



# THE SERVANT KING

2026 NAB LENT  
DEVOTIONALS



Weeks 4-5



## THE SERVANT KING: WEEKS 4–5

Whether it was Paul who wrote it or he was simply transcribing a hymn or poem he'd heard from others, Philippians 2:5–11 is one of the oldest pieces of poetry written specifically for the Christian Church. It speaks of Jesus's divinity, but rather than simply framing it through the lens of his kingship over all creation, it paints a picture of the Son of God as a humble servant – a servant king.

This poem isn't just important for our Christology – how we understand the person, nature, and role of Jesus – it's important for how we live our day-to-day lives. After all, Paul reminds us that this servanthood of Jesus is the exact same attitude we should have in our interactions with others and how we engage with the world around us, shaping what kinds of people we are to be.

Over the seven weeks of Lent, February 18 through April 4, join the entire North American Baptist Conference as we look at these seven verses, reflecting on and praying over each in turn as we prepare our hearts for Good Friday and the celebration of Easter Sunday.



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# WEEK 4

March 8

### Sabbath: Romans 5:1–11

As we mark the weekly sabbath rest during this Lenten season, take time to meditate on today's passage, reflecting on how it relates to Philippians 2:5–11. Read it over a few times, being mindful of where the Holy Spirit invites you to pause to consider what he wants to speak into your life today.

You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

Though he was God,  
he did not think of equality with God  
as something to cling to.  
Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;  
he took the humble position of a slave  
and was born as a human being.  
When he appeared in human form,  
he humbled himself in obedience to God  
and died a criminal's death on a cross.

Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor  
and gave him the name above all other names,  
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5–11 NLT)

Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory.

We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character,

and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God. (Romans 5:1–11 NLT)



March 9

## Safety Not Guaranteed

By Michael Benson

**[H]e humbled himself in obedience to God  
and died a criminal’s death on a cross.  
(Philippians 2:8)**

Then he said, “You will undoubtedly quote me this proverb: ‘Physician, heal yourself’—meaning, ‘Do miracles here in your hometown like those you did in Capernaum.’ But I tell you the truth, no prophet is accepted in his own hometown.

“Certainly there were many needy widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the heavens were closed for three and a half years, and a severe famine devastated the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them. He was sent instead to a foreigner—a widow of Zarephath in the land of Sidon. And many in Israel had leprosy in the time of the prophet Elisha, but the only one healed was Naaman, a Syrian.”

When they heard this, the people in the synagogue were furious. Jumping up, they mobbed him and forced him to the edge of the hill on which the town was built. They intended to push him over the cliff, but he passed right through the crowd and went on his way. (Luke 4:23–30 NLT)

Sharp-eyed readers perusing the September/October 1997 issue of *Backwoods Home* magazine noticed something intriguing in the middle of the classified ads. “WANTED: Somebody to go back in time with me. This is not a joke. You’ll get paid after we get back. Must bring your own weapons. Safety not guaranteed. I have only done this once.”

The mystery surrounding this ad quickly caught on and spread widely across the growing internet, but it wasn’t until ten years later that John Silviera outed himself as the author. At the time of the ad’s publication, he worked at the magazine and was asked to create some filler for the classified ad pages to account for some empty spaces. This odd-ball ad was the result, and in the ensuing decades since its publication, Silviera’s received thousands of responses in

his PO Box from people wondering if this is real, offering their services, asking for his help correcting a mistake from their past, and a whole lot in between.

“Safety not guaranteed.” In the midst of an ad with a sci-fi edge, it was this phrase that helped ground things for many, making it seem real; after all, there are few true guarantees of safety in this life.

When Jesus began his ministry, he knew the outcome. He knew his safety not guaranteed, for the end goal was his death – more correctly, the end goal was his resurrection and the defeat of death, but that could not happen until after he had been killed.

Not only was safety not guaranteed, it was never the point. As we read in today’s passage, even near the beginning of his ministry Jesus wasn’t immune from people being angered at his words to the point of wanting to cause him severe bodily harm, possibly even to the point of death.

If we are to follow in his footsteps – if our lives are to embody the teachings of Jesus and reflect the way Jesus would respond were he in our place – we must not assume we will be safe either.

That doesn’t mean we should speak truth so harshly and directly that we invite the same kind of reaction as Jesus received from the Nazarenes. Our words and actions must always be tempered with love and mercy and grace. Additionally, “safety not guaranteed” does not mean we have an excuse to be reckless as we seek to proclaim the Gospel.

God does not call all of us to be martyrs for him, but he most certainly instructs us to live for him, and that means dying to self. When we follow Christ every day, safety is not guaranteed, but life abundant is.

Consider the places in your life where you might be playing it safe rather than following God where he is inviting you to take up your cross and follow him. What do you need to do differently to die to self?

*Michael Benson is the communications director for the North American Baptist Conference.*

March 10

## Humble God

By Merv Budd

**[H]e humbled himself in obedience to God  
and died a criminal's death on a cross.  
(Philippians 2:8)**

No one who trusts in you will ever be disgraced,  
but disgrace comes to those who try to deceive others.

Show me the right path, O LORD;  
point out the road for me to follow.  
Lead me by your truth and teach me,  
for you are the God who saves me.  
All day long I put my hope in you.  
Remember, O LORD, your compassion and unfailing love,  
which you have shown from long ages past.  
Do not remember the rebellious sins of my youth.  
Remember me in the light of your unfailing love,  
for you are merciful, O LORD.

The LORD is good and does what is right;  
he shows the proper path to those who go astray.  
He leads the humble in doing right,  
teaching them his way.  
The LORD leads with unfailing love and faithfulness  
all who keep his covenant and obey his demands. (Psalm 25:3–10 NLT)

I wonder if you, like me, find the description of God being humble somewhat of an oxymoron. God is great, and therefore there is no need for him to be humble. If he tells of all his incredible feats, he's not bragging but merely expressing truth. But God is humble. All through Scripture, the humility of God peaks through the pages.

In today's Psalm, we are told that he guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way (25:9). It appears the humble walk in humility because God guides them in that way – he leads in humility. In the Matthew parable of the unmerciful servant, the master – who is clearly the God figure – “cancels all the debt of the servant and let him go” (Matthew 18:27). It's almost a throwaway line, but to absorb another person's debt and set them free is not only merciful, it is also an incredibly humble act; it is done without fanfare or attention and almost seems as if it is on the sly.

Such is the nature of our God!

I've found my mind wandering towards thinking about the humility of God – not necessarily the humiliation of Christ and his self-emptying described in Philippians 2, but the humility of God that I experience every day but am often unaware of.

I find that this humility is often experienced in how he answers my prayers. I recall two examples: In one case, I was organizing an event, and with less than a week to go, only one person was signed up. I had a speaker coming and food being offered and I was panicking, so I prayed some of those panic prayers – but nothing happened.

Over the course of the next couple days, I found myself thinking about the event but becoming less anxious, not uncaring just at peace. Later, I received notice that three others had signed up. The next morning, eight more. Later in the afternoon, another ten. On the day of the event, there were over thirty people.

Similarly, I was struggling with finding an appropriate ending for a sermon I was going to preach. Writing the sermon felt like wading through tar – every thought and sentence felt like a struggle. And when I got to the end, it felt like it just ended but had not really concluded.

I had been praying about it and searching and working hard, but nothing came. By Saturday, I had resolved myself to the fact the sermon wouldn't be that good.

Strangely, in the early hours of Sunday morning, I found myself dreaming about my sermon and I was telling a parable that perfectly summarized my message and gave an appropriate appeal for response. When I got to the church, I wrote it down about an hour before I had to speak.

What I find interesting about both events is that even though in retrospect I can see God answered my prayers, had I not taken time to think about it, I almost would have missed the fact. It is as if God was trying to answer my prayers anonymously.



Have a look at your own prayer lists or think back to those concerns that had you so panicked a month ago, or a year ago. Has God answered? Yet, if you are like me, you often don't pause to thank him because he is so unassuming, shy, humble.

The doubters and skeptics would have God boast of himself, perform a sign so grand and persuasive that no one could miss it or deny it. But that would go against his nature. In fact, the only way God gets recognized and boasted about is by his creation boasting about him – recognizing where he has been at work and “declaring his praise” (1 Peter 2:9).

I hope as you look back and see the humble ways in which God answered prayers you have long since stopped praying and thinking about, you will praise him, too.

*Merv Budd is equipping evangelist on the Missional Initiatives Team.*

March 11

## Loving Obedience

By Deb Judas

**[H]e humbled himself in obedience to God  
and died a criminal’s death on a cross.  
(Philippians 2:8)**

“Don’t misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God’s law will disappear until its purpose is achieved. So if you ignore the least commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God’s laws and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.” (Matthew 5:17–19 NLT)

In last week’s verse, Philippians 2:7, Jesus took on the position of a slave, denying all the privileges of his deity. In this week’s verse, he now takes things a step further.

He takes the step of obedience, fully submitting himself to his Father’s will by dying. And not just any kind of death. He dies in the most humiliating and painful way – on a cross as a criminal.

When you think of the word “obedience,” what is the first thing that comes to mind?

In my mind, it refers to something I don’t want to do but will do anyway because it’s either the right thing or because I am submitting to someone in authority over me. Even if I disagree with or don’t like what’s being asked of me, I will obey them.

Contrast that to a biblical definition of obedience: In John 14:15, Jesus tells us, “If you love me, you will obey my commandments.” Obedience and love go hand in hand, with faith tying them together.

Said another way, obedience is an expression of faith and love rather than legalistic rule-following, and it is willingly aligning our lives with God’s will.



How often do I begrudgingly follow Jesus's ways rather than deeply desiring to align myself with him and his ways simply because I love him? It's hard enough to do this in human relationships, let alone our relationship with God.

For God SO LOVED the world, he GAVE his only Son. He initiated, created, and IS love. So how do we get to a place where who we are and how we live is motivated and driven by our love for Jesus?

The process of becoming more like Jesus, and thereby lovingly obeying his will, is a journey of transformation.

According to author Ruth Haley Barton, we cannot transform ourselves. Only the Holy Spirit can. But we can create the conditions for transformation to take place. We create those conditions through practicing spiritual disciplines.

I used to view spiritual disciplines as law. It was a legalistic approach to obeying God. It was a way of measuring whether or not I was a good Christian – do I read my Bible and pray every day? This approach does not produce transformation.

Seeing the disciplines as a way of opening the door to transformation and a way to finding deeper intimacy in our relationship with Jesus requires a posture of humility. Rather than trying to merely obey God and keep his commands, and instead seek to know him more deeply, is a game changer.

The caveat is that this approach does not usually happen first and is certainly not instantaneous. It is the discipline of training versus trying. Over time, we find our heart softening. We begin to adopt the mind of Christ. We discover we are beginning to change our attitude and the lens through which we view the world. We are building spiritual muscle that will produce resilience in difficult times when our faith is challenged.

Transformation is not convenient or easy. It is a slow and deep work that produces Jesus followers who look more like him and love others more freely. And the by-product is that obedience seems to become more natural. As we align our lives with the way and will of Jesus, we slowly die to ourselves and come alive in him.

*Deb Judas is the administrative assistant and director of Formation for the Missional Initiatives Team.*

March 12

## Stubborn Desires

By Dr. Harry Kelm

**[H]e humbled himself in obedience to God  
and died a criminal’s death on a cross.  
(Philippians 2:8)**

“This is what I told them: ‘Obey me, and I will be your God, and you will be my people. Do everything as I say, and all will be well!’

“But my people would not listen to me. They kept doing whatever they wanted, following the stubborn desires of their evil hearts. They went backward instead of forward. From the day your ancestors left Egypt until now, I have continued to send my servants, the prophets—day in and day out. But my people have not listened to me or even tried to hear. They have been stubborn and sinful—even worse than their ancestors.

“Tell them all this, but do not expect them to listen. Shout out your warnings, but do not expect them to respond. Say to them, ‘This is the nation whose people will not obey the LORD their God and who refuse to be taught. Truth has vanished from among them; it is no longer heard on their lips.’” (Jeremiah 7:23–28 NLT)

There are times God’s word speaks a truth I would humanly rather not hear. I like being told about God’s love and provision. I like reading the Bible stories about the parting of the Red Sea and the Lord being my shepherd and me not wanting. I like the message of the feeding of the five thousand and the healing of those who are sick. I struggle more with the message of the Lordship of Jesus, particularly when it comes to doing something I don’t want to do or giving up something I don’t want to give up I don’t always want to live in obedience to him as he did to the Father. There are many times the message of Jeremiah 7:23–28 is one I need to hear.

I am a grandfather to three precious kiddos. They constantly amaze me with how bright, inquisitive, and clever they are. Though my amazement of them knows few boundaries, I often see glimpses of them not wanting to do something and not wanting to give something



up. I am very familiar with that struggle. This impulse lives in them, and it is also there in me. Jeremiah 7:24 states, “But my people would not listen to me. They kept doing whatever they wanted, following the stubborn desires of their evil hearts. They went backward instead of forward.”

Wow! When I read that, and reread it, I see in it how I resist listening to and hearing from God. We often demand doing what we want and going backward rather than forward.

In this time of Lent, we look anticipate the redemption and the deliverance we have through the sacrifice of Jesus. It is also a time for us to consider why we need redemption and deliverance.

To follow Jesus is to practice an ongoing surrender of our way to his way. It is to acknowledge where we are not listening or hearing. It is to confess where we have gone backward and not forward. It is to grieve the hardening of our hearts and our selfishness and sinfulness. It is an invitation to turn ourselves back to him.

Our hope is in Jesus, our redeemer and our deliverer. The invitation of God in Jesus is to draw near. It is to trust in the good news of God’s grace in Jesus and in the new beginning we have as we walk in obedience and faithfulness.

Embrace the good news today. If your experience is like mine, you usually know where you have been resisting God and his work in your life. By God’s grace, we do not need to stay in that place, but we can release the control of whatever it is to Jesus.

*Dr. Harry Kelm is the executive director of the North American Baptist Conference.*

March 13

## A Stooping Servant

By Carissa Steinhart

**[H]e humbled himself in obedience to God  
and died a criminal’s death on a cross.  
(Philippians 2:8)**

One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the debate. He realized that Jesus had answered well, so he asked, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

Jesus replied, “The most important commandment is this: ‘Listen, O Israel! The LORD our God is the one and only LORD. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these.”

The teacher of religious law replied, “Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth by saying that there is only one God and no other. And I know it is important to love him with all my heart and all my understanding and all my strength, and to love my neighbor as myself. This is more important than to offer all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices required in the law.”

Realizing how much the man understood, Jesus said to him, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions. (Mark 12:28–34 NLT)

The last few weeks, we’ve been painting a “picture of the Son of God as a humble servant – a servant king” as we’ve walked through multiple verses from Philippians. This week, we are focusing on Jesus’s humility. In this verse, the Greek word for “humbled” is associated with “one who stoops to the condition of a servant,” clearly connecting this verse to our overall theme.

I’m challenged by our continual callback during Lent to follow in the footsteps of Jesus as a Servant King. Paul is not simply writing this passage as a character study on who the Son of

God is. Instead, we must allow these words to form and shape us and then seek to put them into practice. That being the case, in following the way of Jesus, how can we humble ourselves and become obedient like a servant is?

These questions bring to mind one of Jesus’s famous teachings on The Great Commandment, part of today’s Scripture reading:

Jesus replied, “The most important commandment is this: ‘Listen, O Israel! The LORD our God is the one and only LORD. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these.” (Mark 12:29–31)

A few things stand out to me about these verses. The greatest and most important thing we’re called to do as Jesus’s disciples is to follow and love him with our whole selves – our desires, our thoughts, and our actions. As we aim for this, the transformation in our souls should lead to a different way of being with and loving others – a self-sacrificing, servant-hearted love.

May I propose that this servant-hearted love for others is one way we can humble ourselves and become obedient? It’s unlikely we’ll find ourselves facing a literal cross in our lifetime – but these two action steps can help us follow in Jesus’s footsteps and are lived out in the call to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Loving others in this way – valuing them as much as we value our own well-being – isn’t something we can do out of our own strength. Rather, as we become more like Jesus, little by little and day by day, we will more easily “stoop to the condition of a servant” – placing the will of the Master above our own and loving those around us no matter the cost.

I’m reminded of the sending prayer our church prays together each Sunday before departing:

In our going, let us be with Jesus.

**In our loving, let us become like Jesus.**

In our living, let us do what Jesus did.

*Father, may our hearts, souls, minds, and strengths prioritize being in your presence. May the selfless way we love others be a small taste for them of your love for all of us. May the way we live our lives reflect your incredible gift of humble obedience.*

*Carissa Steinhart is Stu Streeter’s executive assistant and worships at Disciples Church in Medina, Ohio.*

March 14

## Except for the Grace of God

By Dr. Karen Wilk

**[H]e humbled himself in obedience to God  
and died a criminal’s death on a cross.  
(Philippians 2:8)**

*As you begin, pause, take a deep breath, invite the Spirit’s leading, and focus your attention on the text.*

*What words or phrases stand out to you (is the Spirit highlighting)? Why do you think they are catching your attention?*

*What are you wondering about as you ponder the text?*

Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else: “Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: ‘I thank you, God, that I am not like other people—cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I’m certainly not like that tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, ‘O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.’ I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 18:9–14 NLT)

It has often been assumed that these men were going to the Temple to engage in private prayer, but Middle Eastern listeners would have assumed they were going to attend public worship, one of two daily atonement services the Pharisee would have been expected to take part in, but not a tax collector!

The tax collector remains “at a distance”—at the Eastern gate with the others considered unclean.



What do we notice about their descriptions? How do their postures and prayers compare?

Commentators and historians have said that arrogance and self-righteousness were in the character of the Pharisees, a title that literally means “separated ones.” In daily prayers, they thanked God they weren’t “a Gentile, a servant, or a woman,” and “not as the rest of men.” This Pharisee is living up to that reputation!

I wonder when we might be tempted to thank God that we are not like \_\_\_\_\_ and to take pride in all the good “spiritual” things we do.

In contrast, the tax collector assumes the posture and prayer of repentance (v. 13). The repentant would beat their chest because, in their view, it contained the heart, the source of sin in one’s life. This “despised” one was seeking God’s mercy and depending on it.

The Greek words for “have mercy” refer to the atonement sacrifice that was being made in this service. The tax collector was personalizing this public act in his prayer, in effect saying to God, “May this sacrifice atone for me, a sinner.” He knew he could never meet the demands of the Law; he knew he was a hopeless case.

Except for the grace of God. Which leads us to the astonishing conclusion of the parable: The tax collector “was the man who went home justified in God’s sight, rather than the other one” (v. 14 NRSV).

How come?

My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart  
you, God, will not despise (Psalm 51:17 NIV)

“I live in a high and holy place,  
but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit,  
to revive the spirit of the lowly  
and to revive the heart of the contrite.” (Isaiah 57:15 NIV)

“The tax collector yearns to accept the gift of God’s justification, while the Pharisee feels he has already earned it.”<sup>1</sup> The former longs to be in a right relationship with God and contritely seeks it; the latter is secure in his own righteousness and has no need for God. Here (and

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, IVP, 2008, p 350.

throughout the text), we discover that for Jesus sin “is not primarily a broken law but a broken relationship.”<sup>2</sup>

And he has come to restore that relationship through his life, death, and resurrection. A right relationship with God is a gift – Jesus’s gift!

The question is: are we humble enough to receive it? And to share it?

“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (v. 13).

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;  
his mercies never come to an end;  
they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness. (Lamentations 3:22–23 ESV)

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<sup>2</sup> Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, p 350.

# WEEK 5



March 15

### Sabbath: Psalm 23

As we mark the weekly sabbath rest during this Lenten season, take time to meditate on today's passage, reflecting on how it relates to Philippians 2:5–11. Read it over a few times, being mindful of where the Holy Spirit invites you to pause to consider what he wants to speak into your life today.

You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

Though he was God,  
he did not think of equality with God  
as something to cling to.  
Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;  
he took the humble position of a slave  
and was born as a human being.  
When he appeared in human form,  
he humbled himself in obedience to God  
and died a criminal's death on a cross.

Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor  
and gave him the name above all other names,  
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5–11 NLT)

The LORD is my shepherd;  
I have all that I need.  
He lets me rest in green meadows;  
he leads me beside peaceful streams.  
He renews my strength.  
He guides me along right paths,  
bringing honor to his name.

Even when I walk  
through the darkest valley,  
I will not be afraid,  
for you are close beside me.  
Your rod and your staff  
protect and comfort me.  
You prepare a feast for me  
in the presence of my enemies.  
You honor me by anointing my head with oil.  
My cup overflows with blessings.  
Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me  
all the days of my life,  
and I will live in the house of the LORD  
forever. (Psalm 23 NLT)

March 16

## The G.O.A.T.

By Michael Benson

**Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor  
and gave him the name above all other names [ . . . ]  
(Philippians 2:9)**

I will exalt you, LORD, for you rescued me.  
You refused to let my enemies triumph over me.  
O LORD my God, I cried to you for help,  
and you restored my health.  
You brought me up from the grave, O LORD.  
You kept me from falling into the pit of death.

Sing to the LORD, all you godly ones!  
Praise his holy name.  
For his anger lasts only a moment,  
but his favor lasts a lifetime!  
Weeping may last through the night,  
but joy comes with the morning.

When I was prosperous, I said,  
“Nothing can stop me now!”

[ . . . ]

You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing.  
You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy,  
that I might sing praises to you and not be silent.  
O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever! (Psalm 30:1–6, 11–12  
NLT)

There is a truism that if you put two fans of the same sport in a room together, it is only a matter of time before they start talking about which athlete they consider to be the greatest of all time, also known as the G.O.A.T. Basketball fans will gladly debate for days whether

Kobe Bryant, Michael Jordan, or LeBron James is the best. Likewise, baseball has Babe Ruth, Mickey Mantle, and Hank Aaron; soccer – a.k.a., football – has Lionel Messi, Pelé, and Cristiano Ronaldo; and hockey has Wayne Gretzky, with a few honorable mentions like Bobby Orr and Gordie Howe.

We like ranking stuff. It helps us order our often chaotic world, helping us to more easily keep track of the important things in life. With so many things attempting to grab our attention, these kinds of lists can help us decide what to pay closer attention to and what we should ignore.

The trouble is these rankings will always lean more heavily on opinion rather than fact. Liking John Williams as a composer is fine, but saying he is better than everyone else says more about your preferences than it does about his skill. The same is true of Jordan, Messi, and pretty much any other person on this Earth; there is no truly verifiable way to determine who is the “best.”

Except when it comes to Jesus. While there’s no telling how good a ballplayer he is or how well he could compose a theme for the next masterpiece of cinema, we know, with absolute certainty, that as a person – his character, attitude, actions, personality, and everything else that forms who he is – Jesus is the best there is and best there ever will be. He is the absolute G.O.A.T.

As Philippians 2:9 tells us, God has “elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names.” Because of his servant heart, sacrifice on the cross, and defeat of death, Jesus is exalted above all others.

Because of the chaos of the world, it can be hard to remember to focus on the important things, even the big things, so when David writes in Psalm 30, “I will exalt you, LORD, for you rescued me,” it is a grounding wire securing us to the truth that Jesus is our savior. He cares for us, protects us, and turns our “mourning into joyful dancing” (Psalm 30:11).

Write your own psalm of praise to God today. Celebrate who he is to you specifically, how he has rescued you and helped you. Don’t worry about being as poetic as David; God doesn’t care about your skill with words as much as he does the honesty of your heart.

*Michael Benson is the communications director for the North American Baptist Conference.*

March 17

## You All

By Michael Benson

**Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor  
and gave him the name above all other names [ . . . ]  
(Philippians 2:9)**

In my vision, the man brought me back to the entrance of the Temple. There I saw a stream flowing east from beneath the door of the Temple and passing to the right of the altar on its south side. The man brought me outside the wall through the north gateway and led me around to the eastern entrance. There I could see the water flowing out through the south side of the east gateway.

Measuring as he went, he took me along the stream for 1,750 feet and then led me across. The water was up to my ankles. He measured off another 1,750 feet and led me across again. This time the water was up to my knees. After another 1,750 feet, it was up to my waist. Then he measured another 1,750 feet, and the river was too deep to walk across. It was deep enough to swim in, but too deep to walk through.

He asked me, “Have you been watching, son of man?” Then he led me back along the riverbank. When I returned, I was surprised by the sight of many trees growing on both sides of the river. Then he said to me, “This river flows east through the desert into the valley of the Dead Sea. The waters of this stream will make the salty waters of the Dead Sea fresh and pure. There will be swarms of living things wherever the water of this river flows. Fish will abound in the Dead Sea, for its waters will become fresh. Life will flourish wherever this water flows. [ . . . ]

Fruit trees of all kinds will grow along both sides of the river. The leaves of these trees will never turn brown and fall, and there will always be fruit on their branches. There will be a new crop every month, for they are watered by the river flowing from the Temple. The fruit will be for food and the leaves for healing.” (Ezekiel 47:1–9, 12 NLT)



Yesterday’s devotional centered on the personal ways God has saved us, but to stay focused on us as individuals is to miss the much larger picture. There’s no denying Jesus saved you and me, but his death and resurrection did so much more that provide us personal salvation. The cross and the tomb reverberate across history, impacting not just individuals but communities, people groups, and the world as a whole.

The truth is, those of us who read the Bible in English put ourselves at a deficit: so much of what comes across as addressed to the individual – “You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had” – is actually meant to be understood in the collective. In the original Greek that Paul wrote Philippians 2:5, “you” would be better translated as “you all;” this same flaw of the English language is repeated throughout Scripture.

Reread today’s passage of Ezekiel’s vision of a stream that flows from the Temple of the Lord, growing ever wider and deeper as it makes its way across the desert and brings life to all it touches. This time, look for the ways the stream would be seen through the eyes of the community that lives by the Dead Sea. For those who call this place home, the river flowing from the Temple has brought life where there was once only death. The waters flourish with creatures, the riverbanks thrive with trees that provide sustenance to the people and animals, and the leaves of the trees are a healing balm. A similar imagery of healing leaves is also mentioned in the description of Eden restored in Revelation 22:2 – “the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

This vision from Ezekiel is not about how we as individuals are healed through Christ; it is about how the Messiah has changed – and continues to change – our world for the better. How much more then should we exalt the name of Jesus! Yes, he has saved us, and is still saving us daily, but he is also bringing life, restoration, and healing to the nations, to all peoples, and to creation itself.

Go back to the psalm of praise you wrote yesterday. Continue it by writing a new stanza, praising our good God for how he is at work in your community, your nation, and our world. Celebrate the ways he is bringing life, restoration, and healing to us collectively and to all creation.

*Michael Benson is the communications director for the North American Baptist Conference.*

March 18

## What's in a Name

By Dr. Harry Kelm

**Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor  
and gave him the name above all other names [ . . . ]  
(Philippians 2:9)**

So Jesus explained, “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him everything he is doing. In fact, the Father will show him how to do even greater works than healing this man. Then you will truly be astonished. For just as the Father gives life to those he raises from the dead, so the Son gives life to anyone he wants. In addition, the Father judges no one. Instead, he has given the Son absolute authority to judge, so that everyone will honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Anyone who does not honor the Son is certainly not honoring the Father who sent him.

“I tell you the truth, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life.

“And I assure you that the time is coming, indeed it’s here now, when the dead will hear my voice—the voice of the Son of God. And those who listen will live. The Father has life in himself, and he has granted that same life-giving power to his Son. And he has given him authority to judge everyone because he is the Son of Man. Don’t be so surprised! Indeed, the time is coming when all the dead in their graves will hear the voice of God’s Son, and they will rise again. Those who have done good will rise to experience eternal life, and those who have continued in evil will rise to experience judgment.” (John 5:19–29 NLT)

Think of the impact our names have. Parents will spend time and effort in considering what name their precious child will have. This will be a name that goes with them the rest of their lives. In the Bible, a person’s name often expressed a wish or promise for that child. A name

could also be given to a person to identify a new stage of life. Philippians 2:9 tells us that the willing submission and sacrificial obedience of Jesus will be reflected in God elevating Jesus to the highest place of honor. This place of honor comes with a name that is above every other name. It is the name that speaks to the transformation we have in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

In John 5, Jesus does an extraordinary thing. He heals a man who had been disabled for thirty-eight years. The Jewish leaders were not focused on this. They were shocked Jesus would heal on the Sabbath. They were also outraged when Jesus referred to God as “My Father” while describing this healing.

Jesus knew this physical healing was just a part of everything he came to do. In verses 19–29, he speaks about the healing that is not just of physical ailments but the healing that will come in the forgiveness of sins.

Sin is one thing common to the people of all nations and all time. The healing Jesus offers comes with the promise of eternal life. It also comes with the promise of a surrendered earthly life lived in loving obedience to the Lordship of Jesus. This is the healing Jesus offers to all of us. He was fully aware of the coming pain and heartache, as on the cross he would bear the sins of men and women, your sins and my sins.

Jesus also knew this was God’s plan. Remember, in Matthew 1:21, Joseph was directed to give Mary’s baby the name Jesus because “he will save his people from their sins.”

It is in Jesus’s name, as our Savior and Lord, that we can place Philippians 2:9 over the verses that are found in Psalm 145:8–19. This passage speaks about knowing the goodness of God’s presence in our lives, seeing the greatness, power, and grace of God’s working for his people. It is in the name of the Lord Jesus that we experience this. It is in Lord Jesus that we dwell in his presence and experience his rescue in the needs of each day and each moment.

Read Psalm 145:8–19 and consider what Jesus has done in your life. Take time to praise God for the name above every name and how this name has brought the blessing of new life to you. Consider how you can live out the name of Lord Jesus as you walk the journey of life.

*Dr. Harry Kelm is the executive director of the North American Baptist Conference.*

March 19

## Fame

By Michael Benson

**Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor  
and gave him the name above all other names [. . .]  
(Philippians 2:9)**

“Now go and say to my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies has declared: I took you from tending sheep in the pasture and selected you to be the leader of my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have destroyed all your enemies before your eyes. Now I will make your name as famous as anyone who has ever lived on the earth! And I will provide a homeland for my people Israel, planting them in a secure place where they will never be disturbed. Evil nations won’t oppress them as they’ve done in the past, starting from the time I appointed judges to rule my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies.

“Furthermore, the LORD declares that he will make a house for you—a dynasty of kings! For when you die and are buried with your ancestors, I will raise up one of your descendants, your own offspring, and I will make his kingdom strong. He is the one who will build a house—a temple—for my name. And I will secure his royal throne forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. If he sins, I will correct and discipline him with the rod, like any father would do. But my favor will not be taken from him as I took it from Saul, whom I removed from your sight. Your house and your kingdom will continue before me for all time, and your throne will be secure forever.” (2 Samuel 7:8–16 NLT)

There is a unique phenomenon to our twenty-first century digital world where individuals are made famous simply for sharing pictures online of their everyday life. For many of those who have been made “Instagram famous” – particularly those who spend a majority of their lives online – they can easily forget how small their fame truly is.

There are countless videos online of people with low-level, online fame ranting at restaurants or clubs who won’t give them preferential treatment.



It's one thing to be considered famous within a given context like Instagram, a niche fandom, or a tight-knit community, but it's something else entirely to be known around the world. Even greater is to be so famous that your fame doesn't fade when you die but instead grows, akin to that of a legend.

King David of Israel is certainly in this last category. He was quite well known in his time, not just because he was king of Israel but because his deeds were impressive. He was a fierce warrior, a skilled poet, and a talented musician. Even though his flaws have also been part of the retelling of his life story throughout the ages, that has not lessened his fame. As the Lord tells David through his prophet Nathan, "I will make your name as famous as anyone who has ever lived on the earth!" (2 Samuel 7:9b).

God tells David his "throne will be secured forever," but as we see in the historical annals of the Bible, that throne ended with Zedekiah when he was deposed by the ruler of Babylon in 597 BC. From an earthly perspective, that was the end of the house of David and his kingdom.

But from a heavenly perspective, that was but a hiccup in the line, a pause between what was and what was to come. The earthly kingdom was never meant to last, but the heavenly Kingdom of God will never have an end.

David's fame – spanning the globe as well as the ages – pales in comparison to the fame of David's descendent, Jesus of Nazareth. It is Jesus alone who has the name elevated above all others, who's fame is truly transcendent. As Jesus tells his disciples, "Heaven and earth will disappear, but my words will never disappear" (Matthew 24:35).

It is incredibly easy to fall prey to the trap of fame. Even those of us who are more comfortable living in the background and are perfectly content not being known beyond our circle of family, friends, and acquaintances can be tripped up by a desire to be considered special or important. When that happens, the best antidote is to remember that the world as we know it is fleeting and will disappear, but God's Kingdom will last forever.

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March 20

## Status of the Savior

By Nathan Solak

**Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor  
and gave him the name above all other names [ . . . ]  
(Philippians 2:9)**

Some of the people who lived in Jerusalem started to ask each other, “Isn’t this the man they are trying to kill? But here he is, speaking in public, and they say nothing to him. Could our leaders possibly believe that he is the Messiah? But how could he be? For we know where this man comes from. When the Messiah comes, he will simply appear; no one will know where he comes from.”

While Jesus was teaching in the Temple, he called out, “Yes, you know me, and you know where I come from. But I’m not here on my own. The one who sent me is true, and you don’t know him. But I know him because I come from him, and he sent me to you.” Then the leaders tried to arrest him; but no one laid a hand on him, because his time had not yet come. (John 7:25–30 NLT)

The world makes much of status. If you’ve done any travel recently, you know this. The airport lounges are full of travelers who pay for the privilege, and the boarding process has fifteen groups who pre-board with their status before the rest of the “normal” people do. Or maybe your mailbox, like mine, is full of credit cards that offer a certain status with perks at a certain hotel chain. Gone are the days of elite status reserved for the road warriors with millions of miles in the air or hundreds of nights spent in hotels. Status is now pay-to-play, and everyone can be special. And in a world where everyone is special, no one is special.

But our Savior, the God we worship, has a special status. Philippians 2:9 reminds us of that status, that place Jesus occupies. Jesus sits on the highest throne. He has the highest status. Even his name is higher than any other name. The space Jesus occupies is over all and above all because he himself is over all and above all. Jesus is part of a club that has but only one member – himself. Yet sometimes we forget that this elevation comes after his death on the cross. When he comes to earth, he has emptied himself of that status he held in heaven and he has taken on the form of a man.



It's not surprising then that people in his day had a hard time figuring out the logistics of what exactly Jesus's status was as he lived on the earth. Some of the confusion arose, we read in John 7, from the fact that people knew where Jesus was from – he was from Nazareth. Apparently, some traditions over the years had taught that no one would know where the Messiah came from, that he would just, as they say, “appear.” Jesus's rebuttal to this is both enigmatic and simple. Yes, true, you know me, but you don't know the one who sent me.

While the people were confused about Jesus's status, Jesus was sure of who he was. Not only was he the Messiah, but he also was God incarnate. He knew who he was, and he knew that while his status had changed temporarily, elevation would come and he would sit on the throne in heaven with God, reigning eternally with all the power, glory, and status that would come with the return to the throne.

I wonder, as we reflect on this Lenten season, what status are we chasing? For those of us who follow Jesus, our status is already secure: children of the Most High, sons and daughters of the one who sits on the throne, elevated over all. If we truly believed in our status, what would God do in us and through us this week?

*Nathan Solak is the lead pastor at Ridgewood Church in Brookfield, Wisconsin.*



March 21

## Jesus or Jeremiah

By Michael Benson

**Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor  
and gave him the name above all other names [ . . . ]  
(Philippians 2:9)**

Then the LORD told me about the plots my enemies were making against me. I was like a lamb being led to the slaughter. I had no idea that they were planning to kill me! “Let’s destroy this man and all his words,” they said. “Let’s cut him down, so his name will be forgotten forever.”

O LORD of Heaven’s Armies,  
you make righteous judgments,  
and you examine the deepest thoughts and secrets.  
Let me see your vengeance against them,  
for I have committed my cause to you. (Jeremiah 11:18–20)

Jeremiah was not a popular guy. He was born of priestly lineage, giving him a bit of social standing within the culture of the day. But when God calls him to be the mouthpiece of the Lord to warn his people of the coming danger should they not divert from their wicked ways, Jeremiah is ostracized and imprisoned. There is even a plot to kill him, as we read in today’s passage.

Jeremiah’s offending mistake appears to have been speaking the prophetic truths pressed upon him by God. As a result, his enemies want to make him disappear, erasing his name from history, along with his prophetic words. Jeremiah’s response is to call on the Lord, not for protection but for vengeance. He invokes God to punish them. As a result, God declares, “Their young men will die in battle, and their boys and girls will starve to death. Not one of these plotters from Anathoth will survive” (Jeremiah 11:22–23). And Jeremiah’s name, his reputation and legacy, are not forgotten.

Jesus went through a similar trial. His enemies stood against him because he spoke prophetic truths about the Kingdom of God. Like Jeremiah’s enemies, Jesus’s enemies desired to see his teachings and followers fade from history.

Yet, Jesus’s response is quite different from Jeremiah’s. Rather than calling on God’s vengeance to protect him and harm his enemies, Jesus allows himself to be led to his torture and execution.

The way of Jesus is gentle, not one of wielding power over others or reacting out of anger.

Ultimately, the attempt to erase Jesus and his teachings from the annals of history helped him accomplish the very thing that “gave him the name above all other names.”

There are times when people speak out against us or our faith or our God, and all too often our knee-jerk reaction is similar to that of Jeremiah’s. We want to see them punished in some way.

What would it look like if our automatic response was instead modeled after Jesus – not based on wrath and vengeance but on love and forgiveness?

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