

Lent Meditations 2013



THROUGH LENT WITH THE WORDS OF JESUS

**TRINITY ANNUAL CONFERENCE (TRAC)
The Methodist Church in Malaysia**

A WORD FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Reader,

Lent comes early this year; Ash Wednesday falls on 13th February. We may have barely caught our breath coming into the New Year. Time seems to move even more quickly these days.

The season of Lent is an invitation to pause, to slow down a little, to linger with the Lord who loves us. Linger we must, for time in His presence is important. Important too, are Jesus' words to us - Parables, teachings, instructions, commands, - all of them leading us to life. This edition of the Lent Meditation has a group of youthful and young at heart writers, who will help us reflect on Jesus' words.

The format is the same as that used in previous years, the Bible text(s), the devotional commentary, a section to reflect on how the text connects with us and a prayer. Sundays draw us away from words as pictures help us reflect on the glory and grandeur of God in creation.

May this Lent draw us closer to Jesus as we walk with him to the cross, learn to take up our own cross, die with him and then rise again with him to new life!

The Editors

DATES OF LENT 2012

Ash Wednesday: 13th February 2013

Easter Sunday: 31st March 2013

Lent 2013

FOREWORD

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.”
Luke 9:23-24

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus!

This year has brought many changes, particularly in the Trinity Annual Conference. As I reflect on these changes, I am reassured that our God is the one constant in our lives of constant change. And the words of our Lord Jesus are the unchanging foundation of our lives when we take them in and allow them to shape us. Thus, the choice for this year’s meditations was the words of Jesus as he taught and preached and healed, culminating in his seven sayings on the cross.

This year’s Lent Meditations is truly the result of teamwork: writers, contributors of pictures and editors. The Board is glad to have new writers try their hand at the Meditations. The Board is also very glad that young people are taking time to take Jesus’ words and mull on them.

On behalf of the Board, I want to thank the writers and photographers from Whispering Hope Methodist Church under the able leadership of Dr Samuel Ong, and the two editors.

It is the prayer of the Board that these Meditations will draw you closer to the Lord Jesus Christ, whose words are eternal life to us.

Grace and peace,
Rev Yong Wai Yin
Chairperson
Board of Worship and Music, TRAC

Bible Reading:

Matthew 4:12-17; 3:13-17; 4:1-11; Mark 1:14-15; Job 42:3-6; Isaiah 9:1-2; Galatians 5:19-21

Key Verse:

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent for the kingdom of God has come near." Matthew 4:17

Devotional Commentary:

"From that time" marks the onset of Jesus' public ministry. By now, Jesus had been baptized in water by John, and the Spirit by God the Father, and affirmed as His beloved Son. And in the power of the Spirit, he overcame temptation to sin by the devil thrice in the wilderness. John the Baptist had been arrested, and Jesus withdrew to Capernaum in Galilee to *"proclaim the good news of God."*

Jesus' proclamation was, *"The kingdom of heaven (God) has come near (is at hand)"*. This announcement was good news, not only for Jews in Galilee, but for all peoples everywhere, for all time. The prophet Isaiah had foretold that, "the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." In Jesus that dawn has come - Light to dispel the darkness of sin, and Life to overcome the sting of death. Jesus the Christ – God come in the flesh – was not only herald of the message but be the embodiment of the message as well!

How then do we enter *"the kingdom of heaven?"* Jesus tells us, *"Repent"*. To repent is to stop and take a hard look at ourselves, acknowledge the darkness of sin in us, confess them before God and resolve to be done with them, then turn around and walk hand-in-hand with Christ towards God. The way to God, the truth about God, and the life of God can only be found in Jesus. Only Jesus can baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire i.e. to cleanse us wholly, to renew us, and to give us a new life.

Ash Wednesday is a day of repentance and marks the beginning of Lent, a 40-day period, which alludes to the separation of Jesus in the desert to fast and pray. Ashes were used in Biblical times to express mourning. Dusting oneself with ashes was the penitent's way of expressing sorrow for sins

and faults. It is appropriate therefore, as we begin Lent, to begin with confession and repentance.

Over to You:

What do you need to confess to and repent from to make real the presence of God in Christ in your life this Lenten season?

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, as we are tempted by the devil this season of Lent, help us to remain steadfast in prayer and fasting and dependence on Spirit so that we may overcome the wiles of the evil one. Amen.

The Parable of the Wheat & Weeds

Bible Reading:

Matthew 13:26-30, 36-41

Key Verse:

“Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them up in bundles to be burned, then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.” Matt 13:30

Devotional Commentary:

In this parable Jesus is saying that both good and evil will co-exist till the end of the age. The angels will then gather up the evil ones and throw them into the fiery furnace while the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

Key Impressions:

- 1) ***The surreptitious act of Satan - v25*** “...while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away”.
The evil one does not play by the rules and he will make every malicious effort to corrupt the kingdom of heaven. As children of God we must be alert to his subtle schemes and not be deceived by his lies, accusations or temptations lest we become “weed-like” instead of Christ-like.
- 2) ***The bewilderment of the servants – v 27, 28*** “...Where then did the weeds come from? ...Do you want us to go and pull them up?”
Oftentimes, we too are equally bewildered by events, especially when evil seems to triumph over good. Let us take comfort in knowing we have the privilege of going to our Lord for answers, counsel and help.
- 3) ***The sovereignty of our Lord – v30*** “Let them both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters...”
The Lord is sovereign. He is in control and will act at the appropriate time. Nonetheless, we sometimes question His action or the lack of it. What we do not realise is that God could be showing us grace by His perceived inaction. “No,” he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them.”

Over to You:

- 1) What are the weeds in your life that need to be cleared so that your walk with the Lord is not hindered?
- 2) How often do you seek His presence for counsel and help with questions you struggle with?
- 3) In what ways can you express your gratitude to our Sovereign God for His abounding grace to you this Lent?

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, thank You for Your Son Jesus Christ, whose death on the cross made us righteous in Your sight. Enable us by Your Spirit to walk unwaveringly in the light of Christ and so shine before men that they may be drawn into Your kingdom. Amen.

Parable of the Mustard Seed

Bible Reading:

Matthew 13:31-32

Key Verse:

“Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.” Matt 13:32

Devotional Commentary:

In this parable Jesus uses the tiny mustard seed growing into a tree to illustrate the growth potential of the kingdom of heaven. The first disciples began the daunting work of scattering the seeds of the kingdom in faith and obedience amidst fierce opposition. Now, two thousand plus years later we see the evidence of Jesus’ words, the mustard seed has indeed grown into a tree.

Key Impressions:

1) Ordinary men chosen to do extraordinary work.

An often used encouragement to assure those called upon to serve is that the Lord will equip those whom He calls. When Jesus picked his first disciples they were not extraordinary achievers, yet he entrusted them to spread His message of salvation to the very ends of the world. Empowered and emboldened by the Spirit, these ordinary men grew in stature and grace when they attempted extraordinary feats for the Lord.

2) Growth over time and not overnight.

From instant mee to Instagram (a facility to put pictures on the Internet quickly) we live in an age of expecting quick results for almost everything. This mindset, when applied to our work for the Lord, will meet with frustration, disappointment, discouragement or even despair when our expectations are not realised. Let us be challenged to remain steadfast and committed to our calling, leaving the growth and harvest of our efforts in God’s hands.

3) **A welcomed rest for the weary**

The demands of this world can wear out one's soul if we live by its values and expectations. The gospel offers a different world view, a heavenly one that refreshes the soul and revives the spirit. May the Lord find us faithful in telling the lost and weary the Good News, inviting them into His kingdom so that they can find rest and salvation for their souls.

Over to You:

- 1) What is the Lord calling you to do to help grow His kingdom? How convinced are you that He will equip you for the work?
- 2) Are you discouraged that your work for the Lord looks like mustard seeds? Take heart, we see seeds, He sees trees. How resolved are you to stay committed, trusting Him with the outcome?
- 3) With whom will you share the love of Jesus and His offer of salvation this Lent? Will you ask God for the opportunity and the courage to do so?

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, we pray for grace to respond joyfully when called to serve You. May we have the courage to attempt great things for You even though we feel small and inadequate, trusting You to equip us for the task. Amen.

Parable of the Yeast

Bible Reading:

Matthew 13:33

Key Verse:

“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour and it worked through the dough.” Matt 13:33

Devotional Commentary:

In this parable Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to yeast, a leavening agent in baking, illustrating how a little yeast can have a transforming effect on a lot of flour. In the mustard seed parable, the emphasis is on the growth of the kingdom, while this parable emphasizes the impact the gospel can have on the lives of people and the transformation of their communities.

Key Impressions:

1) A regenerated heart reaches out

Once our hearts are “strangely warmed,” to quote John Wesley, we can never be the same again. A heart filled with God’s love seeks to fulfil His will for His people. John Wesley reached out to the poor and lost of his era, bringing the gospel out to fields where they were. His actions not only transformed his community and country, but through the centuries, the work he began has had an impact on the whole world. There is an estimated 70 million Methodists world-wide

2) Communities and countries changed by love

The Methodist Church through the ages has expressed God’s love in visible forms, establishing hospitals, schools, orphanages, homes for the elderly, shelters for the homeless, as well as in many other ways. Countless lives have been transformed for the better by these acts and countless hearts have been touched by Christ’s love. We may not be involved in any big social concerns projects, but our simple acts of love can positively impact those around us. God can use your care and kindness for others to strangely warm their hearts and draw them to Him.

Over to You:

- 1) Will you reach out in God's love and share your heart-warming experience with someone today? Pray for the person's heart to be receptive to His love.
- 2) What pressing needs do you see in your home, church or society? Will you pray for God to show you where and how you can contribute to make a difference for Him?

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, may we be open to opportunities each day to make a difference in the lives of the people You put in our path. May we share with others Your love and joy, wisdom and guidance, compassion and care without counting the costs, so that a lasting impact may be left on their lives. Amen.



Parable of the Hidden Treasure/Pearl Merchant

Bible Reading:

Matthew 13:44-46

Key Verse:

“When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.” Matt 13:46

Devotional Commentary:

In both the parable of the hidden treasure and the pearl merchant, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a priceless treasure that, upon discovering it, one would be willing to give up everything to acquire it.

Key Impressions:

1) Pricey treasures that satisfy fleetingly

The worth of earthly treasures is measured in monetary terms, the higher the price, the greater its value and appeal. The more treasures one has in one's possession, the wealthier he is in the eyes of the world. Many mistakenly think they will be happy and contented when they acquire these pricey treasures. Unfortunately, such contentment does not last and the need to satisfy an inner hunger inevitably resurfaces. The hunger for God in us is never quite quenched till we find our priceless treasure in Christ our Saviour.

2) The priceless Treasure that satisfies for all eternity

When our search for God takes us to the cross, we cannot help but recognise the depth of God's love for us. Jesus was crucified on the cross for our sins. At the cross we are humbled to know that no earthly treasure can redeem us, only the blood of Christ. In Christ, our sins are forgiven and we have the hope of eternal life. Our knowledge of Christ and the promise of our heavenly inheritance is the only treasure we need in this life and the life to come. Truly, the things of this world grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.

Over to you:

- 1) What earthly treasures do you have that you need to surrender to the Lord? Will you trust Him to satisfy your deepest needs?
- 2) How prepared are you to share the reason for the hope you have? Who do you know that are searching for God or are need of Him? Will you point them to Christ by sharing the gospel with them?

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, we pray for our loved ones and friends who need You in their lives. May You will lead them to Your Son, Jesus Christ. When that happens, let them see Your glory and grace, causing them to joyfully give up their treasures of this world for Jesus. Amen.

Parable of the Fishing Net

Bible Reading:

Matthew 13:47-50

Key Verse:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish.” Matt 13:47

Devotional Commentary:

In this parable, Jesus uses the analogy of a lake for the world, a net for his offer of salvation and all kinds of fish for humankind. When the fishermen hauled a full net to shore, they sat down to sort and keep the good catch, but the bad ones were thrown away. Again, Jesus is telling the disciples that at the end of age, the wicked would be separated from the righteous and thrown into the fiery furnace.

Key Impressions:

1) Non-exclusive evangelism

Everyone, the Bible says, has sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. Jesus came to die on the cross for the sins of the whole world. And anyone who calls on Jesus as Saviour and Lord will receive salvation, and be spared from God’s wrath and judgement. But they cannot call on Jesus if they have not heard of Him. The challenge for us, then, is to bring the good news to them. It may require us to go beyond race, culture or socio-economic barriers to evangelise. It is even more challenging if we feel the need to go beyond borders to the remotest of people groups. That would be embracing Jesus’ call for us to make disciples of all nations in its fullness.

2) Commitment to a cause

Commitment to Jesus is to be committed to his cause of saving the lost without reservation or counting the costs of our discipleship. Jesus calls us to follow him and he will make us fishers of men. The task of casting nets and hauling the catch to shore is back-breaking. We must be prepared for hard work and personal sacrifice as we reach out to the lost for our Lord. When we answer the call to be fishers of men, we are making a commitment to pick up our cross daily to follow Him.

Over to You:

- 1) How prepared are you to share the gospel with someone who may be of a different race, culture or social-economic standing from you? If God is calling you to bring the gospel to unreached people groups, how willing are you to obey? Pray and seek counsel from your pastor or church elders.
- 2) What in your life may be stopping you from being fully committed to the cause of Christ? What changes do you need to make to follow Christ without reservation?

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, let us view the lost with Your eyes and Your heart, and help us overcome whatever bias and prejudices that may prevent us from reaching out to them. Grant us Your grace and courage to go beyond our comfort zones and touch their hearts with Your love so that they too may know Christ as their Saviour and Lord. Amen.

Who is the Greatest?

Bible Reading:

Matthew 18:1-4

Devotional Commentary:

After centuries of being subjected foreign rule, the Jews often longed for the coming of the prophesied great military leader—much like David—who will win battles for them, rid them of oppressive rulers, and reestablish the glorious kingdom of Israel (Jeremiah 23:5-6).

Under such eager anticipation, many were hopeful for Jesus' Spirit-enabled ministry to culminate with the liberation of the Jewish people from Roman occupation (John 6:14). This train of thought undoubtedly led the disciples to question Jesus on who will have the highest pecking order in the kingdom of "heaven". Their query, simple as it may sound, was not to be taken lightly, for the allure of authority and prestige were so great that it even caused the apostles to become indignant with each other (Mark 10:35-41).

For such demonstration of worldly desire, Jesus could have responded with a rebuke. Instead, he demonstrated God's patient nature by answering them in earnest. By serving others in humbleness, and to not seek for high social standing but to be dependent on God's providence, these were Jesus' answers to those who aspire to be truly great. Many were probably dumbfounded by his answers, which were contrary to the values and percepts of this world. But to those who understood Jesus' message, I wouldn't be surprised if they were rejoicing in their hearts because they saw a glimpse of the patience and sincerity of our Father who truly knows what is best for His people.

Over to You:

As Paul eloquently puts it, "To live is Christ and to die is gain." His life exemplifies the trials and tribulations all believers must go through.

Do you find it challenging to serve the Lord in your ministry? Perhaps you are discouraged because your work is not appreciated? Or are you ashamed because you are charged with seemingly menial chores? If you have, then take heart because to be the greatest, one must become the

least. To serve and not to be served. Jesus himself showed us great humility by stooping low to wash his disciples' feet. As you continue serving the Lord, keep in mind Jesus' encouragement to his disciples: "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Prayer:

Dear Lord, thank You for Your patience and mercy in dealing with man. Search me, O God, and make known the desires of my heart. Help me to strive for things that are eternal, and not on worldly treasures that will perish. Give me the strength and encouragement, O King, to be Your faithful servant in this world that will soon come to pass. Amen.

Forgiveness

Bible Reading:

Matthew 18:21-35

Devotional Commentary:

In this passage, Jesus reveals just how precious each child of God is to the Father (18:12-14), and the dire consequences of those who causes His followers to stumble (18:6). But how do we react when we are at the receiving end of man's evil deeds – especially from fellow believers?

Consensus from rabbinic discussion would be to forgive a brother with repeated sins up to three times. There is no room for the fourth. Peter, eager to show himself worthy, went further by asking whether one should forgive a repeated sin up to seven times. Against Peter's expectation, Jesus replied with an astonishing seventy times seven times! This obviously was impossible to comprehend, let alone carry out. In essence, Jesus was pointing out that forgiveness for one another is not bounded by frequency or quantity, but as many times as required.

This new teaching is a reflection of how God deals with people who are repentant of their sinful deeds. God will forgive us and will continue to do so if we repent and come back to Him. As children of God, we then ought to do the same.

In the parable which ensued, Jesus told of a King who forgave a slave of his debt worth ten thousand talents. This was equivalent to 16,000 years of wages of a typical laborer – an impossible figure to repay even if his entire family was sold into slavery. This parable removed any doubt from the disciples that Jesus was serious when he said: “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.” (18:22)

Vengeance belongs to the Lord, and He will execute His justice. As for us, we are called to forgive others regardless of the nature and gravity of their sins.

Over to You:

Our Father in heaven was willing to sacrifice His one and only Son in exchange for our salvation. No words could express this act of love for us, and the realization of God's overpowering love often renders us to our knees in prayer and thanks giving.

If there is someone who could truly understand the extent of pain and anguish inflicted by others, it is none other than Jesus who took upon himself the full wrath of God, and Our Father in heaven who, by His own hands, executed His divine justice on His own Son.

Is there a sin too painful to forgive, too grievous to pardon? God knows! Draw close to Jesus, and he will give you the strength to show the same grace and mercy we all have experienced from God. Do not rely on your own determination and mercy, for it will surely fail. But draw close to Jesus, and he will give you rest.

Prayer:

Dear Jesus, thank you for your saving work on the cross. Through you we have received grace upon grace, and mercy upon mercy, because our transgressions number like the grains of sands in the sea. Help us O' Lord to forgive others just as You have forgiven us. We acknowledge that by our own strength, we will never be able to love and forgive those who have caused us much pain. But in You O' Lord, our hearts will find tranquility, like cool water poured on burning coal. In You O' Lord, we will find our rest and the strength to forgive. Amen.

Workers of the Vineyard

Bible Reading:

Matthew 22:1-10

Devotional Commentary:

It is only fair that you earn what you deserve! This merit based principle has been in practice in many societies for hundreds of years, and is very much alive and well today. In studies, sports, career, relationships, and for many, favor from deities, our success in life hinges on the amount of merit we garner through our natural abilities and personal achievements. In Singapore, this way of life can be encapsulated by the word *Kiasu*.

With the same outlook, many of Jesus' disciples would be able to sympathize with ply of the early workers mentioned in this provoking parable. Getting paid the same amount regardless of the duration of work is an antithesis to the norms of the society. It's just not *fair*.

Jesus on the other hand was alluding to the generosity of God with regards to the kingdom of heaven. It has nothing to do with the principles behind the payment of wages. But to set things straight, *since none of the workers were shortchanged* (20:13), arguments of unfair treatment can be confidently put aside.

The focus then is on God's wonderful yardstick used for judging us. "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2:17). In God's kingdom, we are not rewarded based our merits or personal achievements; for everything comes from God. No. Our meritocratic principles are set aside so that the grace of God can prevail (Isaiah 66:2), for the Lord values obedience, faithfulness, love, gentleness, meekness and a contrite heart above status, power and personal achievements. Through faithfulness and obedience in service to God, even the lowly will be exalted above the rest.

Over to You:

"Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?" (Daniel 4:30)

Nebuchadnezzar once boasted about his power and might, not realizing that everything he had came from God in the first place. God almighty responded with the following:

“You will be given grass to eat like cattle, and seven periods of time will pass over you until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes.” (Daniel 4:32)

Do we exalt ourselves because of our natural abilities? Do we, like the early workers of the vineyard or like Nebuchadnezzar himself, think that we are more deserving because of our achievements?

“All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, But the LORD weighs the motives.” – (Proverbs 16:2)

For this reason, if our motives are wrong, if we are boastful and proud, even if you were the first, you may end up being last. May we not fall into the same trap that has ensnared many.

Prayer:

Father, I pray that Your mighty hands will keep me from the being proud and arrogant. I know that everything I have comes from You. Help me not to despise others for whatever reasons. Fill our hearts with thanks giving, and grant us the strength, meekness and faithfulness to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice for Your sovereign plan. May Your kingdom come, may Your will be done. Amen.

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The Wedding Banquet

Bible Reading:

Matthew 22:1-10

Devotional Commentary:

In this sobering parable, we see God extending His invitation to all the peoples of the earth to enter the kingdom of heaven. He not only graciously repeats his invitation, but made known the feast's greatness in order to provide an incentive to attend it.

Unfortunately, the initial guests who had the privilege of receiving the invitation persistently refused to attend. They slight the king's invitation which is both an honor and a command, giving instead petty excuses not to attend. Some even went as far as to kill the king's messengers whose feet brought them the good news! Enraged, the king responded by destroying the murderers.

The king then extended his invitation to all, and it resulted in many – both good and bad – attending the banquet. Some however were not “dressed” for the occasion, and were rendered speechless and subsequently thrown out because they did not meet the credentials for attending the banquet. Clearly, many will receive God's invitation into His kingdom, but only the select few will be chosen.

Over to You:

“The heart is more deceitful than all else, and is desperately sick;

Who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9)

Foolishness would be the appropriate word for describing the guests in this parable who couldn't see the true value of the King's invitation. Ironically for many of us, our lives re-enact the same foolish actions told in this parable time and again. “I don't have the time”, “I need to tend to my business”, “The pursuit of career is more important”, “My love life is obviously more relevant”, “I don't see why I need to”, “Maybe in the future”, “Frankly I just don't give a penny's worth”, “Let me establish my life first, then I might reconsider when I am rich enough”, We are never short on excuses when it comes to shirking off God's invitation to live a life worthy of His calling.

Further, many will rejoice and willingly embrace the good news of great joy: salvation through the redeeming work of Jesus. Unfortunately, only a select few will take up their cross and follow Jesus. For those who do, they will be the select few who will feast with the King of Kings, and the Lord of Lords in His heavenly banquet. For the rest who accepted the “invitation” without wanting to do what is right, their fate is made clear in the parable.

How then will you live your life? I pray that God may grant you understanding and discernment to lead a blameless life, holy and pleasing to Him. May the Lord protect you and keep you from the fiery arrows of the even one.

Prayer:

Father, by Your mercy and grace we ask that You lead us to life everlasting. May we not be foolish. Draw us close to You, O' King. May we learn to hear Your voice and to obey Your commands every day of our lives. Amen.



The Ten Virgins

Bible Reading:

Matthew 25:1-13

Devotional Commentary:

Many longed to see the establishment of the kingdom of heaven but were not able to do so (13:17). It would therefore be nothing short of amazing to learn of the coming of God's kingdom through the promised messiah Himself. Jesus, through his earthly ministry, shared many parables on the kingdom of heaven; each masterfully conveying an important message to those who seek to enter it, and the dire consequences of those who choose to ignore it.

In this passage, we see two groups of people represented by the foolish and prudent virgins who were waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom. The prudent made preparations well in advance, while the foolish, for whatever reasons, were utterly unprepared for the momentous event. In addition, since the bridegroom was delayed, we know that there was ample time for all to be ready.

In the end, the long wait resulted in all the virgins falling “asleep”. When the bridegroom finally arrived, it was tragic to note the fate of the foolish that were caught unprepared. In desperation they turned to the prudent for help but to no avail. When the foolish finally realize what they should have done in the first place, the scripture shows that actions *after* the arrival of the bridegroom no longer counted. Once the gate is shut, there will be no second chance.

Over to You:

Make no mistake therefore that God has made clear the eternal consequences of those who choose to disregard the kingdom of heaven. Once we are denied entry, no amount of pleading will ever change God's decision. Even those who are already in God's kingdom cannot do anything to save us (Luke 16:26).

We will never know when we will finally fall “asleep”. We too will never know when God (the bridegroom) will return to judge the living and the dead. As you meditate on this parable, keep in mind that whatever we do

on earth will have eternal consequences. Many unfortunately will only come to the realization of this fact when it is already too late.

Are you prepared to stand before the Lord and His righteous judgement? I pray that you may be like the prudent virgins who got their priorities right.

Prayer:

Dear Jesus. We are so easily choked by life's worries and pleasures. Before we know it, it may already be too late for us to do what is right before your eyes. Protect us O' King from being led astray by the lies and schemes of the evil one. Help us O' Lord to set our priorities right, and enable us to act wisely in light of eternity. Amen.

His Sovereignty Over Possessions

Bible Reading:

Matthew 25:14-30

Devotional Commentary:

“Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness” (Matthew 15:23)

I used to think that God was unusually harsh and unfair in this parable. Why punish someone for not multiplying his assigned gold? It is not that he lost the gold; he just didn’t do anything with it! Isn’t God being a Shylock by demanding more?

But, if we say that a Christian’s life is a communal life, then a Christian does not live for himself but for others. The talents that God has given each of us is not for us to use (or not use) as we please, but for the furtherance of His work, be it in the local or universal church.

Talents are not possessions. They are given for stewardship and as blessings of grace. We serve with our talents for God's sake, for others' sakes and also for our own sake. Serving allows us to find our place in His Kingdom and His larger scheme of things. In not using and multiplying our God-given talents we are denying His gift to us and His sovereignty over us.

Over to You:

How is the use of my God-given gifts bearing witness to His sovereignty in my life?

Prayer:

*What can we give that You have not given?
And what do we have that is not already Yours?
All we possess are these lives we’re living
That’s what we give to You Lord!*

Humility in a Proud World

Bible Reading:

Matthew 5:3

Key Verse:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:3

Devotional Commentary:

I remember the tagline of a beauty product advertisement back in the 1970s that said, “If you have it, flaunt it!” I thought this summed up succinctly one of the “keys” to success in today’s world.

We are all too familiar with the fact that, to inherit the earthly kingdom, one has to “self-promote”, to shout out, to flaunt what we have. Contrast this with the “qualities” with which Christ says we are to inherit the kingdom of heaven.

Is it possible to be poor in spirit in a world that promotes self-aggrandizement? Only if we see ourselves as God sees us. It is when we see our poverty before Him that we realise that there is truly nothing we can boast about. This allows us to be humble before Him in spirit, mind, and in the values we hold. Only then can we boast not in ourselves and our accomplishments, but in Christ our Lord.

Over to You:

Meditate: To inherit the kingdom of heaven, Christ does not want us to be broken in spirit but to be poor in spirit.

Prayer:

Lord, it is so difficult to put You first above my own self. Teach me, Lord, to appreciate the power of humility and give me the humility to practise it. Amen.

Sharing God's Grief

Bible Reading:

Matthew 5:4

Key Verse:

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Matthew 5:4

Devotional Commentary:

Mourning is synonymous with death and loss. The past year, many of my friends and I had mourned the loss of one or both of our parents. Regardless the level of our preparedness, the passing of a loved one is often followed by a sense of regret – of words unsaid or said, of actions not taken or taken.

As I mourned my personal loss, I realised that mourning should not incapacitate us. Yes, I mourn, but I also act, seek closure and then, by the grace of God, move on.

Reflecting on my personal grief in the light of Christ's statement, *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted"*, I ask myself – in all honesty, do I share the acute grief of God towards sin? Do I mourn as deeply for wrong actions, thoughts and words carried out in spite of, and in the name of, God? And, if I do, what am I doing about it?

God's grief over sin spurred Him to send Jesus Christ to save us. If our mourning spurs us to repent, God's assurance is that we *will* find comfort in Him --- there is no relief from grief outside of God. We are comforted by the fact, when we turn to Him, He forgives our sins, erases our guilt, and reconciles us to Himself.

Over to You:

What are you are mourning in your life? How can you receive God's comfort for these?

Prayer:

Lord, teach me to grieve and mourn over sin as You do, and spur me into action towards repentance and reconciliation with You. Amen.

Survival of the “Meekest”

Bible Reading:

Matthew 5:5

Key Verse:

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Matt 5:5

Devotional Commentary:

Being in an industry where aggression and backstabbing in various forms are expected, I often equate meekness with weakness. If one is to climb the corporate ladder, being meek is not an option.

Can one be meek in a world where only the fittest will survive? It took me a long while to understand that meekness is not weakness. It is not about being passive and a pushover, but rather about choice.

I choose not to assert myself on others, even though I can, so that I can build up others within God's community and demonstrate God's love. Being meek requires strength – not physical strength, but strength of character underpinned by humility and love. Perhaps this is what it means when we sing, “And they’ll know we are Christians by our love”.

We inherit the earth not by being powerful and violent but when we seek God's will in our responses to life and its challenges.

Over to You:

How do we find a way through our aggressive passions and ambitious impulses to a life of more godly “meekness”?

Prayer:

*Lord, make me like You, please make me like You
You are a servant, make me one too
O Lord, give me Your strength everyday
To manifest Your kingdom life, to follow Your way*

Un-stunted Growth

Bible Reading:

Matthew 5:6

Key Verse:

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

Matthew 5:6

Devotional Commentary:

For many years I have been involved in a not-for-profit organisation that, among other issues, seeks to highlight the effects of hunger on children. When hunger is not met, the body feeds on itself. Over time, it would result in stunted growth of body and mind.

What happens then when we subdue or ignore our hunger and thirst for righteousness? We turn inward, become stunted in our spiritual growth and are self-centred and self-consumed.

Not to be mistaken for self-righteousness; righteousness is right-relatedness – to God and to society. Right-relatedness to God is to love the Lord God with all one's heart, soul, mind and strength; right-relatedness to society is to love our neighbour as ourselves.

God intends for us to live our lives in community. We don't live for self but for the community; we hunger and thirst for righteousness for that community. Our actions will determine our current and future witness for Christ within the community we live. And, if we consciously seek to live in right-relatedness to our fellow men and God, Christ – the Bread of Life and Living Water – will surely meet that hunger and thirst.

Over to You

If we seek out righteousness with the same fervour we seek out food, how much richer would our life be?

Prayer:

Lord, open our eyes that we may see Your presence in one another. Change our hearts, fill us with peace, give us the courage to forgive and unite us all in You. Amen.



God, My Compassion

Bible Reading:

Matthew 5:7

Key Verse:

"Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy." Matthew 5:7

Devotional Commentary:

"Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you? ... This is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." Matthew 18:33,35 (NIV)

Reading this reminded me of my own struggle with mercy. I expect others around me to be considerate, family and close friends to be sacrificial, understanding of my plight, kind, loving and helpful. Mostly, I expect perfection out of myself. With all these expectations it is no surprise that more often than not others (myself included) fall short of my expectations. Even God on occasions falls short of what I expect Him to do.

So many of us get disappointed with people around us. Being merciful is showing grace and compassion to others; especially those whom we feel do not deserve our love and care. These could be the foreign workers, refugees or that homeless man. Closer to home, it could be the best friend who wasn't present when you needed their friendship, that brother or sister who betrayed you, the missing father or the mother who didn't understand you. It might be the regrets and guilt we carry for the wrong choices we've made or the struggles to cope with our insecurity and inadequacy.

Today's verse tells us to have mercy. Just as God had mercy on us by sending His son to die on the cross for our sins, He urges us to have mercy on those whom we have wronged, by what they did or did not do. More than that, these acts of mercy are not born out of responsibility or "good" conduct but from the sincerity of our hearts. It is not something that comes naturally but whenever I find the burden too hard to bear, I remember God, my compassionate who so freely gave His son to die on the cross for me, taking with Him the burden of my sins, my wrongdoings, and the things that I fail to do.

"think how much more the blood of Christ cleans up our whole lives, inside and out. Through the Spirit, Christ offered himself as an unblemished sacrifice, freeing us from all those dead-end efforts to make ourselves respectable, so that we can live all out for God." Hebrews 9:14 (The Message)

Over to You:

Think of someone whom you need to show mercy and compassion to (yourself included) and consciously make an effort to pray for that person and share the compassion that God has shown us.

God, My Faithful Friend

Bible Reading:

Matthew 5:8

Key Verse:

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." Matthew 5:8

Devotional Commentary:

I sat down one day with a group of children and got to ask them this question, "What is God like?"

"Kind, loving, strong..." they all said. I replied them cheekily saying, "How do you know for sure? Have you seen God?"

"You can't see God, silly. He cannot be seen!" a young girl replied giggling at the silliness of the idea that one would be able to see God.

As human beings, we can sometimes be like that. Some of us laugh at the idea of seeing God because it sounds absurd but as I read through the Psalms, I truly believed that David saw God. The intimacy he experienced with God was as if he could see and touch God, as if God was his ever present and faithful friend. It is no wonder that God described David as "a man after my own heart".

I yearn to be able to see God like David did and Jesus tells us that the pure at heart will see God. Psalms 51 shows David's sincerity when confronted with his sin and his subsequent repentance. David's plea to God gives us a glimpse of what Jesus meant by the pure at heart. He had no false pretences before God. He knew that no matter what he did, he had God's unfailing love to rely on. David sought God's presence asking for forgiveness and for God to restore in him a pure heart. David knew that a pure heart was the key to the intimate communion that he had with God and it was not something he could gain by his own effort.

Being pure at heart does not mean that we are sinless or perfect but that our hearts are sincere and without false pretence when coming before God. It's like a no-holds barred relationship where we are contrite and transparent before God. I too learnt to struggle and lay bare before God in

my journey with Him and in the process found a faithful friend, just as the song below describes.

*Nothing you can do, could make Him love you more
Nothing that you've done, could make Him close the door
Because of His great love, He gave His only son
Everything was done so you would come*

Over to You:

Dare to "let your hair down" before God – be honest with God – and discover who God is to you.

God, My Redeemer

Bible Reading:

Matthew 5:9

Key Verse:

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Matthew 5:9

Devotional Commentary:

Do you recall the most popular answer to the question, "If you could change the world, what change would you bring about?" As a young girl, I remember watching beauty pageants and any aspiring beauty queen would answer, World Peace. I often wondered how such a common and cliché ideal could still remain so pertinent to the issues we face in our world, our country, our community and our families today. The ideal of world peace is one that is much sought after yet the most elusive of all ideals. Perhaps that is the reason why it remains relevant even in this day and age. So much effort has been put into attaining world peace, including the formation of a united body of countries, the United Nations yet somehow; we've never achieved world peace.

Our God is a God of reconciliation. The central theme of the bible revolves around the issue of reconciliation in particular, the relationship between God and man. One can tell that making peace between God and his creation is very important on His agenda as the theme of reconciliation is evident from the beginning of creation in Genesis. In fact, it is so important that Jesus likens peacemakers to be children of God. My mother-in-law would always tell my husband, "You're exactly like your late father, so low battery. Both of you tire out so easily." My husband's sisters say the same. Children often take after the distinct characteristics of their parents, hence allowing us to identify their parents by observing their physical looks and mannerisms. In the same way, we can be identified as children of God when we bear the heart for reconciliation in the likeness of our heavenly Father.

"Peacemakers" do not just refer to us keeping peace with one another or between our brothers and sisters. No, the role of a peacemaker extends to one that brokers peace between man and God. When others come to believe and praise God through our actions, our encouraging words or by

seeing the grace of God in our lives, we become peacemakers that help reconcile man with God. So, perhaps the key to world peace is in the reconciliation of man with God.

Over to You:

Remember God's redeeming grace in your life and pray for the courage to share His unending love and amazing grace to someone in your life.

*My chains are gone, I've been set free
My God my saviour has ransomed me
And like a flood, His mercy rains
Unending love, Amazing Grace*

God, My Inheritance.

Bible Reading:

Matthew 5:10

Key Verse:

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:10

Devotional Commentary:

"The Lord said to Aaron, 'You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites.'" Numbers 18:20 (NIV)

I often hear of Christian acquaintances, or friends feeling fear or anger when faced with persecution. That's normal. What intrigues me is when they seem surprised that they have been pushed out of their comfort zone to a place that is unfamiliar to them, a place that brings suffering and discomfort, a place of persecution. Persecution is part and parcel of a Christian's walk with God and the bible tells us, persecution is to be expected. In fact, as I read deeper into the verses that preludes Matthew 5:10, it seems that the verses before were meant to prepare us for persecution.

Matthew 5:7, points to our attitude towards our persecutors. Be merciful. Verse 8 reminds us that under persecution, our hearts remain sincere, transparent and contrite before God knowing that He is our saviour. Last but not least, in verse 9, we are taught how to respond to our persecutors, by being gracious and always in pursuit of brokering peace between them and God. Having come to an understanding of these verses in such a manner, I struggle to think how any Christian could hold to such high standards, especially when under persecution. As I thought about it, I remembered the words of a wise lady that I hold to high esteem in my heart. She once said this of her own struggle and I held her words dearly to my heart to this day.

"God is my inheritance, just as He was to the Levites whom He set apart to do His work."

The thought is further explained in Deuteronomy 10:8-9. While all the other tribes of Israel had land and were blessed with stocks of cattle and such, the Levites had none allotted to them. Instead, God declared to them, I am your inheritance. What a wonderful thought especially when we are faced with suffering because of our Christian faith. We have an eternal inheritance, the kingdom of God that cannot be taken away from us.

Over to You:

Thank God for being your inheritance when you get persecuted for believing in Him. Ask God for patience and perseverance to get through the season of persecution. Pray for help to be merciful to those who persecute you, to remain sincere and contrite towards God and finally for the will to share God's grace with your persecutors that they too may come to know God.

God, My Victory

Bible Reading:

Matthew 5:11, 12

Key Verse:

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Matthew 5:11,12

Devotional Commentary:

Being insulted, persecuted and accused of wrongdoings that one has not done is by far a blessing, by human standards. Hearing the stories of fellow Christians being detained, tortured and alienated by their own tribe in my dear homeland Malaysia made me think twice about this verse. As a young child, I had heard of this passage in Matthew 5 often enough but I could never imagine the gravity of persecution and injustice until I heard first-hand stories of it happening in my own country. My heart ached and went to them who had to suffer for the sake of their faith. Compared to the difficulties they faced, the troubles I encountered to be treated fairly in this country paled in comparison.

How does one come to terms with such suffering and be able to 'rejoice and be glad', I thought. God must be a sadist to expect anyone to do that. My thoughts brought me to the bridge of a song I sung so often in youth meetings growing up.

I'm pressed but not crushed persecuted not abandoned
Struck down but not destroyed
I'm blessed beyond the curse for his promise will endure
And his joy's gonna be my strength
Though the sorrow may last for the night
His joy comes with the morning

The lyrics are inspired by Paul's sharing in 2 Corinthians 4:9. It speaks of being beaten but not defeated. This short verse, sung to an upbeat tune, expresses so well the ideal that Jesus spoke of in today's verse. We might be mistreated for our faith in God but we cannot be destroyed. We have

the victory in Christ. Even then, I continued to struggle. I wasn't convinced. I needed a reason for the injustice and persecution that I see happening and 1 Peter 2: 19-25 provides exactly that. We can 'rejoice and be glad' not because we are happy to be suffering but because of the victory that Christ has gained for us by His unjust suffering on the cross. We follow in Christ's footsteps and endure the persecution for 'by His wounds we have been healed'.

Let us strive to understand, especially in this season of Lent, that when we fix our eyes on the cross, it is not about being fixated on the suffering and pain of the crucifixion but that out of the cross flows life, abundant life for us and all who believe as promised in John 10:10.

Over to You:

Thank God for the abundant life that He has provided for us by sending Jesus to die on the cross. As you reflect on the goodness of God in your life, pray for those in our country who suffer for righteousness sake. Pray that they may persevere and take heart that Christ is victorious and so are they. Pray also for the courage to stand with them and pray that the righteousness of God may reign in this country of ours.

Wealth – a blessing or a curse?

Bible Reading:

Luke 6:24

Key Verse:

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.” Luke 6:24

Devotional Commentary:

The word “woe” should make us sit up and take notice for it conveys a curse, a sense of grief, sorrow and trouble to come. It is saying “beware, watch out!”

Eugene Peterson in The Message paraphrased Luke 6:24 like this:

But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made.

What you have is all you'll ever get.

Jesus gives this warning because wealth often gives a false sense of security and fulfilment. In the chase for material things, many throw caution to the wind, employing any means to achieve an end, even if it means disobeying God's commandments. Broken relationships, dysfunctional families, loss of integrity and health are but some of the consequences. Greed blinds us and pride makes us arrogant and selfish. We forget the true source of our wealth; we forget that material things do not last forever.

Jesus does not condemn wealth or possessions, but rather, how we acquire them, how we use them and whether our love of them comes before our love of Him. Instead He calls us to “store up... treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy.” He calls us to remember the poor and needy, to give generously, cheerfully. More important than wealth is our relationship with God and our focus on what is eternal. Whatever we have – material possessions, talents, spiritual gifts – these are to be used to bless others. Lest we become too comfortable or conceited, let us remember that all these will pass away one day. They are ours for a season only.

Over to You:

What is your attitude towards possessions and money? Do you think of them as yours or God's? Ask God to help you develop a right attitude towards whatever He has blessed you with.

Prayer:

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face
And the things of the earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.*

Dear Lord, sometimes it's hard to resist the beckoning glitter of gold that seems to shine and lure us away. Help us to truly see and turn to You. Amen.

Further readings:

Luke 16:19-30; James 5:1-6, 1 Timothy 6:17-19



Hunger after God

Bible Reading:

Matthew 6:25a

Key Verse:

“Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry” Luke 6:25a

Devotional Commentary:

Go to the kitchen of any hotel or restaurant at the end of a business day and you will see good, edible food scrapped into the garbage bins. All over the developed world, tons of food is thrown out on a daily basis while many in third world countries are starving. What a waste, what a sin! Without a doubt, hunger is an alien word to those who are well fed. No wonder Jesus pronounced this woe on those whose tables overflow with abundance!

Our Lord Jesus was always concerned for those who are hungry, not just physically, but more importantly, spiritually as well. This verse speaks of those who lack nothing in terms of food, who eat well, drink well and have fulfilled lives while others find it hard to put a decent meal on the table. Will he who has more than he needs remember he who is hungry? Can a man well-fed and warm empathize with one who is cold and hungry?

When one’s stomach is full and life seems good, will a man still hunger after God?

“My life is just fine now, I don’t need God” is not an uncommon statement that is often heard when we broach the subject of religion with family and friends. But Jesus warns that if we find fulfilment in a full belly and our “good” life instead of seeking to live a life of holiness, the day will come when we hunger for Him and will not find Him.

Over to You:

Look out for someone who may be hungry physically or spiritually. How would you meet his/her hunger? What about yourself – do you hunger after God and find fulfilment?

Prayer:

Because Your love is better than life, my lips will glorify You.

I will praise You as long as I live, and in Your name I will lift my hands.

My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods, with singing lips my mouth will praise You.

(Psalm 63:3-5)

Laughter, Mourning and Weeping

Bible Reading:

Matthew 6:25b

Key Verse:

“Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.” Luke 6:25b

Devotional Commentary:

You are at a party. Laughter rings out, drinks flow freely and food is aplenty; everyone is having a good time. Then someone stands up and says – “Be warned, you will soon be weeping and mourning!” Would you think, “What a kill-joy, what a party pooper!” or would you sober up wondering if there is more to life after the laughter dies off and the party ends?

When Jesus pronounced woe on those who were around him, they must have wondered if he was just out to spoil the good time and life they enjoyed. Today, we still think that the good days will not end. Life can be all about personal gratification and indulgence, worldly pleasure, all fun and laughter. Our priorities are often not what they should be.

When our priorities in life are based more on self than God, the momentary happiness we derive from the things of this world are short-lived. Should things go wrong, that happiness will soon turn to mourning and weeping.

True joy comes from a consistent, personal relationship with Jesus; when the foundation of our faith and hope is built on the solid rock of God’s Word and His promises. The temptations of this world will continue to draw our focus away from the straight and narrow path. But we have Christ Jesus who faithfully walks with us if we turn in repentance and earnestly seek to be His disciple. He alone is our true source of joy and strength.

Over to You:

Do a spiritual check. Think about your priorities in life. What are the things which you find enjoyable, but which may not be in line with God’s commandments?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, I ask You to shine Your Light into my life and show me where I need your help. Give the courage and humility to face the truth, and the strength to make changes. I ask for Your mercy and grace, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Speaking the Truth

Bible Reading:

Matthew 6:26

Key Verse:

“Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.” Luke 6:26

Devotional Commentary:

In the Bible, we read of false prophets who, instead of the truth, spoke what kings and rulers wanted to hear. Telling the truth was risky because it could mean death if what was foretold angered or displeased the king. So rather than speaking honestly, they said what was pleasing and popular and were greatly praised by the hearers.

But God is a God of truth. Proverbs 12:22 says, “The LORD detests lying lips, but He delights in men who are truthful.” God expects us to speak truthfully and not be deceitful in speech in order to win praises from men.

Truth can hurt. Truth may mean being unpopular. Telling a lie may put us into the good books of someone and win us flattery. We may be tempted to speak only what is popular even if it is not true. We stand to lose a friend or the support of a community if what we say is unpleasant to the ear. What shall we do?

In bringing the Gospel to the people, the Apostles chose to speak the truth even though it meant that they faced persecution, suffering, pain and even death. But that did not deter them from obeying God. They chose to please God rather than men.

What about us? When we speak do we seek the accolade of men or do we seek God’s approval?

Over to You:

Is there a situation you are facing that calls for you to speak the truth even if it means being unpopular? Ask the Lord to give you wisdom and to speak with His love.

Prayer:

God of truth, when I speak, help me to always seek to please You rather than seek to please men. Help me speak the truth of Your love to those around me. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

Further readings:

2 Chronicles 18:1-27; Proverbs 12:19; 1 Thessalonians 2:3-6

Eat and Hunger No More

Bible Reading:

John 6:35-40

Key Verse:

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

Devotional Commentary:

Having seen the miraculous feeding of the 5000, the people came for more, perhaps hoping to see another miracle and get yet another free meal. But when Jesus declared that he was "the bread of life", they were puzzled because their minds were set on the physical bread.

In many cultures, bread is the staple food, consumed at almost every meal. Bread will satisfy our physical hunger and sustain us till our next meal – a temporary solution to a human need. However, the "bread" that God offers through Jesus feeds not our physical but spiritual need. Jesus says that those who eat and taste it will never go hungry or thirsty.

While we need to satisfy our daily physical hunger, even more important is the need to feed on the Word of God for our spiritual nourishment and sustenance. When we eat, we chew, savour the flavour and taste of the food, then we swallow. Likewise, with God's Word, we read, meditate, savour and delight in its taste, drawing on its nutrients for our hungering and thirsting souls.

God offers us complete satisfaction through our fellowship with Jesus, the Bread of Life and He calls us to feed on this bread which leads to eternal life and salvation. When we place our confidence and hope in Jesus, when we invite him into our lives, our soul's hunger and thirst will be completely satiated.

Over to You:

When you next eat bread, think of Luke 6:35 and what it means for you to savour the Bread of Life. Is He part of your daily diet?

Prayer:

*Fill my cup, Lord; I lift it up, Lord
Come and quench this thirsting of my soul
Bread of Heaven, feed me till I want no more
Fill my cup, fill it up and make me whole.*

Thank You Father, for Jesus, who came to show me the way to eternal life. Amen.

Walk in His Light and Live in His Life

Bible Reading:

John 8:12

Key Verse:

“When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” John 8:12

Devotional Commentary:

Even as He is the Light of the world, Christ calls us to be the light of world alongside Him. And, if we are to be the light of the world, we serve one purpose – to bring glory to God and His hope to the world.

Our lives should be such that others are drawn by His light in us. We are the instruments through which He shines.

There is no neutrality, no middle way in how we live our lives. Christ says *“Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but have the light of life”* -- either we are in the light with Christ, or in darkness without Him.

As His light of the world, we are to walk in His light and live in His life.

Over to You:

How can I live my life in a manner that others are drawn by His light in us?

Prayer:

Lord, help me to be Your source of ever-glowing warmth, light and hope in a world where darkness seemingly triumphs. Be the ever-flowing oil in my lamp that I may continue to burn now and till the end of my days. Amen.

To Enter or Not to Enter? A Choice with Eternal Consequences**Bible Reading:**

John 10:7-10

Key Verse:

“I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture.” John 10:9

Devotional Commentary:

In biblical days, when sheep returned to the fold from the day’s grazing, the shepherd would stand at the doorway of the pen to count his sheep and attend to their needs. After all had been accounted for and attended to, the shepherd would lay down across the doorway of the pen. The shepherd was the “gate”, preventing human or beasts from entering the pen to harm his sheep without his knowledge.

Key Impressions:**1) Our Shepherd, the gate to our salvation**

When confronted with the truth that the only way to eternal life is accepting Jesus as Saviour, it is not uncommon to meet with the response that all religions are the same. Sadly, whilst thinking their “road” will lead them to “Rome”, they are losing their way to Heaven! Jesus declares, “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved”. The alternative for those who choose not to enter will be eternal separation from God. When one makes the choice to enter into His fold, Jesus is the gate, our Shepherd at the doorway.

2) Our Shepherd, the gate to green pastures and protection

In the days of Jesus, shepherds had a close and special relationship with their sheep. As the shepherds tenderly cared for their sheep – feeding, grooming, tending to their wounds, keeping them from wandering and getting lost, and protecting them from wild beasts – the sheep responded by staying close to their shepherd; they listened to his voice and followed his commands. Psalm 23 expresses wonderfully what it means to have Jesus as our Shepherd. May we like the psalmist proclaim, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want”.

Over to You:

- 1) Is there anyone you know who is lost and needs to be directed onto the right path to Jesus? Will you pray for open doors to speak to them and for the Holy Spirit to give you the courage and wisdom to do so?
- 2) Read and meditate on Psalm 23. Do you need your Good Shepherd to lead you to quiet waters, or do you need His rod & staff to comfort you? Speak to Him.

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, thank You for giving us Your Son Jesus. With Him as our Saviour and Shepherd, You have provided for our needs, both now and forever more. We pray for those whom we love and know who have yet to accept Jesus as Saviour. May they acknowledge that he is the gate to their salvation. Amen.



Who is Jesus?

Bible Reading:

John 10:11-15

Key Verse:

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." John 10 : 11

Devotional Commentary:

Jesus does not say he is just any shepherd but a good shepherd. Traditionally, a shepherd was also the owner of the sheep and his role was to safe-guard his sheep at all costs. Armed with a staff, a shepherd keeps an ever watchful eye over his flock, lest some stray away or are attacked by other animals. Being the owner, he would even risk his life to ensure the sheep are unharmed. Whereas someone hired to do the job will unlikely risk his life protecting what does not belong to him. In this passage Jesus says that because we who are his sheep, belongs to him, he will lay down his life for us, which is what he did when he died on the cross for our sins.

Perhaps this point is just too mind-boggling for us to grasp. The world today is far too self-centred. To think of sacrificing ourselves for someone else is beyond our imagination. Yet this is exactly what Jesus promised – that those who know him and who are known by him – he will give his all for us!

Psalm 23 gives us a good description of what kind of shepherd we have in our Lord and Saviour. He leads us gently besides green pastures and quiet waters; He will protect us, comfort us, in Him our souls are at peace. Even in our darkest hour or when our enemies surround us, we need not be afraid for He will be with us. All the days of our lives His goodness and mercy abide with us.

What a wonderful assurance to have! The question we should ask is whether we know Jesus and are truly his sheep, obedient, trusting and willing to follow where he leads?

Over to You:

Read Psalm 23. Meditate on who Jesus is to you. Imagine him leading you and you following Him.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, I want to follow where You lead. Help me when I am tempted to stray from obedience and trust in You. Amen.

Awaiting a Scientific Breakthrough

Bible Reading:

John 11:25-26

Devotional Commentary:

In hopes that one day science would be able to restore life to the dead, people are subscribing to cryonics –the “science of using ultra-cold temperature to preserve human life in a state that will be viable and treatable by future medicine” (Alcor Life Extension Foundation, 2012). To ensure funding after your death, you’d have to start paying your membership fees now. Since nobody knows when science will be able to resurrect you, a hefty amount should also be allocated to continue your vitrification because if your family cannot afford your freezing lodging, you’d have to be thawed – without your consent.

As Christians, we know that Jesus is the resurrection and the life. He didn’t just make some wishy-washy claim that if you turned over your entire lifesavings to him, then maybe a scientific breakthrough would someday resurrect you. Rather he said that anyone who believes in him will never die. He even substantiated his claim by actions – he messed up every funeral he went for; restoring not just physical life, but also spiritual life.

Over to You:

Despite Christ’s demonstration and guarantee of resurrection and life, people would rather invest everything they have for something so obscure in hopes of attaining immortality.

- Do you believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life?
- With confidence of eternal life in Christ, how then should you be living your life?

Prayer:

Many times Lord, we fall into the trap of investing our lives in things of this earth that are temporary and have no guarantee. Remind us when we stray that our treasure is eternal life in You. Amen.

What is the meaning of life?**Bible Reading:**

John 14:1-7

Devotional Commentary:

In the hustle and bustle of the city, we see people going about their busy lives; attending meetings, rushing deadlines, breaking every traffic law to get to appointments... but to what end? If you take the time to listen to some of these people, you'd hear the same theme running across the board: What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of all the anxiousness, stress, unending work, unreasonable expectations, injustice, etc. that demands all of our energy 100% of the time?

In Viktor Frankl's, "Man's Search for Meaning", he postulates that people experience existential stress because of a lack of meaning in their lives. A survivor of the Holocaust, he revealed that even in the face of constant humiliation and threat of death, what brought him through the ordeal was the ability to find meaning amidst the hopelessness of his circumstances.

Frankl was spot on. Without meaning, life is futile. How then can we find meaning in this anxiety filled-routine-21st century life of ours? In this passage we find the answer! Meaning in life can only be found in Jesus Christ. He is the way, the truth and the life!

Over to You:

Jesus is the WAY

There are only two ways: The narrow way or the wide way. Matt 17:13-14 tells us what to expect and the implications of choosing both ways. Which would you choose? What meaning do you find in the "way" you choose?

Jesus is the TRUTH

The truth sets you free (John 8:32): Truth brings freedom. It also exposes every dark secret sin that you harbour. Will you embrace this truth? What meaning will you find in being free?

Jesus is the LIFE

Life of abundance (John 10:10): Jesus came that we may have a full life;

unlike the things of the earth that promises good things, but only kills and destroys. Which life would you choose? What does abundance in Christ mean to you?

Prayer:

Lord, we have so much on our plates that we are more “human doing” than “human being.” Help us to find our purpose and our meaning in You, the giver, author and sustainer of life. Amen.

Fullness in Nothingness**Bible Reading:**

John 15:1-8

Devotional Commentary:

At some point in life, some of us may have experienced some form of brokenness... emptiness... hopelessness.... So we cloth ourselves with branded clothes; flaunt certain body parts; arm ourselves with fancy gadgets. But it's not enough. We mask our pain with humour; shield our loneliness with cynicism; fuel our esteem with strings of A's; bask in the glory of our children's success; buy million dollar cars, houses, stocks... just so that we can feel some sense of meaning... like we somehow matter. Yet more often than not, we still feel insignificant. We grope around for something- anything to hide our nakedness from ourselves, from others and (stupidly) from God; just like Adam and Eve. But deep within, we know it. We know that God knows it. So when will we stop hiding behind the façade of our fig leaves and find fullness of life in the Vine?

Over to You:

Many of us CLAIM to be in the Vine yet are not bearing fruit. Hear ye, hear ye! Every branch in the Vine that does not bear fruit will be removed! Do we really want God to take such a drastic action before we come back to Him?

Prayer:

You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever (Psalm 16:11). Amen.

Another Fundamental Error: I know what I'm doing!**Bible Reading:**

Luke 23:32-38

Devotional Commentary:

As an educator, it is my responsibility to point it out when students make mistakes. More often than not, students get very defensive when I try to point out flaws in their work. One particular case that still befuddles me was when a student demanded why marks had been deducted. When I pointed out a fundamental error, he gave me this incredulous look and started firing justifications for his decision. This bright kid knew exactly what he wanted and earnestly thought that he was doing it right. Sounds familiar?

From our human perspective, we plan to the best of our abilities our days, our weeks and our futures. We make decisions that, to us, are fair, logical, wise, efficient and accurate. So the natural response when someone barges into our lives to tell us that what we've been doing is wrong is to counterattack. Who does this person think he is to tell me how to live my life?

Jesus' opponents thought they were doing the right thing too. How could Jesus claim to be the King of the Jews, or the Messiah, or even equate himself with God? So, with their limited viewpoints, they condescendingly mocked, tortured and crucified the Messiah. In agony, the Creator of heaven and earth, who knew exactly what he was doing, hung on the cross and said, "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing."

Over to You:

Do you have the tendency to get defensive when corrected? Why? Why not?

Prayer:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting (Psalm 139:23-24). Amen.

The Fear of God: The Road to Paradise

Bible Reading:

Luke 23:39-43

Devotional Commentary:

I don't know about you, but like an elevator, my spiritual life has its ups and downs. During my spiritual hypomania, I'm able to see God's hand in everything; I am contented, patient and optimistic. And then comes the low where suddenly, God seems distant and... irrelevant.

When I look at my non-Christian friends, I very well understand why God isn't necessary. They make good money, have good relationships, are intelligent, have bright futures... Why bother with a God who demands so much when life is great? I get to do what I want, when I want, the way I want. This is paradise... until the economy collapses, cancer strikes, depression hits, war erupts...

Like the thief on the cross, we question and bargain with God, "Are you not the Christ? Save me, for your name's sake. Heal me so that people will know you are really a powerful God. All glory and honour will be yours, O Lord." Yes, we are masters at twisting our evil intentions and presenting them in such godly and humble fashions. Seriously, who do we think we are we bluffing? The repentant thief rebuked, "Have you no fear of God at all?"

Over to You:

God didn't bless us so that we wouldn't need Him. He wants us to enjoy paradise even on earth, but that can only be possible when He is in the picture. Who is God in your life? How significant is He to you?

Prayer:

Lord, we're so sorry that we have often found You irrelevant. When pride gets in our way, please allow us to fall so that we will depend solely on You. Remind us that though You are a loving God, You are also the God of judgment and wrath. May we learn to fear You because paradise can only be experienced in Your presence. Amen.



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No please, not my son!**Bible Reading:**

John 19:25-27

Devotional Commentary:

I'm not a mother, so I cannot imagine the pain a mother would feel seeing her children suffer. Just seeing my friends experience hard times dissolves me to tears; what more a parent who has nurtured a child from conception? We're familiar with the saying, "No parent should have to bury a child." Simeon had warned Mary that, "... a sword will pierce your soul..." (Luke 2:35), and here we see Mary standing at the foot of the cross as her son hangs there dying unjustly.

Why should Mary have to give Jesus up to death at the very hands of those he reached out to? Why should God the Father make His Son the sacrificial lamb to restore relationship with the ungrateful human race that curses Him? In the world that I live in, parents go to great lengths to protect and fight for their children's "rights." Educational institutions are maligned and sued for trying to discipline children. The church is told to mind its own business when trying to keep children accountable and teaching them God's ways. We criticise our pastors left, right and centre and then wonder why no one wants to be a pastor. Why should we give up our children to serve Christ's unfaithful bride?

On the other hand, why did God give up His only Son? Why did Jesus surrender to God's will? Why have some parents dedicated their children to God? Why have many servants of Christ given up their high paying jobs and comfortable lifestyles to subject themselves to perpetual disparagement? Because they know that no matter how painful the price, the eternal results greatly outweigh current suffering (Romans 8:18).

Over to You:

- As parents, can we give up our children as Abraham gave up Isaac; as Hannah, Samuel; as Mary, Jesus; as the Father His only begotten Son?
- As disciples of Christ, are we willing to give up the luxuries that this world affords, pick up our cross and follow him (be it in fulltime ministry or the marketplace)?

- Can we remember that our pastors and teachers are also somebody else's son/daughter, father/mother, husband/wife? Can we encourage them and appreciate their sacrifices rather than be the soldiers that mock and sneer?

Prayer:

Lord, You have blessed us with so much; but we still complain that we are "suffering." Help us to look beyond ourselves and see things through Your eyes; in the light of eternity that we may be contented with what we have and be willing sacrifices for You. Amen.

Forsaken?**Bible Reading:**

Mark 15:33-34

Devotional Commentary:

This verse has always confused me. Did the Father really forsake Jesus? Or was it just that Jesus felt forsaken by the Father even though his Father was there? Theologians have differing opinions. Some say that because Jesus was made sin (2 Corinthians 5:21), God being holy had to turn His back. Others say that God was merely forsaking the humanness of Jesus because he had taken the sins of the world upon himself, but his divine nature cannot be separated from God. Yet others say that it is not possible for God to abandon His own Son because they are one (see John 10:30; 16:32). So debate continues and on this side of heaven, we may not know what really happened that day.

Then again, unlike other gods, our God is not some abstract deity that wants to remain mysterious. Rather, if we look at God's nature, He wants to be known to us. So perhaps instead of asking whether God forsook Jesus and why, the better question to ask is: Why did Jesus cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

If I said, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be thy name", would you be able to continue the entire prayer? If you have memorised the Lord's Prayer, you could. So if we look at Jewish culture in Jesus' time, everyone would have been taught from young to memorise Scripture. Boys and girls would begin learning Scripture from their mothers and boys would later continue their education in the synagogues. Unlike us, requiring the help of Bible footnotes to tell us Jesus was quoting Psalm 22, Jesus knew that those witnessing the crucifixion would know their Scripture and be able to continue the entire psalm. After 40 hours of torture and now hanging on the cross, talking would be agony. Yet Jesus, seeing the women and his disciples in distress still wanted to communicate and comfort them. What better way than to use Scripture that had been etched into their hearts.

Over to You:

- Read Psalm 22 and discover that Jesus was trying to tell the witnesses of the crucifixion.
- How well do you know Scripture? In times of anguish, do you cling to scripture to pull you through?

Prayer:

God Almighty, we often take Your Word for granted; for that we are so sorry, Lord. Help us to treasure Your Word in our hearts that we might not sin against You (Psalm 119:9-16). Amen.

Bible Reading:

John 19:28-29; Psalm 69:21

Devotional Commentary:

Jesus Christ was human. He walked and talked. He slept and wept. And in the encounter with the Samaritan woman by Jacob's well (John 4:6, 7, 31), Jesus was tired, thirsty and hungry after a long journey from Judea to Sychar.

Jesus knew that his work as an obedient Son on behalf of God the Father was now done and death was imminent. Dehydration had set in as he hung on the cross under the burning Palestinian sun, scourged and bleeding. Despite his agony and his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth, he said, "I am thirsty", in order to fulfil scripture (Psalm 69:21). So the soldiers put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. This was not the wine mixed with myrrh (Mark 15:23), which was a sedative to dull the senses, and which Jesus refused. This vinegar wine was a cheap sour wine used by soldiers, and by taking it, Jesus' life and pain would be prolonged.

All the verbal quotations of scripture made by Jesus during his crucifixion came from David's suffering Psalms (Psalms 22:1; 31:5; 69:21). In quoting the Old Testament and fulfilling it, we are reminded that every part of Jesus' passion was not only in the Father's plan of redemption but also a consequence of the Son's direct obedience to it.

And because of his obedience, Jesus has become the wellspring of water gushing up to eternal life for everyone who will drink of it. Vine mixed with vinegar or the water from Jacob's well, or whatever that seems to satisfy us in life for now e.g. money, sex and power, might quench our thirst for a while. But our thirst will never be fully quenched. We will be left thirsting, and we will die. But Jesus offers us living water – one that will satisfy fully, both now and for eternity.

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." John 6:35

Over to You:

What are you thirsting for? How are you quenching your thirst?

Will you come to Jesus for the living water, and never be thirsty again?

Prayer:

Dear God, our Father, wash me of my unhealthy thirsts, and make me thirst always for Christ, the Living Water. Amen.

Bible Reading:

Luke 23:44-46; Mark 15:25

Devotional Commentary:

Crucifixion began at the third hour (9 am), and at the sixth hour (noon) darkness fell over the entire land and lasted till the ninth hour (3 pm). Jesus' cry echoes Psalm 31:6. It contains an address ("*Father*"), and a statement of faith ("*into Thy hands, I commit my spirit*").

Throughout his life and work, Jesus' relationship with the Father was one of submission to and love for the Father. The two were one and inseparable. *"I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the whole world may know that I love the Father."* John 14:31. As is in his life and ministry, so also in near-death, Jesus uttered, *"Father."*

Then Jesus said, *"Into your hands I commit my spirit."* He who was God had given up heaven's glory, to take on the status of a slave, to be born as a human being. In his life and work, he was obedient to the Father, even to death on the cross. In committing his spirit to the Father, he knew beyond any shadow of doubt that the Father would raise him from the dead, and exalt him and sit him at the right hand of the throne of God again. Jesus' words were not one of powerless reluctant resignation into emptiness, but wilful surrender, a declaration of victory over sin and death and assurance of glory!

Over to You:

What do you mean when you call God, *"Father?"*

Death is inevitable. What does it hold for you? Emptiness or glory?

Prayer:

Abba Father, teach me what it means to live in humble submission to You because I love You. Amen.

Bible Reading:

John 19:30

Devotional Commentary:

Jesus – scourged and bleeding from his wounds, thoroughly dehydrated and suffering intensely – had been hanging on the cross from 9 in the morning (third hour) till 3 in the afternoon (ninth hour). Despite his life ebbing away, he was able to muster one last breath, to utter, “It is finished.”

“It is finished.” My life is done. My work for you Father-God is done. My purpose for being here on earth is done. *“I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.”* John 17:4.

The apostle Paul said something similar to the young pastor Timothy, at the end of his life. *“I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”* 2 Timothy 4:6-7.

From life till death, Jesus was faithful to and humble before God. His was the task of being the Messiah, of ushering in the kingdom of God, and inviting people to enter through him. His was the task of demonstrating God’s love for all, for forgiving their sins, and reconciling everyone who would accept his invitation to God. His was the task of bringing us from darkness into God’s marvellous light, and making us a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people. And he did all these faithful obedience and joyful humility. And now, he could die in peace knowing that God’s work has been done, that God was pleased and would be glorified.

“It is finished.”

Over to You:

How are you doing as a follower of Jesus Christ? Are you walking faithfully and serving obediently? When your time is up, can you sincerely and joyfully that you have *“fought the good fight, finished the race and kept the faith?”*

Prayer:

Dear Father in heaven, grant to me the joy of serving You that I may finish the race faithfully. Amen.



There is a great silence today ... because the King is asleep





CONTRIBUTORS

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Hailing from Melaka, Esmie misses the starry night sky that KL is deprived of. She enjoys the fellowship of friends over a game of "Settlers of Catan"; especially when complemented with good food.

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Lee Wah worked as a civil servant for 25 years before retiring to work as administrator for EMC for another 12 years. Currently she is enjoying her days of retirement where there are hardly any deadlines! She is a dog-lover and has a 12 year old silky terrier. A good book keeps her happy and she likes being in connection with family and friends. She also enjoys a cup of good coffee and a good sweat-out on the tennis court.

Dr Samuel Ong

Uncle Sam, as he is fondly known, is "father to the fatherless" and his house a "home to the homeless" at Whispering Hope MC. He is a jack of all trades, passionate about the All Blacks, and now pointing trying his hand at photography, especially in capturing God's wonderful creation.

Colleen

Colleen is a "grandmother" of sort; she was baptised in KL Wesley, an inaugural member of Emmanuel Methodist Church and subsequently Whispering Hope Methodist Church. She loves solving puzzles and top of her list are jigsaws and sudoku. But they don't come close to her love for God's word which never fails to help her bear with, if not solve, some of life's puzzling questions!

Dr. Lee Chong Yew

After eight years in the UK, Chong Yew returned to KL and found his beloved life partner in Whispering Hope Methodist Church. He now serves in Whispering Hope as well as on the badminton court. He has a passion for filling his home with the aroma of Christ and fresh home-baked bread.

Mei Kuan

Mei Kuan is a self- confessed Facebook stalker. Other than her two four-legged children she is occasional "cheerleader" and weekend taxi mum to her "adopted" kids studying and staying in Subang Jaya.

Priscilla Lim

She enjoys the friendship and company of church community life and yet also the silence of her humble abode. It is her hope and pleasure to have the opportunity to journey with friends as they wrestle with God and faith as others have done for her. A teacher by profession, her passion is to bring education to children of all walks of life, teaching them to think and struggle as they face the challenges of life.