



LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

PREPARED FOR THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
OF MARIETTA BY ITS STEPHEN MINISTERS

FEBRUARY 14-MARCH 29
2024

Stephen Ministry Lenten Devotionals 2024

Lent is a season to unearth our brokenness; embracing it as we move toward the cross and the empty tomb. We are reminded to bear one another's burdens, to embrace whatever brokenness resides in our lives and that we are not alone in the burden or our wounds we carry. By allowing God to minister and heal our wounds, we are graced with many blessings through experiencing healing and wholeness.

This compilation of devotionals for each day of Lent 2024 was lovingly and prayerfully written by FPC Stephen Ministers, both past and present. Through these writings, they share God's love and the hope of the scriptures.

These devotionals are a daily reminder that faith can be a great source of strength in our lives, and that our fellowship with one another eases the burdens we carry.

As we celebrate the 30th anniversary of Stephen Ministry at First Presbyterian Church of Marietta, we remember the words of our beloved minister, Denise Beltzner, who wrote this introduction to our Stephen Ministry Devotional Book of 2014, *Bear One Another's Burdens*, prepared in celebration of our 20th anniversary:

Over twenty years ago, Rev. Mary Beth Lawrence and Dr. Jim Speed saw the need and opportunity to bring a wonderful new ministry into the life of our congregation—the Stephen Ministry. This quiet, fly-below-the-radar ministry took root and has grown over the years. ... As you read these daily devotionals, written by former and presently active Stephen Ministers, we hope you learn some things about this ministry. More importantly, we pray that you will be encouraged in your faith so that together we can learn how to better share each other's burdens.

Blessings!
Denise

Asterisk * by writer's name denotes Active Stephen Minister



HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT STEPHEN MINISTRY?

The Stephen Ministry program at First Presbyterian Church is a caring lay ministry that offers a one-to-one relationship to anyone needed in a caring relationship and support.

WHO ARE STEPHEN MINISTERS?

We are lay member of the congregation who receive extensive caregiving training and on-going training and supervision.

WHAT DO STEPHEN MINISTERS DO?

We visit regularly, offering conversation, prayer, support, and encouragement, focusing on whatever the care receiver needs to talk and pray about.

HOW CAN YOU FIND OUT MORE ABOUT STEPHEN MINISTRY?

Contact Rev. Paul Sherwood 770 364-9394

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FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT STEPHEN MINISTRY,
GO TO FPCMARIETTA.ORG/CARE-AND-SUPPORT

LENTEN DEVOTIONALS BY FPC STEPHEN MINISTERS

Week 1: Antidote to Anxiety and Worry

February 14: Philippians 4:6-7 Darcia Jones
February 15: Psalm 27:1 Claire Francis
February 16: Matthew 26:38-39 Mary Groves
February 17: Joshua 1:5-9 Claire Francis
February 18: Peter 5:7 Bennett Frye
February 19: Philippians 4:19 Katharine Wesselink
February 20: Matthew 6:25-33 Fran Sommerville

Week 2: Source of Our Strength

February 21: Isaiah 26:3-4 Pem Cooley
February 22: Philippians 4:8-9 Melissa Ricketts
February 23: John 16:33 Kitty Kendrick
February 24: Psalm 29:11 Denise Lobidinski
February 25: Isaiah 40: 28-31 Denise Beltzner
February 26: Psalm 46:10 Kitty Kendrick
February 27: Ephesians 6:10 Hal McClain

Week 3: Don't Give Up

February 28: Deuteronomy 31:6 Amy Sherwood
February 29: Hebrews 13:5b Jim Ray
March 1: Matthew 18:21 Marilyn Barton
March 2: Proverbs 3:5-6 Claire Francis
March 3: Philippians 4:12-13 Lucy Cooley
March 4: Romans 12:12 Kitty Kendrick
March 5: 2 Corinthians 12:9 Carol Calloway

Week 4: God is Our Refuge

March 6: Ephesians 3:18-19 Lucy Cooley
March 7: Corinthians 4:16-18 Amy Sherwood
March 8: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 Kitty Kendrick
March 9: Psalm 37:23-24 Carla Frost
March 10: Romans 15:13 Lucy Cooley
March 11: Psalm 46:1-5 Marilyn Barton
March 12: Psalm 27:1 Cindy Etheridge

Week 5 Trust God

March 13: John 14:1 Fran Sommerville
March 14: John 14:27 Terry Barton
March 15: Psalm 37:5 Melissa Ricketts
March 16: Matthew 11:28-30 Darcia Jones
March 17: Isaiah 41:10 Marilyn Barton
March 18: Psalms 68:19 Bennett Frye
March 19: Joshua 1:9 Katharine Wesselink

Week 6: Bearing One Another's Burdens

March 20: Isaiah 43:2 Cris Heagy
March 21: Galatians 6:2 Darcia Jones
March 22: Matthew 25:37-40 Doris Faber
March 23: Psalm 55:22 Lucy Cooley
March 24: Zech.9:9-10: Mark 11:1-10
Mary Beth Lawrence
March 25: John 21:15-17 Paul Sherwood
March 26: 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 Marilyn Barton

The Darkest Days Come Before the Son Rises

March 27: 2 Corinthians 4:8-9 Amy Sherwood
March 28: John 4:10-11 Ceil Golightly
March 29: John 3:16 Terry Barton

A Message of Senior Pastor, Rev. Joe Evans

Christianity is no spectator sport. Our faith must become action, and by taking up the discipline of a Lenten devotional you are doing just that. The spiritual practice of a daily prayer and short reading written by one of our congregation's Stephen Ministers will no doubt be a blessing to you.

These Stephen Ministers have been trained to put their faith into action in a unique and important way. They have learned to be present with people during times of loss, illness, transition, and challenge. By listening they have embodied the love of God who is always near, especially when we are in need.

This devotional, prepared by some of our congregation's Stephen Ministers, is also a celebration of the 30th anniversary of Stephen Ministry at First Presbyterian Church. Since 1994 these disciples have been putting their faith into action through the power of presence. I am deeply grateful for the blessing that this ministry has been to our church.

May we all be inspired to put our faith into action that we might do as the Savior commanded: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself."

God bless you,

Rev. Joe Evans

WEEK 1: ANTIDOTES TO ANXIETY AND WORRY

February 14 Ash Wednesday

Philippians 4: 6-7 6Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand--Finding Hope

When I read this scripture, the words that come to mind are hope, peace and trust. I think of the people I know that experience and live with anxiety and fear of the unknown every day. I believe they have to battle these obstacles moment by moment. Who more would benefit from reading these two Bible verses than those who need help to allay their fears and seek hope and peace? We learn that Jesus is there for us, all we have to do is be open and ask him for his help. In James 4:27 he says, "You have not because you ask not." Remember to present your requests to God. You will then find the peace that passes all understanding. I know these words are difficult to comprehend but try to read them over and over again as this may lead you onto the path of greater wholeness in your healing journey.

One goal of Stephen Ministers is to use tools we learned in class to help people find their path to greater wholeness in time of spiritual distress. We believe that with the Holy spirit working through us we can share faith and spirituality with our Care Receiver to help them bear whatever obstacles they may face. We can use the study of the Holy Scriptures as a tool to help Care Receivers discover their needs, as sometimes it takes discussion to find the true meaning of the Bible.

Not only do I think of the words hope and peace, I also hear an old song in my head from my choir days called, "On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand." The words go like this, "My Hope is Built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness; I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus' name. On Christ the Solid Rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand." There are several more stanzas that are just as rich to sing or read for you to relish in God's word.

Prayer: My prayer comes from Jeremiah 29:11. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you, and not to harm you, plans to give hope and a future." I hear you ask for us to trust you since hope and peace requires trusting in you. Amen

by Darcia Jones, Stephen Minister*

February 15

Psalm 27:1 The Lord is my light and my salvation, so why should I be afraid? The Lord protects me from danger, so why should I tremble?

This psalm means a lot to me because of two dangerous situations I have faced. The first occurred on a safari in South Africa. Our truck was headed back to camp in the early evening when we startled a group of elephants. They began chasing the truck, bellowing and coming closer. Our guide had told us earlier that an elephant could turn over the truck like a loaf of bread. While others in the truck were becoming hysterical, I began to pray and eventually the elephants turned away.

The second situation occurred this past summer in the North Carolina mountains. As I was taking my early morning walk, I encountered a Mama bear and her two cubs. As you probably know, there's nothing more dangerous than a mother bear protecting her cubs. As she came closer, I stood very still and began to pray. She eventually turned away to join the cubs who climbed a tree. I'll admit I was scared, but I also had a sense of calm, having trust that my prayer would be answered. So, in a dangerous situation, don't forget to pray!

Prayer: Dear Lord, we thank you for your protection in every situation and know that you are looking out for us. All we have to do is ask for your help. Amen

by Claire Francis, Stephen Minister*

February 16

Matthew 26:38-39 Jesus threw himself upon the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want'.

“We know that the son of God has refashioned our human nature. He wanted us to consider Him as no different from ourselves, so he worked. He was hungry and thirsty, and He slept. Without protest He endured His passion, He submitted to death and revealed His resurrection. In all these ways, He offered His own manhood, as the first fruits of our race to keep us from losing heart when suffering comes our way. To make us look forward to receiving the same reward as He did, since we know that we possess the same humanity.” Saint Hippolytus

Prayer: During this Lenten season help us to take time to see the redemption in the ordinary events of our daily life. As we spend time in prayer and meditation, let us ask God to give us a new perspective to turn challenges into a deeper awareness of His promise of new life. In doing so, we can experience the resurrection as God intended. Amen

By Mary Groves, FPC Club 3:30 Director
and Favorite Retreat Leader for the Stephen Ministry

Reprinted from the 2000 FPC Lenten Devotional Book: “Our Journey With Christ”

February 17

Joshua 1:5-9 No one will be able to stand their ground against you as long as you live. For I will be with you as I was with Moses. I will not fail you or abandon you. Be strong and courageous, for you will lead my people to possess all the land I swore to give to their ancestors. Be strong and very courageous. Obey all the laws Moses gave you. Do not turn away from them and you will be successful in everything you do. Study the book of the law continually. Meditate on it day and night so you may be sure to obey all that is written in it. Only then will you succeed. I command you – be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

This must have been a scary time for Joshua – to take over leadership from the master of leaders, Moses. Not only that, he is expected to lead these stiff-necked people into a strange land which they do not possess! But Joshua was a man of great faith who trusted God implicitly when God said, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged for I will be with you wherever you go.” Joshua’s faith is demonstrated later in chapter 25 when he says, “But as for me and my family, we will serve the Lord.”

During the 2000 census of Cobb County, I signed up to be a follow-up worker for citizens who had not responded to the census form that was mailed out. I was assigned to an area in South Cobb which is known to be a fairly high crime area. With some trepidation, I went up to the door of a rather run-down apartment complex and rang the bell. While I waited for someone to answer, I noticed the Bible verse from Joshua glued to the door. I then breathed a sigh of relief, realizing that God was with me all along and I had nothing to fear.

Prayer: Dear God, Please give us the faith and courage of Joshua when we take on new responsibilities or are in scary situations. Let us know that you are with us all the way and will protect us from harm. We just need to ask. Amen.

by Claire Francis, Stephen Minister*

Reprinted from the 2014 Devotional Book, Bear One Another's Burdens.

February 18 First Sunday of Lent

1 Peter 5:7 Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.

For some reason, doctors seem to preface bad news with the phrase, “It’s probably nothing, but we need to check just to be sure.” Of course, it was something, and one wonders how deeply the doctor believed in his “probably nothing” diagnosis.

I went home and said to my wife, “It’s probably nothing, but he set up a test for Tuesday.” Of course, it was something, and my wife knew it in the pit of her stomach.

On Tuesday the technician said, “It’s probably nothing, but the doctors like to make sure.” Of course, it was something, and I’m sure the technician knew the doctors would not waste a tech’s time to “just check.”

I stopped off at the grocery store on the way home just after I finally found out it really was something and bought some bananas. The cashier handed me my change: a quarter, two pennies, and a nickel. Funny how I remember that. On the way to the car, I looked at the quarter and to my surprise saw it was not a quarter, but a rather crude silver coin with the impression of a flying angel stamped upon it. I suddenly felt the presence of an angel and the assurance of God; not assured that I would survive, but assured the He was present.

I did survive, and I carry that coin as a reminder that we do have angels and a heavenly Father caring for us.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us in our daily lives to remember that you truly do care for us. Amen.

by Bennett Frye, Stephen Minister

Reprinted from the 2014 Devotional Book, Bear One Another’s Burdens.

February 19

Philippians 4:19 And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.

The Philippian church had sacrificially given to Paul's ministry and, in his letter to them, he assured them that his God would supply their needs. While I'm not sure whether Paul was talking about spiritual needs or physical needs, we are told over and over in scripture that God will supply all of our necessities and more.

We are all familiar with Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus says not to worry about what to eat or what to drink or what to wear, but to seek His Kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be given to us. We should spend more time building a relationship with Jesus than we do in worrying about the material wants and needs of the earthly life.

And what of our spiritual needs? They are far greater and just as accessible. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you (James 4:8). He longs for a close relationship with us and is always there when the pressures and worries of life are heavy. We are promised the Holy Spirit to guide, comfort, and convict us. He cleanses us, fills us, empowers us. Through the Holy Spirit we are able to live a life of joy and contentment, no matter what our circumstances.

by Katharine Wesselink, Stephen Minister

Reprinted from the 2014 Devotional Book, Bear One Another's Burdens.

February 20

DO NOT WORRY

Matthew 6:25-33 25 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life[a]? 28 “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. 29 Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31 So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Anxiety and worry. Who among us has experienced this? Probably most of us at one time or another. In these verses of Matthew, Jesus teaches us that worry is unproductive. He implores us to not worry about tomorrow but to live in the present moment and only focus on what we have to do today.

The current books, lectures, podcasts and videos tout the phrase, “Be mindful – live in the moment.” It kind of comes across as a new concept. But guess what? Jesus was teaching this idea almost two thousand years ago. Attend to his words:

25 Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

26 Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

The last verse in this scripture passage, Matthew 6:33, is one of the most popular memory verses about the promise of God to meet the needs of His children which says, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be provided unto you."

What is your go-to coping mechanism for dealing with stress and/or worry?
Sometimes we take such a hard road when anxiety and worry are present. Rumination – is this your path? Complete focus on the negative? Shallow breathing, heart racing or shut-down stance?

I remember some years ago I was in a tizzy. I felt overwhelmed and confused about the pressures of life. I told myself to sit at the dining room table and write down all the blessings in my life. My list was enormous. I felt stunned and grateful. Would you consider doing this?

Try to turn your mind and heart to God our ever-present source of comfort. Calm yourself and ask Him to lead you in the path of wisdom and peace. Remember that God is in complete control of everything. One breath at a time. Amen.

by Fran Duggan Sommerville, Stephen Minister*



*Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.
Galatians 6:2*

Stephen Ministers provide confidential one-to-one care to people going through a crisis or a difficult time. They meet with that person on an ongoing basis, offering distinctively Christian care and support.

WEEK 2: SOURCES OF OUR STRENGTH

February 21

Isaiah 26:3-4 3You [God] will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you. 4Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD, the LORD himself, is the Rock eternal.

Here are just two verses from the sixty-six chapters of the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Isaiah came at a critical time at the life of the Jewish people. His time covered a period of loss—loss of the peoples' confidence in the institutions that had been taken for granted; loss of their independence as they were surrounded by powerful and ferocious neighbors; and finally, loss of their very national existence as the cream of their society were taken away from their homeland to be deposited in an alien far-away land.

Isaiah, in his words to Israelites recorded in this book, sounded a call of warning to them, as many a prophet had done, accusing them of being the cause of their own troubles, for they had turned away from their God under the attraction of other religions that offered them more fertile land, more fertile lifestyles. They had also turned away from their God's service, as the rich took advantage of the poor and the downtrodden.

And yet, here we find a word of peace. Here we find a glimpse of righteousness.

We are now in the season we call Lent. As we all know, Lent precedes Easter. Consider Jesus, the Messiah. Isaiah, at various places in his text, pointed to the coming of such a one and described the nature of that one, even to include a graphic allusion to the future Messiah's death on the cross. During Lent, we look ahead to Jesus' suffering and death. We also, like the people of Isaiah's time, are given the opportunity to examine our own culpability in the deterioration of life as we view our troubled world, trouble as viewed in its totality that reaches its essence in the death of Jesus.

And yet Isaiah offers us—God offers us—peace. Despite the confusion, the disappointment, the sadness, the evil we see around us; despite our own contribution to all of this, God promises us peace. I invite you to trust in the Lord this day, throughout Lent, and forever, for our risen Lord is your rock.
Peace!

By Rev. Pem Cooley, retired Presbyterian Minister

February 22

Philippians 4:8-9 Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. 9 Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

We know we are not supposed to worry. God instructs us to “not be anxious about anything,” but we do it anyway. We worry about family, friends, children, finances, co-workers, health conditions, clothing, food, and how others see us. The list is endless. In our lives today, it seems as if everything we encounter in society, in relationships, and in daily happenings, is a potential breeding ground for worry. It is so easy to ponder the negative, and we sometimes do.

Can we think of a time when worrying actually benefited anyone or the situations? The results can be subtle, coming and going, or they can become intense, paralyzing us emotionally or physically, and can be transferred to others just by speaking out worry. I was visiting with a neighbor of mine and she was expressing great anxiety for her daughter. All of her decisions and discussions concerning her daughter were ruled by the “what ifs” and the potential for something going wrong. I found myself becoming anxious while listening and was worried that what I could offer may not help.

For all of us who find our minds and bodies captive to this worry, there is great hope in God’s word. We know the familiar passage that instructs us on what not to do (Phil 4:6). It seems simple, easy to share and say, but it may not always be felt or well-received. But if we go just a little further, God reveals to us what we can do to overcome that worry. *Whatever is true, whatever, is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable...think about such things.* It may take some time to turn around the easiness with which we worry, but little by little, adding these thoughts will brighten our minds, soften our lips, and heal our ills, adding peace and joy at times we may need it most.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we thank you that your word is filled with all the instruction and promise of peace in our lives. Guard our hearts and minds to ponder the good and not the negative. Amen.

by Melissa Ricketts, Stephen Minister

Reprinted from the 2014 Devotional Book, Bear One Another’s Burdens.

February 23

John 16:33 I have said these things to you, that in my heart you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.

As Stephen Ministers, we are blessed to serve God and provide care to those in our congregation and neighborhood who need to be comforted. Usually this is through a one-to-one ministry in which we meet with our care receiver to listen, support, and pray.

We have also found other ways in which Stephen Ministry can serve our congregation and community. In the past, we have supported the Career Transition Ministries that worked with those in transition in their careers during a severe economic downturn. While the Career Transition Ministries assisted with the nuts and bolts of finding jobs, Stephen Ministers were there to help with many of the other challenges of unemployment: fear, depression, worry, guilt, and hopelessness. Stephen Ministers attended each meeting to offer confidential care and encouragement.

In addition, Stephen Ministers provided support for our congregation during the pandemic by calling those who were alone and perhaps feeling unsupported, to offer conversation and encouragement. We have also led Grief Support groups, a “Surviving the Holidays” workshop, and we help host “The Longest Night” service each December. We make sure there is a Stephen Minister available each Sunday morning for anyone in need of immediate conversation.

While we weren’t promised that we wouldn’t have difficulties in our lifetimes, we have been promised that in Jesus Christ, we can find peace. Stephen Ministers can help those in the midst of tribulations remember that the Christ who overcame the world still offers us that peace.

Kitty Kendrick, Stephen Minister*

February 24

Psalm 29:11 The Lord gives strength to his people; The Lord blesses his people with peace.

This scripture touches my heart and soul because it shows how God gives us strength and peace when we need it. The time that I needed peace the most was when my sister was in the last two weeks of her life. Renee had fought ovarian cancer for five years and she was only 53 years old.

After years of praying for Renee, I then began asking God to give me strength and peace as I dealt with waiting to get a call that Renee had passed away. I knew that God had given me strength many times during Renee's fight. This was especially true during a visit with my parents when I received a call and had to tell my parents that after a year Renee's cancer was back.

What a gift to receive strength as we deal with the ups and downs of life. The Lord then blesses us with peace because that is what our soul needs most when we are dealing with major issues. The peace that I received helped me to stand up at my sister's memorial and speak on behalf of the family. As I shared with family and friends, the peace of God was with me.

May this scripture remind all of us that God blesses us every day with strength and peace.

Prayer: Dear God, I come to you today knowing that I need strength to deal with issues in my life. You bless my life with peace when I need it the most. Thank you, God, for the peace that passes understanding. Amen

by Denise Lobidinski, Stephen Minister

Reprinted from the 2014 Devotional Book, Bear One Another's Burdens.

February 25 Second Sunday of Lent

Isaiah 40: 28-31 28Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.29 He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.30 Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;31 but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Many years ago, while vacationing in Bar Harbor, Maine, my best friend and I decided to splurge and take a glider ride at sunset over Frenchman's Bay. It was worth every penny! The view was beyond spectacular. I called it a visual trifecta—breathtakingly beautiful sunset, mountains, and the ocean.

One of the parts of the glider ride which I had not anticipated was the quiet. When the tow plane that had pulled us skyward was released, it was eerily silent. I was reminded of these verses, "They will soar on wings like eagles..." I haven't had many "soaring" experiences in my life. Most of the time I more closely identified with the final two lines—"they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint." But truth be told, when "I run" I often grow weary, bone tired weary. So, during those times I may slow down to a walk.

As the prophet reminds us, it is the Lord, the everlasting God, who doesn't get tired or grow weary! Not us. Our strength is renewed when we trust in the Lord and not in ourselves. Through our daily routines when we tire from simply walking, He will give us the strength to keep moving. When the pace of our lives is such that we feel we are on the treadmill at a full sprint, He will renew our stamina to continue. And if we are so blessed to soar in this life, we know that, too, is a pure gift from above.

By Rev. Denise Beltzner, former FPC pastor and Stephen Leader

Reprinted from the 2014 Devotional Book, Bear One Another's Burdens.

February 26

Psalm 46:10 "He says, be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the Earth."

Do you ever feel discouraged? By the news? War, crime, politics? How about things that are more personal and closer to home? Loss? Illness? Disappointment in your career? Feeling caught by the demand of others? Financial stress? The challenges of life today seem never-ending.

God never promised that we wouldn't have trials on this earth. What He did promise was that He would be with us through them all. What wonderful assurance! But.... we must quieten our hearts and minds (be still) so that we can feel His presence.

God is omniscient – He is all-knowing! He is omnipresent – He is everywhere! He is omnipotent – He is all-powerful! We know how the story ends – God wins! So be still and listen for God's voice.

by Kitty Kendrick, Stephen Minister*

February 27

Ephesians 6:20 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty Power.

All that we have comes from God. All of our strength comes from God. We have studied this and even shared these words with each other in times of need. Know that these are not just supportive words.

Do not stop there. Do not be afraid or daunted when contemplating the Lord's work that you have to do. You have seen God intervene and give you strength, you have felt God's power flow through you, you know He is with you and these Biblical assertions are true. These words in Ephesians are given to us as direction for our lives.

The allegory of armor which follows this passage may not resonate with us so much today as it did when this was written. We don't use armor and don't know many that do. But the Bible is telling us to consciously prepare for the work which seems to scare us. We are called to accept the journey which is given to us even when we cannot see how it will end. We are called to use the Lord as our strength, to allow Him to sustain us and to keep us grounded in His plan. We are told to act as if we are directly working for His plan. This is because we are.

Let the process be to prepare as fully as possible and then give our best. From there, allow God to use us and our efforts as He sees fit.

Even in our weakness we are to trust in the Lord for the strength that we need to act. We are to fearlessly call on His strength in all things, on all occasions, and in all manner of our actions. We are to prepare for our challenges, both large and small, by confidently calling on His strength. We are to know that His strength will see us through, that by staying faithful to Him we will stand firm against anything the world sends against us.

Prayer: Dear Lord, let me daily understand how to confidently use Your strength for Your will. Let me not be sidetracked from Your path with my daily responsibilities or my self-driven needs. Let me always be mindful that all of my strength comes from You and not from me. And let me remain faithful so that I may stand firm in the end. Amen.

By Hal McClain, Stephen Minister

Reprinted from the 2014 Devotional Book, Bear One Another's Burdens.

WEEK 3: DON'T GIVE UP

February 28

Deuteronomy 31:6 Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you.

For as long as I can remember, I have loved to sing. The most positive memories of my childhood revolve around music. When I was in Elementary School, I was chosen many times to sing solos in various school programs. I remember my teachers telling me not to be afraid of singing on the Auditorium stage in front of all those students and teachers (“them”). They would always tell me not to look at any one person. They would say, “Sing to the big clock in the back of the auditorium.” And, “Don’t be afraid of ‘them’.”

It has taken me many years to realize and accept that focusing on God rather than focusing on what people (“they”) may, or may not think about me is the key to overcoming my fears. This is not only true for my singing, but for anything I endeavor to do. I continue daily to re-teach myself that God is that “Clock.” “Focus on Him and be Strong and of Good Courage.”

Prayer: Dearest God, please help me focus on you and not fear or be afraid when facing the daily challenging aspects of my life. Please give me strength and courage as I continue to contend with “them.” Amen

by Amy Sherwood, Stephen Minister*

February 29

Hebrews 13:5b "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

The theme of this devotion is "...don't give up!" Of course, that begs the question, what are we trying to do, and why? The author of Hebrews is likely quoting Joshua 1:5 - and if you read the first chapter of Joshua, you can see that God is giving Joshua a "pep" talk, getting Joshua ready for the daunting task of taking the place of Moses. Can you imagine filling those shoes? Joshua surely grew up with the stories about Moses - he grew up in the palace of Pharaoh, killed an Egyptian and went into exile in the wilderness for about 40 years, and then when he was an old man of about eighty years, God called him to go toe-to-toe with Pharaoh, then the mightiest man on earth, to convince him to let the Israelites go. Ok, that may be easy for Joshua - after all, he was a mighty warrior and was groomed for the job, and faithfully served with Moses for many years before being called as leader of the entire nation. What about the readers of Hebrews? What about us?

Back to, for what are we to persevere, and why? We know that we are redeemed by God's Grace, and God has redeemed us not because of anything we have done to impress Him (quite the opposite!), but because it pleases Him to redeem us. But what about the Grace God shows during the rest of our lives? He doesn't save us and immediately call us home, or certainly not in most cases. We are called to be Holy because God is Holy. This lifelong process of sanctification is not something that comes naturally, but by surrendering to God's will, and by God's Grace, God gives us the "goods" to become sanctified.

What can get in our way? If you've lived life on this earth for more than a few years, I don't have to tell you what makes us struggle. But go back to Hebrews chapter 13, verse 5 and read what the author is talking about - love of money! Does that sound familiar? It should. Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 6:10 that the love of money is the root of all evil. Paul goes on to say "...through this craving some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs." Is this hyperbole? Can't we love God and money too? Not according to Jesus, who told us in Matthew 6:24 that you can't serve God and money. Ok, maybe we have our answer. We love that which we serve. When we worry about the "Almighty Dollar" and start to serve it, we risk crossing over to loving money and abandoning God.

by Jim Ray, Stephen Minister

March 1

Matthew 18:21 21 Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" 22 "No, not seven times," Jesus replied, "but seventy times seven!"

Forgiveness, particularly forgiving seventy times seven, seems out of step with our modern world, where civility, let alone forgiveness, doesn't come easy. How can Christians practice forgiveness in an unforgiving world?

An example of forgiveness in our modern world is found in the Nickel Mines schoolhouse killing in 2006. The world was stunned not only by the tragic shooting of ten Amish girls, but by the response of the Amish community. As one of the fathers who lost a daughter said, "Our forgiveness was not in our words, it was in what we did." These Amish citizens attended the funeral of the man who had brutally attacked their children, took food and flowers to his widow and children, and shared the funds raised for the victims' families with the killer's family. When asked how they could show such forgiveness so soon after this tragedy, the Amish responded that this is what we are instructed to do in the Lord's Prayer. In their view, if we balk at forgiveness, we may jeopardize our own salvation.

When we experience an injustice, it's easy to allow rage, resentment, and revenge to fill our hearts. Forgiveness is hard work. It was not easy for the Amish, as one father admitted when he said he had to get up and forgive all over again each day.

Forgiveness is part of their faith, as it is for all Christians. May God give us the grace to offer forgiveness when we are wronged, quickly and without reservation, and the strength we need to follow his commandment, so that we can be an example of God's word in action.

by Marilyn Barton, Stephen Minister*

March 2

Proverbs 3:5-6 Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek His will in all you do and He will direct your paths.

When we bought our cabin in North Carolina, the previous owner had tacked this verse on the bulletin board in the kitchen, where it still remains. It serves as a daily reminder that we can't solve all the world's problems. We need to trust in God to be the problem solver and follow His guidance.

The New Living Translation of the Bible says it very well. "When we have an important decision to make, we sometimes feel that we can't trust anyone – not even God. But God knows what's best for us. He's a better judge of what we need than we are! We must trust Him completely in every choice we make. We should not omit careful thinking or belittle our God-given ability to reason, but we should not trust our own ideas to the exclusion of all others. We must not be wise in our own eyes, but be willing to listen to and be corrected by God's Word as well as by wise counselors. Bring your decisions to God in prayer, use the Bible as your guide and then follow God's leading. He will direct your paths by both guiding and protecting you."

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, Be with me today as I make every decision both large and small. Show me the way so that whichever path I choose, it will be to your honor. In your name I pray. Amen.

by Claire Francis, Stephen Minister*

March 3 Third Sunday of Lent

Philippians 4:12-13 "I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

Living in a first world country in a secure environment, I have rarely had the opportunity to feel true hunger. There are a couple of members of my family who often get "hangry". That's the situation that when you are a bit past mealtime, you may not be the most pleasant person to be around. My husband has learned that this is a grueling thing when we take road trips!

Once in my life I faced the potential of truly being hungry. Many years ago, I had just arrived in Scotland to meet my husband who would be arriving in a couple of days from a submarine patrol. He had made a reservation for me at a lovely B&B overlooking the Firth of Clyde. There were no restaurants nearby. I had no transportation. Oh, and it was Sunday afternoon. Nothing was open. I knew no one. I was beginning to be afraid as I sat alone in my room.

There was a knock at the door. Fortunately, there was a family in the B&B who had kitchen privileges. The words, "Hey, would you like something to eat?" never sounded sweeter.

My example is a stretch of truly knowing hunger. God answered my prayer through understanding strangers. Sometimes each of us is called to be the one to bear another's burden. Who needs you today?

by Lucy Cooley, Stephen Minister*

March 4

Romans 12:12 “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.”

I had major back surgery in August of 2021. Yes, it was in the middle of COVID when hospitals were on lockdown – no visitors were allowed. Even for a patient who had just had major back surgery and needed major assistance! The nurses were very short staffed, so I felt guilty anytime I had to ask for help. I asked an aide who had come to my room to take my vitals to please take me to the restroom. She replied that she couldn't because she had to get home immediately – she had just received a call that her four-year-old son had a fever of 104 degrees and she had to get home. Of course, she did! My IV had worked itself out of my hand so I didn't always get the pain medicine I needed. And of course, the IV team came to fix it when the physical therapist was there working with me so they had to come back later. My hospital bed was broken – the back wouldn't go up and down. I couldn't hold my phone, water, a fork....oh, and there was a lady on the hall who moaned all day and all night. This was definitely an experience that lived out this verse for me! Thank goodness it was short-lived – from surgery Monday morning to my release from the hospital Thursday morning.

I remember laying there, alone in body, hurting so badly that I would do everything in my power not to move. I watched the clock tick slowly. I was definitely faithful in prayer. I prayed the Lord's Prayer over and over and over again. I felt the Holy Spirit's presence helping me to be patient in affliction. I definitely wasn't joyful in my circumstances but I was joyful in hope. I had hope that the surgery had been successful. I had hope knowing that my pain was temporary. And the Holy Spirit gave me hope and peace even in these circumstances.

While my story represents a very condensed period of time of my being joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer, isn't this an example of how life is? While life is tough here on Earth sometimes, we are here only temporarily. We are confidently assured that God's promises to us will be fulfilled. Because of His promises, we can look to Him during our troubles for comfort.

by Kitty Kendrick, Stephen Minister*

March 5

2 Corinthians 12:9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

What does Paul mean in his letter to the Corinthians when he makes this statement about the sufficiency of grace and the perfection of power through weakness? What kind of weakness?

To understand the background of this statement and to explore what "weakness" means, one source I read, Baker's, Commentary on the Bible, (pp. 993-995), I rely on here for context.

Apparently, Paul is being challenged by the Corinthians who are angry, for one thing, because Paul would not accept financial support from the Corinthians when he was with them. More importantly for this discussion, they were also in doubt about his authority as an apostle. In the latter part of 2 Corinthians, Chapter 11 vs. 21-33, Paul summarizes his apostolic service and emphasizes his weaknesses and vulnerability rather than distinguishing himself by any personal strengths.

Immediately prior to our featured bible verse, Paul relates an experience he says was "fourteen years ago" (12:2). According to Baker's Commentary, this timeframe would be between Paul's first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion and before his arrival in Antioch. He states that "he knows a man in Christ" (12: 2) who had this experience, but there seems little doubt that this man is actually Paul himself.

In Paul's account of this revelation, he says that he was "caught up in the third heaven" (paradise) (12:2), but he does not know if he was "in the body or out of the body." (12:2) He heard "inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell." (12:4). Paul says that he could boast about this fantastic experience because it would be the truth, but he refuses because he does not want anyone to think more of him than what they know of him through his everyday life. (12:6).

And then, Paul speaks to the point of our featured scripture lesson. Paul says: "to keep me from becoming conceited . . ., there was given me a thorn in my flesh." (12:7). We do not know what this "thorn" is specifically, but it must have been a grave affliction, for Paul pleaded with the Lord three times to "take it away from me." (12:8). In refusing to take the affliction away, the Lord said: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Paul now describes why, because of his experience and this statement, he will boast in his weaknesses, in hardships, insults and persecution. (12:10). Paul then responds to the Lord's pronouncement and says: "For when I am weak, then I am strong." (12:10) Paul took up the Lord's challenge and accepted the sufficiency of God's grace and the perfection of God's power through his weaknesses.

This is, of course, a challenge to us. What are our "thorns"? How can we use our human weaknesses to show God's divine power? What better season than the Lenten season to consider and act on this challenge. Let our response also be: For when I am weak, then I am strong."

by Carol Callaway, Stephen Minister

Reprinted from the 2014 Devotional Book, Bear One Another's Burdens.



Love one another as I have loved you... in John 15:12, Jesus says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

Loving and caring for one another is not just the pastor's job— it's something Jesus calls us all to do! Stephen Ministry is a ministry in which people with special gifts for caring put those gifts to use in an organized way, bring Jesus' love and care to those who need it most.

WEEK 4: GOD IS OUR REFUGE

March 6

Ephesians 3:12-19 “And may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.”

When our daughter was a little girl, we always looked forward to when we read books before bedtime. One of her favorite books was “The Runaway Bunny”. In this story a particularly mischievous bunny is always getting into trouble and running away from his mother. No matter where the bunny would go, his mother would always find him. He could run – but he could not hide from her. I think our daughter realized even as a child that this story was a parable about God’s love.

As human parents we know that in our imperfect way we love our children and that we will seek them out in whatever circumstances they encounter. We love them and want to protect them, even when they are grown. The wonderful news is that God is the perfect parent! No matter how hard we try to run away from him – he is there. His love totally surrounds us. He is there especially when we may doubt it the most. We may not fully understand God’s love, but like his grace – it is amazing.

by Lucy Cooley, Stephen Minister*

March 7

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Wisdom evolves through our experiences of suffering. It is born out of our own suffering as well as in the understanding of the suffering of others. It has also been said that “adversity builds character by teaching us empathy and compassion.”

Because as humans, we are flawed, we tend to be discouraged when experiencing disappointments. We often do not see these adversities as opportunities to grow in character. Even though these disappointments and setbacks can manifest themselves in physical or emotional decline, we need to focus on the power that God has to renew us every day.

I have experienced the physical and emotional impact that aging has had on me. When I have a setback, I struggle with shifting my focus toward God and serving others, but once I do, I am uplifted by the peace and calmness that only believing in Him can give. I feel validated and valued, more confident and comfortable being me.

In fixing our eyes more on God, instead of the challenges we face daily on Earth, we free ourselves to follow His will by loving and serving others. Our focus then shifts from what we can see, which is temporary. We can then focus by faith, on the unseen, which is eternal.

Prayer: Dear God, please give me the strength and the faith to focus on You and the unseen rather than my own problems. Please give me the clarity and inner peace to see You, and serve you more. AMEN

by Amy Sherwood, Stephen Minister*

March 8

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 “Rejoice always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

Really?? We’re supposed to rejoice always? Pray continually? AND give thanks in ALL circumstances? What about when my brother was diagnosed with a terminal disease? What about when we suddenly lost our child? Even then? Always?

Yes, even then. These are God’s instructions for us. Paul, the writer of these verses, wrote them from a Roman prison. He wasn’t happy to be there – but he did feel joyful and thankful even in his current circumstances because of his faith in his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

So, what does “Rejoice always” really mean? It requires us to depend on our faith. There simply is no other way. But it is possible to rejoice always as we rely on our own faith. God has promised us that in ALL things He works for the good of those who love him. When we think outside of “the box” (outside our current circumstances) and remember all of God’s promises to us, rejoicing is effortless!

And “pray continually?” Prayer is a discussion with God, a talk. He doesn’t care where you are when you talk with Him. It can be in the car, at your desk, anywhere. There’s no right or wrong way to pray. God just wants to have a relationship with you. Talk with Him constantly and ask Him to help you whatever your circumstances.

“Giving thanks in all circumstances”, especially difficult ones, requires us to again draw on our faith in Jesus Christ. This Lenten season, remember He has promised us eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. It is exactly this promise that enables us to give thanks in ALL circumstances.

by Kitty Kendrick, Stephen Minister*

March 9

Psalm 37: 23-24 – 23 The LORD makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; 24 though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand.

This passage assures us of two important things:

- A person's life journey is established by God. He is intimately involved in guiding and directing us where to go. We follow where he leads us. When we align ourselves with God's will, it brings joy to Him. This is why it's important to live within His principles, following in His path, and seek His guidance in all aspects of our lives.
- Even when we stumble along that path, God stays steadfast beside us and provides protection, love, and strength. He is committed to staying beside us in difficult times, no matter what the cause.

And so, our lives are not left to chance or fate, but are guided by a loving God who will uphold us even when we face obstacles and setbacks. We are encouraged to trust in God's guidance and commit our ways to Him, seeking his wisdom in all of our decisions. At the same time, God invites us to find comfort and strength in His presence. We are not alone in our life journeys; we have a loving faithful God who walks hand-in-hand with us. We can rely on His strength as we walk through life.

by Carla Frost, Stephen Minister*

March 10 Fourth Sunday of Lent

Romans 15:13 NRSV May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

You should not be surprised if this verse sounds familiar. These words are of part Pastor Joe's benediction. They wash over me, covering me with a sense of peace and preparing me for the week ahead. My prayer is that I don't forget them before I walk out of the front door!

Let's think about this for right now. We're over halfway through Lent. How are things going? Are we keeping our promises to give up chocolate, or to bring items for the Food Pantry, or to be kind to strangers? Are we bogged down in the bleakness of the season? Are we feeling that Lent is just too long.

If today is a challenging one, God offers us the opportunity to hit the reset button. Perhaps we should take a moment and replace worry with hope. Sometimes all we need is to just stop all the busyness of our day and ponder the joy and peace of believing. After all God is the God of hope.

by Lucy Cooley, Stephen Minister*

March 11

Psalm 46:1-5 God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, Even though the earth be removed, And though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though its waters roar and be troubled, Though the mountains shake with its swelling. Selah There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God, The holy place of the tabernacle of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved.

God made this beautiful world in which we live and rejoice. Yet each year, this world faces natural disasters that leave us sad, fearful, and confused. There are fires, floods, earthquakes, and climate disasters. We know that God has told us that we should not fear, but terrible things happen with no warning and apparently no reason. How can we still believe that “God is our refuge and our strength” in the midst of such chaos and uncertainty?

This verse reminds us we are not helpless, for God has empowered us to take action in ways that demonstrate our faith in God’s power. We can pray for the people affected, not only for their physical needs, but for their spiritual needs, and that people will turn to God for peace, strength, and grace. We can look for God in the midst of the earthquake, the storm, the fire. Often people ask "Where is God?" in a disaster, but look closer and you will see His hand at work helping, too. We can believe God’s promise that He is our refuge and strength. “Therefore, we will not fear”. He will give us peace amidst the disasters.

God made this beautiful world and he made us, and he will take care of his creations.

by Marilyn Barton, Stephen Minister*

March 12

Psalm 27:1 The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?

We all struggle with fear. Darkness brings fear. As we pray in the dark, can God hear us? We feel alone and our worries seem huge. In the morning, daylight comes and we are comforted by the light. The Lord is my light and salvation (Psalms 27:1).

We need to let go of our fear and trust and have faith in God. When I was in the hospital last July, as I was leaving the ER, I was told all the private rooms were taken and I would have a roommate. After five hours in ER, I was anxious to get to a place to sleep. That was around eleven p.m. My roommate was watching TV with loud volume, and I wasn't able to sleep well.

The next evening, she had a meltdown with hives. She was afraid about an upcoming procedure. She was screaming for relief. Eventually her meds gave her relief.

The next evening, I was being discharged. I went over to her and introduced myself and asked her if I could pray for her and she nodded yes. I held her hand and prayed. I told her if she was scared that night to pray to God over and over until she felt God's comfort.

As I was leaving, I told Kay I loved her and she told me she loved me. I am sure her darkness had lifted and God was her light that night.

by Cindy Etheridge, Stephen Minister*

Stephen Ministers are the After People.

They are there...

after the phone call you hoped you'd never get.

after the funeral, when everyone has left
and the emotions you've held at bay come crashing in on you.

after the relationship falls apart and the bottom falls out of your life

after the doctor says, "I'm sorry, but there's nothing more we can do."

after the nursing home director shakes your hand and says,
"Welcome to your new home."

after the last child honks the horn, waves, and drives away—
and the house suddenly seems empty.

after the gavel comes down, the handcuffs go on,
and your loved one is led away.

after the baby arrives,
demanding more of you than you ever dreamed possible.

after you find a pink slip with your final paycheck.

after your family and friends have heard your story one too many times,
but you still need to talk it out.

WEEK 4: TRUST GOD

March 13

Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. John 14:1 (NLT)

Our Heavenly Father knows our every need! Say that aloud right now if you have privacy. If no privacy, repeat in your mind. We know this intellectually and yet many times that concept is placed aside.

Trying to do things on our own can make for frustrating and troubling times. Right?

Totally trusting in a living God means giving up and looking up to our Lord.

Oh, the times I have weighed my heart down with controlling. It just does not work!

Recently I was struggling for about a month with a health concern that occupied my thoughts to an extreme. I just knew that I could bring the issue to a positive outcome, but alas I could not. I fretted and I did that on a daily basis.

One day as I went about my chores, I clearly felt The Lord ask..... "DO YOU TRUST ME?"

From that moment on, I had complete peace about my concern and how it would play out in the near future. It was as if lightness came over me, and I actually never worried again.

Guess what? HE knew exactly what I needed! My thoughts were flooded with mental calm.

And once again – I remember singing in my childhood Baptist church – the old hymn...

"Trust and obey for there's no other way
to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey"

To God be the glory for holding our heart in HIS hands and giving us complete peace in all circumstances.

by Fran Duggan Sommerville, Stephen Minister*

March 14

John 14:27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

What a beautiful gift! Peace—peace of mind. Peace—peace of heart.

In the world we live in, it seems that everywhere we turn, there is turmoil, strife, fear, pain suffering...and more. It weighs on us, it weighs on the people we care about, it weighs on the people we come in contact with, and it seems heaviest on the people who are in the midst of the latest news story. If we stop to consider “how awful” things are, we can easily become terribly discouraged.

Do we have a choice? We do. We can accept Christ’s gift to us. We can accept Peace in our heart and in our mind. And—we can share it with the people we come in contact with—whether we know them or not.

What a wonderful challenge! To accept Peace in our heart—and to share it with others. Please join me today in accepting it into your heart—and in sharing your Peace with someone else—today, tomorrow, every day.

by Terry Barton, Stephen Minister

Reprinted from the 2014 Devotional Book, Bear One Another’s Burdens.

March 15

Psalms 37:5 Commit your way to the LORD; Trust in Him and He will act.

A cold Tuesday morning in January was the first day of a journey through an unexpected health situation that would render me almost completely reliant on the support and care of friends, family, and doctors. I confess that this was not an easy awakening to the concept of asking for and receiving care that I could not give myself. I experienced times of great pain, moments when I felt embarrassed, when the medications altered my personality, and I struggled with the loss of independence. It was difficult for me to look beyond the hardship and recognize that this was a time when God was working His mercies of healing and teaching, and He desired so much for me to be in a relationship with Him.

I was grateful for the time to reflect on only Him, searching my own self for how I could accept and be thankful for this particular journey. I began to renew disciplines of being obedient in prayer and opening my heart to be fully His. Through faith, love, support, and encouragement by those God placed around me, a calm, joy-filled peace surrounded me and I felt His presence become a source of strength and healing.

It can be an easier path to focus on the physical and tangible—a weight so much heavier that we can bear—but there is hope and truth in the awakening, and in the recommitting of ourselves to God, that He will act in the perfect way, delivering, healing, restoration, and guidance, always through love.

Prayer: Creator God, I lift my heart to you with thanksgiving for guiding our hearts and minds to you. May we rededicate our lives to you in absolute trust that you will always act to do your will for us and in our lives. Amen.

By Melissa Ricketts, Stephen Minister

Reprinted from the 2014 Devotional Book, Bear One Another's Burdens.

March 16

Matthew 11: 28-30 28 Come to me and I will give you rest—all of you who work so hard beneath a heavy yoke. 28,30 Wear my yoke---for it fits perfectly—and let me teach you; for I am gentle and humble, and you shall find rest for your souls; for I will lighten your burdens.

Sometimes it is hard to decipher scripture. I find it a challenge, or it just won't make sense to me. Bible Studies can help us to learn the meaning of scripture as the discussion with others helps to clarify meaning and how it applies to daily life. This scripture implies that Jesus put His own yoke on us, like a humble farmer would put one on his livestock. This actually means giving Jesus control and letting Him direct our lives. "The work won't be difficult," He says, "just learn from Me."

Why is this so difficult for us? What are the challenges? I found a scripture that helps explain this in John 16:1-28. Challenges to following Jesus include the challenge of Opposition (from people and circumstances), the challenge of Commitment (taking up the cross), the challenge of The Temporal (episodes of suffering), and the challenge of Growth (being stretched). Maybe we are proud, and we want what we want, and nothing will stop us. Developing trust in the unknown is not always easy either but seems to be a factor here also.

Nobody wants to be preached to or pressured. Jesus never forced anyone to follow Him. Keep it simple. It seemed so simple when Jesus journeyed to find His disciples. The disciples learned of Jesus and simply followed Him. Trust in Jesus and He will lighten your burdens.

*Dear Jesus,
Give me a humble heart. Help me find rest for my soul. Show me Your path for easing the burden placed by the yoke of man and myself. In Your Name I pray.
Amen*

by Darcia Jones, Stephen Minister*

March 17 Fifth Sunday of Lent

Isaiah 41:10 (English Standard Version)

10 Fear not, for I am with you;

be not dismayed, for I am your God;

I will strengthen you, I will help you,

I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

For I, the Lord your God,

hold your right hand;

it is I who say to you, “Fear not,

I am the one who helps you.”

Watching my children, and my grandchildren, I’m often reminded of how like a parent-child relationship is the one we have with God. Like a child crying to a parent, we say, “I’m afraid,” and He tells us “Fear not, for I am with you.” He reaches out like a loving parent to lift us up and hold us close.

But if you know children, you know that the very time a child needs us most may be the time she refuses any help. “Carry me!” “Pick me up!” and “Do it for me!” is followed by “I can walk by myself!” “Don’t pick me up!” and “I can do it!” Her struggles make her cry with weariness and rage, yet she won’t let us help her.

God must sometimes feel that we cry out for His help, and then refuse it. We ask for peace, but won’t take it. We turn our troubles over to Him, then take them right back. We cry inconsolably, yet we won’t acknowledge God’s power to help us. When we are too proud or independent or stubborn to accept that we need God’s help, He has promised to help us, to strengthen us, and to hold our hand. When we look back at a trying time, we often realize God was carrying us, even when we didn’t even know it, just as He promised.

by Marilyn Barton, Stephen Minister*

March 18

Psalms 68:19 Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior. Who daily bears our burdens.

Fear. There are so many levels of fear. Small fears: it might rain on a picnic day. Larger fears: the pet cat has been caught by a coyote. Then there are the BIG fears, life and death fears: soldiers-overwhelmed-by-the-enemy type of fear; a-mother-caring-for-a-desperately-sick-child type of fear; a patient-fighting-cancer type of fear.

All are legitimate fears, but each with a different severity, from a mild concern to a soul-searing panic. So which ones do we bring to God? Surely, we need God's hand while we wrestle with the cancer brewing deep within, but does God bother with the fear of a ruined picnic? Regardless of how big or how small a fear, should we ask for God's intervention, or at least His peace?

Much like an earthly father, our Father in Heaven wants to share in our lives, our desires and our fears, large and small. Perhaps, like an earthly father, God smiles when He hears of our petty concern, gives us the equivalent of a pat on the head and says, "Don't worry, even if it does rain, you'll have fun. I'll be with you."

When the panic of cancer strikes to the very core of one's being, God takes His child in His arms, holds tight, and whispers, "Don't worry, no matter the outcome, I am here. Fear not for I will be with you to the end of the age."

Fears—large and small—our Father shoulders them all.

By Bennett Fry, Stephen Minister

Reprinted from the 2014 Devotional Book, Bear One Another's Burdens.

March 19

Joshua 1:9 Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

“I will be with you wherever you go.” Those words were particularly comforting to me several years ago when one of my daughters was in Colombia, South America as a part of a Presbyterian Peace Fellowship team. I was at home, fearfully praying (oxymoron!) for her safety. She had emailed one Sunday that the team would leave the relatively safe city and go into the countryside on Tuesday if their leaders felt it was safe enough after the murder of some Christian peacemakers in the area.

On Tuesday morning, as I was praying, I was led to the first chapter of Joshua, where he was about to enter the promised land. The Israelites would encounter enemies but would be victorious in conquering the land God had promised to them. God told them in Joshua 1:9 “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified or discouraged for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” He had promised to never leave or forsake them.

I found great comfort in those words and was able to relax and trust God to take care of my child. After returning home safely she told me that as a part of her training she had written a letter to her family in case she did not return home. And she later reported that as they walked along a country road, they saw guerillas with machine guns behind the trees. During what could have been a dangerous mission for her, God’s hand was on my child. God not only protected my child, He protected her mother’s heart.

by Katharine Wesselink, Stephen Minister

Reprinted from the 2014 Devotional Book, Bear One Another’s Burdens.

WEEK 6: BEARING ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS

March 20

Isaiah 43:2 "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; The flames will not set you ablaze."

The next verse of this text begins "For I am the Lord, your God" and as in verse 2 "I will be with you." What a comfort to know when we are faced with life's difficult challenges that God is always there. After forty years of marriage, the unexpected death of my husband was devastating. Even though six years have passed, there are few days when memories do not come flooding back. During those moments when I know God is with me, it causes me to stop and remember how blessed I was to have love in my life.

How do we deal with grief? The love of a mourner needs a place to go. With each new day, we are given the opportunity to share and pass on that love. It is very difficult at first, for some it takes a long time, but with God's help it gets easier. Take time to make someone smile. Hug those who are hurting. Contact old friends, or make new ones. Share your faith with others. Volunteer.

Here at FPC I took part in a Grief Share support group. I have also joined the Stephen Ministry: a special group of volunteers who are trained, able, and willing to do Christian caregiving in our community. Our church also celebrates a "Longest Night" service for those who find the holidays difficult. Grief is love that can take us to places unimaginable. At times I still have tears in my eyes, a lump in my throat, and an ache in my heart, but if you share the love you carry, it will eventually bring new joy and meaning to your life. To quote a mourner's kaddish (a Jewish epitaph written by Merrit Malloy), "Love doesn't die, people do. So, when all that's left of me is love, give me away."

by Cris Heagy, Stephen Minister*

March 21

Galatians 6:2 Carry each other's burdens and, in this way, you will fulfill the laws of Christ.

DEVOTION: HOW CAN I BEAR THIS ANY LONGER?

As I prepared for my Devotion and Prayer for the Stephen Minister 30-year Anniversary Devotional Booklet, I didn't know exactly what I was going to write. I woke up the next day with a phrase that stuck in my head. It went like this, "How Can I Bear This Any Longer?" I have heard this question frequently among friends, family, co-workers, and clients in my career. As a Stephen Minister I suspect I will hear this frequently from Care Receivers also. Suddenly a musical voice popped into my head from my Bible School days. The song was, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," one of my favorite songs when I was young. I looked up the words and history of this song. This song was written by a pastor named Joseph Scriven, a man who was not a stranger to tragedy. He was always ready to help those in need because of the experiences he endured. He lost two fiancées; one drowned on the night before their wedding day. When his mother fell ill, he wrote a poem for her called, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus". In it, he describes what Jesus meant to him, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear."

Because of these difficult experiences, he went on to write with conviction, "What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!" He knew that God could bring peace to troubled hearts who seek Him: "Oh! What peace we often forfeit, Oh! what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in Prayer."

As a message to SELF and to fellow Caregivers and to our Care Receivers, I would like to end this devotion saying; instead of becoming discouraged when we face trials, temptations, or trouble, remember Scriven wrote that we simply should "take it to the Lord in prayer." Even in today's world remember that Jesus is your friend. TAKE YOUR PROBLEMS TO HIM. SPEND TIME WITH HIM. HE LOVES YOU.

*Prayer: (taken from Jesus Calling by Sarah Young) We know that you are the God of all time and all that is. You ask us to seek you not only in the morning quietness but consistently throughout the day. You ask us to not let unexpected problems distract us from you. Instead, you ask that we talk to you about everything. You are our friend. You want us to not react as if we are being punished when we experience adversity. Instead of a negative response when things go wrong you would like to see us view difficulties as blessings in disguise. You ask us to make you our refuge by pouring out our hearts to you, trusting you at all times.
This is what we strive for.
Amen.*

By Darcia Jones, Stephen Minister*



Some important guidelines for this caring relationship protect both the care receiver and the Stephen Minister:

The relationship between a care receiver and a Stephen Minister is confidential.

Men are matched with men, and women with women.

Stephen Ministers can help find a referral to an appropriate mental health professional or other community resource when the care receiver's need exceed what a Stephen Minister can provide.

March 22

Matthew 25: 37-40 “...I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

Perhaps you’ve seen the chaotic television commercial with the voice-over lamenting that people don’t care and it seems they’ve just stopped trying.

When my husband David was in the final stages of a very long illness, I noticed a prayer request card in the friendship pad at church and filled it out. A few days later I got a concerned call from the pastor. The pastor told me about Stephen Ministry and asked if we were interested. My husband and I talked it over, and he decided he would like to meet a Stephen Minister. A few days later one called and asked to visit. He and my husband seemed immediately to connect, and my husband had a loyal friend.

Each week after that, the Stephen Minister called and asked if he could visit. When my husband felt well enough the Stephen Minister came. One time the pastor, the Stephen Minister, and an elder came to the house and we all had communion together.

During the Stephen Minister’s visits, I often took the dog for a walk so that they could be alone. I don’t know what they talked about; I do know that they prayed together and played checkers almost every week.

After I called the Stephen Minister to tell him my husband had died, he notified the church and the pastor called me and visited me. The Stephen Minister’s call to the church also prompted the pastor to contact my daughter and her family.

And so...next time you see the ad lamenting that people don’t care and have stopped trying, look closely at the bottom of the screen, and you may see the footnote I see there: Stephen Ministers excluded.

Prayer: Our Father, Thank you for all ministers who have heard your command to “love one another, as I have loved you.” Amen.

by Doris Faber, Stephen Minister

Reprinted from the 2014 Devotional Book, Bear One Another’s Burdens.

March 23

Psalm 55:22 (NLT) "Give your burdens to the Lord, and he will take care of you. He will not permit the godly to slip and fall."

Most of us carry burdens. Sometimes these burdens are just a nuisance – weighing us down – but we can forget them if we can just get busy with something else. Put them out of our mind. At other times our burden can be so heavy that we feel as if we cannot move. Even breathing seems to be a challenge.

Sometimes we seem to love our burdens, claiming them as part of who we are. Maybe we have a grudge against someone that we enjoy remembering, or perhaps someone has hurt us so badly that it doesn't seem fair to forgive them. After all, they should have to be responsible for their behavior, right? Maybe our burden is for another who is suffering or a decision needed to be made. The heaviest burden is often something we can do nothing about.

All of these things involve control. Who is in control – me or God? If I continue to grasp my burdens to myself, I will never be free of them. I like to have a picture in my mind when I have my devotional time. Here is what I like to think when I know I need to turn something completely over to God. I think about being in a very peaceful place, maybe by a lake. I'm holding a helium filled balloon. I let the balloon go free. I cannot get it back. If only I can let my "balloon burdens" free to float to God, he will take care of me. He will not allow me to slip and fall. BUT, I need to let go.

By Lucy Cooley, Stephen Minister*

March 24 Palm Sunday

Zechariah 9:9-10; Mark 11:1-10 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields.

He didn't look much like a king, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the animals' feeding trough. He didn't look much like a king when he was surrounded by smelly fishermen, eating with questionable people, touching lepers. And he didn't look much like a king now, riding into Jerusalem on the back of a simple young donkey. (Kings in those days rode in heavy chariots pulled by strong, beautiful horses.)

Nevertheless, the people hailed him as their true king. In his brief ministry, he had given dignity to the very young and the very old, gentleness to those who were more accustomed to abuse, and wholeness to people wracked by brokenness and pain. He brought good news of a life with God to those who thought they were forever barred from the Divine Presence because of their inability to keep hundreds of laws. He told marvelous stories about the way life with God could be, and he satisfied the deep hunger in their hearts. He was indeed their true king. So, they honored him with everything they had. They covered the road with their cloaks, so that he would not ride in a cloud of dust. They waved leafy branches as he passed by. And most of all, they shouted their praise to their king, "Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

Some would say that Jesus still doesn't look much like a king. He never had a multi-million-dollar television empire, he died an ignominious death, and his entire estate consisted of the clothes he wore on his back. But those who are called by the name of Christ know the rest of the story. We know that God's powerful love was stronger than the combined forces of sin and death, and that God raised Jesus to new life. We know that there is nothing else which can bring joy and forgiveness, wholeness and well-being to our days, except the new life that God gives us each and every day in Jesus Christ. We know that in Christ we can have peace, in this life as well as in the life to come.

Prayer: O Lord Christ, We thank You for living with us on this earth, showing us the Father's love and your tender mercy for all. We honor You for being the Lord of our lives, and the King who rules with perfect justice and love. We pray that as we journey with you this week, we may bear witness to the good news of life in Your kingdom. Amen.

by Rev. Mary Beth Lawrence, former FPC pastor, founding leader of FPC Stephen Ministry

Reprinted from the 2000 FPC Lenten Devotional Book: "Our Journey With Christ"

March 25

John 21:15-17 15 When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” 16 Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.” 17 The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.

This passage of John’s Gospel has always been sad to me. While Jesus visits with the disciples in Galilee, following his resurrection, he prepares breakfast on the shore for his disciples. Then Jesus addresses Peter with this strange series of questions. They are strange because they are the same question: Do you love me? Peter, the strong, man, was the disciple who announced first the confession that Jesus was the Christ. Peter was the default spokesman and leader of Jesus’ band of disciples; the one upon whom Jesus planned to build his church. How could the church still be built after Peter’s betrayal? Just after this conversation, Jesus ascended into heaven and left the disciples alone.

But Peter understood the conversation and the charge to feed my lambs, take care of my sheep, and feed my sheep. Peter had so bravely announced that he would die before he would desert Jesus, the Christ, the Lord. Yet in human weakness, Peter betrayed Jesus three times with denial. As one of his final lessons, Jesus taught Peter, and the other disciples, about the depth of his love and God’s love. Divine love led Jesus to forgive Peter three times. Simultaneously, Jesus was charging Peter to build the church by taking care of the disciples and by making new disciples. Jesus was challenging Peter three times, to confess his love, to accept forgiveness, and move on with the ministry of building the church. Peter was restored to the good graces of Jesus and commissioned to build the church.

We rarely take time to consider this love of Jesus. We rarely face up to our sins and ask for forgiveness. Jesus must be disappointed in us when we sin, and especially when don’t seek forgiveness. I pray for forgiveness every day. I pray for a specific sin every day. I ask that I will be a forgiver every day. I trust that Jesus who is filled with the love of God, forgives me and helps me to live a better life.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I don’t deserve your forgiveness, but I trust that you forgive me and love me. Help me live in your joy, as I seek to dwell in the love of your will. Amen.

by Rev. Dr. Paul Sherwood, Parish Associate of Congregational Care

March 26

Corinthians 1:3-4 (NIV) Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

Each time we meet for supervision as Stephen Ministers, I am struck by the uniformity of our answers to the question: What does your care receiver need from the caring relationship? Consistently, each of us will give some variation on the answer: “A safe place to talk, a listening ear, a place to share prayer.” We know that it is not our place to offer advice, suggest a solution, or even advance our opinion of their situation. We are simply called upon to be there as Christ’s presence in their life, which is really not easy at all, and is the highest calling we will ever have. Often the hardest thing we do is to sit beside a suffering care receiver and let our presence be a silent reminder that we care, and so does God. Most of us know from our own experience that when our hearts are breaking, the only thing we want is a gentle hand on ours, and a soft prayer in our ears.

Jesus said, “Where two or more are gathered in my name, there I will be also.” Just being together in His name is all He asks. We don’t have to do anything, say anything, or give anything. We don’t have to philosophize or analyze. Just be there. And together, let’s clear our minds, open our hearts, and make room for the Lord.

By Marilyn Barton, Stephen Minister*



YOU DON'T HAVE TO CARRY THE BURDEN ALONE

When you are going through a difficult time,

When you need someone to listen, care for, and encourage you,

When you need someone to pray for and with you,

A Stephen Minister can help by providing
one-to-one confidential Christian care.

TO LEARN MORE, CONTACT

Rev. Paul Sherwood 770 364-9394 paulsherwood@fpcmarietta.org
or Claire Francis 678 313-1961 francisr@bellsouth.net

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT STEPHEN MINISTRIES,
GO TO WWW.STEPHENMINISTRIES.ORG.

FINAL DAYS OF LENT: THE DARKEST DAYS COME BEFORE THE SON RISES

March 27

2 Corinthians 4:8-9 8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

There are days when my fears and anxieties take hold. It seems difficult to let go and stop attempting to control the conditions and circumstances of my life.

Life is difficult. It is not fair. On this Earth, bad things happen to good people and good things seem to happen to bad people. These are facts. I have experienced and witnessed these things throughout my life, both on a personal and global level.

Yes, we are “hard pressed on every side,” but with God we will not be crushed. Yes, the seemingly unjust situations that occur do perplex us; but, if we focus on God and doing His will for others rather than earthly injustices, we will not feel despair. We may feel persecuted at times, but with God’s help, we will not feel abandoned.

Prayer: Dear God, please help us to focus on You when we feel struck down by earthly situations, concerns and injustices. Please give us the strength to look to you. By looking through your “God lens,” give us the clarity to feel peace and to see beyond life’s injustices and disappointments. Amen

by Amy Sherwood, Stephen Minister*

March 28 Maundy Thursday

John 4:10-11 KJV 10Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His son to be the propitiation of our sins. 11Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.

At the end of our Sunday worship, Rev. Joe Evans instructs each member of his congregation to “remember who you are...But above all else, cloth yourself in Love.” Not the way we love God, but the way He loved people in Biblical times and loves us today. In St. James Episcopal Church a few doors away, at the close of worship you might hear the minister say, “May the love of God which passes all understanding be with you now and forever more.”

The example given in scripture speaks of God sending his son to atone for the sins of the whole world. God’s love for us, to which both ministers refer, truly is beyond our comprehension.

As we prepare our hearts and minds for the glory of His resurrection, we are asked to love. Not just our family, our friends, our neighbors. We are asked to love those with whom we differ, those with whom we have different political preferences, those whose belief systems are different from ours. We are called to love those who sin, those who are lost, and those most vulnerable in society. This scripture is a reminder that love is more than gift giving or acts of kindness to those individuals with whom we are already familiar; it calls us to love each other in ways that are all-encompassing and pass all understanding.

by Ceil Ramsey, Stephen Minister*

March 29 Good Friday

John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (RSV)

This is a very well-known, beautiful, and beloved verse; one that many of us learned as a child. It has been described as the summary of the Bible. It's that special; very clear, direct, and to the point. We can take it as our guidance and as we “believe in him” we are instructed to follow him and his teachings.

I'm struck by the context and reassurance that we have for this verse every day – but especially this day – the day of Jesus' Crucifixion. But it was different on that day, long ago – and probably the bleakest, darkest day of all for the followers of Christ. Christ's death wasn't what they expected and they didn't have the New Testament or even John 3:16 to guide them through this day. Their Sunday will be glorious, but they didn't know that.

We, living nearly 2000 years later, do know the whole story. Today, the darkest day, leads to the Resurrection, the most glorious day of all – Easter Sunday. Halleluiah! And, thanks be to God.

Prayer: Our Heavenly Father – we thank you for your eternal love and for giving us Jesus. We ask that you forgive us of our sins and guide and help us, as we strive to follow Jesus. Amen

by Terry Barton, former Stephen Minister

THIS DEVOTIONAL BELONGS TO:

