

## **Lenten Devotional in a Season of “Social Distancing”**

*The following provides a daily meditation for this season of “social distancing.” Each day focuses on one of the “Psalms of Ascent” (Psalm 120-134), which traditionally were sung or read before the great Passover celebrations in Jerusalem. Join your FCC family in authentically drawing closer to God through the Word as we approach the pinnacle of our faith, Holy Week. Just like the pilgrims of old, we may sing these psalms together, from our own journeys, joining our voices to the great chorus of faith, even while we are “apart.”*

*Consider the following format for each devotion: Begin with centering yourself (and others) in prayer. Read the assigned Scripture for the day. Listen to the text, ask questions, think through its images and words. Consider the reflection, but, don’t let it dictate your own understanding. These words are meant to guide, not control. Close in prayer, trusting in God’s goodness to sustain you, in this moment, and in life’s continued journey.*

### **Week 1**

#### **Monday, March 16**

Read: Psalm 120

Reflection:

These words offer a prayer from someone no longer “at home” in their land, and while we may all start experiencing *too much* of our homes in the next several days, I relate to the feeling. The preventative measures and environment of anxiety in this age of coronavirus make us all feel like strangers, longing desperately for the familiar.

There’s an obvious tension in this psalm of being a peacemaker in a world at war. While there’s no call to arms going off for us, I do feel the pressure of social media and other communications’ channels in maintaining a healthy balance of education and caution. There’s a lot of talking down to those who are either reacting too “strongly” to fears or those who are making light of all this “social distancing.” As we all wrestle with the anxiety and fears of our community, can we strive to speak “peace?” Can we offer the Word of God, also known as “grace” to those around us when tensions feel so high?

It’s certainly costly - but perhaps that kind of attitude is closest to the One we claim as the Prince of Peace.

Prayer: *As I call to You, O God, may Your Spirit help me follow Your Living Word to speak and show love to my neighbors.*

## **Tuesday, March 17**

Read: Psalm 121

Reflection:

Today is Saint Patrick's Day, but it probably doesn't feel like it. And yet, this holiday did not originate with excess libations and wearing too much green. It began as recognition for the legacy of Patrick of Ireland, a Christian who devoted his life to serving those who had chained him in his youth. Patrick helped embolden the faith of a people and culture that in turn, helped preserve the Christian tradition as well as much of Western civilization.

This psalm is a powerful tribute to recognizing God's faithful presence in the "hills" of life. The journey to Jerusalem was not always easy - it was a steady climb through country that wasn't always safe. The psalmist's cry that God "protects your going out and coming in" is a reminder that God journeys *with us*. Patrick testified to this, with his life and subsequent writings: "*Christ be with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me...Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.*"

No one need journey alone, and in this season, we can hold to the God who "neither slumbers nor sleep" (v.4).

Prayer: *For all of us pilgrims, walking up and down these hills towards Jesus, help us know Your journey with us, too. Amen.*

## **Wednesday, March 18**

Read: Psalm 123

Reflection:

It may be hard for us to care for "Jerusalem" when we're on the other end of the world, but for the Jewish people, Jerusalem was home to God's special Presence via the Temple. This city held the tent God chose to pitch among Israel - and so the people felt ownership of its territory. As Christians, we may still feel special affinity towards Jerusalem, but God's Presence is housed in *all of us!* We are living "temples" - so how do we take ownership of one another?

We may start by praying for our friends and family by name, then moving into co-workers or neighbors - maybe even praying for those we *don't* know. Perhaps praying for the "peace of Jerusalem" includes our own communities - seeking actively the welfare of our towns, neighborhoods, and counties. That may go without saying, but you might surprise yourself by deepening our spiritual focus locally. What we pray for, we should then live out.

"For the sake of the house [my neighbor] of the LORD our God, I will seek your [my community] good" (v. 9, reimagined).

Prayer: *May we always see Your face in Your living temples, LORD.*

## Thursday, March 19

Read: Psalm 123

Reflection:

My dog has a way of looking at me that screams: “FEED ME.” The thing is, I feed that dog faithfully and without fail - so why is he always so desperate? Maybe that’s how we come off sometime in our prayers - we pray so earnestly for things we desire/need, without recognizing that our Maker provides for us faithfully and without fail. Maybe we need help seeing past our “stomach love” and open up our viewpoints to include those around us.

This psalm is beautiful in that it is voiced *by* the community: “have mercy on *us*” (v.3). Israelite faith was unique in that it upheld the importance of individuals while also calling attention to the corporate body. We are a *community* - not just a gathering of individuals, but truly, bound together by God’s love and Spirit. I love my dog dearly, but he provided a helpful reminder that God has a whole lot of children, and as special as I may be, I am but one piece of that picture.

May we all look longingly to God in such a way, that we are reminded that it’s not our eyes alone looking up to the hand of the Almighty.

Prayer: *LORD, listen to Your children praying - give us love, give us power, give us grace. Amen.*

## Friday, March 20

Read: Psalm 124

Reflection:

When was the last time you said “thank God,” and really meant it? I’m recalling the previous times I’ve said it, they served more like a reflexive phrase than a response of praise. Yet this psalm makes the bold claim that without God’s help, there would be no reason for praise - there would be no victory, help, or life itself. This is about as authentic a “thank God” as you’ll find.

As is often the case in Scripture, God’s works led the writers to tell the story to the next generation. Can we follow that tradition and not just authentically “thank God,” but tell the story to the next generation? What will we say to people about this point in history? Will we claim that “if it had not been the LORD who was on our side” (v. 1)...all would have been lost? More importantly, will our praise of God show up in how we live?

We can really only claim victory once the storm has passed - so wait actively, our help is in the Name of the LORD.

Prayer: *You are our help, O God - may none of our actions fail to witness that. Amen.*

## **Saturday, March 21**

There are no texts for today. Rather, practice a true “Sabbath” and rest in the knowledge that you are loved by the God of the universe. Be true to that, and cease striving for anything else.

“The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Prayer: *Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the Universe, for You are good, and Your steadfast love endures forever. Amen.*

## **Sunday, March 22**

Join us for “virtual worship” through tuning into the website: [www.fccstjoseph.org/sermons-3/](http://www.fccstjoseph.org/sermons-3/) either during our live-stream at 10:30 AM, or on your own at a later time.

Whether you “join in” into this virtual worship or not, use this day as a time for praise, reflection, and strengthening of your discipleship for the daily journey of following Christ. May God’s Spirit go with you, guiding and empowering you, and reminding you that even in “social distancing” we are a *community*. We are family of God, bound through Christ’s love and presence, and we never journey alone.

**May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you, now and forever. Amen.**