESV*

Spotlight Passage

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord...

And the Lord spoke to Aaron, saying, "Drink no wine or strong drink, you or your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them by Moses." *Leviticus 10:1-2, 8-11 ESV*

Reflection

While the actions of Nadab and Abihu may seem foreign to us on this side of Calvary, the Lord is worthy of true worship and true praise always. This is why Paul writes that we are to examine ourselves before we take the bread and cup of communion (1 Corinthians 11:27-29) – to not take it lightly and to ensure there is no unconfessed sin or unforgiveness rooted in our hearts. The next time you take communion or stand to worship, be still before God, allowing the Spirit to show you the magnitude and privilege of being in his presence, and the importance of approaching him with an honest heart.

Have there been times recently when I've felt compelled to worship publicly, even when my heart is not in it? What is getting in the way?

What are some verses I can lean on in those times when it is difficult to worship?

Candlelight Prayer

Father, it is a privilege to proclaim your death through the bread and cup of communion and to sing and speak your praise. Examine me, Lord, and reveal the wickedness and sins of my heart and intentions, that I may approach you boldly and in truth.

A Thread of Hope

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. *Hebrews 4:16 ESV*

Spotlight Passage

Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

Genesis 37:5-8 ESV

Reflection

Alexander Pope, the English poet and satirist of the Enlightenment era, once said, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." The writer of Proverbs teaches that "in the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise" (Proverbs 10:19 NKJV). Of all the areas of our life where foolishness might abound, our tongue often takes the lead. Here in Genesis, Joseph tells his brothers and his father his dreams, a foreshadow of Joseph's life to come. At this moment though, he is a young lad, and these dreams come across as offensive and presumptuous. Talk less, listen more. Let us learn to be silent before we speak and to understand before we share.

Just because something is true (like Joseph's dream) does not mean it is wise to be spoken. When have I spoken recently in foolishness?

Is there a situation I need to rectify because of my foolish words or actions?

Candlelight Prayer

Lord, I confess I take pleasure in voicing my opinions and often speak without discerning your wisdom. Forgive me for my foolishness. I praise you because you are the giver of wisdom. Jesus, you grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and other people (Luke 2:52). I ask that your Holy Spirit would grow me in the same way, even today.

A Thread of Hope

Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. *Philippians 3:13-14 ESV*

Spotlight Passage

"I have the right to do anything," you say — but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything" — but I will not be mastered by anything. *1 Corinthians 6:12 NIV*

Reflection

It's easy to condemn adultery or murder as sins God abhors. But what about gluttony? The apostle Paul warns us against being mastered by anything. When overeating, overdrinking, overscrolling on our phone, or overexercising is a regular practice, it creates addiction and a form of idolatry. We may choose these excesses to suppress negative emotions, comfort us when we are hurting, distract us from problems, or simply because it feels so good and we lose all self-control. Our only master should be the Lord Jesus Christ, and we can self-medicate by ingesting the meat of the Word and by drinking the Living Water that fully satisfies.

Am I replacing the mighty Comforter and Counselor with some form of excess?

What steps can I take to better face anxieties or stresses in my life?

Candlelight Prayer

Lord, I confess, I have too often used excess to comfort my heart in this turbulent, chaotic world. Help me to remember that these things can still be enjoyed without overindulging, and create in me a hunger for more of you. Give me the strength and self-control to walk away from this temptation and replace this idol with a deeper dependence on you.

A Thread of Hope

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." *John 6:35 NIV*

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." *John 4:12 NIV*

Spotlight Passage

I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church. *3 John 1:9-10 ESV*

Reflection

Proverbs 26:20 teaches that “for lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, quarreling ceases.” Gossip is both destructive and seductive. Destructive in its ability to shred trust and unity among friends and acquaintances, and seductive in its ability to spread quickly. John captures the root of gossip when he says that Diotrephes “likes to put himself first.” When we gossip, we are indeed raising ourselves above those we tell tales about, which is exactly opposite to the heart of Christ. Jesus humbled himself amongst his very creation, and taught us to do the same.

Where and when am I most tempted to partake in gossiping?

What practical step can I take to flee from this temptation? With whom can I share this step for increased accountability?

Candlelight Prayer

God, you know how seductive gossip is to me. I acknowledge how my sin is destructive, not only to my own character, but also to my relationships and trust with others. Please forgive me. Please remove my craving for information, my desire to be “in the know,” my impulse to spread gossip.

A Thread of Hope

Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. *John 4:23 NIV*

Spotlight Passage

Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me." *John 12:3-8 ESV*

Reflection

Greed encourages us to continually consume, making us believe that we don't have enough or that we deserve more. But trying to see the world's possessions as worthless may only make them more desirable. Rather than change the way you see the world, seek to understand the way that God sees you. The Creator of the heavens loves you personally, every fault, every flaw. He *died* for this love. When you realize how God sees you and how much He loves you, the longing for worldly possessions will become a mere shadow in light of the true joy and contentment found only in him.

When have I been most susceptible to greed, and in what ways?

How can I find contentment in what I have been given?

Candlelight Prayer

Father, help me understand in a greater way how you see me, that Christ forsook the riches of heaven that I might have life through his death and resurrection. Give me a proper perspective over my possessions, that I would not hold too tightly or too carelessly to what you have given me.

A Thread of Hope

For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. *Romans 8:24-25 ESV*

Spotlight Passage

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.”

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. *Genesis 4:2b-8 NIV*

Reflection

John tells us, “Do not be like Cain...Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him” (1 John 3:12a, 15). We may hold onto hate because we fear that if we forgive someone who has hurt or wronged us, they are being let off the hook. But holding hatred in our heart is an offense to God. “Bear with each other,” Paul writes to the Colossians, “and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13 ESV).

How am I harboring hatred in my heart right now?

How does God view the one I hate?

Candlelight Prayer

Lord, I confess I have hatred in my heart, which goes against your command to love. Please forgive me. I pray for patience with other people. When I feel my heart burn with anger, I pray that the Holy Spirit surrounds me with your love and reminds me of how patient, kind, and merciful you have been to me.

A Thread of Hope

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” *Matthew 22:36-40 NIV*

Spotlight Passage

How can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. *Matthew 7:4-5 NIV*

Reflection

The Pharisees criticized the so-called "sinners" while their own hearts and motives were unholy and judgmental. They were far from sinless; Jesus saw through religious actions to the attitudes of their hearts. How easy it is to judge others' faults or sins instead of allowing the Holy Spirit to show us our own!

Whom have I judged recently?

How is God leading me to extend grace?

Candlelight Prayer

Lord Jesus, I confess I am a sinner just like the people I judge. I need your grace every day. Forgive me for my hypocrisy. Lead me to show the grace I have received to others around me.

A Thread of Hope

But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says:

"God opposes the proud

but shows favor to the humble."

...Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

James 4:6, 10 NIV

Spotlight Passage

Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the Lord's anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. *Judges 2:11-13 NIV*

Reflection

John Calvin once said, "The evil in our desire typically does not lie in what we want, but that we want it too much." We may not worship idols of wood, stone, or precious metal. However, when we let people, places, or things take first place in our hearts, we slowly lose sight of the Lord and his preeminence. We must put God first and give him our full devotion.

What am I holding higher than the Lord right now?

Is there a gift from the Lord that I want too much? Do I worship the Giver, or the gift?

Candlelight Prayer

Heavenly Father, I confess there are idols in my life that keep me from worshiping you fully. I pray that your liberating love will help me demolish these idols. You are God alone, and I want to give you my full devotion. Give me an undivided heart.

A Thread of Hope

The Lord delights in those who fear him,
who put their hope in his unfailing love.

Psalms 147:11 NIV

Spotlight Passage

Listen, my son, and be wise,
and set your heart on the right path:
Do not join those who drink too much wine
or gorge themselves on meat,
or drunkards and gluttons become poor,
and drowsiness clothes them in rags.
Proverbs 23:19-21 NIV

Reflection

Intemperance is excessive indulgence. Our culture encourages us to have one more drink, one more cookie, binge-watch one more television show, be “shop-o-holics,” and post every detail of our lives on social media. This is not a wise way to enjoy the pleasures of the world; moderation and restraint are necessary.

When have I been most susceptible to overindulging?

What limits might God be leading me to implement?

Candlelight Prayer

Father, you know what I turn to when I am feeling weak, where I have a hard time choosing moderation and restraint. Forgive me for being intemperate. May your Holy Spirit grow self-control in me.

A Thread of Hope

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. *Titus 2:11-13 NIV*

Spotlight Passage

Korah son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, and certain Reubenites—Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—became insolent and rose up against Moses. With them were 250 Israelite men, well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council. They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord’s assembly?” *Numbers 16:1-3 NIV*

Reflection

These Levites had been appointed by the Lord for special work, but it was not good enough. They were jealous of Aaron’s and Moses’ special roles as priests. Their jealousy led to their death. Truly, jealousy will kill our contentment as well, preventing us from dedicating ourselves to the Lord with glad hearts.

When have I been most susceptible to jealousy?

What tools has God given me to overcome?

Candlelight Prayer

Lord, please forgive me for being jealous of people around me. I don’t want jealousy to take over my heart. Help me fix my eyes on you instead of looking around at others.

A Thread of Hope

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

Colossians 3:1-2 NIV

Spotlight Passage

One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite." Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her.

2 Samuel 11:2-4a NIV

Reflection

David was a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22) and abundant blessings surrounded him. Yet, he fell into sin because of his lust. Instead of turning away from the sight of Bathsheba's nakedness, he chose to stoke the flame of desire into a raging fire. The result was a spiral of sin including lying, treachery, and murder, and the consequences from the Lord, including a household of strife for the rest of his days. A moment's pleasure was a huge price to pay for a lifetime of consequences.

Our eyes and mind can go places that feed lustful desires. Is there any area in my life where I am exposing myself to the dangerous pitfalls of lust?

We can count on the devil putting lustful temptations in our paths. Am I taking every thought captive to Christ and quickly rejecting sexual temptation?

Candlelight Prayer

Lord, my flesh is weak, and I can only fight this battle with your strength. Forgive me and help me flee from any place or practice that feeds lust. May I daily put on the full armor of God to withstand the onslaught of this over-sexualized culture. Thank you for the strength to overcome all temptation through the power of the Holy Spirit.

A Thread of Hope

Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. *Psalms 51:10-12 NIV*

Spotlight Passage

Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said.

But he denied it before them all. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

Then he went out to the gateway, where another servant girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth."

He denied it again, with an oath: "I don't know the man!"

After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away."

Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, "I don't know the man!"

Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Matthew 26:69-75 NIV

Reflection

The devil "is a liar and the father of lies," (John 8:44) but Jesus "came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). When we lie, we betray our trust in Jesus to provide and instead take self-protection in our own hands. Rather than lie, let us live by the truth and trust ourselves to our Lord.

When am I most tempted to lie?

Is there a lie I need to confess or correct today?

Candlelight Prayer

Jesus, forgive me for lying, for betraying you and how you desire honesty in my heart and from my mouth. Please "guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long" (Psalm 25:2).

A Thread of Hope

But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. *John 3:21 NIV*

Spotlight Passage

"Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."

And immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man. Seize him and lead him away under guard." And when he came, he went up to him at once and said, "Rabbi!" And he kissed him. And they laid hands on him and seized him. *Mark 14:42-46 ESV*

Reflection

Throughout the Gospels, Judas presented several clear signs of his contempt for Jesus. Left unchecked, this contempt and bitterness seethed into malice, the strong hatred and visceral desire to harm another. The root of malice is often unchecked bitterness, and as the cloud of his hatred lifts, even Judas could say "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" (Matthew 27:4a ESV). When we find ourselves enveloped in a rage, we must seek help. Look for someone neutral and calm to speak to, who can show us paths out of our anger that we may not be able to see.

Who in my life can I speak to when I am feeling deeply bitter or resentful, and trust that their counsel will be wise?

What tools do I have to work through my emotions and my responses to others?

Candlelight Prayer

Father, help me see that my heart is no different than Judas's. I confess that I have the same ability to let bitterness and anger seeth into malice. Keep me from this, Lord. Put people in my path who can speak into my life, and let the fruit of the Spirit overwhelm me.

A Thread of Hope

So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. *1 Peter 2:1-3 ESV*

Spotlight Passage

Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. They came up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and struck him with their hands. Pilate went out again and said to them, "See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him." So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold the man!" *John 19:1-5 ESV*

Reflection

Making a mockery of something reduces the perception of its power. We often mock what we don't understand. Pilate's soldiers savagely beat and humiliated Jesus before the men and women of Jerusalem, seeking to destroy his dignity. The pain humiliation inflicts has been shown to be as real as physical assault - it attacks the very foundation of our identity, the understanding of who we are and what we wish to portray to the world. Seek to uphold the dignity of every person, remembering that they are made in God's image and are beloved by their Creator.

Pausing to reflect on my words, have I mocked someone or some situation recently?

Are there people I do not uphold in their God-given dignity?

Candlelight Prayer

Father, when I mock others, I do so to lift myself up. I confess this is the opposite of the example Jesus gave, which is to love, serve, and honor others above myself. Forgive me for my mocking words and actions. Help me to grow in love, sincerity, and humility.

A Thread of Hope

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. *Romans 12:9-10 NIV*

Spotlight Passage

Then the whole community of Israelites began complaining again. They complained to Moses and Aaron in the desert. They said, "It would have been better if the LORD had just killed us in the land of Egypt. At least there we had plenty to eat. We had all the food we needed. But now you have brought us out here into this desert to make us all die from hunger." *Exodus 16:2-3 ESV*

Reflection

Complaining – we are all susceptible to it. From the mundane complaints about traffic or the slow service at a restaurant, to the existential complaints to God about our life circumstances, murmuring rots away our fellowship with God and destroys trust with those around us. For whatever is troubling you, rather than complain, determine what is within your power to change and what is not. And for what you cannot change, recall the words of the Lord to Paul when he says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

When have I been most susceptible to complaining and discontentment?

In those areas of my life where I am discontent, what are the things I can change and the things that I cannot?

Candlelight Prayer

Father, forgive me for complaining. When things don't go my way, or are not what I expect, help me to have grace, patience, and understanding. Help me to understand what is within my power to change, and what I must leave in your hands.

A Thread of Hope

Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his name.
For the Lord is good and his love endures forever;
his faithfulness continues through all generations.
Psalms 100:4-5 NIV

Spotlight Passage

For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. *James 3:2-6 ESV*

Reflection

While it is very natural to want to be funny or well-liked when speaking with others, our tongues often seem to have a mind of their own. Depending on whom we are with, it is sometimes easy to slip into crude talk, or to use speech or language that belittles others. Obscene or unkind talk does not reflect the new life and promises we have inherited in Christ. Our tongue should continuously glorify the Lord, who says, "Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving" (Ephesians 5:4 ESV).

Has there been words or language I have spoken recently that I would not say at the feet of Jesus?

How can I use my words to glorify God?

Candlelight Prayer

Lord, I confess my tongue is a fire; I often stumble in what I say. I pray you protect me from worldly talk and bring my thoughts closer to yours. I pray that when I speak, you encompass me with reminders of my new life in Christ. "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer" (Psalm 19:14 ESV).

A Thread of Hope

And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." *Isaiah 6:5-7 ESV*

Spotlight Passage

So his servant put her out and bolted the door after her. She was wearing an ornate robe, for this was the kind of garment the virgin daughters of the king wore. Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the ornate robe she was wearing. She put her hands on her head and went away, weeping aloud as she went.

Her brother Absalom said to her, "Has that Amnon, your brother, been with you? Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother. Don't take this thing to heart." And Tamar lived in her brother Absalom's house, a desolate woman.

When King David heard all this, he was furious. *2 Samuel 13:18-21 NIV*

Reflection

King David was the only person qualified to bring justice for his daughter Tamar. Although he reacted emotionally after hearing about her rape, he decided not to act; it was too messy. How often do we decide to stay out instead of getting involved in others' messes? Sins of omission occur when we forsake our moral obligations to pursue justice.

When have I witnessed injustice and failed to act?

Upon reflection, what was the Holy Spirit prompting me to do instead?

Candlelight Prayer

God, forgive me for preserving myself instead of stepping in. I recognize I sin against you by not acting. Help me be an instrument for justice, righteousness, and peace in the world.

A Thread of Hope

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

And what does the Lord require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy

and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8 NIV

Spotlight Passage

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."
Genesis 3:6-10 NIV

Reflection

Prayer is what connects us to God. Imagine having a best friend and never speaking to them! You speak highly of them, exclaim your love for them, but *never speak* to them or listen to them... it's inconceivable! At the very least, it's a poor excuse for a relationship. In the same way, we must speak and listen to the Lord even if our voices cannot muster a sound. Prayer is our communication with God until we enter eternity. If we are hiding from God because of our sin, bring it before him and take heart in the power the cross has over our deepest shame.

Have there been moments where I chose not to pray because of a difficult circumstance, emotional trigger, or sin creating a wall between God and me?

Is there a situation in my life where I can commit to praying more earnestly?

Candlelight Prayer

Lord God, Samuel said, "As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you" (1 Samuel 12:23). I confess I have sinned against you when I have failed to pray for myself and for others. Even when I have no words or energy left in me, help me pray, for I cannot be separated from you.

A Thread of Hope

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. *Philippians 4:6-7 ESV*

Spotlight Passage

The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." *Luke 10:17-20 ESV*

Reflection

C.S. Lewis once described pride as the preeminent sin because it "leads to every other vice" (*Mere Christianity*, ch 8). This was Satan's downfall; the devil thought too highly of himself, and not highly enough of God (Ezekiel 28:12-18). Jesus witnessed Satan cast out of heaven because he attempted to overthrow God and steal his glory (Isaiah 14:12-14). Pride is at the root of every haughty individual who falls from their pedestal. The key to overcoming pride is practicing humility; Jesus is our best example. The Creator of the universe set aside his sovereignty and chose a path of suffering to pay for our sins.

When have I recently allowed pride to rule in my life? What was the result?

Rick Warren stated, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less" (*The Purpose Driven Life*). Who has God put in my path that I can encourage by putting their needs in front of my own?

Candlelight Prayer

Father, you created my innermost being, and every gift, talent, and success is only because you provided the ability and the circumstances. May I give you glory at every opportunity. When I receive constructive feedback, help me to humble myself and be open to learn how to be more Christlike. As you allow the refiner's fire to shape my character, help me to swallow my pride and embrace humility as you did.

A Thread of Hope

Then he continued, "Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them." *Daniel 10:12 ESV*

Spotlight Passage

All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, he said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?"

Even as the words were on his lips, a voice came from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like the ox. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes." *Daniel 4:28-32 NIV*

Reflection

While our world praises ambition and putting oneself first, James calls selfish ambition demonic (James 3:14-15). Truly, our self-sins (selfishness, self-centeredness, selfish ambition, self-righteousness, self-admiration, self-pity, and many others) show that our functional god is often ourselves. Let's pursue humility daily by making Jesus our God. As John the Baptist said, "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30).

Which self-sin do I struggle with the most?

How is the Spirit prompting me to decrease myself in order to increase Christ in my life?

Candlelight Prayer

Lord, I confess that I think of myself more often than I think of you. I put myself first and easily forget that you call me to serve others and put their interests first. Forgive me and humble me, I pray. You are my God. Let me follow your example today.

A Thread of Hope

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Philippians 2:1-4 NIV

Spotlight Passage

And behold, the woman meets him, dressed as a prostitute, wily of heart... She seizes him and kisses him, and with bold face she says to him, "I had to offer sacrifices, and today I have paid my vows; so now I have come out to meet you, to seek you eagerly, and I have found you. I have spread my couch with coverings, colored linens from Egyptian linen; I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. Come, let us take our fill of love till morning; let us delight ourselves with love. For my husband is not at home; he has gone on a long journey; he took a bag of money with him; at full moon he will come home."

With much seductive speech she persuades him; with her smooth talk she compels him. All at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as a stag is caught fast till an arrow pierces its liver; as a bird rushes into a snare; he does not know that it will cost him his life. *Proverbs 7:10-23*
ESV

Reflection

Sensuality is the indulgence of our desires without regard for God's boundaries, a misuse of the gift of our senses. In this proverb, a married woman entices a young man into an affair through touch, sight, and smell, and by affirming his worth through seductive speech, all outside of the bounds of marriage. But sensuality is not limited just to sexual gratification. It can be substance abuse, or hard partying, anything from which we indulge our senses at the expense of our fellowship with God.

When have I been most susceptible to satisfying myself with little regard to God's boundaries?

What tools has God given me to overcome?

Candlelight Prayer

Heavenly Father, you know how I indulge my senses at the expense of fellowship with you. All good gifts are from above, coming down from you (James 1:16). Holy Spirit, please grow the fruit of self-control in my character. May I enjoy my senses and your other gifts appropriately, and honor you with my body, for I am your temple.

A Thread of Hope

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies. *1 Corinthians 6:19-20* NIV

Spotlight Passage

Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, "Lie with me." But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her.

But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, she caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house. *Genesis 39:6b-12 ESV*

Reflection

The second-century doctor Galen once shared that the early Christians were marked, as New Testament scholar N.T. Wright words it, by two ideals — "they believed in the resurrection of the body, and they didn't sleep around" (*Paul, A Biography*, "The Challenge of Paul"). Sexuality is a gift from God, a beautiful and powerful expression — perhaps the ultimate expression — of love and vulnerability within the context of marriage. It is a gift to be enjoyed, cherished, and pursued. As such, God has set clear boundaries for our protection, for our health, and for our dignity. Let us be known, like Joseph and the early Christians, as those who abide by faith within the bounds of healthy sexuality that God has set, and flee from sexual sin.

Is my struggle with sexual sin mostly in my mind or in my actions?

How can I pursue purity over pleasure?

Candlelight Prayer

God, you know my thoughts and actions. You know where I have succumbed to sexual sin, whether it is in my mind or my deeds. Please forgive me. Since we have your promises, help me to purify myself from everything that contaminates body and spirit, and perfect holiness out of reverence for you (2 Corinthians 7:1), through Jesus Christ, my Lord.

A Thread of Hope

Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. *1 Timothy 4:12 NIV*

Spotlight Passage

Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"

But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."

Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? ... And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven."

Matthew 12:22-26, 31 NIV

Reflection

The Pharisees slandered Jesus by spreading the notion that his power came from the devil instead of God. Slander — speaking false and damaging statements about someone — is taken seriously enough to be illegal in our nation. God also takes slander seriously. Slander is a form of malice that we need to rid from our character (Ephesians 4:31).

Have I spoken false and damaging statements about someone else?

How is God prompting me to control my words or rectify my sin?

Candlelight Prayer

Father, today I am reminded "to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone" (Titus 3:2). Forgive me for using my words to hurt others. Make me more like Jesus, that I would lift others up and express the love I have received through him.

A Thread of Hope

But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practice and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. *Colossians 3:8-10 NIV*

Spotlight Passage

I passed by the field of a sluggard, by the vineyard of a man lacking sense, and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction. A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man. *Proverbs 24:30-34 ESV*

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

Luke 10:38-42 ESV

Reflection

When God placed Adam in the garden, he set him about to cultivate and work the ground. Work and rest are divine rhythms, embodied by God through his very act of creation as a pattern for us to follow. But when work and rest are out of proportion, either by working too much without rest, or resting too much without work, we are not carrying forward a true and accurate picture of our Creator. We must find the healthy balance God has prescribed, so as to not become like the sluggard of Proverbs whose fields become overgrown, and to not become like Martha in this moment, whose dedication to a tasklist makes her miss what is most important.

Am I more inclined to laziness or to overworking? In what ways?

How can I better embody a healthier rhythm of work and rest?

Candlelight Prayer

Father, I confess that I am inclined to [laziness/overworking]. Help me find a better balance of work and rest, that my priorities would be correct and my life would glorify you.

A Thread of Hope

Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. *Colossians 3:23-24 ESV*

Spotlight Passage

So Saul disguised himself and put on other garments and went, he and two men with him. And they came to the woman by night. And he said, "Divine for me by a spirit and bring up for me whomever I shall name to you." The woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the necromancers from the land. Why then are you laying a trap for my life to bring about my death?" But Saul swore to her by the Lord, "As the Lord lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing." Then the woman said, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" He said, "Bring up Samuel for me." *1 Samuel 28:8-11 ESV*

Reflection

We may not consider ourselves as exposed to the extremes of sorcery or divination as Saul, but we are certainly not immune to it. Paul warns us that we struggle "against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12). We must be vigilant that there is a spiritual realm all around us of which we understand very little, and yet, it understands us greatly, and seeks to draw our attention and devotion away from God.

Is there an instance when I sought to engage the spiritual world without God's armor?

Read Ephesians 6:14-18. Which aspect of the armor of God stands out as my greatest need right now?

Candlelight Prayer

Lord, like Elisha's servant in 2 Kings 6, open my eyes that I may see a small glimpse of your presence around me in the midst of this darkness and turmoil, and to know you are close even in the silence.

A Thread of Hope

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. *Ephesians 6:10-13 NIV*

Spotlight Passage

"Now you have gone off because you longed to return to your father's household. But why did you steal my gods?"

Jacob answered Laban, "I was afraid, because I thought you would take your daughters away from me by force. But if you find anyone who has your gods, that person shall not live. In the presence of our relatives, see for yourself whether there is anything of yours here with me; and if so, take it." Now Jacob did not know that Rachel had stolen the gods.

So Laban went into Jacob's tent and into Leah's tent and into the tent of the two female servants, but he found nothing. After he came out of Leah's tent, he entered Rachel's tent. Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them inside her camel's saddle and was sitting on them. Laban searched through everything in the tent but found nothing. *Genesis 31:30-34 NIV*

Reflection

In this passage, Rachel stole her father's household gods. Anytime we steal, we have made the item a functional and false god in our lives. God is clear in the eighth commandment: "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:15). Trust that God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:19).

Where have I been tempted to steal?

Is there a more subtle way that I have stolen from others, if not physically?

Candlelight Prayer

Lord, when I steal, I express my distrust that you will give me all I need. Forgive me. Help me to trust you with everything I have and desire, and to honor you as my only God. May I be generous instead of selfish, and seek others' prosperity instead of my own gain.

A Thread of Hope

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. *Romans 15:13 ESV*

Spotlight Passage

A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." *Luke 22:24-27 NIV*

Reflection

Christians are not immune to conflict! Strife is division, dissension, and disagreement within the community. We are sucked into, or stir up, strife because of our strong opinions. Scripture says, "Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions" (Proverbs 18:2). Let's lay down our opinions that start strife. Instead, may we imitate Christ, who laid down his rights in order to serve.

What opinions am I delighting in instead of seeking understanding with others?

Have I stirred up or contributed to strife in the community, at church or elsewhere?

Candlelight Prayer

Jesus, your opinions were perfect and your divine rights highly exalted over everyone. But you laid that all down, humbled yourself, and took on the form of a servant (Philippians 2:5-8). Forgive me for delighting in my own opinions and airing them when it causes strife. Make me a peacemaker, that I may sow in peace and reap a harvest of righteousness (James 3:18).

A Thread of Hope

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. *Ephesians 4:1-3 NIV*

Spotlight Passage

But when Naaman had gone from him a short distance, Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said, "See, my master has spared this Naaman the Syrian, in not accepting from his hand what he brought. As the Lord lives, I will run after him and get something from him." So Gehazi followed Naaman. And when Naaman saw someone running after him, he got down from the chariot to meet him and said, "Is all well?" And he said, "All is well. My master has sent me to say, 'There have just now come to me from the hill country of Ephraim two young men of the sons of the prophets. Please give them a talent of silver and two changes of clothing.'" And Naaman said, "Be pleased to accept two talents." And he urged him and tied up two talents of silver in two bags, with two changes of clothing, and laid them on two of his servants. And they carried them before Gehazi.
2 Kings 5:19b-23 ESV

Reflection

Swindling is extracting from someone something that is not rightfully ours, whether it is money, possessions, or even someone's time and attention. We can do so very intentionally through deceit, as Gehazi does here, but also less conspicuously, through emotional manipulation or false facades. Seek always to keep an eternal perspective, to see that anything we may desire to gain will never compare to the infinite worth of knowing Jesus.

Am I currently trying to gain what is not rightfully mine?

Do the synonyms cheating, defrauding, overcharging, or underpaying bring a past sin to mind?

Candlelight Prayer

Father, you want me to have nothing to do with sin. I confess that sometimes I think a little is not a big deal, but I know Christ died for this sin within me. Help me to understand and live according to your Word, which says, "Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice" (Proverbs 16:8). I want to be trustworthy and to love you with my whole heart.

A Thread of Hope

I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints...
Ephesians 1:16-18 ESV

Spotlight Passage

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents...

And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.'...

Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." *Matthew 18:21-35 ESV, shortened*

Reflection

How can we expect the Lord to forgive us of our sins when we cannot forgive others? When we let a grudge or bitterness sit in our heart, it can poison our entire wellbeing. Sometimes, it is hard to choose to forgive someone who has deeply wronged us, and in those times, the only recourse may be to remember that you are to forgive "as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32b).

Is there a grudge that I cannot seem to forgive?

In Jesus' parable from Matthew 18, with whom do I identify? Is it the king? The unforgiving servant?

Candlelight Prayer

Father, I pray for a soft heart so I can forgive as you have forgiven me. Help me to release any bitterness, grudges, and anger that I may be holding onto.

A Thread of Hope

Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you. *Ephesians 4:31 NKJV*

Spotlight Passage

Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, "Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." *Numbers 11:4-6 ESV*

Reflection

Scripture teaches that "the eyes of man are never satisfied" (Proverbs 27:20 NKJV). Ungratefulness has an uncanny ability to distort our vision. Like a toddler who doesn't get his or her way, we may become angry that we are not getting what we think we are entitled to. But this is true - we *aren't* getting what we are entitled to. Our sinfulness and rebellion deserve eternal separation from God's perfect holiness. Anything more than that, no matter how small, is grace.

What do I feel I deserve from God or from others?

Are there any blessings for which I have failed to express my gratitude?

Candlelight Prayer

God, you are kind to those who are grateful and ungrateful. I want to recognize the grace I have received through your Son Jesus. Forgive me for acting like an entitled toddler, for my constant desire for more, my focus on what I perceive as what I deserve from you. I recognize that "the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23 ESV). I give you thanks today for your abundant gifts.

A Thread of Hope

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 4:4-7 ESV

Spotlight Passage

And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. *Acts 15:36-40 ESV*

Reflection

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls for us to "let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil" (Matthew 5:37 ESV). Here in Acts, although we don't know why Mark departed from Paul's first missionary journey, we can discern that it caused deep hurt and likely feelings of untrustworthiness in Paul that made him refuse to take Mark on his next journey. But at the end of his life, Paul could write that Mark is "very useful to me for ministry" (2 Timothy 4:11). Take heart in this grace, that your life can be defined not by your mistake, but by your recovery.

In what ways am I most likely to be untrustworthy? In my time, my promises, my commitments?

What ways can I seek to be more honest with both myself and with others in my words and actions?

Candlelight Prayer

Jesus, I confess that I am repulsed at evidence of untrustworthiness in others. However, I fail to see my own shortcomings. Help me see my failures. Forgive me for my sins. Make me more like you, for you are always faithful to your Word.

A Thread of Hope

The Lord is my strength and my shield;
in him my heart trusts, and I am helped;
my heart exults,
and with my song I give thanks to him.
Psalms 28:7 ESV

Spotlight Passage

Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him. And the soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head and arrayed him in a purple robe. They came up to him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" and struck him with their hands. Pilate went out again and said to them, "See, I am bringing him out to you that you may know that I find no guilt in him." So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, "Behold the man!" When the chief priests and the officers saw him, they cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him!" *John 19:1-6a ESV*

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" *Matthew 27:46 ESV*

Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last. Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent!" *Luke 23:46-47 ESV*

Reflection

Forty lashes minus one. The punishment the Law prescribed. The beating the Apostle Paul endured at least five times during the course of his ministry. And possibly, the very beating Jesus endured before his crucifixion.

We don't know if this was the number of lashes Jesus received, or if the Roman soldiers exacted an even more severe punishment. But that one lash — the one lash that was withheld by the Law — symbolizes *grace*.

It is deserved, but never given.

To the guilty who offered their backs to the whips in accordance with their punishment, those brutal seconds awaiting the final, searing crack of rope or bone against bare flesh, were spared.

Forty lashes, *minus one*.

Here, in this small, unremarkable phrase, lies the power of the gospel. That after thirty-nine days of reflection on our sin, we find that we, too, are spared, by grace through faith. That someone stood in our place, and bore the humiliation and shame our sin so richly deserved. That our feelings of guilt, or remorse, or disgust at the state of our hearts, were nailed firmly to the cross.

Carried by the very *One* we rebelled against.

And that our hope of eternal life was sealed forever when he rose from the grave.

This is the joy and the hope and the beauty of the gospel. We deserved all of the punishment, the crushing separation from God, the brutal humiliation of the crown of thorns and the purple robe,

the nail prints and spear. And yet Jesus bore it all and rose victorious from the grave, granting us new life and the free gift of salvation by grace through faith.

This is our God. The God who created the heavens and the earth. A God of righteousness and holiness, who loves you deeply, who stands outside of time and yet entered it willingly to endure the cross, for our sake.

For my sake.

Minus one.

Candlelight Prayer

Jesus, you were pierced for my transgressions, you were crushed for my iniquities; the punishment that brought me peace was on you, and by your wounds I am healed (Isaiah 53:5). I am so humbled and so grateful that you chose to take my place and my punishment. I owe everything to you; you are the one who triumphed over my sin. I praise you and thank you for the forgiveness you extend, the incredible gift of new life, and the hope of eternity with you. Amen.

A Thread of Hope

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. *Romans 8:39-39 ESV*