

March 9. Read Matthew 3:13-17. John (who called people to repent, and baptized them when they did) tried to stop Jesus from being baptized. He had said that the one coming after him would baptize “with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matthew 3:11). He saw Jesus as that sinless savior, and felt unworthy. But Jesus said, “This is necessary to fulfill all righteousness.” Jesus modeled baptism for us. We value our baptisms as a sign that we choose to follow Jesus, and let him direct our lives. Baptism is a type of washing. We come to God tired and defiled and are washed clean, given a fresh start. Jesus did not need that kind of baptism—he was sinless. Yet he humbly asked to be baptized any way. Jesus did “what was necessary for us, humbling himself and identifying with our humanity (see Philippians 2:5-11, Hebrews 2:11-18). What does that tell you about how much he values you? In the words from heaven, discerning readers could hear echoes of Psalm 2:7 (a “royal psalm” the New Testament church applied to Jesus) and Isaiah 42:1, a “servant song” Jesus said shaped and described his mission. How do allusions like these point your heart to the connected sweep of God’s grand story in human history?

March 10. Read John 1:29-37. The gospel of John focused more deeply on the meaning of events. Here we “see” Jesus’ baptism when the baptizer points him out to his followers as “the Lamb of God,” and recalls seeing the Spirit descend on him. We see the result of this powerful testimony, too. Two of John’s disciples took his words seriously, and immediately began following Jesus. “The Lamb of God, who takes the sin of the world!” evoked Jews’ annual sacrifice of a spotless Passover lamb, recalling God freeing them from Egypt and pointing to the Messiah, the ultimate deliverer. It also evoked Isaiah 53:7’s picture of God’s suffering servant—“Like a lamb being brought to slaughter...he didn’t open his mouth.” In neither their world nor ours was the lamb a symbol of power. What does this tell you about God’s divine idea of true strength? What kind of strength is God leading you to develop in your own heart, and with your family, friends, and coworkers? We don’t read about any conflict when two of John’s followers set off after Jesus. John saw his life mission being about leading people to Jesus (see John 3:28-30.) How can a desire for creditor status get in the way of your life carrying out its deepest mission?

March 11. Read Romans 6:1-7. In Romans 5:20, Paul wrote that “where sin increased, grace multiplied even more.” It seems that some of his opponents tried to discredit his trust in God’s grace by saying, “Let’s keep sinning, so that there can be even more grace.” Absolutely not, Paul replied. We can’t truly accept God’s grace without dying to that old way of living, and our baptism is the way we show that we’re serious about that. Christ’s followers through the centuries have wrestled with the paradox that, even as we “walk in newness of life,” we still fall short of God’s ideal again and again. (Paul himself stated the other side of this paradox in Romans 7:14-25.) In what ways have you seen Christ’s gift of new life break the ruling power of sin in your life? What are the ongoing areas of struggle in your life? The New Interpreter’s Bible notes that Paul’s words are about status as the source of actions, “like saying ‘shall we remain in France,’ assuming that if one does one will continue to speak French.” How, in Christ, can you “declare independence” from your old status as a sinner, even as you keep seeking to grow beyond certain acts of sin?

March 12. Read Matthew 4:1-11. God's people, Israel, wandered in the desert for 40 years before they entered the Promised Land. The Israelites gave into the temptation to distrust God (see Numbers 14:28-34). Jesus, God's son, spent 40 days and nights in the wilderness. He, too, was tempted, but did not succumb. He loved and trusted God, and built his life on the Bible's principles. Unlike Jesus, you've probably never been tempted to turn stones to bread. The temptation "fit" him—he could use his power to be the political, material kind of messiah most Israelites hoped for. In what ways have you been tempted to use your unique abilities and powers for our own glory and advancement, rather than to bless others and build God's kingdom? Jesus met temptation with scripture. So can we. Author Gary Smalley advises us to learn Philippians 4:8-9, and check temptations and choices against it before we act: "...if anything is excellent, if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, all that is worthy of praise." What other Bible passages help you resist the lure of evil? Do you, like Jesus, make memorizing key Bible passages part of your life with God?

March 13. Read Luke 4:1-13. Luke slightly altered Matthew's account of the temptations. He said Jesus "was tempted for forty days by the devil." He also reversed the last two temptations, perhaps so that the sequence began and ended by emphasizing Jesus' standing as God's son, and the regular temptation to doubt that. Matthew contrasted Jesus' success in withstanding temptation to Israel's failure in the wilderness. Luke went even farther—his genealogy of Jesus ended, in Luke 3:38, with "Adam son of God." That son of God failed when tempted, but Jesus did not. Each wilderness temptation Jesus faced involved an easier path to being the messiah Israel thought they wanted. "Dazzle them with signs, impress them with your power, meet their material needs," the tempter whispered. "Why try to change their earthly focus, and face suffering and death?" In what ways are you tempted to follow Jesus only if it's easy, and doesn't create any risks? How are you opening yourself to Jesus' power to grow the fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22) in your life, making it better both now and for all eternity?