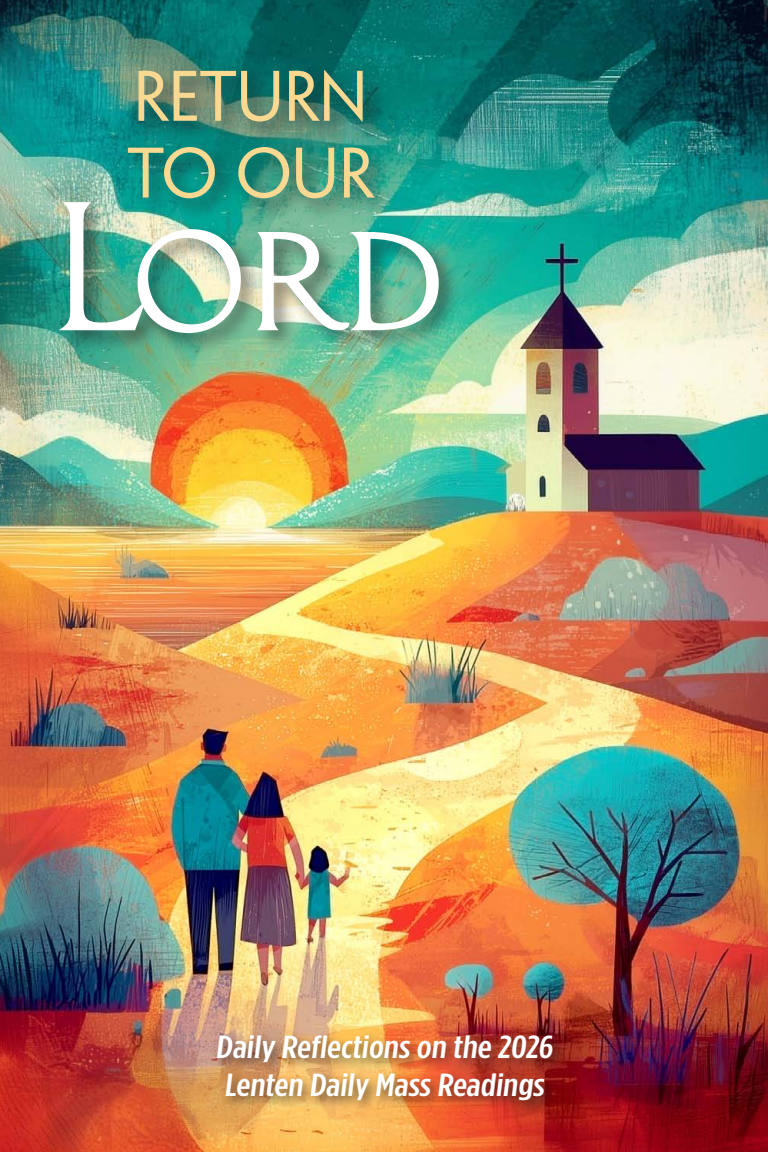


RETURN TO OUR LORD



*Daily Reflections on the 2026
Lenten Daily Mass Readings*

INTRODUCTION

Lent invites us to a whole self and whole life conversion—turning ourselves around and returning to the central figure of our spiritual lives, Jesus Christ. The spiritual life not just about trying to get to heaven but even more about trying to become more and more fully related right now to God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. These daily Lenten reflections provide thoughtful insights into many important dimensions of our reorienting of ourselves and our lives to God, prayer as the discipline of being present with God, compassion and love as characteristics of both relationships and service, and trust that the fearful experiences of pain and suffering do indeed lead to new life.

And if this handy Lenten booklet helps draw you closer to God through your daily reflection on God's Word, we invite you to consider using similar reflections for each day of the year in the quarterly editions of *Words of Grace: Daily Reflections & Prayers for Catholics* available from AllSaintsPress.com.

— Steve Mueller, *Editor*

RETURN TO OUR LORD

Jl 2:12-18 | 2 Cor 5:20—6:2 | Mt 6:1-6, 16-18

What greater honor or grace, what more real and perfect happiness can we desire, than that of being loved by God? Yet our hearts allow themselves to be carried away by their caprices and go from creature to creature, just as if they were going from house to house, to see if they can find lodgings and discover real satisfaction. All in vain! God, who has reserved the human heart for himself, has forbidden all creatures to give our hearts genuine satisfaction and contentment, so that we are forced to return to our Lord. And even if we return to God more by force than by love, God does not refuse to restore us to God's grace, to give us back the place we had previously enjoyed, and to caress us without inflicting any reproaches.

—St. Francis de Sales
Sermon

*How might I focus more on God's love
as the main source of satisfaction in my life?*

The beginning of our Lenten penitential season is signified by signing a cross on the forehead with ashes made from last year's Palm Sunday palms. **Ashes**, associated with destruction, loss and grief, remind us of the fleeting and ephemeral quality of human existence—especially when confronting God's majesty.

DENY YOURSELF/AFFIRM YOURSELF

Dt 30:15-20 | Lk 9:22-25

The time-tested practices of Lent recall the metaphorical wheat and weeds that grow together in our spiritual gardens. Strength is often a weakness, and weakness is frequently a strength. One who is quiet by nature listens well but may be slow to speak out when injustice demands outcry. A person who is ambitious may succumb to self-promotion but possesses the zealous skill to spread the gospel. Moreover, by urging us to deny ourselves, the Lord implicitly encourages us to affirm ourselves. Faith strives to suppress the downside of our traits, while advancing their fruitful counterparts. Lent is not merely a season to beat ourselves down, but also a time to build ourselves up by honing virtues that are often the silver linings of our weaknesses.

—Jerry Welte

*Which of my weaknesses are
the counterparts of hidden strengths?*

“We can only approach the kingdom of Christ by *metanoia*. This is a profound change of the whole person by which one begins to consider, judge and arrange one’s life according to the holiness and love of God, made manifest in God’s Son.”

—The Catholic Rite of Penance, #6

LENT AS A TIME OF LIBERATION

Is 58:1-9a | Mt 9:14-15

Lent is not only expiation, to satisfy the divine justice, but above all a preparation to rejoice in his love. In laying upon us the light cross of ashes, the Church desires to take off our shoulders all other heavy burdens—the crushing load of worry and obsessive guilt, the dead weight of our own self-love. We should not take upon ourselves a “burden” of penance and stagger into Lent as if we were Atlas, carrying the whole world on his shoulders. Penance is conceived by the Church less as a burden than as a liberation. It is only a burden to those who take it up unwillingly. Love makes it light and happy. And that is another reason why Lent is filled with the lightness of love.

—Thomas Merton
Seasons of Celebration

*What heavy penitential burdens
do I most wish to do away with this Lent?*

Abstinence forbids the use of meat, but not of eggs, milk products or condiments made of animal fat. All Catholics 14 years old and older must abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday and all the Fridays of Lent.

HE CAME TO CALL SINNERS

Is 58:9b-14 | Lk 5:27-32

During his ministry Jesus reached across social and religious boundaries. He questions current concepts of what was right, of what showed a person to be accepted by God or to be unacceptable to God, to belong to God's people or to be outside the scope of God's covenanted grace. In all these cases he was confronted by boundaries drawn within Israel, by Jew against Jew, boundaries drawn for religious reasons, drawn by those most admirable for the strength of their commitment in religious matters, those most concerned that their religious practice be what God wants. In each case Jesus called these boundaries in question, disregarded them, broke them down. And he did so in the name of God's Kingdom. He came to call sinners, not the righteous.

—James D.G. Dunn
Jesus' Call to Discipleship

*What boundaries in my life
do I most need to question and eliminate?*

The Easter Duty is the serious obligation binding Roman Catholics to receive the eucharist sometime during the Easter season (in the US, from the first Sunday of Lent to and including Trinity Sunday, 10 days after Ascension Thursday).

RESISTING THE DEVIL'S DIVERSIONS

Gn 2:7-9; 3:1-7 | Rom 5:12-19 | Mt 4:1-11

The tempter seeks to divert Jesus from the Father's plan, that is, from the way of sacrifice, of the love that offers itself in expiation, to make him take an easier path, one of success and power. The duel between Jesus and Satan takes place through strong quotations from Sacred Scripture. The devil, to divert Jesus from the way of the cross, sets before him false messianic hopes: economic well-being (the ability to turn stones into bread); a dramatic and miraculous style (throwing himself down from the top of the Jerusalem Temple and being saved by angels); and lastly, a shortcut to power and dominion (in exchange for an act of adoration to Satan). These are the three groups of temptations: and we, too, know them well!

—Pope Francis

*How have these false hopes and temptations
diverted me from following Jesus?*

In Jesus' time **the Devil** (Greek *diabolos*, Hebrew, *satan*) was an evil spirit who is subordinate but hostile to God, struggling with God for domination of the earth, and, as in today's Gospel, tempting humans to transfer their loyalty from following God to following him.

DO UNTO OTHERS

Lv 19:1-2, 11-18 | Mt 25:31-46

Love your neighbor as yourself, says Jesus, who is quoting the author of Leviticus, who is perhaps quoting texts from ancient Egypt or China or India or Greece. The Golden Rule finds expression in major religions and philosophies that pre-date the Old Testament by thousands of years. It is the one thing on which all agree: we should treat others as we would wish to be treated. Jesus takes this up a notch by warning that those who DON'T follow the Golden Rule will spend eternity in torment. We hope that we will be those who, by our compassion, will inherit the kingdom of heaven. But in the end, it is God's mercy that saves us, and that mercy will also save the world.

—Kathy McGovern

*How might I follow the Golden Rule
better in my words and actions today?*

Penance or penitence is the spiritual change (conversion of mind and heart) by which one turns away from sin, and all that it implies, toward God, through personal renewal guided by the Holy Spirit. It involves sorrow and contrition for sin, together with other internal and external acts of amendment.

PRAYING AS JESUS TAUGHT

Is 55:10-11 | Mt 6:7-15

When we call God Father, we know in the next line that praying for God's name to be hallowed won't be a matter of a thundering, bullying god giving himself airs while we cower in a corner. Likewise, when we truly pray for God's kingdom to come on earth as in heaven, we can then move on to pray for bread, forgiveness, and help without the risk that those prayers will collapse into mere selfish or pragmatic petitions. There is nothing wrong with bringing our own heartfelt needs, hopes, and desires to God. We are constantly encouraged to do that. The thing that can go wrong is to imagine that we can twist God's kingdom into the shape of our muddled and often misguided longings.

—N.T. Wright
Simply Good News

*What petition in the Lord's Prayer
means the most to me today?*

The prayer taught to the disciples by Jesus is variously known as “**The Our Father**” from its opening words, or the *Pater Noster* (Latin, Our Father) or just the Lord's Prayer. It summarizes first our obligations to God and then what we expect God to do for us in our relationship.

GOD'S INVITATION TO NEWNESS

Jon 3:1-10 | Lk 11:29-32

Like the prophet Jonah, we are constantly tempted to flee to a safe haven. It can have many names: individualism, spiritualism, living in a little world, addiction, intransigence, the rejection of new ideas and approaches, dogmatism, nostalgia, pessimism, hiding behind rules and regulations. We can resist leaving behind a familiar and easy way of doing things. Yet the challenges involved can be like the storm, the whale, the worm that dried the gourd plant, or the wind and sun that burned Jonah's head. For us, as for him, they can bring us back to the God of tenderness, who invites us to set out ever anew on our journey. God is eternal newness, who impels us constantly to pass beyond what is familiar, to the fringes and beyond.

—Pope Francis
Gaudete et Exsultate, #134

To what does God seem to be inviting me now in my life?

Sackcloth (Greek, *sakkos*, bag or sack) was a rough fabric woven from black goat's hair and used for many purposes especially grain bags. The sign of mourning or repentance, to replace one's regular clothes with sackcloth was an outward symbol of one's inner emotional affliction, turmoil and grief.

ENTERING INTO SILENCE

Est C:12, 14-16, 23-25 | Mt 7:7-12

In the presence of the sacred we naturally descend into silence. Silence lies at the heart of all the great spiritual traditions pilgrimages. It is the vehicle that encourages us to dive beneath words, ideas, chatter and concepts to discover the unspoken truths and the unfathomable mystery of being. The variety of forms of contemplation, prayer and meditation meet together in their reverence for the act of silence. Through them we learn to still the clamor of our hearts and the competing voices that cascade through our mind to discover a place of profound stillness and receptivity. We soon begin to understand that silence is not a vacuum or a barren desert of the heart, but the source of creativity, love, compassion and transforming wisdom.

—Christina Feldman

Silence

*How and when can I use silence
to help draw closer to Christ?*

The **RCIA** (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) is the Church's process of discerning and ritualizing the stages of gradual conversion in order for one to be baptized and received into the community. The process moves from inquiry to catechesis to purification and enlightenment to further post-baptismal catechesis.

IF YOU ARE ANGRY

Ez 18:21-28 | Mt 5:20-26

It is better to learn how to live without being angry than to imagine one can moderate and control anger lawfully; and if through weakness and frailty one is overtaken by it, it is far better to put it away forcibly than to parley with it; for give anger ever so little way, and it will become master, like the serpent, who easily works in its body wherever it can once introduce its head. Take pains to refrain from sharp words. Pardon one another so that later on you will not remember the injury. The recollection of an injury is itself wrong. It adds to our anger, nurtures our sins and hates what is good. It is a rusty arrow and poison for the soul. It puts all virtue to flight.

—St. Francis de Sales
Introduction to the Devout Life

What anger do I most need to let go of today?

In order to stop the escalating pattern that often leads to killing, Jesus tells his listeners to avoid not only anger but also abusive and disrespectful name-calling like “you empty-head” (Aramaic, **raqa**) and “You fool” (Greek, **moros**, the root of our word *moron*).

LOVE AS JESUS DID

Dt 26:16-19 | Mt 5:43-48

Do you want to know the secret of true happiness? Well, decide here and now to love things and people as Jesus loved them, that is, to the point of self-sacrifice. Don't bother with the bookkeeping of love, love without keeping accounts. If someone greets you and smiles, greet him and smile back, but if someone else treads on your feet, smile just the same. If someone does you a good turn, thank the Lord for it, but if someone else slanders you, persecutes you, curses you, strikes you, thank him and carry on. Do not say, "I'm right and he's wrong." Say: "I must love him as myself." This is the kind of love Jesus taught: a love which transforms, vivifies, enriches, brings peace.

—Carlo Carretto
Love Is for Living

What do I most need to do to love more as Jesus did?

Love is the force that binds persons in relationship and is expressed in the fierce attachment to one's group, especially the family. God's love or attachment to the covenant community (Hebrew, *hesed*) includes aspects of loyalty, dependability, trustworthiness and an eagerness to help when situations turn bad.

SEEING JESUS AS HE REALLY IS

Gn 12:1-4a | 2 Tm 1:8b-10 | Mt 17:1-9

When the disciples Peter, James and John accompanied Jesus to the mountain top, suddenly they saw him the way he was, the way he really was all the time, although they had never seen it before, the glory which blinds the everyday eye and so becomes invisible. This is how he was, radiant, brilliant, carrying joy like a flaming sun in his hands. This is the way he was—is—from the beginning, and we cannot bear it. So he manned himself, came manifest to us; and there on the mountain they saw him, really saw him, saw his light. We all know that if we really see him we die. But isn't that what is required of us? Then, perhaps, we will see each other, too.

—Madeleine L'Engle
The Irrational Season

*How might my behavior most change if
I realized that Christ is dwelling in each person I meet?*

In Greek and Roman literature, a **transfiguration** (metamorphosis, change in form) was a common motif describing the way gods appeared to humans in everyday life and especially in warfare. But Jesus' transfiguration is different—it is a glimpse of God's glory breaking forth from Jesus' human form.

REJOICING IN GOD'S FORGIVENESS

Dn 9:4b-10 | Lk 6:36-38

By forgiving us, God buries our past in the heart of Christ and brings relief to the secret wounds of our being. When we can express to God all that burdens our life and keeps us trapped beneath the weight of a judgment, then light is shed on the shadows within us. Knowing that we are listened to, understood and forgiven by God is one of the sources of peace and our heart begins to find healing. Dare to rejoice in what God is accomplishing through you and around you. Then all forms of pessimism about yourself and others, which were waging war on your soul, will melt away.

—Brother Roger of Taizé
Essential Writings

*How have I felt God's forgiveness lift
the burdens in my life?*

Sacramental **absolution** is the act by which the priest, acting in Christ's place, grants forgiveness of sins in the sacrament of reconciliation. The essential formula of absolution is: "I absolve you from your sins; in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

GIVING UP SUPREMACY

Is 1:10, 16-20 | Mt 23:1-12

The Gospel value of humility calls us to give up the desire for prestige and position, the little things that might indicate we are “superior” to others. Marking our difference from others is profoundly bred into us from childhood. Knowing where we fit on the social scale, the intellectual achievement grid, the economic pecking order is often part of the perverse tendency to define ourselves in relationship to others rather than in the discovery of our own uniqueness. I think this is why Matthew’s Jesus forbids the use of honorary titles like “Teacher” (*Rabbi*, Mt 23:10) that elevate some and “demote” others. Let us be honest. Mostly we don’t want to be treated like others; we want to be treated better than they are.

—Bonnie B. Thurston
Religious Vows

*In what ways do I most need
to stop thinking myself superior to others?*

Phylacteries (Greek, *phylakterion*, Hebrew, *tefillin*) are two small cubic leather boxes containing certain scripture quotes written on small strips of parchment. During prayer time, a man wears them tied to his forehead and upper left arm as prescribed by Deuteronomy 6:8.

PROBLEMATIC RELATIONSHIPS

Jer 18:18-20 | Mt 20:17-28

I often think that our Lord must have been terribly bored with the disciples very often, humanly speaking. Certainly, he wasn't picking out brilliant, accomplished, pleasing personalities with whom to live. In today's Gospel the mother of James and John wanted the best place for her two sons. So even the relatives were hanging on to see what they could get out of the situation! He certainly had to get away from them every now and then and do a lot of praying. They say a mystic is someone who is in love with God, again using that comparison as the kind of love we should feel. This is one of the most absorbing problems of all the work we do, this relationship we have to all those around us.

—Dorothy Day
Meditations

*What relationships with others might need more
of my attention today?*

When used figuratively, a cup indicated one's portion or lot, such as the wine shared at dinner. Thus when Jesus asks the disciples whether they can **drink the cup (chalice)**, he means can they share in his portion of suffering instead of just expecting rewards and glory.

USING RICHES WISELY

Jer 17:5-10 | Lk 16:19-31

We can't do without "stuff." There is nothing wrong with buying, nothing wrong with the existence of brands. In order to turn the spiritual corner before us, we will need to integrate who we are with what we buy. To realize that we each have some freedom to accept God's gifting us with life, by becoming someone who stewards more life for others. In that work, God's gift of life becomes more believable to others, and awareness of and responsible relationship to God spreads through our use of our resources, through consciousness about those affected by our purchases. We live out our relation to our ultimate meaning through what and how we buy. Let the integration of faith and economy be the mark of the true spiritual seeker today, a consuming faith.

—Tom Beaudoin
Consuming Faith

*What changes might I need to make in
my buying habits to better reflect my Christian values?*

"What good is it if the eucharistic table is overloaded with golden chalices when your brother is dying of hunger. Start by satisfying his hunger and then with what is left you may adorn the altar as well."

—St. John Chrysostom

FAMILY FEUDS

Gn 37:3-4, 12-13a, 17b-28a | Mt 21:33-43, 45-46

It's a comfort to see that even in scripture, families aren't perfect. There are rivalries, favoritism, and jealousy. Joseph was a spoiled child, the favorite son of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel. His older brothers were jealous of this best loved child with his long tunic. Joseph didn't help matters by his behavior, telling on his brothers and bragging about his dreams. His brothers wanted to kill him, but in the end they sold him for twenty pieces of silver. Hopefully, our family rivalries aren't quite this extreme (though I confess that there were times when selling my little sister to a band of passing Ishmaelites was tempting), but often our families are also in need of healing, reconciliation, and forgiveness.

—Angeline Hubert

What issues in my family need healing and reconciliation? How can I be a source of that reconciliation?

Confession is a shorthand way of describing the sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation because the ritual requires that one tell or "confess" one's sins to a priest who is authorized to forgive sins in the name of Jesus and the Church.

LEARNING OUR WEAKNESS

Mi 7:14-15, 18-20 | Lk 15:1-3, 11-32

In the depths of our own sin, we rediscover God; deep in the abyss of evil, we sense God to be near. In our weakness we feel the need for God. Even the prodigal son—he is in each of us!—did not know his father properly before leaving home. But on his return in such a sorry plight he understood what kind of a man he was, since the father's overflowing compassion, then revealed, provided him with all the evidence he needed. God never reveals himself better to us than in the abyss of human wretchedness. Wasn't it in Babylon that Israel rediscovered God, and in that fearful loneliness and gloom that the true hope was born? When one hopes, one overcomes fear, puts one's trust in God, feels God's presence in the darkness and begins to pray.

—Carlo Carretto
Summoned By Love

*When have I most felt God's presence
in the darkness of my life?*

“Although I have often abandoned you, O Lord, you have never abandoned me. Your hand of love is always outstretched towards me, even when I stubbornly look the other way. And your gentle voice constantly calls me, even when I obstinately refuse to listen.”

—St. Teresa of Avila

A WELL OF LONGING

Ex 17:3-7 | Rom 5:1-2, 5-8 | Jn 4:5-42

Christians believe that Jesus is our best revelation about what God is like and about how God relates to humanity. In today's Gospel, Jesus pantomimes God's longing for relationship with us as he sits alone by a well. Unlike the gods of the nations who play tricks, punish and overpower human creatures, Jesus comes to us as one whose desire for union with us is as deep and relentless as thirst and as vulnerable as a parched man sitting by a well with no bucket. He offers living water—all that is needed to fulfill humanity's need for meaning and love—but he can do no more than offer it; it cannot be imposed. No matter what our past has been, he awaits us with transforming love. Will we pay attention?

—Mary M. McGlone, CSJ

*How will I make time this week to meet Jesus
by the well of God's longing for me?*

In Jesus' day Roman Palestine consisted of 5 districts: Judea, Samaria, Galilee, Perea and Idumea. To the Judeans, the **Samaritans** were a heretical and schismatic group of spurious worshippers of the God of Israel and so a deep-seated hostility permeated all social, political, economic and religious relations between the 2 groups.

THE VALUE OF THE LITTLE STUFF

2 Kgs 5:1-15ab | Lk 4:24-30

Why is it so difficult to believe that God can do marvelous things through the most ordinary circumstances? Why does it often take a big catastrophic event before we are finally convinced of what we need for our spiritual transformation. Lent is a good time to find our spiritual transformation through the ordinary, humdrum of everyday life, for there most spiritual changes happen. Most of us won't experience something like a plane crash or major accident. Like Naaman, we expect that the "little stuff" is of no importance or value, then we may miss the very opportunities where God is calling us and inviting us to change our hearts. Be aware today of little things.

—Joyce Rupp
Inviting God In

*How might I be more attentive to
the little changes in me that are occurring this Lent?*

"If we look forward to receiving God's mercy, we can never fail to do good so long as we have the strength. For if we share with the poor, out of love for God, whatever God has given to us, we shall receive according to God's promise a hundredfold."

—St. John of God

FORGIVENESS OVER AND OVER

Dn 3:25, 34-43 | Mt 18:21-35

Today's Gospel lays out the mystery of forgiveness and places it in the center of the universe: between a rejection and a plea—an embrace. It is clearly the most important message Christ came to earth to give us—that there is no entering into his Father's kingdom if one remains hardened and unforgiving. When Jesus told Peter he had to forgive seventy times seven times, it wasn't a numbers game. Jesus was teaching that forgiveness is as intrinsic to life as our breathing. Forgiveness has to be a continuous way of life. Forgiveness has to be always in the present tense, for it is never done. Radical forgiveness, asked for and given, seventy times seven times, is the only way out of the angry, unforgiving thoughts that gnaw at our consciousness.

—Antoinette Bosco
Radical Forgiveness

*To whom do I most need to ask for
and to give forgiveness today? Why?*

The **kingdom of heaven** is Matthew's characteristic description of the kingdom of God. Since out of reverence Jews often substituted another word instead of saying God's name, this might be one more indication that Matthew had a previous Jewish background.

TRUSTED WITH FREEDOM

Dt 4:1, 5-9 | Mt 5:17-19

God makes trees and animals what they are without consulting them, and they are perfectly satisfied. With us it is different. God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, real or unreal, true or false, the choice is ours. We may wear now one mask and now another, and never, if we so desire, appear with our own true face. But we cannot make these choices with impunity. Causes have effects, and if we lie to ourselves and others, then we cannot expect to find truth and reality whenever we happen to want them. If we have chosen the way of falsity we must not be surprised that truth eludes us when we finally come to need it!

—Thomas Merton
New Seeds of Contemplation

*What choices have I made to hide
my true self from others? from God?*

The Law and the prophets is a convenient way of identifying the two major categories of Israel's sacred scriptures, the Law (found in the first five books of the Bible or *Torah*) and the prophets who communicated God's messages for the covenant community.

FACING MY OWN DEMONS

Jer 7:23-28 | Lk 11:14-23

Possession is not just a state of anxiety, and Jesus was not merely a master therapist. He wasn't curing mental illness but expurgating the demonic. Psychology concerns itself with the emotional response to being possessed; Jesus faced the demonic head-on and was able to heal a person by ridding him of the demonic influence that controlled him. If jealousy is ruining your life, you have to arrive at deep-seated realization about who you are and what life is about before that demon will depart. If envy is giving you violent thoughts, you have to change the way you see things before it will leave you alone. If greed consumes you, you have to face this adversary to be free of it.

—Thomas Moore
Writing in the Sand

*What, like the demons, seems to control me
and make it hard to respond to God at work in me?*

Driving out evil spirits was not something that Jesus claimed to do on his own power but only through a greater power given by God. He explains that the real meaning of his exorcisms is related to the cosmic struggle of God against the powers of evil affecting our world.

LOVING MY NEIGHBOR & MYSELF

Hos 14:2-10 | Mk 12:28-34

The Quaker teacher Douglas Steere was fond of saying that the ancient human question “Who am I?” leads inevitably to the equally important question “Whose am I?” —for there is no selfhood outside of relationship. We must ask the question of selfhood and answer it as honestly as we can, no matter where it takes us. Only as we do so can we discover the community of our lives. As I learn more about the seed of true self that was planted when I was born, I also learn more about the ecosystem of communal relations in which I am called to live responsively, accountably and joyfully with others. Only when I know both seed and system, self and community, can I embody the great commandment to love both my neighbor and myself.

—Parker J. Palmer
Let Your Life Speak

*What difference does it most make
to realize I belong to God?*

In biblical times, only about 5% of the people could read, and 1% could write. Those who could write were called **scribes** (Latin, *scribere*, to write). The Jewish scribes were often biblical scholars (often called *Rabbi* or teacher) who were experts especially in interpreting the meaning of the Law (*Torah*).

I'M GLAD I'M NOT LIKE THEM

Hos 6:1-6 | Lk 18:9-14

The Pharisee's prayer is one we often pray. "I'm glad I'm not like him, her, or them. I am lucky not to belong to that family, that country or that race." We are always comparing ourselves with others, trying to convince ourselves that we are better off than they are. But this is a very dangerous prayer. It leads from compassion to competition, from competition to rivalry, from rivalry to violence, from violence to war, from war to destruction. It is a prayer that lies all the time, because we are not the difference we try so hard to find. No, our deepest identity is rooted where we are like other people—weak, broken, sinful, but sons and daughters of God.

—Henri J.M. Nouwen
Sabbatical Journey

What can I do to stop thinking I am better than others and recognize how alike we are?

Tomorrow is called **Laetare Sunday**, from the Latin word for rejoice, which is the first word of the Entrance Antiphon of the Mass, "Rejoice, Jerusalem" (Isaiah 66:10). It reminds us that the rigors of Lent are now half over and encourages our anticipation for Easter.

JESUS: LIGHT OF THE WORLD

1 Sm 16:1b, 6-7, 10-13a | Eph 5:8-14 | Jn 9:1-41

John's story of Jesus healing a blind man becomes the occasion for the Jesus to say, "I am the light of the world" (9:5). Jesus brings people out of darkness into light and gives sight to the blind. He brings enlightenment, a religious metaphor that many people associate primarily with Asian religions. But enlightenment is central to John's Gospel and to early Christianity more generally. John announces it in the magnificent and thematic prologue to his Gospel: Jesus is "the true light, which enlightens everyone," who "was coming into the world" (1:9). Our condition is blindness, being "in the dark," unable to find a way. The solution is to regain our sight, to see again, to have our eyes opened, to come into the light, to be enlightened.

—Marcus Borg
Jesus

*From what blindness do I most want and
need Jesus to open my eyes with his light?*

For Biblical people, **light** was not produced by the sun but an independent reality that was associated with God, who created it (even before the sun, Gen 1:3) and gives it to human eyes (Ps 13:4). Seeing occurs when light goes out from the eye to illuminate objects.

BEYOND LONELINESS

Is 65:17-21 | Jn 4:43-54

Every life deals with loneliness at some point. Our partner dies; sickness sets in that makes the old social calendar impossible; we find ourselves in a new job, a new town, a new country, a new world. But loneliness is about more than simply figuring out how to use time while we try to forget the pain that comes when we're at loose ends. It is also a call to make other people's needs our own. We learn in loneliness that everybody needs someone. Most of all, loneliness is not a call for other people to take care of us but the call to ourselves to do something to alleviate the loneliness and needs of others.

—Joan Chittister

Between the Dark & the Daylight

*Who most needs something
that I can do for them today?*

The **prayer of intercession**—asking for favors on behalf of another—has been characteristic of Christian prayer through the ages. It is an expression of belief in the communion of saints. In intercession, the one who prays looks not only to personal interests, but also to the interests of others.

WE ARE ALL HANDICAPPED

Ez 47:1-9, 12 | Jn 5:1-16

Our parish has no designated handicapped pews so the disabled sit in the assembly. This makes perfect sense, for honest reflection reveals that everyone is handicapped. Some disabilities are obvious, while others remain unseen. Veterans can be paralyzed from the waist down, but disciples may be too afraid to stand up for the truth. Down Syndrome involves mental disability, but so does obstinance. The blind need canes or dogs, while the prejudiced require sensitivity training. Once we identify a person as “in-valid,” we risk subtly presuming ourselves to be valid by default. Lent is a time to acknowledge our hidden disabilities. Once we name them, we restore our solidarity with the handicapped and admit our common need for the healing of Christ.

—Jerry Welte

*What hidden disabilities can I identify
in myself that I might need help with?*

“Whatever will come my way, whether good or bad, may I accept it calmly, and always give thanks to God, who has ever shown me how I should believe in God, unfailing and without end.”

—St. Patrick

I WILL NOT FORGET YOU

Is 49:8-15 | Jn 5:17-30

Victims of Alzheimer's lose their history. They lose the touchstones to their imagination and those bright shining moments when the world was full of laughter. They lose places where they walked between the drifts of windswept winter. They lose faces they once held between their hands. They lose the self. And we have to watch them walk on into oblivion. But even though the victims of the dread disease forget everything, they're never forgotten. I believe that somehow in the miracle of God's grace they can hear what Isaiah said: "Can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you, See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands" (Is 49:15-16).

—Jane Sigloh
Like Trees Walking

Who might I most remember and reach out to today?

Amen is a Hebrew word used to affirm the truth of what is said. In John's Gospel, Jesus uses the curious double "**Amen, amen**" to stress the importance of what he is about to say and urge his audience to pay close attention to his message.

GOD SEES OUR HUMBLE WORK

2 Sm 7:4-5a, 12-14a, 16 | Rom 4:13, 16-18, 22

Mt 1:16, 18-21, 24a or Lk 2:41-51a

God sees the fruit of our labor, even if others cannot. Think of Joseph, the carpenter who taught Jesus his craft, a man given no lines to say in the New Testament and whose life remains almost completely hidden. His work was of supreme importance—even though others may not have seen this at the time. How similar this is to the many millions of people who do hidden work today: spending long hours working to put their kids through school; taking on an extra job to save money to care for an elderly parent or relative; working to exhaustion scrubbing floors, doing multiple loads of laundry, and spending hours over a stove for their families. Even if their efforts are hidden from others, they are seen by the One whose gaze matters most.

—James Martin, SJ

The Jesuit Guide to (Practically) Everything

*How can I notice and express gratitude
for the humble work of those around me?*

In the biblical world, **betrothal** was the formal process between families before marriage that legally bound the partners to be wed. Thus it could only be dissolved by a bill of divorce. During this time, the woman does not live with the man nor have sexual relations with him.

POLISHING THE SOUL

Wis 2:1a, 12-22 | Jn 7:1-2, 10, 25-30

Lent is a cosmetic season to beautify not only the outside but also the inside. Our Lenten practices are intended to allow what is inside to radiate outward, as Jesus did when he became the transparent, see-through Christ. But, you object, he was the Son of God! True, but does not the glorious image of God also reside in you? Perhaps like dull, old silver, the image has lost its luster—tarnished by neglect, sins and human frailties. Prayer polishes the soul and a habitual desire for inner beauty causes your soul to surface splendidly on your face in a radiant smile. Your transfiguration into the glorious Christ need not be delayed until death. Simply begin today to think, to speak, and to act as he did.

—Edward Hays
The Lenten Pharmacy

*How has my behavior this Lent allowed
Christ's image to shine from within me?*

The **Jewish feast of Tabernacles** (Latin, tent, Hebrew *sukot*) also called the feast of Ingathering or Booths was a major seven day spring harvest festival at the beginning of their new year. People lived in the fields in temporary dwellings (tents) commemorating the exodus and gift of the land.

LISTENING FOR PROPHETIC VOICES

Jer 11:18-20 | Jn 7:40-53

In Jesus' day, since Jerusalem was the center of religious tradition, one who came from Galilee would have been a suspect leader. Was Jesus an authentic prophet? Was Jesus a revered rabbi? The crowds followed Jesus because they had never before heard anyone who spoke like him. This implies that the religious leaders were not giving the people the spiritual teaching they needed. What does that say to us about hearing the truth from God? Where do we get that truth and how do we hear it? Like those who condemned Jeremiah, do we condemn the prophets in our midst? Today we might be called to listen to new voices in our midst and pray for the gift of discernment to decide what is true and what is false.

—Dorothy Jonaitis

*What voice do I most need to hear
today that I might have been ignoring?*

When Jeremiah calls Yahweh the **God of Hosts**, this has nothing to do with the little white wafers we receive at communion (Latin, *hostia*, a sacrificial victim). Instead, it identifies the angelic armies (Latin, *hostis*, a stranger or enemy, hence *hostile* soldiers) who carry out whatever God commands.

BELIEVING MEANS BELOVING

Ez 37:12-14 | Rom 8:8-11 | Jn 11:1-45

In today's Gospel, Jesus claims that "Everyone who believes in him"—here, as most often in the New Testament, believing does not mean believing in doctrines about Jesus, but "beloving," the loving that is a combination of commitment, loyalty, faithfulness, allegiance to the beloved, and trust in the beloved. The result? That they "may not perish but may have eternal life." "Eternal life" in John's Gospel does not mean an afterlife, but "the life of the age to come." Already in the present, we may experience the life of the age to come by centering in God as known in Jesus. Jesus is now, already, "the resurrection and the life," to use another of John's phrases, the way from death to life.

—Marcus Borg
Jesus

*How have I most experienced new life
coming to me through Jesus?*

Flesh (Greek, *sarx*) describes all that is weak, corruptible and mortal in human persons. **Spirit** (*pneuma*, breath or wind), which God breathes into us to make us alive (Gen 2:7), dwells in us and permeates "the flesh" so that we can live in the Spirit (Rom 8:9).

A TALE OF TWO WOMEN

Dn 13:1-9, 15-17, 19-30, 33-62 | Jn 8:1-11

Today's readings describe the experience of two desperate women—one innocent, falsely accused, slandered, and the other a sinful woman. One fell into the hands of the hypocrites and the other into the hands of the corrupt: there was no way out. Both were sentenced to death. The first explicitly trusts God, and the Lord intervened. The second, poor woman, knows that she is guilty, shamed before all the people, and probably prayed too. What does the Lord do with these people? He saves the innocent woman and does her justice. He forgives the sinful woman. He condemns the corrupt judges and helps the hypocrites convert by giving them time to repent before any condemnation. Looking at how Jesus acts, we can trust God's mercy.

—Pope Francis

*How might I thank God for his mercy
to me and extend that mercy to others?*

Execution by **stoning** is mentioned several times in the Bible, usually as a spontaneous event although the Jewish *Torah* prescribes it for several crimes such as idolatry, blasphemy, child sacrifice, divination, adultery, Sabbath violation, fornication by an unmarried woman, rebellion of children and an ox that gores.

DARKNESS AND DRYNESS IN PRAYER

Nm 21:4-9 | Jn 8:21-30

The truth is that I do not feel much, if anything, when I pray. There are no warm emotions, bodily sensations, or mental visions. Whereas for a long time the Spirit acted so clearly through my flesh, now I feel nothing. I have lived with the expectation that prayer would become easier as I grow older and closer to death. But the opposite seems to be happening. The words “darkness” and “dryness” seem to best describe my prayer today. Are the darkness and dryness of my prayer signs of God’s absence, or are they signs of a presence deeper and wider than my senses can contain? Is the death of my prayer the end of my intimacy with God or the beginning of a new communion, beyond words, emotions, and bodily sensations?

—Henri J.M. Nouwen
Sabbatical Journey

*What helps me continue to pray
when I feel like God is absent?*

In John’s gospel **the world** (Gk: *cosmos*, an ordered universe) usually refers to the forces that we often experience resisting God’s ordering power and opposing Jesus. Though the world is hostile to God, God is not hostile to the world but sends Jesus to save it.

MARY, MODEL OF PRAYER

Is 7:10-14; 8:10 | Heb 10:4-10 | Lk 1:26-38

Mary attunes herself to God's word and trusts that it is speaking truth to her. By participating in that dialogue with reality, she allows the truth which is spoken to become real. She does not hide from truth; she faces it. She does not run from truth; she embraces it. She sees the truth of what is, and in doing so, she lets it be. Mary is therefore the model of prayer for all Christians. Prayer is getting in touch with reality, letting it speak to us, and incarnating the word which comes to us. We let it happen; we don't make it happen. For saying "yes" to God in prayer does not just mean acknowledging that we heard it. It means changing our lives in accordance with that word.

—Richard Rohr & Joseph Martos
The Great Themes of Scripture: New Testament

*How has my prayer helped me
face reality and change my life?*

"Mary is the first Christian to follow Christ, and she is the first and most perfect model of Christ. Indeed, that is why the imitation of Mary is not only relevant to women but to all Christians."

—St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein)

LIVING THE GOSPEL WAY

Gn 17:3-9 | Jn 8:51-59

How simple and how timely the gospel is. In it lie the answers to our problems. The gospel is like a light shining in the darkness. Why is it then that we who are Christians refuse to even try the clear answers of the gospel? Why do we wish to constantly compromise, water down and eliminate from the gospel whatever is too hard for us? Why settle for such a pale reflection of his strong words and loving teachings? We seem to have tried everything that our intelligence and genius can come up with. But so far we certainly have not succeeded. Nor are we leaving our children a better world to live in. Why then do we not try the way of love, the way of the gospel?

—Catherine de Hueck Doherty
The Gospel without Compromise

*What aspect of Jesus' words and
teachings most challenges me?*

The “**I AM**” (put in capital letters in the translation) is God’s sacred personal name (4 consonant letters YHWH, pronounced *Yahweh* in English, see Exodus 3:14) which was closely related to the verb “I am.” LORD in small capital letters is now used in most Bible translations to indicate this personal divine name.

JEREMIAH'S STRUGGLES

Jer 20:10-13 | Jn 10:31-42

Jeremiah had countless faults and shortcomings. He was guilty of irritation, impatience, petulance, hopelessness, doubt, complaint, fear, fury, and even of self-pity. Nevertheless, with all his human frailties, he was patient, long-suffering, hopeful, bold, even heroic. He endured more than did any other prophet; he was mocked, humiliated, rejected, scorned, persecuted, even tortured. He was surely one of the loneliest of men, sacrificing marriage, children, and friends for the sake of his calling. He says that without God he burns as with fire and that, although he has sworn to have nothing more to do with God, he cannot live without speaking God's message to those who despise both God and him (20:8–9).

—Mary Ellen Chase
The Prophets for the Common Reader

*What might I most need to face
or suffer to speak God's word to others today?*

In the biblical world, to **blaspheme** meant to dishonor God or something holy by speech, for example by calling God abusive names or telling lies (slander) or, as in this reading, by claiming for oneself the honor and status due to God alone. It was punishable by stoning (Lv 24:16).

CHILDREN OF GOD

Ez 37:21-28 | Jn 11:45-56

Jesus explains to people that each person is a child of God. He offers people unconditional positive regard. He gives full attention, sympathetic support and respect. He teaches that God does not play favorites. God loves all equally. Children of God are supremely safe in this love (but not protected in the world), and children of God are themselves capable of this kind of loving. Jesus gathers people into communities in which each person does the same thing that Jesus originally did: loving another person on the level beyond any description, beaming full attention (with all one's heart, soul, mind, strength) of positive regard. In his community all people are absolutely equal and each is absolutely unique.

—Beatrice Bruteau
The Holy Thursday Revolution

*How might I be more present and
attentive to each person I meet today?*

Ezekiel says that for people to end their sinful behavior they must abandon their “idols, **abominations** and transgressions.” The strange word **abominations** refers to things and especially behaviors that are very disgusting to God and thus the Jews ought also separate themselves from them.

THE DEATH OF GOD'S OBEDIENT SON

Mt 21:1-11 | Is 50:4-7 | Phil 2:6-11 | Mt 26:14—27:66

The major character of Matthew's passion story is Jesus. Matthew portrays Jesus as God's obedient Son who fulfills the Scriptures and is faithful to God's will even unto death. But Matthew does not portray Jesus' commitment as a fanatical quest for martyrdom or a morbid riveting on suffering and death. As the story unfolds it becomes clear that a primary cause of Jesus' death is the hostility of his opponents, a hostility generated by Jesus' own teaching and healing. Jesus is ultimately *put to death*. At the same time, however, the Gospel also presents the death of Jesus as inevitable, foreseen, and accepted. While human forces move to quench the life of Jesus, on another level that death is absorbed into the mysterious redemptive plan of God and transformed into a life-giving force.

—Donald Senior, CP

The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew

*How might we be more faithful in
my dedication to living more fully as Jesus taught?*

Blessed palms are sacramentals (material objects, things or actions set apart or blessed) and thus are to be treated with reverence. They are blessed and distributed today in commemoration of the triumphant entrance of Christ into Jerusalem. Some of these are burned to make the ashes for Ash Wednesday.

JESUS GOD'S SUFFERING SERVANT

Is 42:1-7 | Jn 12:1-11

Perhaps no passages were as important for a new understanding of a suffering messiah than the four servant songs of the prophet Isaiah. By identifying Jesus the messiah with this suffering servant/son, Christians connected Jesus' suffering and death with his resurrection. His faithful suffering service to God's justice was rewarded by his resurrection and placement at God's right hand. The suffering servant also clarified how Jesus' death could help others achieve the righting of wrongly ordered relationships and overcome the effects of sin. His resurrection was the first step in bringing humanity into right relationship with God again. So whoever joined himself or herself to Jesus' death and resurrection through faith and baptism would also share the reward of eternal life with God.

—Steve Mueller

*How might I better show my faithfulness
in God's service this week?*

In 4 "Servant Songs" (42:1-4, 49:1-7, 50:4-11, 52:13-53:12), the prophet Isaiah describes **God's servant** who is called to be a misunderstood and ill-treated prophet to a sin-weary people. These songs helped Israel to interpret the suffering and humiliation of their exile and early Christians to understand Jesus' suffering.

DYING WITH CHRIST

Is 49:1-6 | Jn 13:21-33, 36-38

Lord, help me begin to die now to those things that keep me from living with you and with my neighbors on this earth—to grudges and indifference, to certainties that smother possibilities, to my fascination with false securities, to my corrosive fear of dying someday, which eats away the wonder of living this day, and the adventure of losing my life in order to find it in you. And somehow, during this season of sacrifice, enable me to sacrifice time and possessions and securities, to do something about what I see, something to turn the water of my words into the wine of will and risk, into the bread of blood and blisters, into the blessedness of deed, of a cross picked up, a savior followed.

—Ted Loder
Guerrillas of Grace

*How has my spiritual striving led me
to grater maturity and responsibility?*

In the biblical world where honor was very highly valued, **betrayal** by a friend is the most shameful of actions because friends commit themselves fully to one another by their word of honor and so would be expected even to give their lives for the other if necessary.

THE MYSTERY OF JESUS' PASSION

Is 50:4-9a | Mt 26:14-25

The passion is really the mystery of all mysteries, the heart of the Christian faith experience. By the word “passion” here we mean the events which end Jesus’s earthly life: his betrayal, trial, execution on a cross, and death. So much bad, manipulative, guilt-inducing theology has been based on it that it’s fair to wonder whether there is any hope of starting afresh. I believe wisdom does open up that possibility. The key lies in reading Jesus’s life as a sacrament: a sacred mystery whose real purpose is not to arouse empathy but to *create empowerment*. In other words, Jesus is not particularly interested in increasing either your guilt or your devotion, but rather, in deepening your personal capacity to make the passage into unitive life.

—Cynthia Bourgeault
The Wisdom Jesus

*How does Jesus’ faithfulness in his suffering
most help me to deal with my suffering?*

The most ancient and always the central event of the liturgical year is the Easter **triduum** (Latin, three days) celebrating the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. The sacred three days (Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday) are a liturgical season in themselves and not strictly part of Lent.

JESUS THE BREAD OF LIFE

Ex 12:1-8, 11-14 | 1 Cor 11:23-26 | Jn 13:1-15

Christ is God's answer to our human hunger, because his body is the bread of eternal life: Take this and eat of it, all of you! Jesus' invitation reflects our daily experience: in order to remain alive, we need to nourish ourselves with life, drawing it from plants and animals. Yet eating something dead reminds us that we too, no matter how much we eat, will one day die. On the other hand, when we partake of Jesus, the living and true bread, we live for him. By offering himself completely, the crucified and risen Lord delivers himself into our hands, and we realize that we were made to partake of God. Jesus calls each of us to sit at his table. Blessed are those who are called, for they become witnesses of this love!

—Pope Leo

*How might I help in some practical way today
and in the future to feed the hungry in my locality?*

Footwashing was not part of the Passover ritual, but a common sign of hospitality upon entering a house. This was usually the task of a servant. So, when Jesus acts as a servant instead of the master that he is, what would normally be considered humiliating becomes a sign of his love.

WHAT RESPONSE CAN I MAKE?

Is 52:13–53:12 | Heb 4:14-16; 5:7-9 | Jn 18:1–19:42

O Lord, what can I say to you? Is there any word that could come from my mouth, any thought? any sentence? any response? The immensity of your divine love makes any response seem totally inadequate. Let me just stand and look at you. Your body is broken, your head wounded, your hands and feet are split open by nails, your side is pierced. Your dead body now rests in the arms of your Mother. It is all over now. It is finished. It is fulfilled. It is accomplished. Gracious Lord, generous Lord, forgiving Lord, I adore you, I praise you, I thank you. You have made all things new through your passion and death. Let me always live under your cross and proclaim the hope of your cross unceasingly.

—Henri J. M. Nouwen
A Cry for Mercy

*As I contemplate Jesus crucified,
what response do I most wish to make?*

Crucifixion was the most painful torture the ancient world had devised. When one's arms and legs were fixed to a cross by tying with rope or nailing, the victim began a slow process of asphyxiation, which could last days or be hastened by breaking the victim's legs (John 19:31-32).

JESUS IS OUR HOPE

Easter Vigil: Gn 1:1—2:2 | Gn 22:1-18 | Ex 14:15—15:1 | Is 54:5-14
Is 55:1-11 | Bar 3:9-15, 32—4:4 | Ez 36:16-17a, 18-28
Rom 6:3-11 | Mt 28:1-10

Easter Sunday: Acts 10:34a, 37-43 | Col 3:1-4 or 1 Cor 5:6b-8
Jn 20:1-9 or Mt 28:1-10

Today we acquire a new and living hope that comes from God. It is not mere optimism. It is not a pat on the back or an empty word of encouragement, uttered with an empty smile. Jesus' hope is different. He plants in our hearts the conviction that God is able to make everything work unto good, because even from the grave he brings life. The grave is the place where no one who enters ever leaves. But Jesus emerged for us; he rose for us, to bring life where there was death, to begin a new story in the very place where a stone had been placed. God is greater. Darkness and death do not have the last word. Be strong, for with God nothing is lost!

—Pope Francis

*When have I most experienced God
working everything unto good in my life?*

Jesus' **resurrection** was the first great sign (the second was the gift of the Holy Spirit) indicating that the world's final transformation had begun. Though many Jews believed in a general resurrection at the end of time, an individual's resurrection before that end time was a complete surprise.