

Easter Readings to Touch Your Heart

40
Days

40
Words

KEN PETERSEN
& RANDY PETERSEN

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40 Days. 40 Words. Easter Readings to Touch Your Heart

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*To Dad,
who gave us a love for words—
and God's Word.*

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Introduction

For us as brothers still in grade school, the celebration on Easter Sunday was an exciting event. We remember Easter mornings: putting on crisp new suits, walking into our local Baptist church “sanctuary” (actually a converted barn), and seeing an explosion of lilies and palm fronds decorating the platform in front. We fondly recall the congregation singing a particular hymn with its refrain, “Up from the grave he arose,” which climbs the scale into a triumphant “hallelujah.”

It was thrilling, even to us boys. We did not yet understand the full cosmic impact of Christ’s resurrection, of course, but we knew that somehow, in rising from the grave, Jesus had saved us. This was the special excitement of this very different Sunday—exactly what Easter should be.

Later, as we learned in a Christian college more about the Bible and the early church, we became aware that there was more to Easter—that there was a Good Friday and something called Maundy Thursday and a day before that known as Ash Wednesday. And we learned about something called Lent.

We believed then, as we do now, that Christian faith needs to be real and not rote. We looked skeptically at certain church traditions, feeling that the faith we live should not be done simply because “it’s always been done that way.” Our decision to follow Jesus is personal and freely chosen, not prompted by the “ought to” of tradition.

And yet, along the way, we have made other discoveries about Easter. One is that Easter is not just a day but a whole season, an opportunity for special devotional time to bring us closer to Jesus. Another discovery is that some of those Lent traditions have solid roots in the Bible and are worth considering more deeply. And one more thing—many Bible people journeyed with Jesus in the days leading to His crucifixion and resurrection, and we might learn a thing or two by walking in those same shoes in preparation for Easter.

Looking back at our days in that Baptist barn, we reflect on that same hymn. “Christ Arose” starts with a somber grief, “Low in the grave he lay,” echoing the agony of Christ’s disciples and followers shaken by His crucifixion. Perhaps even as boys we sensed that the big celebration of “up from the grave he arose” was much more explosive because of the quiet opening despair of “low in the grave he lay.”

And that’s the point of this forty-day devotional book. Our personal faith in the resurrection of Jesus is made deeper and richer by engaging with the solemn journey leading up to it. The wilderness we sometimes find ourselves in is made more understandable when we experience the wilderness Jesus endured for forty days. The celebration of our salvation is more joyous when we remember the despair we were saved from.

This book is an invitation to walk with Jesus on the road to Easter.

Ken Petersen and Randy Petersen



7

Repent

I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live.

EZEKIEL 33:11

In a common cartoon image, a long-haired, long-bearded man stands on a busy street corner with a sign that says, “Repent! The end is near!”

Whatever the punch line, there’s a sobering truth in that image. People rush on with their lives, ignoring the prophet who warns them of impending disaster. They urgently need to stop, take stock, and change their ways before it’s too late. But they have appointments to keep: “Sorry, I have a lunch . . .”

Repentance is a major theme of the Bible and echoes through the forty days leading up to Easter. Stop, take stock, change your ways. All of that is wrapped up in the word *repent*—and must not be dismissed because of lunch meetings.



Many of the Old Testament prophets called for repentance. “Say to them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather

that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways!” (Ezekiel 33:11).

The Hebrew word for “repent” (*shuv*) can also mean “return.” The image used again and again is this: God’s people have turned away from God and are going the wrong way. They need to turn back, return, repent. “Return, Israel, to the LORD your God,” Hosea cries. “Your sins have been your downfall!” (Hosea 14:1).

The New Testament continues this tradition with John the Baptist—who probably looked a lot like that cartoon street prophet—preaching, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 3:2). He baptized people in the Jordan River as a sign of their repentance. Jesus continued the same tradition, with the same message, as He began His public ministry (4:17).

This also became the call to action preached by the early apostles. In his Pentecost address after Jesus’s followers received the Holy Spirit, Peter told the Jewish people, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).



The Greek word used most often for “repentance” in the New Testament is *metanoia*. Literally it means a change (*meta*) of mind (*nous*). The Greeks loved the thinking process, and thus they often emphasized the mental aspects of life. But whenever we see repentance in the New Testament, it also

carries the Hebrew sense of a turning, a changing, not just a new way of thinking but a new way of living.




For us who are saved, it's a little too easy to parrot the all-too-common words "Jesus died for our sins" and miss the point. The apostle Paul says, "[Jesus] gave himself for our sins to rescue us" (Galatians 1:4). Jesus gave himself up. It was either Him or us in the grand scheme of things. Jesus stepped forward and in some way that we cannot imagine took on himself our own sins.

In that light, what does it say if we come to the cross without true repentance? How can we observe the real meaning of Easter if we continue to harbor secret sin? How can our failure to repent—to change our minds and hearts—be anything other than disrespect for our Lord Jesus?

Preparing Your Heart for Easter

Has it been quite a while since you repented of sin? This Easter season is a time for you to do so. Consider repentance in terms of godly sorrow: not just your mental acknowledgment of your sin, but your deepest heart feelings about the cost of your sin to others and to God.

Father, forgive me. I have sinned and continue to sin repeatedly. This is a time for me to change my ways, to come to you to ask for a new mind and heart. Help me to be the person you've made me to be.



21

Holy

You must be holy because I am holy.

1 PETER 1:16 NLT

It should come as no surprise that the Holy Bible uses the word *holy* a lot. More than five hundred times. Makes sense: the Bible is the story of God, and God by definition is holy, the Holy One.

But when the apostle Peter calls us to be holy just like God, it becomes troubling. For us to be holy like God is hard to do. Actually impossible.

Even so, many people try, making this instruction something it wasn't intended to be. We pursue being holy through legalistic checklists, pious practices, and perfect church attendance. For some it becomes an obsession with trying to do everything "right."

In our preparation for Easter, we are confronted with this problem, which is in fact a profound truth and question—God is holy, we're not, so what are we to do about it?



"There is no one holy like the LORD," Hannah prayed (1 Samuel 2:2). Not that we need to be reminded, but God is different from us. Special, set apart, a cut above, off the charts.

On a holiness scale of one to ten, God is eleven.

We might recall the verse in Isaiah where God says, “My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts . . . and my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine” (55:8 NLT). This is God making clear how He is different, on a totally other level from us.

It’s interesting that Scripture often uses images of God that depict His closeness to us. He is the Great Shepherd, and we are His sheep. He is the Vine and we are the branches. He is the Potter and we are the clay. These images emphasize God is like us. Indeed, Jesus is God in human form—precisely for the purpose of being “one of us” (see Matthew 1:23).

Theologians use two terms to describe these aspects of God. One term is *immanence*, how God is knowable by us as human beings, how we can connect to Him. The other term is *transcendence*, how God is apart and wholly other—how He is holy. As Tim Keller says, “God is transcendentally unique.”⁸

When Peter asserts that God is holy (1 Peter 1:16), he is reminding us that God is transcendent, set apart, just as in the Israelites’ temple He was separated by a veil in a section known as the holy of holies.

We might prefer those loving, intimate images of God, how he is our Great Shepherd, for example. Yet it is His true holiness that is the basis for the whole story of God and us. We might wish that God didn’t make such a big deal about our sin, but to do otherwise would make Him less than holy.



God is holy, we're not, yet we are called to be holy like Him.

We identify, no doubt, with Isaiah, who tells his account of being called by God. It starts with seraphim shouting out, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty" (Isaiah 6:3). Isaiah becomes deeply aware of his own unholiness: "Woe to me! . . . I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty" (v. 5).

Like Isaiah, deep down we *know*. We know we are unclean, sinful, messy souls. In the presence of a holy God, we become aware of our own failures and brokenness.

God is holy, and we're not. We're separated from Him. This is the problem.



Of course, the cross is the solution, right? Through Christ our sins are taken away, and we are made "as white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18). As the seraphim announced in the Isaiah account, "Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for" (6:7). Peter says, "Put all your hope in the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world" (1 Peter 1:13 NLT).

This is the Easter connection, how Jesus and the cross and the resurrection join us to a holy God.

Sometimes in our personal salvation stories we forget how the enormous divide between a holy God and our own troubled humanity was bridged by Jesus. Sometimes by jumping to

Easter morning we forget how the temple veil dividing us from the holy of holies was riven in two.

Perhaps it is in our preparation for Easter through this Lenten season that we live in the wonder of God's transcendence *and* immanence, marveling that we can in any way be special to the God of the universe yet cradled in the Great Shepherd's arms.



There is still the question of how we live *now*. Peter's admonition, "You must be holy because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16 NLT), sits there, seeming to call us to impossible perfection.

It may be that we are simply meant to wrestle with this verse, returning to it in humility over and over, reminding us of how great our God is. It may be that in acknowledging God's transcendence we find greater assurance in His wisdom and His sovereignty over our circumstances.

And it may also be that Peter is calling us not to perfectionism but to be different as God is different, set apart from the world. Peter adds, "Don't slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires. You didn't know any better then. But now you must be holy in everything you do" (vv. 14–15 NLT).

Peter is telling us to pursue a life that pleases God, that walks with Him faithfully each day, that draws on His strength and wisdom through the trials and circumstances we face in life.

Preparing Your Heart for Easter

Holy God, help me to stand apart from the world and the culture of sin. Help me to draw from your strength in living my life. Help me to seek you in all aspects of my life.



28

Sacrifice

*Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and pleasing to God—this is your
true and proper worship.*

ROMANS 12:1

The game of baseball is quietly losing one of its best plays, the sacrifice bunt. With a runner on base, the batter chooses not to take a full swing at the ball but instead makes soft contact, pushing the ball onto the infield grass. The batter is almost certainly thrown out at first base, but the runner advances a base and is more likely to score if the next batter gets a hit.

The sacrifice is still allowable, but no one does it anymore. The stat crunchers have decreed that the play gives up too much. The out is worth more than the base.

The whole idea of sacrifice may also be losing traction in society at large. Give something up to help someone else? Well, let's crunch the stats and see if it really helps the greater good.



Sacrifice might be *the* major theme of the Bible. The law of Moses set up an elaborate sacrificial system, the prophets complained that sacrifices were being made with impure motives,

then Jesus became God's perfect sacrifice, and His followers are called to be living sacrifices.

Even before Moses, many ancient cultures had traditions of slaying animals on altars to appease their deities. But Leviticus codified the process for Israel. There were burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, and trespass offerings. Some of these were prescribed for annual festivals, such as Passover. All of them involved bringing something of value to the altar—either at the tabernacle or later the Jerusalem temple.

In Isaiah's opening chapter, God complains about the hypocrisy of His people: "I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. . . . Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me" (Isaiah 1:11, 13).

God wanted hearts and lives, not blood and guts. "Stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed" (vv. 16–17). For rich landlords who cheated the poor all year and then expected to bribe God with a big sacrifice—well, that was just a lot of bull.



Sacrifice is a foundational theme of the Easter season. We sacrifice something we otherwise value and crave. Perhaps we are that sacrificial baseball hitter, giving up something to help another. And the whole of Lent points to Jesus's sacrifice for us on the cross.

The key to it all is this idea that God wants lives, not symbols. As God said through another prophet, "I desire mercy,

not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6).

Jesus quoted that passage more than once in His dealings with the hypocritical religious leaders He encountered. And yet He became the sacrifice that every other sacrifice pointed to. “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith” (Romans 3:25). Elsewhere, Paul called Christ “our Passover lamb” (1 Corinthians 5:7).

The book of Hebrews makes the point that Old Testament sacrifices had to be repeated year by year, festival by festival, but “Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many” (9:28).



The story of sacrifice doesn't end there. We who follow Jesus are called to be “a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1). We give our lives to God in worship and loving support of others. “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Hebrews 13:15–16).

Preparing Your Heart for Easter

Ask yourself the question, How can I give up myself to help someone else get closer to success? Take some time to think of possibilities. Make a plan to do something sacrificial for another. What if we all lived like that each day?



29

Nail

He has taken [our sin] away, nailing it to the cross.

COLOSSIANS 2:14

You might know the old aphorism “For want of a nail.” As that story goes, a missing nail caused a horseshoe to fall off, which kept the horse from going into battle, which kept the rider from delivering the decisive blow, so the battle was lost, and the war was lost. All because a nail wasn’t doing its job.

We might use the same approach to the story of the crucifixion of Jesus.

But let’s talk a bit about nails first.



These fasteners go back to the beginning of history. In the Bible’s fourth chapter we read of Tubal-Cain, “who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron” (Genesis 4:22). Archaeologists confirm that nails were among the tools of the Bronze Age.

In one of the many grisly stories in the book of Judges, a homemaker named Jael became an Israelite hero by offering an enemy general a place to sleep—and then pounding a nail into his head (4:21). Well, it’s described as a tent peg, basically a large nail.

Solomon built the temple, adorning its most holy place with gold—including gold nails (2 Chronicles 3:9).



Biblical nails also pointedly have application for our own spiritual condition.

In the conclusion to Ecclesiastes, the author compares wisdom to two pointy objects. “The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails” (12:11). Goads were pointed sticks, like long nails, that shepherds used to poke errant sheep—like us. “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way” (Isaiah 53:6).

And of course nails hold things fast. They keep chairs from being rickety and walls from falling over. Like nails, God’s wisdom solidifies our lives, providing some surety when our lives get wobbly.



Jesus knew all about nails. He worked with His stepfather as a carpenter (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3). The Greek word could be used for a builder, stonemason, or craftsman, but nails would have been part of His tool kit. It is part of the poetry of the gospel that this builder, who put so many lives back together, was fastened to a slab of wood with nails—and that was how He crafted the salvation of the world.



And so, in this time of Easter when we anticipate the tragedy and triumph of the cross, the nails that pierced Jesus's hands and feet become a kind of horrific beauty. Nails and flesh are real things in a real world. The reality of the torture attests to the walking-on-earth reality of Jesus Christ.

The disciple Thomas needed proof, so Jesus showed him the nail prints (John 20:24–29). Once again, nails find their way into this story. This wasn't some hologram of the risen Jesus, not a mass hallucination. The doubter could touch the scars. The crucified Jesus was truly back from the dead, as the nails bore witness.



For want of a nail . . . the war was lost? No, the war against sin and death was decidedly won when the Carpenter was nailed to a cross for our sins and lived again.

Preparing Your Heart for Easter

Father, thank you for sending your Son, in real physical flesh and being, to save me from spiritual death. Help me to follow Him each day, mindful of the price He paid for me.

Let the truth of Jesus's sacrifice and new life fill you this Easter!

Spend 40 DAYS journeying through 40 WORDS and draw closer to God in heart, soul, and mind.

From terms found in the Gospels—*repent, palm, cross*—to expressions related to traditional Christian practices—*Maundy, ashes, abstain*—these words will guide you to a deeper appreciation for our Savior's death and resurrection. Each day will bring you to Scripture with a devotional reading and a reflection question, prayer prompt, or exercise that will reveal the realities of redemption and the fullness of what it means.

Be inspired to richer love, greater devotion, and more abundant praise this Easter season.



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