

A Verse to Live by

“Search me, 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 (NIV)

March Prayer Focus

In 1 Thessalonians 5:19 Paul instructs us not to quench the Spirit. This month I challenge each of us to ask God to search our hearts and reveal any unhealthy motives, intentions or thoughts that hinder the Holy Spirit working through and in our lives. The Spirit comes to us as fire (Acts 2:3-4) that we can fan into a full flame to accomplish God's good and perfect will. Don't let anything in your heart “quench” this holy flame in your life.

Life Application Challenge

I challenge each of us through the remainder of Lent (ends April 9th) to take a heart inventory. Take an honest look at what is in your heart: your priorities, preconceptions, motives. Is there any bitterness, envy or unforgiveness that is taking root? Write down a list of the things God has revealed to you. Every day of Lent ask God to help you overcome and heal the unhealthy areas of your life, and to make the healthy areas flourish even more.

Recommended Scripture Reading 1 Thessalonians 4 & 5

In these Chapters Paul gives us instruction on how to live a lifestyle pleasing to God and reminds us of our inheritance as His children.

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Why Observe Lent?

Before I share why I feel Lent is important to observe, I would like to give a brief explanation of what it is. When I was a new Christian, and for quite some time after, I never really understood what Lent was and why we celebrated it. “Isn’t that for Catholics?”, I thought to myself. Hopefully this will answer questions you may have.

The Lenten season, February 26-April 9 this year, lasts 40 days, modeled after Christ’s time of fasting in the desert. It is a time to draw closer to God and open our hearts to His refining grace. Some do this by fasting from food, or by giving up other things they enjoy to focus that time in prayer and meditation. The idea is to use these 40 days to open wide the door of your heart and allow God’s refining love to change you. Lent is a wonderful opportunity for all Christians of all denominations to take time to focus on confession, giving, fasting, praying, and reflecting on what Christ has done for us.

This is a wonderful chance to make our hearts, minds and spirits more in tune with God and to deepen our relationship with Him. I think of the two greatest commandments Jesus said we are to live out: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Matt 22:37-39) Lent provides us with a great opportunity to reflect on our relationship with God and see what we may be holding back from Him. Is there an area of your life you have refused to submit to God? Is there a recurring sin you are struggling to overcome? I encourage you to use this Lenten season to submit to God what you have been resisting, and to confess sins you may be struggling with. We are assured that God will forgive us, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)

If you need support to overcome a recurring sin, find an accountability partner. I know that is a scary step. It can leave us vulnerable to judgement, but the Bible has many verses that encourage us to seek the help of others. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 is a great example of this, “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.” Make this season of Lent the time you stand against Satan’s attacks and show him that you will no longer allow fear, pride, or stubbornness to hold you back from God’s plan for your life! Let this be a time for

victory, a time of renewed strength, and a time of restoration. May each of us come to church Easter Sunday with joy in our hearts, victory in our lives, and freedom from the burdens we have carried for far too long. Allow the Holy Spirit to do His sacred work in your heart and set you free from the sins, hurts and baggage that has weighed you down.

In Matthew 11:28 Jesus lovingly appeals to those who are overwhelmed to “Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Don’t carry those burdens anymore, set it all at the cross. Jesus is better at handling those situations anyway! Feeling defeated or overwhelmed was never in God’s plans for you. Those feelings come from unhealthy choices and the evil one, but Jesus came, died, and rose again to set you free from that. He is not only our Savior from sin and death, but He also saves us from the everyday storms in life. The cross doesn’t just reveal how sinful we are but it also reveals our value. God loved us so much He did not even spare his precious, perfect son. John 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” The reality of God’s sacrifice for us hit me when I watched my own precious son suffer and die before my eyes. I am convinced there is no greater pain on earth than to watch your own child suffer and die a slow, painful death. But the reality that my son’s pain didn’t come close to the emotional, physical and spiritual pain our Savior suffered is almost too hard for me to think about. And God, our Father, loved us so much that He sacrificed His perfect Son for... us -- His imperfect and rebellious children.

There is tremendous value in observing the Lenten traditions. This is a great time to give up and give more. Giving up would be fasting from food or other things to focus that time in prayer and meditation. Giving more would be giving time, money, or a service to someone in need. Our works do not save us, the Bible is clear on that, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Eph.2:8-9) But by our works someone may be led to salvation.

Watching God Work,

Carolyn Abel