

**Monday, February 26 – Read Acts 2:5-12.** Jerusalem in Jesus' day was not insular or isolated. Jews from throughout the Roman Empire came to Jerusalem for major festivals. On Pentecost, 40 days after Jesus' death, people from Cyrene were present, and some lived in Jerusalem (see Acts 6:9). In fact, Isaiah 66:19 had said God's love would be taken to Libya (where Cyrene was located). Israel's faith began when God told Abraham: "I will make you into a great nation... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:2-3). What chances did Israel's location (at the Middle East's strategic crossroads) give the nation to live out that promise? What beliefs or feelings kept them from blessing all peoples on earth? Libya, Simon's homeland, is much in today's news. It's been both reviled for its leader's acts and courted for its oil for the last 40 years. Amid the headlines, have you stopped to think of Libya (or other infamous nations) as places whose people God loves? How can we as God's people act seriously on the call to bless all peoples on earth?

**Tuesday, February 27 – Read Luke 23:13-26.** Simon had most likely made the trip from Cyrene to attend the Passover feast in Jerusalem. Whether he was arriving a bit late, or was staying outside the city and was on his way in, his plans were jarringly interrupted. The law allowed Roman soldiers to force anyone they met to carry things for them. Since Jesus couldn't carry his cross, they drafted Simon to do it. Simon's plans on that morning no doubt included celebrating the Passover, perhaps buying mementos for family members back in Cyrene—but not what he actually did that day. When did you last find your plans disrupted by something unplanned, and perhaps unwelcome? How do you, as a Christ follower, deal with situations like that? The soldiers who made Simon carry the cross likely weren't concerned for Jesus. They just had a job to do, and weren't going to carry the heavy burden when they could force Simon to. Which people are you tempted to "use" in your daily life? How can you stay in tune with the possibility that God's at work in any contact with another human being?

**Wednesday, February 28 – Read Mark 15:15-21.** Matthew (27:32) and Mark also tell of Simon carrying the cross. The flogging and mockery, as well as Jesus' sleepless night help us see why he was too weak to carry the wooden cross beam. Mark added that Simon was "the father of Alexander and Rufus." Mark's readers must have known Alexander and Rufus—there was no other reason to include that information. Acts 13:1 lists Christian "prophets and teachers" from Antioch. One was, wrote scholar John Stott, "Simeon (a Hebrew name) called Niger ('black'), probably...African, and conceivably none other than Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross for Jesus." What did Simon see and hear at the cross that might have led him to follow Jesus? Scholars believe Mark was written in or for Rome. In Romans 16:13, Paul wrote, "Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too." It's likely that Simon of Cyrene, his wife and sons all became early Christian church leaders. What seeming coincidences has God used to move your life in positive directions?

**Thursday, March 1 – Read Luke 17:1-5.** When Jesus gave his disciples a model prayer, it included, “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.” (Luke 11:4) In Matthew 18:21 Peter asked if he should forgive as many as seven times. Jesus said, “No—seventy times seven.” Luke says his words about forgiveness so startled the disciples that they gasped, “Lord, increase our faith.” Do you ever fear that Jesus meant you should be a submissive “doormat”? He didn’t. The gospels show Jesus firmly confronting his foes (e.g. driving money changers from the Temple—Luke 19:45-46). How can God and wise human therapists help us deal with hurt and betrayal in healthier ways than hate (which harms us more than others)? The Old Testament often echoed our more natural human response toward people who hurt us (e.g. Psalm 139:21: “Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD?”). Jesus taught, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). How can you care for your own hurt and anger, yet pray for people who offend or hurt you?

**Friday, March 2 – Read Luke 23:32-34.** We read earlier this week about the deliberate, casual cruelties of the Roman soldiers toward Jesus. Everything about a Roman crucifixion was designed to create the maximum possible suffering and pain for the person crucified. Yet the amazed witnesses (probably including Simon) heard Jesus pray, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Lewis Smedes wrote, “When we forgive evil we do not excuse it, we do not tolerate it, we do not smother it. We look the evil full in the face, call it what it is, let its horror shock, stun and enrage us, and only then do we forgive it.” How does this deepen your insight into the painful process needed to pray Jesus’ prayer for his tormentors? God is the great forgiver. At Pentecost, Peter said bluntly: “You...put [Jesus] to death by nailing him to the cross.” He went on, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:23, 38). If God forgave people who crucified Jesus, can God forgive you? Will you accept God’s forgiveness?

**Saturday, March 3. Read Luke 9:18-26.** An average Israelite around 30 C.E., hearing the term “Messiah,” thought of power, wealth and royal privileges. But when Peter affirmed his faith that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus spoke of his self-giving, sacrificial death. His followers, he added, must also deny themselves and take up their cross daily to follow him. Soldiers forced Simon to carry Jesus’ physical cross—but he seems to have willingly borne the spiritual cross for the rest of his life. What do you believe Jesus meant when he said a disciple needed to “take up their cross daily and follow me”? Have you had to “crucify” anything in order to follow Jesus? Are there ambitions or dreams you cherish that you think you might need to let go of to deepen your Christian commitment? In our culture, which avoids pain and struggle at all costs, how can you this Lenten season more fully enter into the painful spiritual struggle of facing life’s conflicts and hurts with God, as a step toward forgiveness?