

# **Youth Group Devotionals**

## **Week 1**

### **Reflections on the Cross**

The purpose of this series of Lenten Devotions is to help us focus on the meaning of what Christ did for us on the Cross and to draw us into deeper reflection of our own lives.

Each day we will be highlighting a different aspect of what Christ accomplished through the cross during his final hours. We will also be highlighting a different spiritual discipline each day that you can use to help you reflect on your growth in Christ and devotion to him. God bless.

## **Jesus' Sacrifice: An Out Pouring of God's Love – Availability**

### **John 3:16–21**

As we draw nearer to Easter, let's take the next few weeks to focus on Jesus and what He did for us on the cross. Today, we turn to perhaps the most well known passage in the Bible.

#### **Read John 3:16-21**

Spend time this morning reflecting on the simple truth found in John 3:16-17. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.” What an incredible love that God has for us that He would send his Son to die for us! Sometimes we fail to grasp the depth of God's love for us. This is the Good News, that while we were sinners and stuck in the condemnation we'd brought upon ourselves, Jesus died for us to set us free and give us life with Him.

#### **Read Philippians 2:5-8**

In coming to die for us, Jesus emptied himself and took on human form. He set aside his divine right to the power and position as God of the universe to be just like us. He made himself available to do what God the Father wanted him to do. Only He could choose to set aside his own glory in exchange for such a frail humanity. As we continue to remember and focus on what God has done for us, think of how you can practice the spiritual discipline of availability. Just as Jesus made himself available to do whatever God would have him do, make yourself available to do whatever God may be calling you to do. Write down one thing God is putting on your heart today, then do it.

*Today God is calling me to make myself available to...*

*“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son for it. Not that he was unable to save us in another way, but in this way it was possible to show us his abundant love abundantly, namely, by bringing us near to him by the death of his Son. If he had anything more dear to him, he would have given it to us, in order that by it our race might be his. And out of his great love he did not even choose to urge our freedom by compulsion, though he was able to do so. But aim was that we should come near to him by the love of our mind. And, our Lord obeyed his Father out of love for us.”*

-Isaac of Ninevah

## Servanthood

Within Isaiah are four mysterious “Servant Songs”, passages that speak of an unnamed Servant of God who simply defies expectations. The passage, the last and most famous of the Servant Songs (Isaiah 52:13-53:12), is often claimed to describe Christ. But Isaiah was not written for a Christian audience – it was written for a Jewish one. They, of course, do not see the Suffering Servant as Jesus. But if we read it from their eyes, perhaps we can learn something not just about Christ, but also about us in the process. There are two speakers in the Servant Song, but we will only read the words of one of them. The speaker here consists of pagan observers who are witnesses to the Suffering Servant.

### **Read: Isaiah 53:1-10**

The speaker’s response to the Suffering Servant was at first that of incredulity. This guy was essentially a nobody, coming from seemingly nowhere. But then in verse 4-5, they noticed that this Suffering Servant took up a suffering that was not his to bear. And soon, the pagan observers realize in verse 6 the cold, hard truth: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray.” And as you read the testimony of these pagan observers, you realize in the end (vs. 10) that in seeing how the Suffering Servant suffered for transgressions not of his own, these pagan observers learned who the LORD is.

My favorite theologian is Stanley Hauerwas, and one of his claims was that Christianity in America has forgotten what it means to be Christian. I agree. So often, we think of ourselves as superior over others. To have Jesus means that we are more righteous, more powerful, more authoritative, and – in some churches – wealthier than those without Jesus. One of the great temptations of leadership is exactly that: because we are *doulos* people, counselors, Sunday school teachers, worship leaders, pastors, district superintendents, etc., we are somehow bigger, faster, better, stronger Christians than those who were not in positions of spiritual leadership. But if the passage today tells us anything, it is that God’s servant does not lord it over everyone. Indeed, Jesus said in Luke 22:25 that the greatest must be like the ones who serve.

And what does it mean to serve? Verses 7 gives a hint. Oppressed and afflicted, “yet he did not open his mouth”. He was led “like a lamb before the slaughter”. Imagine if you were in an argument with someone else at school and you simply shut up. That is the picture Isaiah was painting of the Suffering Servant – a Servant bullied for sins not of his own. Indeed, servanthood in the Bible cannot be separated from humility, from sacrifice, and from suffering. Yes – servanthood might mean that you will need to stay up late tonight talking on the phone with someone instead of doing your homework. Yes – servanthood might mean that you will need to shut up and take verbal abuse from someone who doesn’t know what he or she is doing (remember the Cross?). Yes – servanthood might mean that you will have to sacrifice your time, your schedule, prom night, etc.

Spend some time in reflection. What does it mean to serve? Maybe some of you are leaders in the church. What does it mean to serve for you? Maybe it means to spend less time with your friends in youth group and spend more time with those whom you don’t know as well? Perhaps it means praying for each other, or simply listening. Perhaps it means less time in the limelight on stage, more time in the pews worshipping together with everybody. In our reflection, let us look to the cross and remember the Christ who fulfills Isaiah’s vision of the Suffering Servant, and realize that ultimately, servanthood flows out of love.

## **Jesus: the Fulfillment of God's Purpose – Celebration!**

We're nearing the middle of the week, which has probably been filled with its ups and downs and twists and turns. Perhaps you've been under a lot of stress, or just collapsing under the weight of this world. However, take heart! God reminds us that He always fulfills his promises and that He will surely deliver us from this world.

### **Read Isaiah 61.**

Even in this relatively short chapter, there's a lot to take in. This passage focuses on how Jesus fulfills God's promise to us. The **first three verses** details the Anointed One's mission aka Jesus' ministry: to preach good news, proclaim freedom for the captives, proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance, and to comfort those who mourn.

In fact, Jesus even read a part of this passage in **Luke 4:18-19**. It's interesting that He stopped reading in the middle of the sentence, after the word "favor". Why would He only quote half of it? By doing this, Jesus was showing that His work would be divided into two parts: He has already fulfilled the things mentioned in verses **1-2a** during His time on earth.

In His second coming, He will do the things mentioned in verses **2b-3**. When the Messiah comes, He will bring judgment on unbelievers, which is the "day of God's vengeance". However, the Messiah will also comfort Israel. When He returns, He will change Israel's sadness to joy! There are a lot of shifts in imagery in this passage, such as wearing a crown instead of ashes, which is usually placed upon one's head as a sign of mourning. The **remaining eight verses** of this chapter talks about God's promises of restoration, glory and prosperity for Israel in the future. During this time, Jews and Gentiles will live together in harmony and peace. Well, what does this mean for us?

God *truly* cares about the broken, the lonely, the weak, the depressed, the outcasts, the prisoners, etc. These are not just empty words: God restores and then sends out those who have been redeemed to rebuild the ruins—other lives that are also broken. He sent Jesus to rescue us and demonstrate His love, kindness, and grace. Just as Christ has restored us, we should go out and be lights in the world, rejoicing and proclaiming to all what He has done for us.

In **verses 10-11**, the author speaks for the redeemed people who will rejoice in response to God's blessings! He praises God for His message, His active presence, and His faithfulness to His chosen people. He is just overflowing with praise and thanksgiving!

Should we not rejoice as well? God has clothed us in garments of salvation and in robes of righteousness. This picture of joy is also shown in the jewels the bride wears and the bridegroom's fancy clothes. We are no longer shackled by sin; rather, we have been set free in Christ! Take comfort in what God's plan, and what is to come in the future. God has kept His promise by sending His Son to complete His mission on earth, and surely, God will continue to fulfill all of His promises.

Take a few moments to reflect on this passage. Remember that the Lord is our comfort and salvation. He can create beauty out of ashes, and joy out of our sorrow and mourning!

## Jesus' Death for Human Sin – Fasting

Let's take a trip back to the time of Jesus, imagine yourself standing over one of your sheep. You've been waiting for it to give birth for a while now and the moment has finally come. A young lamb is born before you and over the next few weeks you watch it struggle to walk and grow. It is beautiful and wonderful display of God's creation and life; the best of your livestock. One day you get up and lead your little lamb down to the temple. You must hand this young beauty over to the hands of the priest. Before your eyes the life is taken from this world, slaughtered upon the alter, its blood taken for your sin and impurity. You watch the death of this little lamb you've raised knowing that your sin is the cause of it. A vicious cycle that never ends: a life for your sin.

### *Read Hebrews 7:18-28*

The priests were responsible for interceding between God and His people. One day a year the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies, the place in the temple where God's presence dwelled. A rope would be tied around their ankle, if they were found impure before God they would die and have to be dragged out. Priests were still human and subject to the law of death and sin. (Look at verses 23 and 27-28 again). In their weakness they served God but it was never enough for they were humans bound in their impurity and unable to save the people. All they could do was offer sacrifice, perform rituals, and pray on the people's behalf.

Hebrews 7 reminds us that the priests could not ultimately save people, but because our God is merciful he provided a priest that was free from the law of death and sin. In Jesus we find no weakness that He should be unable to save us. Read verse 24-25 again. He stands before God interceding for us now at this very moment! But perhaps the key verse is verse 27: No more daily sacrifices but one death removes all sin past, present, and future! We no longer bring a lamb to be slaughtered because Jesus was slaughtered on the cross. Read Jn 1:29, 36; Mark 14:22-24. Take a few moments to reflect on these verses.

Although we no longer offer sacrifices and God does not require them (because they don't save us, only Jesus) we must remember that which is said in Heb 12:28-13:17, Romans 6:12-15 and Ps 51:16-17. Many of you may know that Lent started last week (if you don't know it Google it), a season of fasting. Fasting is an important spiritual discipline, not to give something up as a sacrifice to God, but instead to keep our focus on Him and our hearts broken and contrite. This is the time when we join our brothers and sisters in preparing our hearts for Easter, for remembering what Jesus' death really was. Fasting is not just for the few weeks before Easter but anytime when you want to humble yourself and refocus on God by removing something in your life (not just food!) that is distracting or more important to you than God. I encourage you to look at verses related to fasting and let God teach you more about fasting from his Word. (<http://www.biblegateway.com/keyword/?search=fasting&version1=31&searchtype=all>)

*Dear God, I humble myself before you knowing you are a wonderful merciful God who first humbled yourself on the cross and became my High Priest, forever interceding on my behalf. Help me now to have a broken and contrite heart before you and bring to my mind anything that I desire more than you. Help me set those aside and if necessary enter a time of fasting to refocus on you. Amen.*



## Jesus' Death for Eternal Life

### Read John 10:1-22

Sheeps. They're fluffy and cute, they make funny noises and look really silly when they run. They're also about as sharp as mashed potatoes. I guess so are we since God sees fit to mention that people are like sheep repeatedly in scripture. I think it interesting to note in this passage Jesus makes reference to himself in two different ways. One primary way we see Jesus is as the Good Shepherd. Jesus as the Good Shepherd lays down his life for a bunch of sheep. These sheep, by the way, might not even comprehend the significance of the sacrifice of the Shepherd; because they're so busy going about their business of being sheep. Only the Shepherd is wise enough to find the good pastures for the sheep, find the places of quiet waters for their drinking, keep predators away, save them if they foolishly run off or fall in a pit and break a leg. Sheep don't see this, they just see each other and the things right in front of their face, and yet Christ, the Good Shepherd with all authority lays down his life on behalf of his sheep. This implies that there was something so deadly coming at the sheep they didn't even see, and the Shepherd in his wisdom realized the significance and in an act of sheer love lost his own life to save the herd. The other way Jesus speaks of himself in this passage is as the Gate. The Shepherd is the one who uses the Gate, it is his field, his sheep. The sheep don't typically leave the pen by jumping over the fence though I'm sure a few silly sheep try. No, they generally leave by the gate when it's opened for them. Likewise, Jesus is the one who leads us, and he is the only way through. If we try to go hop over the fence by ourselves we get lost without our Shepherd, we are isolated from our fellow sheep, and an easy target for any predator looking for a meal. The pasture is Eternal life, and only through the sacrifice of Jesus can we as sheep be lead by the Shepherd safely into sharing in it. As a person, I may not like the implications of this kind of reference, but in a very real way we are often the same as these sheep, and our Shepherd has used his authority as Shepherd to sacrifice himself on our behalf so that we with him might shared in the redemption of Eternal life which he has come to lead us into. Are you hearing the Shepherd as He's calling you?

### Reflection on the Discipline of Chastity

You might be asking yourself what any of this has to do with the spiritual discipline of Chastity? We as believers participate in the Eternal Life through Christ; because we live in Christ and he also lives in us. While some view this as a largely spiritual connection, I think that many times we overlook the physical connection of our bodies with Christ. When God says that we are one body as the church, it is very physical words he uses.

My Mom, who grew up Catholic, was able to give me a better perspective on this, since Catholics tend to have a longer tradition and richer understanding of the practice of Celibacy. As a result of these talks with my Mom, at an early age (middle school) I began to fantasize about becoming a nun. In my mind I would be like St. Clare of Assisi forsaking the promise of a wealthy future for a life of devotion to God. Now, I realize this concept might sound quite foreign to a number of you, but follow me here. What I realized from these dreams is there is a whole lifetime full of the Divine romance in whatever capacity you serve. Being single allows us to participate in the Divine romance in a way we are not capable of doing if we are married. Likewise our perception of the Divine romance changes if God brings us into a marital relationship. Wherever you find yourself now, remember that we are all called to purity in Christ. This purity is one of the thought life and the body. It's a purity that is internal and interpersonal. Since through Christ we are made pure, let us not defile one another by the way we treat and view them.

### Prayer

*God, to you I come at this hour. I earnestly wish to be pure in thought, word, and deed in imitation of your own holy purity. Obtain for me, then, a deep sense of modesty which will be reflected in my external conduct. Protect my eyes, the windows of my soul, from anything that might dim the luster of a heart that must mirror only Christlike purity. Help me to understand the nature of the Divine romance in Eternal Life through Christ. Amen.*