

As the season of Lent arrives each year, Christians everywhere are drawn to the foot of the cross where Jesus laid down His life for us. It is a period of deep reflection, self-inspection, and ultimate awe at the magnitude of love God has shown a sinful, self-absorbed world. As Christians, we know that without Christ's saving work on our behalf there would be no true joy, no lasting happiness.

And how many are there among us who have no true joy because they do not know Jesus?

For those who do not yet know Jesus as their Savior or who are in a relationship with God that is still unsure, Pastor Ryan Peterson of St. John Lutheran Church in Ellisville, Missouri, has prepared *A New Perspective*. Read these engaging pages; share them with others. Let these straightforward messages focus your attention on the cross and a divine love that proved itself unstoppable when it came to reaching man.

You may well find this Lenten season is different for you. You may encounter a new perspective that changes everything. It is our prayer that you will.



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LUTHERAN HOUR MINISTRIES
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a new perspective

Reflections 2009

INTRODUCTION

I love the cycle and variety of the calendar. Having grown up in Wisconsin, I am quite accustomed to four distinct seasons. (Actually, there seems to be more than that, but we'll just say, "four.") What's your favorite time of the year?

A lot of people like summer; others like winter. Some enjoy fall the most; for others, spring is their favorite. Each one is unique, depending on where you live and what you enjoy. Your perspective helps to determine your favorite season of the year.

For quite awhile, thousands of years in fact, Christians have used Lent to reflect on their own life and get ready for Easter Sunday—the "Super Bowl" event that Christians celebrate each year.

It's a great season of the year because the event connected to Easter Sunday, Jesus' resurrection from the dead, offers hope and answers to the daily challenges and struggles of our lives.

What does the word "Lent" mean? It comes from the Latin word for spring, the season of the year when Lent occurs in the northern hemisphere. Lent is a time to pause, re-focus, and reflect on Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness and His journey to the cross. That's exactly what we're going to do: pause, re-focus, and reflect.

It's easy to get caught up in the routines of life—the normal, the mundane. Want to try something a little different for the next few weeks? How about stretching yourself to consider a new perspective?

As we consider this perspective together, let's focus on seven questions:

What's my perspective?

What about Jesus?

What about my life?

What about my junk?

Who *is* Jesus, really?

What does Jesus think of me?

Now what?

I hope these questions help you to sort through some of your own assumptions, questions, and struggles.

Enjoy the journey...

Pastor Ryan

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pastor Ryan Peterson, a teaching pastor and Director of Next Generation Ministries at St. John Lutheran Church in Ellisville, Missouri, developed these *A New Perspective* reflections. Ryan has been on staff at St. John for over five years, serving in different capacities along the way. He has a passion for communicating the love of Jesus and moving people towards a deeper relationship with Jesus that shapes their entire life. You can find Ryan on Facebook, his blog, or out riding his bike, running, or hanging out with his awesome wife, Kristy, and really cool son, Andrew.

For more information on St. John, go to www.stjstl.net.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Not too long ago, I was talking with a good friend. We had been questioning, challenging, and discussing something important. (At least, it seemed important to us.) We went back and forth.

I said something.
She said something.

I said something back.
She shot back at me.

I said the most profound thing in the world.
She disagreed.

Finally, she said, "I think we just have different perspectives."

She was right: we did have different perspectives. Isn't that a part of life? You're not the same as your neighbor, brother, or mother. You see life differently. Your angle on the world, its events, and what it all means is unique.

I'm glad you picked up these reflections. Life is hard. Life can be lonely. Life is exciting as well. Usually, it's everything in between. Life isn't always what you expect it to be.

If you've ever been surprised, disappointed, or challenged by life, then keep reading, and engage in these reflections. Consider your life and a new perspective. Through it, you will be introduced to a God who is active in your journey, wanting to give you a new perspective on life.

A new perspective never hurts, does it?

O Lord, You have searched me and You know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; You perceive my thoughts from afar. Psalm 139:1-2

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

Think about your life. What phrase best describes your life?

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

You've come to the final day of these reflections. So then, what's next? That's a good question to ask on a day like this.

Everybody has a different perspective on who God is, what He did, and what He does today.

So what's your perspective? What's your take on the whole deal? Could it be true that the God who created everything wants to know you personally?

Can you really come to know who God is? And can you see that God is at work in this dark world, even shining as a bright light? Did God really come down in Jesus and make Himself known to the world, including you? Did He give up His life so you could know what true life really is, even right now? Does all of this really impact the way I interact with people I know? Absolutely!

No matter where you are with all of this, I'm glad you have been a part of this journey with me. You may understand some things about God better. Awesome! You may have more questions than answers. That's even better. That's where I live everyday—in the questions. I have been a follower of Jesus for 28 years. Do you think I fully understand God? Do I have Him all figured out? I definitely know Jesus better in some ways, but with more answers come more questions.

I hope I never stop asking questions. And I hope you don't either. Asking questions assumes you don't know everything, and that you need help. That's exactly where I am in my relationship with Jesus.

God has come down. He sent His Son Jesus into our world at Christmas. And Jesus, through His life, death, and resurrection, has come to rescue you and all of creation from the death and destruction you were heading towards because of sin. Easter is the celebration of Christ's resurrection from the dead. Let Jesus change your life. Let Jesus be the one who leads you in every decision you make. He cares about you, your life, and your future. He wants to keep moving you closer to Him. Only Jesus can give you a new perspective on life.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. John 10:10

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

Now what are you going to do after this Lenten journey?

THE TOMB

It's empty. There's nothing in it. There used to be a body, but now it's gone. Trust me: this isn't normal. People are supposed to *stay* in their final resting places. But that's not what Jesus did.

The Bible describes that amazing day like this, "There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and His clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of Him that they shook and became like dead men" (Matthew 28:2-4).

The tomb is empty. The cross is empty. The people are gone.

Jesus bled blood for you.
 Jesus took a spear for you.
 Jesus felt the nails for you.
 Jesus died for you.

Do you believe He really loves you and that He's looking out for you, even right now? Next time you're tempted to say, "God, I can't believe You did that *to me*," think about God saying back to you, "Look at what I did *for* you."

Now, Jesus lives in you. Wow! That's a huge statement. No matter where you go, He's there with you. Every decision you make, He's there. All the trouble you get into, Jesus wants to rescue you. If you try running away, remember that God is always pursuing you, never wanting to see you go.

Just think about this verse from Romans:

He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things? Romans 8:32

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

What are you willing to trust God with now?

LIFE-CHANGING MOMENTS

Have you ever had those moments? You know, *those* moments? They're the ones that cause you to think a little differently, or consider what your life is really all about.

I have had a few in my life:

High-school graduation
 Going to college and figuring out a major
 Getting married (actually, getting ready to get married)
 Becoming a parent

What about you?

While each of these changed my perspective, there is no doubt in my mind that the final one—becoming a parent—changed my perspective more than anything else. Suddenly, I wasn't just responsible for myself. Suddenly, sleep became a more valuable gift. Suddenly, I learned to not be afraid of dirty diapers.

My heart began to change as well. If you're a parent, you know what I'm talking about. If you're not, you probably will experience this someday. I started writing this reflection at the kitchen table, having just finished breakfast. My son Andrew was still working on his until he decided his eggs looked better on the floor than his tray. He has gotten into this pattern recently of throwing things, including his sippy cup and his food.

Life is different than it used to be. And tomorrow will be different still. I think you would agree. That's why a new perspective isn't necessarily a bad thing.

The length of our days is seventy years or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away. Psalm 90:10

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

What have been some of the most life-changing moments you've experienced?

LOOKING AROUND

It's one thing to look at your own life, your own experiences, and your own background. Each of us has a story. My good friend used to say, "Behind every face there's a story." While somewhat trite, it's so true. You have one, too.

It's another thing to look around at the rest of the world. You may gain a new perspective on life simply by looking at the circumstances of others halfway around the globe, whose life seems *soooooo* different than yours.

But that can seem overwhelming, maybe even too far out there.

Look around your city, neighborhood, and family. Our world economy is very different today than it was five years ago. Your bank account, 401(k), Roth IRA, home value, and everything else is different.

As I write this, though, gas is the cheapest it's been in five years. I feel like I'm getting it for free, although when I was in high school I never thought I'd see the day when it cracked a buck a gallon.

As I look around, my perspective changes.

How have you been affected by what's going on in the economy? How has that changed your perspective on life? Do you feel more helpless, maybe even hopeless?

If so, you need to keep reading. I want to introduce you to a God who is active in the middle of the mess, wanting to talk with you right now. Are you willing to listen to someone else?

(God) wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. 1 Timothy 2:4

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

How do you feel about everything happening in the world right now?

THE CROSS

Crosses are everywhere. It doesn't matter what you think of Christians, Christianity, or Jesus, it's hard to ignore the reality that the cross is everywhere. But have you ever stopped to think what an odd choice it is as the symbol of Christianity?

It's a tool of torture, but followers of Jesus look at it with hope.

Why hope? Are they nuts? Am I nuts? If you're a follower of Jesus now, are *you* nuts?

On that cross was a man. On that cross was God. He was, as the song I shared with you a few weeks ago said, "Truly Jesus." Your sins were placed on Jesus. Your junk—all of it. God, who cannot stand sin, did what He had to do. He unleashed His wrath on sin.

Jesus took the hit. You should have. But *He* did. He died the death you deserved. You received the life He deserved. Theologians have called it "The Great Reversal."

Why did God do it? "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son..."

That's why. *Love*. How wide is God's love? It's wide enough to include you. It's wide enough to include me. It's wide enough to include the whole world.

Everything else in life excludes; Jesus includes. You are a part of the family. You belong to Jesus.

It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into Your hands I commit My Spirit." When He had said this, He breathed His last. Luke 23:44-46

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

What do you think of when you look at a cross?

SELF-CONTROL

For most of us, I would venture to say that self-control isn't the first virtue you think about. By that, I do not mean we have no self-control or we are out of control. No, it isn't about that at all. It is more about using the self-control *we do have* smartly—the way God intended it.

We can't fight temptations and issues of self-control without the power of Christ. Christ endured the temptations in the desert and even the temptation on the cross. He was perfect. We are not.

This last fruit is a tough one. You can spend the rest of your life *practicing* self-control. When you actually see someone who has evidence of this particular fruit of the Spirit, it throws you off a little. You expect something else.

It's like

- a college student who doesn't drink. What?
- an unmarried couple that's not living together. Yeah, right.
- a kid who hasn't copied somebody else's homework. Liar!

Without self-control, you get self-destruction. It may not happen right away. At the start, it seems fun. It feels free. Of course, it does. It always does.

But as you resist self-control, you don't get freedom.
 You get addiction.
 You get drunkenness.
 You get a loss of self-respect.
 You get the *opposite* of freedom.

Don't you want freedom in Jesus? There are a lot of different ways to live your life. You've probably experienced some of them already. Are you ready for a new perspective, a new way? Are you ready for a better way?

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no Law. Galatians 5:22-23

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

Now that you've reflected on each of these fruits of the Spirit, what's your impression of them and how they apply to your life?

YOU CAN DO IT

Remember being a kid?

Life was good. Physical education was a class in the middle of the day, not a chore to be done so you keep off the weight. Recess was the best 30 minutes of the day. Little homework, if any, was the norm.

As a kid, I believed I could do anything, be anything, achieve anything. In first grade, I told my teacher I was going to be the president of the United States of America. She still reminds me of that when I see her. For me, it wasn't a big deal. It was simply a dream I had, and it was a dream I could achieve.

From my perspective, I could do it. Nothing was stopping me.

I'm not sure when it changed, but somewhere along the journey of life, it changed. The question is, what's "it"?

It's the idea I can do anything, be anything, try anything, experience anything.

Life isn't always that easy though, is it? Think back on the past six months of your life. Is your life different than you thought it would be? Don't worry—you're not alone.

Even though you didn't know how your life would turn out, and you still don't know, there is someone who does. The God who created you, who made you, who thought of you, and who thinks of you still, knows what is going on in your life *now* and knows what will happen in the future.

You may not believe in Him, but He sure knows a thing or two about you. Here's the deal though, He wants you to get to know Him. He doesn't need to get to know you anymore; He has that covered.

But you're missing out on something if you miss the opportunity to know Him.

In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps. Proverbs 16:9

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

How is your life different than you thought it would be while growing up?

GOING HOME FOR THE FIRST TIME

When I was deciding what college to attend, it was important to me to go at least a few hours away. After all, who wants to go away to a school that's only 30 minutes from home?

Definitely not me. My junior year of high school, I visited a university in Chicago that was about two hours from my home. I told my parents before I left for the weekend trip: "If I come home with a t-shirt from the school, I'm going there."

It was a great weekend. I bought a shirt. And I even wore it home.

But I ended up not going there. I decided to attend the school only 30 minutes from home. In contrast to some of my friends who did the same, I didn't go home every weekend. I did my laundry at school. And I ate cafeteria food more than my mom's awesome cooking.

I didn't really go home until Thanksgiving break. Do you remember going home the first time after you had left for college?

Life was different.

My room was different. I came home and found my room had been overtaken and made into an exercise room. More significant than my room's transition, however, was the reality for my parents and me that I was now different. My life circumstances and situations had changed. My experiences were different. My perspective on life was changing.

It's all part of the process.

Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails. Proverbs 19:21

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

If you ever went away—either to college, a job, or somewhere else—what was it like to go home for the first time?

GENTLENESS

Most of the world views gentleness as a weak virtue. Our culture values power more than gentleness.

Gentleness. Yeah, it seems like a word for wimps.

Or maybe not.

When we see that gentleness isn't passive, but rather a value that "describes a person who is so much in control of himself that he is always angry at the right time and never angry at the wrong time" (Aristotle), we see it's something the Holy Spirit works in our hearts.

The Holy Spirit wants to work it in your heart as well. That's why it's a part of the nine fruits of the Spirit.

My son Andrew is 100 percent boy. He's aggressive; he's active; he loves to climb. Of course, he reads his books and is cute as can be, but he definitely likes to be on the move. Occasionally, when he gets tired or angry at life, he'll start swinging his arms around, hitting whatever might be in his way.

We have to say, *"Andrew, ggggeeeennntttttllllleee."*

Or, if he is around a dog, and starts hitting the dog really hard, we say, "Andrew, gentle."

Jesus was a man on the move. He often stirred up conflict with those He met. Jesus didn't always bring peace to the places He stayed. But He was gentle. He was in control of Himself. He was in control. Period.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no Law. Galatians 5:22-23

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

Why is gentleness such a tough virtue to model today?

FAITHFULNESS

Most of us equate faithfulness with marriage; but it goes far beyond that. If you're married, you may remember these words from your vows: "And I pledge to you my faithfulness." Faithfulness is reliability and trustworthiness.

The problem with faithfulness is that many of us would rather be happy in the moment than faithful for the long haul, as if the two were mutually exclusive. Convenience is easier than faithfulness in our relationships with others. It also goes for our relationship with God.

This is what I love about God. Even though we are unfaithful, He remained faithful. That's the story of the Old Testament, and it continues as Jesus came to be "the faithful one."

Jesus was faithful as He fulfilled His mission of saving the world. With undivided faithfulness, He entered Jerusalem on a donkey to begin the most difficult week of His life. He did it, not because it was convenient or glamorous, but because He *is* faithful.

Often, lyrics are more powerful than other words. Even if you're not familiar with any hymns, I think you'll appreciate the words of the famous hymn, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness":

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not;
As Thou has been Thou forever wilt be.
Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided –
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

Thomas Chisholm wrote this hymn in the early 20th century, based on the words of Lamentations 3:23. He wrote it because over his entire life he had learned to see the greatness and faithfulness of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no Law. Galatians 5:22-23

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

Think about the most faithful friend you know. What characteristics and qualities describe that person so you believe they are faithful?

NOT A KID ANYMORE

Jesus was raised in Nazareth, about 20 miles southwest of the Sea of Galilee in the northern part of Israel. He grew up like other Jewish boys. He learned the trade of His father, a carpenter. He did what other Jewish boys did at that time (well, not *everything*, I suppose).

And now, at the age of 30, Jesus, a local boy, has come home. But He has come home as a prophet, not as the carpenter who left town. In the eyes of the locals, He's not a prophet. They're too familiar with Him, and they know Him too well to accept the *new* Jesus.

About a year and a half ago, I visited the church I grew up at. A lot of things looked the same. A lot of people looked the same. I hadn't seen many of them for years. I'll be honest: it was a weird feeling. I was different. They were different. But to some of them, I was still "little Ryan."

Jesus came home to the church of His childhood, the place where He was nurtured, the place where He first learned the Scriptures. Obviously, He had learned His lessons well. But the people could not get past "little Jesus" to Jesus the teacher and prophet. The people of Nazareth had heard of their famous carpenter's miraculous exploits, although this was the first time He had visited His hometown to teach.

When Jesus showed up on the scene again, the people had different reactions. Mark, one of the Gospel writers, said the people were "amazed." They asked a lot of questions; in other words, they were curious. But some of them were offended; they couldn't believe what Jesus was doing.

That's because Jesus *was* different. He was different than them. He is different than us.

Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor." Mark 6:4

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

Finish this sentence: Jesus is different because _____.

HOW DIFFERENT?

Do you think Jesus is different? Even if you don't believe in Him as your Savior or think He has your best interest in mind, wouldn't you say He is at least different?

If you read any of the things He did in the New Testament Gospels, then you'd have to say, "He's different."

Here are a few of the different things Jesus did:

Asking questions in the temple at age 12
 Gathering crowds on the hillside
 Feeding thousands with a few loaves of bread
 Healing the sick
 Raising the dead

It's not really the kind of stuff a normal dude would be doing. But then again, maybe He's not a normal dude. Maybe He's more. Maybe He's someone worth believing in. It's one thing to believe in someone. When I believe, I'm saying, "This is true."

But it's another to *follow* someone. I don't know where you are in your spiritual quest, but you're somewhere. We're all somewhere.

When I follow someone, I'm saying, "I trust this guy."

It's a pretty big deal to actually trust someone, especially when the stakes are high.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. Proverbs 3:5-6

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

Obviously, Jesus was different. As you think about your spiritual journey, does that make things harder or easier?

GOODNESS

When I was in school, whether it was grade school, high school, college, or graduate school, I oftentimes looked forward to getting a test or paper back. Not that I wasn't nervous, but I didn't like living without knowing how I did. You know how when you get a paper back, and the teacher puts a grade on the top, then he or she usually writes something next to it?

What does it usually say—"good," "great," maybe even, "excellent"? If it says much more, it's usually not good for you.

If you're anything like me, "good" is like a B. I'm not sure why; maybe that's how I was trained. I want an A. I don't want a good grade; I want an excellent grade. I don't want a good car; I want a great car. I don't want to settle for a good deal; I want an awesome deal.

Good is good, but for many people it's like a distant second notch rating. So when we hear that a fruit of the Spirit is goodness, we may not fully appreciate its value.

Goodness, according to the Scriptures, doesn't mean B or second place. In fact, good or goodness has *incredible* value.

"God saw that the light was good" (Genesis 1:4).

Jesus said, "No one is good except God alone" (Mark 10:18).

"Be ready to do whatever is good" (Titus 3:1).

"Be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good" (Titus 3:8).

But is good really good enough? That's a great question. The fact is this: no good is ever good enough for God. You can't do so much good that you please God. God, because of who He is, demands perfection.

So you're stuck.

But then again, maybe not. Enter Jesus. That's what this season is all about. You're not good enough, but there is someone who is, and His name is Jesus. If Jesus is living inside you, when God sees you, He sees Jesus. He sees better than "good enough." He sees perfection.

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, **goodness**, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no Law.* Galatians 5:22-23

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

How do you define goodness?

KINDNESS

The word Paul uses in Galatians 5:22 means “goodness of heart,” and it carries the idea of uprightness, goodness, and generosity. What’s true kindness according to the Scriptures? There is a story in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 10. You might have heard of it before. It’s about a Good Samaritan.

Jesus described a man who was out traveling and was attacked by robbers along the way. They beat him up and nearly killed him. A priest walked by and ignored the half-dead man. A Levite (similar to a priest) did the same. Who would help the poor dude?

Someone who should have been his enemy—a Samaritan—was the one who stopped. This guy wasn’t the religious leader or a political authority. He was a hated foreigner. But he showed kindness. He gave up his time, resources, and much more to take care of the man along the road.

When have you shown kindness? When have you given something up? It’s easy to think *kindness* and then think *pushover*. But that’s not the case. Jesus Christ modeled kindness, and now with Christ living in us, we are also to model that same kindness Christ showed.

Kindness doesn’t mean giving in; it means giving up.

It means getting rid of the anger you might have in your heart. Has anyone ever burned you so bad you wanted to take them down, right now? You know what you wanted to do to them, and you don’t want to say it because you know how wrong it is.

Kindness also means getting past your own desires and your own needs. Are you willing to do that in your own life?

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no Law. Galatians 5:22-23

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

Who has modeled this fruit of the Spirit to you in your life?

TRULY JESUS

Jesus *is* different. I think this reflection will show *how* He’s different.

A good friend of mine is a worship leader and songwriter. About two years ago, he wrote an amazing song that talks about who Jesus really is. He called it “Truly Jesus.”

Check out these words. Reflect on them as your thoughts for the day.

Behold the man who sleeps is the God who walks on the waves

Behold the man who weeps is the God who empties graves

If He’s not man then who?

If He’s not God then how?

Truly man, truly God, He is truly Jesus

Just like us, but truly not

He is truly Jesus

Behold the man who laughs is the God which glory shrouds

Behold the man who fasts is the God who feeds the crowds

If He’s not man then who?

If He’s not God then how?

Behold the man we wound is the God with a crown on His head

Behold the man in the tomb is the God who won’t stay dead

Truly man, truly God, He is truly Jesus

Just like us, but truly not

He is truly Jesus

He’s the Son of Man and the Son of God

He is truly Jesus

If He’s not man then who?

If He’s not God then how?

Written by Christopher Kai

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

When you think of Jesus, what do you think of?

STUCK

What do you do when you find yourself in a tough spot? Are you someone who gets discouraged easily, or do you get really fired up and try to find a solution?

I'm a learner. I like to think about the experiences of other people. That's probably why I love to read. Many leadership challenges I've encountered can be overcome through a minor investment at your local bookstore.

What about the bigger issues of life? The truth is I'm not the first person to ever go through them. These struggles may seem unique to me, but they're not. I hear people say all the time, "The Bible is the guide for life." Yes, it is, but it's more than an owner's manual like you get for your new TV. It's a story describing in detail God's interaction in human history. That's one of the things I love about God. He deals in human history, not apart from it. The Bible is filled with people coming to understand life in light of God's work in their lives: specific people doing specific things at specific times in history.

When I read the Bible, I read of a faithful God never giving up on unfaithful, messed-up, irreverent people. I read of a God who makes promises and actually keeps them! I read of a God who wants nothing more than to have a relationship with me.

I may not find the answer to my problem on page 392, but I can definitely be reminded of a God who has remained faithful and trust He will be the same God for me.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness. 2 Timothy 3:16

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

What did you do the last time you felt stuck in life?

PATIENCE

Patience? Who has time for that? In a world filled with impulse purchases, instant credit, and high-speed Internet, who has time for patience? Let's face it—we're all too busy for that.

Or maybe not.

Patience does not come naturally to me. I am a gotta get 'em kind of guy. And if you're anything like me, than you can relate. I prefer my speed and my time.

Nevertheless, patience is a fruit of the Spirit. God has been working on this fruit in my life lately. My son Andrew is a year and a half old; I am learning what it is like for a father to have patience with his child. And in the process, I am beginning to get a glimpse of God's patience with me.

Andrew doesn't want to put his shoes or jacket on. We're already running late, now we're even later. I don't like to be late!

Think about yourself in relation to God. Like a patient Father, God waits for you. You decide you don't want your shoes on. You'd rather do something else, something that seems more important at the time. Still, God waits for you.

God is not slow. He's just not on *your* schedule!

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, **patience**, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no Law. Galatians 5:22-23*

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

Who do you have the most trouble being patient with on a regular basis? How would your relationship with that person be different if you exhibited more patience?

PEACE

A lot of us lack peace in our lives. Instead, we have heartache, heartburn, and stress. One of the best and most calming feelings in the world is to have peace over a decision we are making or a path we are taking. Wouldn't you agree?

When do you feel most at peace?

A good friend of mine had to recently make a choice about a couple of job opportunities. Either one would be a good match for him, but as he made the choice and then reflected, he said, "I have never had more clarity and greater peace about any job decision in the past."

I can find peace when I'm at the lake, just looking at the clear water. I can find it in the mountains, marveling at how beautiful they really are. I can find peace at a bookstore, just flipping through some books.

But can you find peace in the midst of chaos, which is where many people find their lives on a daily basis?

Christ's peace is more powerful than our troubles. Paul, in Colossians 3:15 says, "Let the peace of Christ *rule* in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace." The word "rule" literally means to "award prizes, judge, or control."

So peace should be in control of my heart. My heart and life should be filled with peace, even when life seems busy or messy. Cool. That's what I want. How about you?

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, **peace**, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no Law.* Galatians 5:22-23

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

What does this Bible verse mean to you: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts"?

A PLAN

Do you remember the movie *Simon Birch*? It was released about ten years ago, yet many consider it a classic today. Simon, a young man, has many challenges, including dwarfism. Despite his struggles and genetic disabilities, he is determined to find a destiny larger than his underdeveloped body.

The movie was inspirational, sad, and definitely a tearjerker. Bring your tissues the next time you see it.

In the movie, Simon Birch had a pressing question, which was foundational for him, and central to the movie. It was not a small question, either.

Does God have a plan for us?

Let's make it more personal for you: Does God have a plan for you?

If you have never reflected on that question, now is a good time to start. Is there someone else who has your best interest in mind, or are you on your own in this world? Some of us like individuality and the freedom that comes with not being accountable to anyone but ourselves.

Let's say for a minute that God does have a plan for you, but it involves more than just you. God's plan for you involves a central character in the story of your life. Sorry to break it to you, but the central character in your life is not you. Bummer, huh?

Maybe not.

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many. Mark 10:45

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

Does God have a plan for your life?

LOOKING BACK

One of the first things your parents taught you was to look both ways before you cross the street. Yesterday, I asked you, “Does God have a plan for you?” Assuming He does, how do we figure out what that plan is?

Why doesn’t God just drop the set of blueprints in our lap, and we go from there?

Our plans are determined by looking in both directions. Let’s start with looking back. Looking back includes more than reflecting on our own lives; it also means considering life in a way that’s bigger than just our own experiences.

The Bible describes in pretty good detail the different ways that God has worked in the past. Maybe it has some clues for us, then. The Old Testament is filled with examples of God working powerfully in the past:

He parted seas.

He rescued nations.

He sent floods, and then He dried up the earth.

In the New Testament, a man named Joseph had his plans. Then God messed them up. It must have been hard for him to trust that God actually had his best interest in mind.

Does God ever seem to mess up your plans or strategies?

Mary and Joseph, though they didn’t know what would happen to them, began to realize they were being used in God’s plan. Hundreds, even thousands of years earlier, God predicted He would send someone to “save His people from their sins.” God sent an angel to confirm what others had been talking about for centuries.

God didn’t forget the promise He made way back when—a promise to send “this one.” God never lost sight of people. God has never lost sight of you.

As you look back, you see His faithfulness. So as you look ahead, do you have any reason to doubt He’ll continue?

O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. . . they would put their trust in God and would not forget His deeds but would keep His commands. Psalm 78:1, 7

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

Why do you think God is or isn’t faithful, from your perspective?

JOY

What’s the difference between being happy and joyful?

You can’t *try* to be joyful. It is a result of an inner change in your life. Remember, the fruit of the Spirit is the work of the Spirit in our lives. We don’t try really hard to get them. As a result of Christ living in us, these character traits, which are found in Christ, can also be found in us.

Some people argue whether joy is an experience, or a discipline. Author Mark Buchanan would suggest joy is a discipline, which he calls “little glimpses of heaven.” Of course, we will experience joy in some ways, but if it’s only an experience, moments of joy will be few and far between.

Maybe joy is a mindset, an attitude, a way of the heart.

And yet there is someone—Satan—who is committed to your joylessness. The last place you’ll find a party is in hell. So often, we let *life* steal joy away from us. You know what I mean—the daily grind, the hopeless path we’re on, the frustrating and unexpected happenings along the way of life.

So where can you find joy during this Lenten journey? It’s only in Jesus. He entered the world in joy. After Jesus had been born, the angels said to the shepherds in the field, “I bring you good news of great joy” (Luke 2:10).

He also left the world, giving joy to His disciples. Shortly before His death, during His own Lenten journey, He said, “I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no Law. Galatians 5:22-23

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

When were you most joyful this past week, and why?

LOVE

I love chocolate.
 I love reading.
 I love the Packers.
 I love Starbucks.[®]
 I love my family.
 I love Jesus.
 I love my wife.

Is it appropriate to use the same word in describing how I feel about chocolate as I do about my wife? Love is one of the most overused, if not *the* most overused, words in the English language.

I have to admit sometimes it's hard for me to love. I don't think it's a coincidence the apostle Paul puts "love" first in his list of fruits of the Spirit. It's foundational.

The problem is that we'd rather be in love than love. You know the difference, right? Being in love is that all-consuming, can't-get-her-off-of-your-mind, driving-a-hundred-miles-through-snowdrifts-just-to-see-her-for-one-hour kind of love.

The word "love" has three different meanings in the New Testament:

Eros: sexual passion

Phileo: brotherly/familial affection (Philadelphia – the city of "brotherly love")

Agape: Spirit-generated, selfless love

The word Paul uses in Galatians 5 is "agape." Do you see why? The other forms of love are good and appropriate, but agape is what Jesus demonstrated.

God didn't send an angel to bring salvation. He didn't ask a superhero to rise to the occasion. He didn't send Jack Bauer to the rescue. He came Himself, and He didn't meet us halfway. He came all the way, and gave us His all.

The Bible is the story in which Jesus is the hero, the one who loved selflessly.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no Law. Galatians 5:22-23

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

What is one relationship in your life where you need to practice better love than in the past?

LOOKING AHEAD

After you look the one way, you have to look the other way before crossing the street. In fact, I remember from driver's ed that you're supposed to look left, look right, and look left again. That's because traffic from the left is closer to you than any traffic from the right.

You can't look just one way and pull out into traffic. Both views are necessary. We've already thought a little about why it's important to look back. It's disastrous, though, to only look in one direction.

You need to look ahead.

The problem with some people is that they get stuck in the past. Maybe you're one of them—somebody who can't *get past* what has happened *in* the past. You feel guilty; you feel trapped; you feel stuck. It's like the past did so much that you feel paralyzed even thinking about the future.

Oftentimes, it can be harder to give the future to Jesus than it can be to give Him the past. The future involves hope. Hope is wanting and believing in something you don't have yet. But when we're talking about Jesus, and talking about the hope that a Christ-follower has because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, hope is not a wishy-washy idea. It's a certainty because you trust that Jesus is in control.

Lent is a season for genuine reflection. A lot of people use Lent to look back. While that is important, don't lose sight of looking ahead. That's what Jesus did while He was on the earth. He looked ahead to what His Father wanted Him to do. He looked ahead to meeting people's needs. He looked ahead to His ultimate destiny.

Notice how I didn't say, He "looked forward." That phrase gives the impression of being excited or "I can't wait."

Jesus' love for you kept Him looking ahead.

It is by grace you have been saved, though faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. Ephesians 2:8-9

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

What makes you most excited about looking ahead? What scares you the most?

JUNK

Junk. We all have it. Yeah, look around your house, your room, your office, and you're bound to find some kind of junk. Maybe it's in a pile, or maybe it's spread out—a little here, a little there.

Do you think you have junk in your life, though?

In your heart? In your mind? In yourself?

At least a few times a year (usually three or four), my wife and I like to clean out. I'm not talking about the "let's throw a few things away" cleaning; I'm talking about the "get this stuff out of here" cleaning. It's amazing how much one or two people can accumulate and not even know it; that is, until there's no room left for anything else because the junk has taken over. There's an old saying in real estate, "No matter how big your house is, you're going to fill it."

Junk is sin. The truth is that everybody messes up. Even though some don't like the word, it's true: everyone sins. When we're honest, we can admit it. It's something I can't deny, because I sin, too.

The problem with sin is not what it does to us. It's what it does to our relationships. The Bible teaches that our sin causes us to become God's enemies. *What?* A little sin, a little white lie, a little peak at a magazine makes me an enemy of God?

Yup. Here's the other thing: no amount of good works helps the situation. You'd think it would—like I could do more good than bad, and all would be okay.

But you can't do it on your own.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

How do you view sin?

FRUIT

So what does a life lived in Jesus really look like? Does it involve being at church all the time? Does it mean no more fun? Does it mean rules, rules, and more rules?

Actually, it's none of the above. Hopefully, that's good news to you! When there has been a change in your life, others know it. They know it because of your "fruit." You don't have to prove it to them, because it comes naturally and is plainly seen.

That's one way the Bible describes results. Other people see a new you.

Ever been to a high-school reunion, and you found yourself saying, "I can't believe how much that person has changed. They're not even the same person!" Or, maybe everyone around the bar was saying that about *you!*

There are a few verses in the Bible that describe the results, or by-products, of a life lived for God. The best example, I think, is in Galatians 5:22-23. Paul the apostle lists nine "fruits of the Spirit." No other list like this appears in the Bible.

Long after Paul, Michael Clarke Duncan, in the movie *The Green Mile*, said: "A man cannot hide what's inside his heart."

For the next few days, we will focus on one fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit are the by-products of living for God. It's the spontaneous work of the Holy Spirit living in us, not our attempts to try and get them. That's important for us to remember. We don't try to earn these fruit. We don't try harder to get closer to perfection. They are what naturally happen when Jesus Christ is at the center of our lives. These fruit are found in the nature of Christ. So, when Christ lives in us, so do these qualities. Tomorrow, we'll start with the first one, and maybe the hardest—love.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no Law. Galatians 5:22-23

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

Take a look at this list. It's unique in the Bible. Which one of these comes easily to you, and which of them do you struggle with regularly?

DO WHAT IT TAKES

So if you're a follower of Jesus, what are you doing as you follow Him? There is a lot of debate out there as to what a Christ-follower should do in his or her faith journey. I could give you a very specific, strict "program" of what to do and what not to do. But that wouldn't be very helpful, because you know yourself better than I do.

I could suggest you read your Bible for ten minutes every day. But you might hate to read.

I could suggest you write in a journal three times a week. But you might hate to write.

I could suggest you pray in the same place at the same time every day. But you might have young children at home, and find that totally naïve and unrealistic.

The difference between going to college and growing in maturity as a Christ-follower is simple: from one you graduate (hopefully!), and from the other you don't. Just because you heard a preacher teach about the Trinity, or read about creation in the Bible, doesn't mean you've completed the course. The cool thing about a relationship is that it is always dynamic, alive, and changing. A stagnant relationship is a dead relationship.

Life happens, and growth will happen. Those of us who are Type-A personalities want to know what's next, and who's teaching it. If that works for you, great. For the rest of you, though, find what works for you right now and stick with it. Keep doing it. Keep growing. Keep asking questions. Then life will happen again, and you'll ask different questions. Read different parts of the Bible, and get involved in different opportunities.

As long as you're grounded in Jesus, you're doing the right thing.

Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. 1 Corinthians 11:1

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

What can you start doing right now, based on your life situation?

RUNNING IN OPPOSITE DIRECTIONS

This is where it gets tough. Taking the time to think, reflect, and even consider what your life really means is one thing. But you take it to another level when you start thinking about your own junk, your own faults, and your own sin.

Who wants to talk about this anyhow, much less deal with it? If you've been avoiding this type of conversation for a long time, you're probably thinking, I've made it this far without dealing with this stuff. Why should I worry about it now?

Good point, but not everyone makes it this far. And eventually, as my dad always said, "If you play with fire, you're going to get burned." I don't want that kind of life.

Do you?

Do you want a life of guilt, sneaking around, lying, hiding, and covering up your junk? Or do you desire something deeper and more satisfying than the life you're living right now?

When people know your secrets, they run away.

When God knows your secrets, He runs *toward* you.

Jesus told an awesome story in Luke 15. It's called the Story of the Lost Son. A young man, the son of his father, wasted all of his inheritance money. He wanted it quick, and then he lost it quick. Time went by, and the father and son were separated. Eventually, the son came to his senses after he was broke with nowhere to go. So he went back to his father.

What did his father do when he saw him? *He ran towards him.* That's what God does to you.

But while he (the son) was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. Luke 15:20

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

Have you ever experienced someone who "ran toward you" when you had a problem?

BETTER THAN YOURS

Sometimes when I look at my own life, my own shortcomings, and my own failures, I become thankful. Huh? How is *that* possible?

It's possible because I compare myself to others. You ever do that? Every once in awhile, in a weak moment, when in a discussion with my life, I'll say, "Yeah, but _____ has _____." I compare in order to communicate that I deserve more.

Comparison eliminates joy. It makes contentment impossible. Comparison plays upon pride, which C.S. Lewis, a famous 20th-century author, calls the root sin. He calls pride the source of all other sins.

In one of his best books, *Mere Christianity*, Lewis said:

Well, now, we have come to the centre. According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind. Does this seem to you exaggerated? If so, think it over...if you want to find out how proud you are the easiest way is to ask yourself, 'How much do I dislike it when other people snub me, or refuse to take notice of me, or shove their oar in, or patronize me, or show off?' The point is that each person's pride is in competition with every one else's pride...Pride gets not pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others.

Is pride an issue in your life? How can that be changed?

Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall. Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud. Proverbs 16:18-19

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

How has pride damaged some of your relationships?

WHICH ONE?

You probably know of a lot of churches, especially if you have lived in that area for a long time. But you may not know more than what their sign says. And oftentimes, the sign is not the best indication of what's *actually* happening among the people. Notice how I didn't say, "what's actually happening inside." Church is not "inside."

The church is people; it's a community of people following the way of Jesus.

So which church is the right one for you?

The right one will follow Jesus as the one true God. It will worship Jesus as the God who made Himself known to humanity at Christmas, who gave His life for humanity on Good Friday, and rose to new life on Easter.

You have your own preferences in terms of musical style, teaching style, location, and even demographics of the crowd. But don't compromise on the real deal; go to a church that follows Jesus. If the church doesn't follow Jesus, don't go. Look for Jesus. You'll know.

When the teacher teaches, you'll hear Jesus. When the music plays, you'll hear the name "Jesus." You will want to grow in your understanding of Him. More importantly, you want to be around people who challenge you to know Jesus better. And I mean not just know *about* Jesus, but actually *know* Jesus. There is a difference. The goal is not facts and figures. The goal is a deep and abiding relationship like you would want as you get to know someone else.

Which church will lead you into a growing relationship with Jesus?

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

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

After going to a church this week, write down some of your impressions and experiences, and then share them with someone you trust.

OTHERS

We've reflected a lot on your own personal journey of faith. But you don't live life in a vacuum. You live in relation to other people, with other people, next to other people, side by side with other people.

You're not alone in this big, bad world. Whether you'd like it that way or not, I'll let you answer that. But you're not alone. There are people around you. You might *feel* alone, but that's different.

A 20th-century church leader by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our fellowship is in Jesus Christ alone, the more serenely shall we think of our fellowship and pray and hope for it."

People are designed to live in community. God's focus is on the experience of a community, a group called to journey together.

Now is a great time to get connected to a community of faith. How, though? I want to invite you to get involved with other believers.

Why? Because fellow believers gather regularly to encourage one another, to grow, to learn, to challenge, and to keep receiving the gifts God gives. Here's the other thing: these fellow believers are imperfect, messy, mistake-ridden people—just like you and me. That's why together, we need God's love every day. We're in this together.

Want to give it a shot?

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another... Hebrew 10:25a

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

Are you willing to find a community where people can support you in your faith journey? What churches have you been driving by lately that you may want to try this week?

TEMPTING, ISN'T IT?

Some of my best memories while growing up were when we went fishing. I grew up near Big Cedar Lake in Wisconsin, and a few times a summer we'd go fishing—either with our parents or with my grandma. I specifically remember one fishing experience. I had entered a fishing contest and won for the smallest fish!

To be quite honest, I really don't enjoy fishing that much. But I know someone who does. And he's pretty good at. He goes fishing regularly, and it doesn't matter how warm it is outside. He doesn't have a favorite fishing spot, but he has a few favorite techniques.

He knows the right kind of bait, and he knows the opportune times to fish. Some call him "Lucifer," others call him "Satan." Some call him the "Devil." The literal meaning of his name, though, is "slanderer."

You're not the only one who has ever been tempted. Jesus has been there, done that.

As Jesus started His ministry, the devil tries to get Jesus to doubt what the Father had said at His Baptism—that Jesus is the Son of God. *Isn't that what the devil does?* Isn't that what temptations are all about? Trying to make you doubt or call into question your identity and relationship with God?

What are your greatest temptations—cheating, looking at pornography, lying to those you love?

What did Jesus do when tempted? He quoted Scripture. The only words Jesus speaks in the dialog between Him and the devil are quotations from Scripture. It was such a part of His life that He responded easily with the Word of God.

What can you do next time you're tempted? Remember this: the Word of God trumps temptation.

No temptation has seized you except that which is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. 1 Corinthians 10:13

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

What are your greatest temptations? Identifying them is an important first step in avoiding the trap.

A MOMENT

There's a movie a few years old called, *Closer*. While I certainly won't endorse the movie, it definitely addresses some core relational errors in our society. Four people are caught in various relationships, each one with his or her own agenda and desired outcome.

In one particular scene, one of the women, quite angry at the time, says to the man: "There's a moment. There's always a moment."

She was referring to that moment when you decide to go one way or the other.

It's a great line. And it's so true.

There's a moment. There's always a moment. You know what I'm talking about.

The pain may be different; the circumstances may be different; the decisions may be different, and the effects may be different. But for every opportunity to sin, there's a moment. The moment may be some innocent flirting, or merely a look at a magazine. It may begin with a friendly conversation.

You know when the moment is, I believe. Even when you're a follower of Jesus, these moments continue. You're not exempt from them. In fact, it actually becomes more difficult because you feel torn—knowing what you should do, but fighting against what you want to do.

Identifying the moment, being aware of it, and having the ability to name it, will go a long way in making the right decision at the moment.

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Colossians 3:5

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

As you think about your own life, are there any consistent *moments* you can identify?

NO POWER

When you become a follower of Jesus Christ, the devil has no power over you.

Jesus came because of your sin. On the cross, sin was dealt with once and for all. A famous man once said that Jesus came to conquer "sin, death, and the power of the devil." He did it all—every last bit of it: sin, death, *and the power of the devil*. Conquered.

But the devil is still a liar, and he's still the enemy. In the first century, Peter wrote, "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings" (1 Peter 5:8-9). He's active, but he has no power over you.

He'll try to trick you.

He'll try to deceive you.

He'll try to make you doubt the promises of God.

But he has no power over you.

On the cross, sin was dealt with once and for all. In the tomb, Jesus rose to new life. He didn't stay dead. The resurrection of Jesus is unique when compared to all other religions in the world. Every other religious leader who has ever walked this earth died and stayed dead. Jesus has been resurrected from the dead. He's the only one.

Because of this, the grave is not the end for you. It's only the beginning of a life you will enjoy more than ever before.

But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

From your perspective, what is the devil like?

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

That's a big question, but we need to ask it sooner or later. What do you want in life? We've considered a lot of different perspectives, including your own and even those found in the Bible.

Yesterday, we reflected on the resurrection. It was necessary. Without it, nothing else matters. So now, what do you want?

Do you want a life with Jesus, one that is centered in the resurrection? Many say they do, but they don't want it now. Sure, they want to go to heaven when they die, but they don't want His power and promises on earth.

Why not?

Because with them comes an awesome privilege and responsibility. Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow Me." He didn't say, "I'll check in with you after you die." A lot of people like their sin too much. They'd rather not die to the sin and come alive in Jesus. They'd rather stay in their sin and try to have Jesus on the side.

Remember the Gospel? Jesus lived, died, and was *raised* from the dead, giving you a new life in Him. All your junk, all your sins, and all your negative baggage have been erased by the act of Jesus on the cross. Now, Jesus invites you to follow Him into a new adventure of hope, challenge, and security. He's not inviting you so He can leave you. He's inviting you so you can go along with Him.

You want to go? If that's the life you want, hear the invitation again: "Follow Me."

The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, He said to him, "Follow Me."
John 1:43

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

What kind of life do you want?

LETTING GO

Confession is a major part of this journey we are on during the season of Lent.

The longest book of the Bible, the book of Psalms (right in the middle of the Bible), includes 150 different chapters or psalms. These psalms are all unique, yet many of them are prayers of confession. One of my favorites and one that I read regularly is Psalm 32. If you have a Bible, check it out. It should be right in the middle of your Bible.

There is so much truth in these words and in the experience of the author, who was probably King David of the Old Testament. I know there are times in my life where I do not let go of or acknowledge my faults. I want to control my life. Are you with me?

Basically, the writer admits that when he's silent about his junk, he just "wastes away." But when he was willing to confess, to let go, and to no longer hide his junk from God, "You (God) forgave the guilt of my sin" (Psalm 32:5).

God wants to forgive you. He's not trying to hold it from you. He's not trying to trick you. He didn't make it hard.

Lent is a time of letting go. It's a time to confess that we are imperfect and that we need Jesus. We need Him more than ever right now.

Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Psalm 32:1

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

Are you willing, right now, to confess your sins to God? If so, go ahead. God is listening.

TAKING ADVANTAGE

Maybe it's hard for you to let go because you don't trust that letting go will actually do anything. Maybe for a long time you've believed that God may exist, but He's certainly not active or interested in your life.

God is still active and is always doing something. That means He is also doing something in your life, whether you know it or not, whether you like it or not.

God didn't create you and then let you go. He didn't say, "See ya." God is not Santa Claus. He's not a grandfather enjoying life in his rocking chair. He didn't start the timer and is now watching the minutes of the world tick away. You see, darkness entered the world after God had created a perfect world. It's called sin. That darkness of sin is still in the world. It's all around us. Watch the news. Read the paper. Look out your front door. Stinks to be us, right? We're stuck in the middle of it. Bummer for us to be living in it.

But it's an opportunity for God to save us from it.

And God *did* do something about it. He took advantage of the opportunity. Jesus was the way. Let me say it a different way: Jesus *is* the Way.

Everything gets messed up in darkness. The devil, who lives in darkness, and loves darkness, makes the darkness look good. You know what it looks like: drug addiction, pornography, gambling, vicious gossip about friends, family, or co-workers, overblown pride in yourself, your stuff, and your accomplishments.

Does it look so appealing now?

Bummer for us. Opportunity for God.

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. Matthew 28:20

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

What new perspective is God creating in you right now?

I'M WELL-KNOWN

At the church where I serve, one of our core values in my area of ministry is that "every child should be known by name."

Nobody likes a finger pointed at him or her.

Nobody likes the name, "hey, you!"

Nobody is an "it."

You are a human being. One of your needs, as well as mine, is to be known. It's a bonus when you're known by name.

You know the old *Cheers* theme song, right?

"Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came; You want to be where you can see, Our troubles are all the same; You want to be where everybody knows your name!"

At that Boston bar, you could walk in and people would know your name. They would be glad you're there. You would be welcome at *Cheers*.

As someone who works with people all the time, I try really hard to remember names. I have found that when I'm more concerned about sharing *my* name, *my* story, and *my* background, I often can't remember someone's name even two minutes later. It's different when I actually take an interest in them.

God has taken, takes, and will always take an interest in you. You are someone for whom God sent His Son Jesus, the Christ. It's because of *you* that Jesus came to earth, went to the cross, died a painful death, and was raised in an amazing way. It's because of you. You are well known to God.

That includes everything about you—the good, the bad, and everything in between.

You know my folly, O God; my guilt is not hidden from You. Psalm 69:5

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

What does this adoption mean to you?

I'M ADOPTED

Maybe you have more experience with adoptions that I do. Admittedly, I don't know that much. Some of my friends were adopted at a very young age. They don't have any memory of their biological parents.

For them, their adopted parents *are* their parents.

In the New Testament, Paul the apostle wrote, "But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under Law, to redeem those under Law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.' So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir" (Galatians 4:4-7).

By birth I am the son of Roy and Joanie Peterson.

By spiritual re-birth, by adoption, I am a son of God.

My parents are great. I can honestly tell you they loved me, cared for me, and helped to shape me into who I am today. I don't know your situation, but I know that my situation is not the common one today.

If your parents have ever let you down, if they've separated themselves from you, or you from them, even if you don't know who they are, God makes a promise to you.

God wants you to be a part of His family. You don't have to do anything to join; it's not some sort of club. It's a gift God gives in the person of His Son, Jesus, the Christ. At just the right time, God sent Jesus, born of a woman. This is what we celebrate at Christmas. But through His life, death, and resurrection, He has redeemed (a fancy church word for "bought back") you to be a part of His family.

So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.
Galatians 4:7

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

What does this adoption mean to you?

CHANGE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

God so loved the world that He sent Jesus. Because of Jesus, you are given a new life. You are given a brand-new life from the inside that will work its way out.

The world is saved through Jesus—through His action.

But I can hear you say, I have tried through my behavior to change. I have tried through my commitment to please God, through my dedication to be a good husband, through my own strength to break a habit. I've read the Bible and tried to keep the Ten Commandments.

And I fail and I fail and I fail.

You can't change your life until you've been changed. It's all about Jesus changing you and being your Savior. It's about Jesus being the Savior for everybody, including you. It's about Jesus life, death, and resurrection.

WOW! I just said a lot in that past paragraph.

That's the point. You can't do it without being changed from the inside out. And only Jesus' action on the cross (Good Friday) and His resurrection from the dead (Easter Sunday) can accomplish that change.

This is why Jesus went to the cross. On the cross, God abandoned Jesus in our place, and because Jesus was forsaken, I know I never will be.

It's not you. It's all Him.

But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under Law, to redeem those under Law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Galatians 4:4-5

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

Has your life been changed from the inside out? What does that mean to you?

FROM MY PERSPECTIVE

Have you ever thought about what kind of person was Jesus?

That's a great question to ask during the season of Lent. We've spent a few weeks reflecting on our own lives, and now we're starting to consider our lives within the context of a new perspective—one that involves Jesus Christ in some way. You probably have a question or two about Him, don't you?

When Jesus was actually here on earth, walking in the dust, and getting His sandals dirty, what made up His personality? What kind of attitude did Jesus have? What about His relationships?

Here's a question I think of every once in awhile: Would I have liked Him?

Would I have been friends with Him?

Would I have been a casual observer?

Would I have judged Him?

Back in Jesus' day, there was a group of people who thought they knew Him. Instead, Jesus confronted them in different ways. Would I have been one of them?

How do you see Jesus? Through what eyes do you view Him?

Throughout history, many have given their opinion of Jesus. Today, ask ten different people what they think, and you'll probably get eleven different reactions. I'd like to see Jesus through the eyes of someone who seemed to know Him pretty well—His buddy, Lazarus. We'll pick up there tomorrow.

You know my folly, O God; my guilt is not hidden from You. Psalm 69:5

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

How do you see Jesus? If you had to write one paragraph on what kind of person He was, what would you write?

I'M VALUABLE

It's all about Jesus. Your new life is because of Jesus. Only Jesus can change your heart, transform your life, and give you hope for what's yet to come.

If you've spent years trying on your own, I hope you've come to the point of realizing you *can't* do it on your own. Our human nature says, "Keep trying. You can fix this problem yourself." I haven't met a human who can, though.

Jesus offers a better option. He says, "Follow Me."

So what does life look like when you follow Jesus? Your core identity is different. One thing Jesus said is "are you not much more valuable than they?" The "they" He was referring to were *birds*.

You're valuable to God. You're worth something. You're not worthless, as some may have tried to convince you in the past. You have value. Your value is found in Jesus.

Because your value is found in Jesus, and not in your job, your stuff, or your accomplishments, Jesus said very plainly not to worry about your life. Easier said than done.

The temptation is to worry about my future, to worry about my past, to worry about what I'm doing today.

How would your life be different if you trusted Jesus' words: "Do not worry"?

These might be words worth memorizing and putting into practice.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life... Look at the birds of the air... are you not much more valuable than they? Matthew 6:25a, 26a

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

How valuable do you feel right now in your family? In your job? With God?

WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET

People have investigated the resurrection of Jesus for centuries on many levels. Did it really happen? How? People just don't get the whole "raised from the dead" thing. At least, they don't in real life.

But it is history. It happened. There were witnesses. And there's light and life for anyone who is in doubt about it. Are you in doubt about it? Has that become a major barrier for you in your spiritual journey?

You will find that with Jesus there's always a connection between light and life. With Jesus, what you see is what you get: *life* in Him, because He is the *light*.

The problems in our lives are all tied to sin. Sin permeates our lives, separates us from God, and each other. Death owned us. Death is a reality for all of us.

For those who don't believe, there's no hope, no life, nothing.

The Bible says, "Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

Jesus' resurrection is the most important and crucial part of our faith. Easter changes everything.

Cancer, death, struggles, pain, and suffering are all in the human package. But your life doesn't need to focus on that. Easter is the proof that Jesus is alive and there is a light in the middle of all the darkness.

With Jesus, you can have confidence that no matter what the world throws at you, in the end, you win with the same Jesus who came out of the darkness of the tomb into the light of life.

And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. 1 Corinthians 15:14

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

What do you think of Jesus' resurrection?

LAZARUS' PERSPECTIVE

I need to say it up front: we don't know that much about Lazarus. He was one of the guys we hear of occasionally in the life of Jesus, but he wasn't one of the twelve disciples. The disciples followed Jesus around for about three years, so they knew Him pretty well.

I think Lazarus knew Jesus pretty well, too.

Lazarus had more of a normal relationship with Jesus. The two of them hung out at Lazarus' house; they ate together, and they became friends. In fact, Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, upon realizing their brother was sick, said to Jesus, "The one You love is sick."

The one *You love*.

Jesus loved Lazarus. You might be thinking, of course, Jesus is supposed to love everyone. True. But the Bible intentionally notes that after hearing about his friend Lazarus' death, "Jesus wept."

It's the shortest verse in the Bible, but it's powerful. It's powerful because we realize how human Jesus is. He wept. And He loved.

In the midst of His human nature, though, Jesus is God. That's obvious when we look at the perspective of Lazarus. Jesus had something bigger in mind after Lazarus died. He was getting ready for a resurrection – and not only that of His buddy.

He was already anticipating His own.

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?"

John 11:25-26

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

How does the reality that Jesus was human affect your opinion of Him?

ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

The title for this reflection could summarize the life of Jesus. For Jesus, it was all about people. That's why He came—not for Himself—but for people, people who needed Him.

The Gospel of Luke describes the time when Jesus was kicking off His ministry at the age of 30. He was in the synagogue in His hometown of Nazareth. Jesus took the scroll of Isaiah the prophet, unrolled it, and read a passage from chapter 61. It talked about the one who was to be anointed.

He would preach good news to the poor.
 He would proclaim freedom for the prisoners.
 He would recover sight for the blind.
 He would release the oppressed.
 He would proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

After reading it, He rolled it back up, sat down, and said, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Who *is* Jesus?

Jesus is the answer to what the prophets were talking about.
 Jesus is the preacher, releaser, healer, and proclaimer.
 Jesus is all about people.

If Jesus is all about people, then He's a servant—someone with incredible humility. That does describe Him pretty well. His teaching supports that, and His action proves it. Even after Jesus died, the apostle Paul reflected on Jesus and said:

Jesus made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Philippians 2:7-8

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

In what ways can you be more focused on the needs of other people, serving them rather than wanting to be served?

COMPASSION

I have already mentioned that the disciples of Jesus knew Him pretty well. Even though they knew Him well, they oftentimes still seemed to misunderstand Him.

There are places throughout the Gospels where the disciples of Jesus do some rather crazy things. In one situation (recorded in John 9), they are walking along with Jesus the Christ, the one who had already healed many, fed thousands, and claimed to be the "light of the world." It was then that they decided to get into a theological conversation at a most inopportune time about a man born blind.

"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

With this question, they are making a *huge* assumption about this man. Have you ever assumed something when you shouldn't have?

They figured that because he was blind, he (or his parents) was/were being punished for something they had done. They interpreted the Law to mean that if someone suffered from a disease, ailment, or sickness, that *somebody* had committed some sin against God.

The disciples were more interested in the *why* behind the question. For the disciples, the blind man was an unsolved riddle rather than a sufferer to be relieved.

But for Jesus, he was a human who needed help. Jesus saw an opportunity, not an explanation. He practiced urgency, rather than apathy.

Then, Jesus healed this man. With some spit, mud, and His compassion, Jesus gave the blind man his sight. That's who Jesus is—a God of compassion.

We need that in our world today, don't we?

When Jesus saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Matthew 9:36

YOUR PERSPECTIVE:

How can you show more compassion to someone today than you have in the past?