

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood  
First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**ASH WEDNESDAY**

**February 18, 2026**

**Day 1 – Remember You Are Dust**

*“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow, you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”* (Genesis 3:17-19)

It is Ash Wednesday, the traditional beginning of Lent in the Christian Church. Our annual observance of Ash Wednesday is somber and reflective by design as we face the truth of our mortality in the statement, *“dust you are and to dust you will return”* (Genesis 3:19). Our Ash Wednesday liturgy contains no music, only Scripture and prayer as we come before God in repentance and sorrow for our sin and the death of Christ on our behalf. We receive the cross of ash on our foreheads because ash is a biblical symbol of grief.

Why do we choose to focus on morbid things like death, grief, sorrow, and mourning on Ash Wednesday? Because of the terrible damage sin did and continues to do. In the beginning when, *“God created the heavens and the earth”* (Genesis 1:1), he *“created [humanity] in his image”* (Genesis 1:27). Then he placed the prototype man and woman in the Garden of Eden and *“blessed them”* (Genesis 1:28). It was perfect, a paradise so complete even God said it was *“very good”* (Genesis 1:31).

Even while living in paradise Adam and Eve chose sin over a perfect relationship with God and eternal life. It has been that way ever since as, *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Romans 3:23) and *“the wages of sin is death”* (Romans 6:23). In fact, in all the history of humanity, *“There is no one*

*righteous, not even one... there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away... there is no one who does good, not even one” (Romans 3:10-12).*

We mourn because we were created to live with God forever in a perfect relationship, but we forfeited all of it when we chose to sin and continue to sin. We mourn because we have to experience physical death. We mourn because Jesus had to die to secure our salvation as, “...*he took up our pain and bore our suffering... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed... and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:4-6).*

So, whether you participate in our Ash Wednesday service or not, whether you take the cross of ash or not, allow yourself to grieve and mourn as you reflect on your own mortality and the death of Christ as you repent of your sin.

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**THURSDAY**

**February 19, 2026**

**Day 2 – Returning to God**

*“Even now,” declares the LORD, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. (Joel 2:12-13)*

Everyone experiences grief and sorrow in this life, but no one likes it and we all tend to seek a way out of it as quickly as possible. This is a very human response to the negative feelings associated with grief. Life can be incredibly hard, which Job understood when he said, *“Mortals, born of woman, are of few days and full of trouble”* (Job 14:1). It is safe to say, Job was not an optimist! In fact, when he experienced all the grief of losing all his children and all his wealth he said, *“I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes”* (Job 42:6).

Several people in the Old Testament expressed their grief with the practice of putting on a sackcloth garment, covering their head with ashes, and then sitting in a pile of ashes the way Job did. When Daniel learned the Israelites in Babylon would have to remain in captivity for 70 years while Jerusalem was in ruins he, *“...turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes”* (Daniel 9:3). When Mordecai learned King Xerxes had issued a decree to execute all the Jewish people he, *“... tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly... there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes”* (Esther 4:1-3). When the King of Ninevah heard Jonah’s message that God was going to destroy his city, *“...he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust”* (Jonah 3:6).

The ashes on Ash Wednesday are a symbol of repentance and the sorrow that goes with it, as well as the grief in the knowledge that Jesus died because of our sin. While repentance brings out the negative feelings of grief and sorrow, it is a very good thing for us. That is why God told the Prophet Joel, “...*return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning*” (Joel 2:12). Repentance is always filled with sorrow – it is supposed to be. Still, we must not rush through it because the sorrow of repentance before God will cleanse us as the Apostle John wrote, “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). Rather than rushing through repentance because it is humbling and unpleasant consider the words of David, “*Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting*” (Psalm 139:23-24).

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**FRIDAY**

**February 20, 2026**

**Day 3 – A Broken and Contrite Heart**

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so, you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge... Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. (Psalm 51:1-12)*

King David is easily one of my two or three favorite people in the Bible outside Jesus. He was a real man who went through the same ups and downs of life all of us deal with. Sometimes he got it right, but sometimes he failed miserably. I can relate to King David. He was a hero when he defeated Goliath (1 Samuel 17), but he was a disgrace when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and then had her husband murdered to cover it up (2 Samuel 11). Even though God described him as, “*a man after my own heart*” (Acts 13:22), David learned the hard way the truth of Moses’ words, “*be sure that your sin will find you out*” (Numbers 32:23).

Right about the time David thought his cover up was complete, scandal would be avoided, and he would escape the consequences of his adultery and murder the Prophet Nathan walked in, “*Then Nathan said to David, ‘This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul... I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with*

*the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites” (2 Samuel 12:7-9).*

David was busted and he knew it. At that point he had a decision to make: Since he was a powerful king who could do pretty much whatever he wanted would he have Nathan executed and continue the cover up, or would he repent. David chose repentance and Psalm 51 is his prayer to God. It is heartfelt, authentic, and beautiful. It is genuine repentance.

If, as Scripture teaches, “*all have sinned,*” (Romans 3:23) that includes you (and me). How will you respond? Will you continue to cover it up, or will you come clean before God who loves so much that, “*While we were sinners Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:8)?

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## Devotions for Lent, 2026

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### SATURDAY

February 21, 2026

#### Day 4 – Following Jesus into the Wilderness

*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”*

*Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”*

*Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”*

*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”*

*Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’” Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him. (Matthew 4:1-11)*

Every time I read this passage I go back to watching old western movies with my dad and picture Jesus and the devil facing off on a deserted, dusty street with the whistle from “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly,” in the background. This is good vs. evil at high noon, but it is more than my silly childhood fantasy, or the plot of a movie. Jesus faced temptation from the devil himself he defeated the old snake soundly. In the process, he gave us a master class on dealing with temptation with Scripture and rejecting the devil’s lies.

I think it might help us to have a better understanding of temptation. First, temptation is not sin and that is a big distinction. James wrote, “...each person is

*tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death” (James 1:13-15). Second, we do not have to give in to temptation because, “No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13). Finally, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).*

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First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**MONDAY**

**February 23, 2026**

**Day 5 – Hungering for God**

*“You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water. I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name, I will lift up my hands. I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you. On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night. Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings. I cling to you; your right hand upholds me” (Psalm 63:1-8).*

Physical hunger is perhaps one of the most demanding sensations common to all of us. When you are hungry you may be able to ignore it for a while, but eventually it will demand attention. But, what about spiritual hunger? What about a hunger for God himself?

David was not merely interested in God’s blessings or protection; he craved God’s presence. His language in Psalm 63 seems almost desperate, reminding us that spiritual hunger is not polite or passive. It aches. It reminds me of words written by the Sons of Korah, *“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?”* (Psalm 42:1-2)

The good news for followers of Jesus is found in the Beatitudes contained at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount, *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled”* (Matthew 5:6). Because we know righteousness is not our own but, *“...comes from God on the basis of faith”* (Philippians 3:9) and *“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”* (2 Corinthians 5:21), we can

equate the righteousness God gives us with his presence in our lives. In other words, when we *hunger and thirst* for God's presence we will be *filled*. However, being *filled*, or satisfaction does not come to the mildly curious, or those who are passive in their faith, but to those who are hungry.

Jesus taught, "*I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst*" (John 6:35), That is why we fast during Lent – we want to focus on our hunger for God's presence by making space for Him. We give up something for lent and we fill the space with prayer, Scripture, silence, time with him. We intentionally turn away from the things that distract us so that we can find the place where intimacy with God deepens.

Are you hungry?

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**TUESDAY**

**February 24, 2026**

**Day 6 – Choosing Worship Over Power**

*“Fear the LORD your God, serve him only... Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you... Do not put the LORD your God to the test... Be sure to keep the commands of the LORD your God... Do what is right and good in the LORD’s sight...”* (Deuteronomy 6:13-19).

There are no shortcuts to spiritual growth. It only comes through intimacy with God and that only comes when we spend time with him. It is not always easy, but to quote the fictional Jimmy Dugan in the movie, *A League of Their Own*, “It’s the hard that makes it great. If it was easy, then everyone would do it.” Yes, it can be hard to spend focused time with God because we are so easily distracted, but he always blesses us when we do.

Ok, I know there are times when you have done the things you are supposed to do – you set aside the time, you prayed, you read your Bible... and it seems like nothing happened. You felt nothing and your life did not change. Remember two things: First, spiritual growth takes time, it takes a lifetime! Paul wrote, *“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me... I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do ...I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 3:12-14). Second, your faithfulness matters much more than instant success, so keep the faith! Sometimes you and I just need to do the work and trust God for the results. Paul wrote, *“And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him”* (Hebrews 11:6).

It might help to know when Moses told the Israelites, “*Do what is right and good in the LORD’s sight...*” (Deuteronomy 6:13-19) they were still not in the Promised Land. He was speaking to an entire generation who had been born in the wilderness. They had never been to Egypt, so they had no firsthand recollection of what God had brought their nation through. They had not seen God move in power through the plagues on Egypt, or the parting of the Red Sea. Sure, they were standing on the threshold of the Promised Land, but they were not there yet. To reach the Promised Land they would have to trust God by taking him at his word and doing what was *right and good*.

We do not have to have great faith to have intimacy with God... but we do have to have *some* faith. Jesus said it would take, “*faith as small as a mustard seed*” (Matthew 17:20). So, keep doing what is *right and good*. God has promised to bless you for your faithfulness.

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**WEDNESDAY**

**February 25, 2026**

**Day 7 – Resting in God’s Faithfulness**

*“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear... The Lord Almighty is with us... Come and see what the Lord has done... He says, ‘Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth’” (Psalm 46).*

Our lives are often characterized by hurry, striving, and unrelenting demands, but the Bible offers a radical invitation: rest in Jesus. Rest in the biblical context is not just inactivity, sleep, or even a good vacation; it is a spiritual posture of trust rooted in who Jesus is, what he has done, and what he will do. Jesus said, *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28–29).*

The rest Jesus offers is the perfect remedy for those who are exhausted by the weight of sin, the expectations of others, the need to perform, and the very human façade of self-reliance. It is wrapped up in the biblical concept of Sabbath. *“There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his” (Hebrews 4:10).* Some misunderstand the concept of Sabbath and reduce it to a commandment, or a day to be kept as if the thing stressed-out, overly driven people need is something else on their to-do list. Sabbath is an invitation to rest from a works based, self-justifying approach to life with its illusion of self-control by embracing the complete sufficiency of Christ.

Jesus does not demand more effort. Instead, he invites us to rest, to surrender, to trust him. David wrote, *“Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation*

*comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress; I will never be shaken” (Psalm 62:1-2). He also wrote, “My heart is not proud, Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content” (Psalm 131:1-2). That is rest!*

The invitation to rest in Jesus is at the heart of the Lenten Season. It is part of the reason we incorporate fasting into the observance of Lent. It creates space in our lives, not so we can do more, but so we can rest in Jesus and spend time with him. Resting in Jesus is an act of worship grounded in his sufficiency. It embraces his love, his grace, and his presence. As Paul put it, it allows, “...*the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, [to] guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7).*

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**THURSDAY**

**February 26, 2026**

**Day 8 – Take Up Your Cross**

*“Jesus said, ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels’” (Luke 9:23-26).*

On first reading it might seem like today’s challenge from Jesus to, “...*take up [your] cross daily and follow me*” (Luke 9:23) and yesterday’s admonition to, “*Be still, and know that I am God*” (Psalm 46:10) are contradictory. However, the two verses fit together to give us a beautiful picture of what it means to follow Jesus – we rest in him and serve him.

Many people read the challenge to “...*take up [your] cross daily and follow me*” (Luke 9:23) and interpret it to mean followers of Jesus have to do more, work harder, and stoically endure the drudgery of life in order to follow him well, but Paul wrote, “...*because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ...it is by grace you have been saved... and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast*”

(Ephesians 2:4-9). That is the part where we are still, knowing he is God. Salvation, our relationship with Jesus is never earned by the things we do, it must be accepted only through faith. Paul went so far to write, “*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!*” (Galatians 2:20-21).

So, taking up your cross is not so much about the work we do as it is about embracing a life surrendered to Jesus – pursuing an intimate relationship with him, allowing him to define who we are, and giving up the control, status, or security that we all seem to crave. Jesus himself is our example of this spiritual attitude as Paul wrote, “...*have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!*” (Philippians 2:5-8).

Ultimately, the call to take up the cross is a call to trust where we cannot be defeated but have the freedom of belonging wholly to Christ.

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First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**FRIDAY**

**February 27, 2026**

**Day 9 – Loving God**

*“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength [and] love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:30-31).*

In this answer given to a Pharisee who asked him, *“Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” (Mark 12:28)* Jesus completely described the Christian life in praxis – love God and love people. If you do not know any other Bible passages from memory, learn this one and apply it because it is the essence of all it means to follow Jesus.

Jesus prefaced his answer to the Pharisee with a qualifier, *“The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Mark 12:29)*. Do not overlook that statement because it is vital to Christianity. There is only one God. *“This is what the Lord says... ‘I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God’” (Isaiah 44:6)*. This is absolute truth and must never be compromised because everything else rests on that foundation, *“For there is one God and one mediator between God and [humanity], the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people” (1 Timothy 2:5-6)*.

So, if there is only one God (and there is) we can simplify Jesus’ answer to the Pharisee even farther to say loving God completely is the key to life – this life, as well as life eternal. It includes our emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical self and will manifest in love for other people. The Apostle Peter wrote, *“Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love... since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us... God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them... There is no fear in love... We*

*love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister” (1 Peter 4:8-21).*

Ultimately, loving God fully is not about perfection, but direction. It is a daily, ongoing pursuit of wholehearted devotion empowered by grace. As believers grow in love for God, they find that this love reorders their lives, deepens their joy, and anchors them in hope. To love God fully is to live as God intended – devoted to the God who first loved us and showing his love to everyone else.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood

First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**SATURDAY**

**February 28, 2026**

**Day 10 – Loving Your Church**

*“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).*

In yesterday’s devotion we considered the relationship between loving God and loving others. As Peter wrote, *“Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love... since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us... God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them... There is no fear in love... We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister” (1 Peter 4:8-21).* So, we cannot claim to love Jesus if we can’t stand people!

With his *new command* Jesus made the requirement to *love one another* specific to the local church. It was the night he was arrested and Jesus was celebrating Passover with his closest disciples. He washed their feet, confronted Judas, and predicted Peter’s impending betrayal (John 13:1-38). Just before leaving the upper room and going to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray he told them, *“Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).* So, the way, perhaps the only way, people who are not yet part of our church will know we are followers of Jesus is to love one another – to treat those who are part of our congregation, as well as other congregations well.

The Apostle Paul wrote, *“Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it”* (1 Corinthians 12:27) and *“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers”* (Galatians 6:10) and *“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching”* (Hebrews 10:23-25).

May it be so among us.

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By Dr. Steven Wood  
First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**MONDAY**

**March 2, 2026**

**Day 11 – Mercy, Not Sacrifice**

Jesus said, *“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners”* (Matthew 9:12-13).

In response to the Pharisees who criticized his friend, Matthew and scoffed that he was eating with *“tax collectors and sinners”* (Matthew 9:9-12), Jesus quoted an Old Testament statement, *“For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings”* (Hosea 6:6). Jesus cut to the heart of biblical faith, pure religion, and compassion, justice, faithful love with his answer. He also exposed the blatant hypocrisy of the Pharisees of whom he would later say, *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to... You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are... You say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the temple is bound by that oath.’ You blind fools! ...You also say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath.’ ...You give a tenth of your spices... But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness... You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel... You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence... You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean...”* (Matthew 23:13-28). *Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town.*

As I have said many times, let me say again, religion is not a bad thing, but religious practice can never replace faithfulness, kindness, and justice. In the ancient world sacrifices were offered as part of Jewish religious practice to express repentance, gratitude, and devotion to God. However, they came to be viewed as an end unto themselves, a religious checklist to keep God happy of off your case. While we no longer practice animal sacrifices modern religious checklists include things like attending church, reading your Bible, praying, and being a 'good person.' Just like the Old Testament sacrifices those things are all good because they were instituted by God and prescribed in his word, but they do not reflect the character and person of Jesus. That's the problem. Religious practices are props designed to flow out of devotion to Jesus and a desire to follow his example. We are to move beyond outward observance to inward transformation, where mercy becomes the defining mark of those who follow Jesus.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood  
First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**TUESDAY**

**March 3, 2026**

**Day 12 – Forgiven Much, Loving Much**

*“Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more? ...whoever has been forgiven little loves little.” (Luke 7:41-47)*

Jesus spoke these words at the home of a Pharisee named Simon who had invited him to dinner fairly early in his ministry. Sometime during the meal an unnamed woman with a bad reputation broke up the gathering when she came in and poured a jar of expensive perfume on Jesus’ feet while she sobbed and dried his feet with her hair (Luke 7:36-38). Note, this event should not be confused with a similar one near the end of Jesus’ ministry in which Mary, the sister of Lazarus did the same thing at a gathering in Lazarus’ house (John 12:1-11). In the first event, Simon the Pharisee was more than a little ticked off that his dinner party had been interrupted, *“When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner” (Luke 7:39).* Jesus responded by giving Simon a lesson on spiritual gratitude.

Spiritual gratitude is much deeper than saying “thank you” for the good things in life. It is a posture of the heart, an awareness that every breath, every strength, and every moment of grace comes from God. While we are all jars of clay – fragile, flawed, and fleeting, *“Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8)* because *“...God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).*

Just like the woman who poured perfume on Jesus’ feet gratitude must be a major component of the Lenten Season as we recognize the tremendous blessings

of life in Christ and what it cost him to provide. Gratitude comes from a place of humility; it softens our hearts and loosens our grip on our lives as it deepens our trust in the sufficiency of Christ. It causes us to be grateful for God's blessings and provision instead of always asking for more. It molds our perspective so that we recognize how much we have already been given. It helps develop a faith that sustains us, a love that surrounds us, and a hope that anchors us beyond our circumstances.

Finally, gratitude helps shape how we see others. Every individual person, no matter how broken they appear, is created in God's image and endowed with intrinsic value because of him. Gratitude fosters compassion, patience, and reverence for human life because of God's image in each person.

Spiritual gratitude is an act of worship.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood  
First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**WEDNESDAY**

**March 4, 2026**

**Day 13 – Seek First the Kingdom**

*“...seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”* (Matthew 6:33-34)

About halfway through his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) Jesus addressed the anxiety, ambition, and distraction that often characterize life, both in the first century and now. He said, *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal... do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear... Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? ...So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them”* (Matthew 6:19-32). Of course, Jesus understood the need for necessities of life and the stress often associated with poverty and want, but still he said, *“...seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well”* (Matthew 6:33). This is a call to reorder life itself because people who follow Jesus operate in the Kingdom of God. We are to place God’s authority, values, and purposes at the center of our lives.

Paul echoed Jesus’ teaching when he wrote, *“...the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit...”* (Romans 14:17). So, the Kingdom of God has to do with much more than provisions, although God is completely trustworthy when it comes to providing for his people (Proverbs 37:25; John 6:35). It is about recognizing God’s authority over everyone and everything, trusting in his love, compassion, and kindness, as

well as professing Jesus Christ is Lord and living daily in his Kingdom. Faith in Jesus replaces obsession and reshapes desire.

That is one of the reasons fasting is part of the Lenten Season. Whether it is a meal, a particular food, a habit, social media, or screen time, we lay aside something to apply the teaching of Paul to, “*Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things*” (Colossians 3:2). Lent helps shift our focus away from ourselves and upward to Christ. Lent is good for us because when Jesus is first where he belongs everything else finds its rightful place. He shapes us for his purpose, makes us more like Jesus, and gives us hope to live like we are on our way to heaven.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood

First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**THURSDAY**

**March 5, 2026**

**Day 14 – Private Devotion**

Jesus taught, *“Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So, when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others... But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others... But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him... When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you”* (Matthew 6:1-18).

In this section of his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) Jesus taught about the private nature of practicing the Christian faith. Jesus did not mean we should not share the Gospel, pray, or teach the Scriptures in public. In fact, his only charge to the local church was, *“...go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”* (Matthew 28:19-20) and all of that must

be at least somewhat public. However, when our efforts at piety become performance, it opens the door to hypocrisy and pollutes the whole process. Hypocrisy makes good things like giving to those in need, supporting our local church, praying, and fasting ways to make ourselves look good and gain the approval of others as the focus shifts from Jesus to us.

So, if someone happens to notice you helping someone in need, or if you lead a verbal prayer that others hear, or if someone finds out what you gave up for Lent that is fine so long as your focus is on Christ and you direct their focus toward him, as well. Keeping your focus on obeying Jesus and giving him glory will keep your piety pure – anything else just pollutes it.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood  
First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**FRIDAY**

**March 6, 2026**

**Day 15 – A Heart of Obedience**

Jesus said, *“If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of Truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you... Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.”* (John 14:15-21)

Obedience is much, much more than following the rules. It is loving Jesus and following his teachings and example because of our love for him. In other words, it is about listening to God with trust and responding with faithful obedience. Throughout Scripture, God made it clear that obedience flows from relationship, not guilt or obligation. The Prophet Samuel said, *“To obey is better than sacrifice”* (1 Samuel 15:22), so God desires our hearts before our actions, our surrender before our service.

An obedient heart begins with humility. *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight”* (Proverbs 3:5-6). Trusting God requires us to let go of control, which is almost always a façade anyway. Still, we often try to hold on to our perception of control, which makes obedience difficult when God’s ways challenge our comfort, pride, or plans. For most of us the first step toward obedience is humbly admitting that God’s wisdom far surpasses our own. When we remember God said, *“...my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways... As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than*

*your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts”* (Isaiah 55:8-9) obedience can become an act of humility and love rather than loss.

To develop an obedient heart we can look to the example of Jesus as Paul wrote, “...*have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!*” (Philippians 2:5-8) Even though he is God Incarnate; obedience was not always easy for Jesus. In the Garden of Gethsemane, just before being arrested, tortured, and crucified, he prayed, “*Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done*” (Luke 22:42). That is our example of an obedient heart.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood

First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**SATURDAY**

**March 7, 2026**

**Day 16 – The Narrow Way**

Jesus said, *“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”* (Matthew 7:13-14)

At the core of the Season of Lent is an invitation to slow down, examine our hearts, and remember that following Jesus is not a casual, haphazard, or serendipitous journey. We follow Jesus on purpose because we love him. His words about the narrow way confront us with a truth we often resist – following Jesus is costly. The narrow way is not about earning salvation, but about responding faithfully to the grace we have received. It is the path of repentance, humility, and daily surrender.

Throughout the Bible God’s people are repeatedly called to choose a way of life that runs counter to their culture. Moses told the Israelites, *“I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore, choose life”* (Deuteronomy 30:19). Lent puts that same choice before each one of us. As we go through the Season of Lent together, we are invited to turn from habits, desires, and attachments that tend to draw us away from God and to walk in obedience.

Jesus put it bluntly, *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me”* (Luke 9:23). Throughout the Season of Lent, we follow Jesus toward the cross, not his cross, but ours. We recognize the narrow way is marked by self-denial, not self-indulgence; by trust, not control; by love, not power. In other words, the narrow way is also a way of faithfulness that begins with the seemingly small things. Paul captured the way of the cross when he wrote, *“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with*

*each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”*

(Colossians 3:12-17) Through the way of the cross we choose forgiveness over resentment, truth over convenience, and generosity over accumulation. These choices shape our spiritual selves and make us more and more like Jesus. In that, we are not striving for perfection but Christlikeness.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood

First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**MONDAY**

**March 9, 2026**

**Day 17 – God’s Steadfast Love**

*Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, “The LORD is my portion; therefore, I will wait for him.” (Lamentations 3:22-24)*

Lent is a season of honest, humble self-examination. We confess our sin, acknowledge our weakness, and confront the ways we fall short of God’s holiness. However, the heart of Lent is not our faithfulness to God, but God’s faithfulness to us. As we pause to reflect, we discover that even when we wander, God has remained steadfast, consistent, and true. God is faithful.

God is faithful in that he always keeps his promises. If you happen to be going through a difficult season it might help to know that our text today (Lamentations 3:22-24) was written by the Prophet Jeremiah as he walked through the rubble of Jerusalem after it was conquered and destroyed by the Babylonians. His home, his family, his friends, his entire way of life was wrecked as Jerusalem was destroyed and many of the Jewish people were killed or carried away into exile. Despite all that, Jeremiah acknowledged God’s faithfulness. How could he do that? How can we? You see, faith in God does not deny suffering, but invites us to bring come honestly before God. King David wrote, *“The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. The righteous person may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all...”* (Psalm 34:17-19). God never leaves us, turns away from us, or forgets about us.

Of course, God’s faithfulness is best seen in Jesus Christ. *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16). Even though, *“all have sinned and fall*

*short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23) and *“the wages of sin is death”* (Romans 6:23), *“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8). God is faithful. Practices such as fasting, prayer, and serving others are never ways to earn God’s favor – we already have his favor. Rather, the spiritual disciplines we practice during the Lenten Season and throughout the year are our response to his faithfulness. We fast because God sustains us, we pray because God listens, and we give because God first gave to us. *“We love because he first loved us”* (1 John 4:19).

As we draw a little closer to Holy Week remember God’s faithfulness did not end at the cross. *“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances... Do not quench the Spirit... The one who calls you is faithful...”* (1 Thessalonians 5:16-24).

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood  
First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**TUESDAY**

**March 10, 2026**

**Day 18 – Serving as Jesus Served**

Jesus said, *“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* (Mark 10:41-45)

Part of the reason we observe Lent is to take our focus off ourselves and place it on Jesus and the needs of others. Humble, sacrificial service was at the heart of Jesus’ ministry on earth. To follow his example, we do not simply perform good deeds, but we adopt an attitude of love, respect, and compassion that places others before ourselves, even when it costs us something. When the disciples got into an argument about who should be in charge, who should have power Jesus told them, *“You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:42-45). Then on his last night with the disciples before he was arrested, tortured, and crucified Jesus washed their feet, an act usually reserved for the lowest household servants. When he finished, he said, *“Do you understand what I have done for you? ... You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you”* (John 13:12-15).

Jesus overturned and redefined every cultural standard of success, power, and greatness. While most people value influence, recognition, affluence, and comfort in this life, Jesus set a much higher bar for those of us who follow him – we are to serve others. Life in Christ according to his teachings and example is a life of humility, sacrifice, and love. He stated it plainly, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength [and] Love your neighbor as yourself”* (Mark 12:30-31). Then the Apostle Paul quoted Jesus when he wrote, *“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’”* (Galatians 5:13-14).

Who can you serve in the name of Jesus today?

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood

First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**WEDNESDAY**

**March 11, 2026**

**Day 19 – Suffering**

*He was despised and rejected... a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely, he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:3-6)*

No one in their right mind enjoys suffering – it runs contrary to human nature, but it is an all-too-real part of life. In fact, the Season of Lent has a way of drawing us into the suffering of Jesus. When we slow down during the sacred season and our hearts turn toward repentance we are confronted with the suffering of Jesus and the high price he paid for our salvation.

We come face-to-face with the suffering of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane when he told his closest friends, “*Sit here while I go over there and pray... My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me*” (Matthew 26:36-38). Then Jesus prayed, “*My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will*” (Matthew 26:39). Take a moment or two and sit with Jesus in your mind as he deals with his impending torture and death while still submitting to God’s plan. Consider his suffering and surrender. Then allow your mind to consider the betrayal that took place moments after he finished praying. One of His closest friends handed him over to be arrested, and the rest scattered in fear!

The Prophet Isaiah wrote, “*He was despised and rejected by [humanity], a man of suffering, and familiar with pain*” (Isaiah 53:3). Have you ever felt lonely? Jesus knows about that. Have you ever been ridiculed by people who think they know you? Jesus knows about that, too. Have you ever been let down or even betrayed by your friends or family? Jesus knows all about that, as well. While we tend to picture him hanging on the cross when we think about Jesus’ suffering, he dealt with all the things we suffer with before he got to the cross. The Apostle John wrote, “*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us*” (John 1:14). That means Jesus is God Incarnate and experienced all the trials of human life that you and I experience so he does not just sympathize when we suffer, he empathizes.

Whatever you might be dealing with today remember Jesus is with you and he understands what you’re going through.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood  
First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**THURSDAY**

**March 12, 2026**

**Day 20 – Trusting God’s Will**

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. (Proverbs 3:5–6)*

I recently read an article about cars that drive themselves. These “autonomous vehicles,” use a combination of GPS and artificial intelligence and are in use in some major cities. Let me say for the record, I will never ride in one. I admit it, I have control issues and I want to drive. Can you relate?

Control issues are one thing when it comes to driving a car, but what about when it comes to life, especially life in Christ? Our text today reminded us to, “*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to Him, and He will make your paths straight*” (Proverbs 3:5–6). Following Jesus often exposes how we tend to “*lean on our own understanding*” – our plans, our schedules, our opinions, and our priorities. The Lenten Season helps us focus more on Jesus and less on ourselves as it gently but firmly calls us to loosen our grip and place our confidence in God’s wisdom instead.

I am reminded of the Israelites’ 40-year season of wandering in the wilderness. Even though the wandering was punishment for their refusal to follow God in the first place, he remained faithful – they were wandering, but they were never lost. God was with them, he provided for them, and he continued to guide them. In other words, we can trust God and his will because he is faithful and trustworthy.

Every Sunday in our local church we pray together, “*Give us today our daily bread*” (Matthew 6:11), as part of The Lord’s Prayer. That line of the prayer is

directly related to God's provision for the Israelites during the wilderness wandering. *"When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, 'What is it?' (that is literally what the Hebrew word, manna means) ...Moses said to them, 'It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat... Everyone is to gather as much as they need... No one is to keep any of it until morning.'* However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell... Each morning everyone gathered as much as they needed, and when the sun grew hot, it melted away" (Exodus 16:14-21). When you and I pray for God to give us, *"our daily bread"* we are asking for enough to meet our needs, not an abundance, not more than enough, not excess – enough. We are also making a statement of faith that we not only trust God to provide, but we trust him to lead as we follow.

# JARS OF CLAY

## Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood  
First Congregational Church, Durand MI

### FRIDAY

March 13, 2026

### Day 21 – Strength Renewed

*Do 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. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; 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. (Isaiah 40:28-31)*

As of today, we have crossed the halfway point of the Lenten Season. I hope it has been a season of honest self-examination, listening for the voice of God, and a stronger relationship with Jesus. Perhaps some of us entered the Lenten Season feeling “weary,” as the Prophet Isaiah put it in today’s text. You may be weary of responsibility, weary of uncertainty, weary of disappointment, or weary of the silent struggles you feel you cannot share with anyone. However, our text today reminds all of us that weariness is never the end of the story for people of faith. “...those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.”

God specializes in renewal. The promise of today’s Scripture is not given to the strong, or the energetic, or the ones having a string of good days. It is given to those who are *tired... weary... weak* – Those who admit their discouragement, acknowledge their limits, confess their sin, and lean into God’s sufficiency. Strength is renewed by our trust and hope in God – nothing else will do it.

If Lent teaches us anything it teaches us how to wait and trust God while we do through prayer, fasting, repentance, and hope. As usual, Jesus set a perfect example on how to deal with weariness. After his baptism, he was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, “*After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was*

*hungry*” (Matthew 4:3). This has got to be one of the biggest understatements in the whole Bible! In addition to being *hungry* I have no doubt Jesus was also weary – and then, only then, did the devil show up. Although he was physically weakened by his 40-day fast Jesus went toe-to-toe with the devil through a series of three temptations and was overwhelmingly victorious. Notice the final scene of the story, “*Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him*” (Matthew 4:11). So, the wilderness was not a negative for Jesus, or a detour from God’s plan – it was a place of victory, a place of renewal where he resisted temptation, depended on God’s Word, and defeated the devil.

Renewal does not always come as a sudden burst of energy or immediate relief. Sometimes it comes slowly as Paul wrote, “*Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day*” (2 Corinthians 4:16). Maybe that is what Lent is all about.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood

First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**SATURDAY**

**March 14, 2026**

**Day 22 – Faith That Perseveres**

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1-3)*

Faith is not optimism. It is not positive thinking. It does not deny the realities of life. Faith is not science, or proof, or knowing for sure. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “*Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see*” (Hebrews 11:1). In other words, faith is trust in God, hope in Jesus, and belief about things we do not yet understand. It is a steady confidence in God that endures through trials, questions, and delays. It is not the absence of struggle or doubt but is belief in the midst of those things. It is not based on visible evidence or immediate results. It is rooted in the character of God, his consistent unchanging character.

That is part of what Paul was talking about in Hebrews 11 when he listed several people who showed their faith in God through their actions in difficult circumstances. After praising people like, *Abel... Enoch... Noah... Abraham... Isaac... Jacob... Joseph... and Moses* (Hebrews 11:5-31), Paul wrote, “*...the world was not worthy of them... These were all commended for their faith...*” (Hebrews 11:38-39). Were these people perfect? Of course not. Did they deal with doubt, failure, and sin? Absolutely. Did they “deconstruct” their faith as some are prone to do when they struggled or had questions that could not be answered? No.

*“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”* (Hebrews 12:1-3) Faith that perseveres is tough, it is scrappy. That is how James could write, *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything”* (James 1:2–4).

So, keep the faith. Do not give up. Persevere.

# JARS OF CLAY

## Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood  
First Congregational Church, Durand MI

### MONDAY

March 16, 2026

### Day 23 – Compassion for the Lost

*Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” (Matthew 9:35-38)*

I do not know who said it first, but I have often heard, “compassion is love in action.” David wrote, “*The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made*” (Psalm 145:8-9), which not only reveals what God does, but who he is. Again and again in the Bible God responded to his people with compassion. The Prophet Jeremiah wrote, “*I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, “The Lord is my portion; therefore, I will wait for him.” The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord*” (Lamentations 3:19-26).

Compassion is much more than a feeling or sympathy or even empathy. It flows out of our faith in Jesus, or at least it should. When compassion flows out of our faith it often breeds faith in others. When Jesus responded to the people with compassion many of them were moved to follow him because of his compassion for them. In other words, compassion is quite possibly the absolute best strategy for evangelism – the most effective means for sharing the Gospel available to Christians and the local church.

Therein lies the problem. Far too many professing Christians claim to follow Jesus but do not seem to love people. The Apostle John wrote, *“We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister”* (1 John 4:19-21). Could that be why Jesus described workers in our text today? Is it possible for people who claim to follow Jesus to dislike, dismiss, exclude, or even hate others? Nope.

If you and I follow Jesus we are here to make life better for other people – all people regardless of their race, nationality, citizenship, gender, religion ...you get the idea. All means all. If we love Jesus, we will love people – all people.

Compassion is love in action.

# JARS OF CLAY

## Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood  
First Congregational Church, Durand MI

### TUESDAY

March 17, 2026

### Day 24 – A Life of Humility

*Therefore, if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. (Philippians 2:1-4)*

Pastor Rick Warren wrote, “Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it’s thinking of yourself less.” (Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 2103). In other words, humility is not weakness or thinking poorly of ourselves. It is seeing ourselves as God sees us. Remember, you are created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27), which gives you intrinsic value that nothing can diminish. You are also chosen by God (John 15:16; 1 Peter 2:9), precious to God (Isaiah 43:4), and perfectly loved by God (Jeremiah 31:3; John 3:16; 1 John 3:1).

With all that said the Bible calls us to humility – seeing ourselves in faith as God sees – dependent, grateful, and surrendered to him and his will. The Prophet Micah wrote, “...*what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God*” (Micah 6:8). To *walk humbly with God* is to live in constant awareness of who we are and who he is, recognizing that every gift, opportunity, and success flows from him.

Pride is the opposite of humility. It pushes God to the margins of life, elevating self-sufficiency and control. James wrote, “*God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble*” (James 4:6). Of course, Jesus is the ultimate example of humility as Paul wrote, “...*being in very nature God, [he] did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made*

*himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!”* (Philippians 2:6–8). The King of kings humbled himself, playing in the dirt with children, washing his disciples’ feet, and spending time with those on the fringes of his culture. He taught us, “...*whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Matthew 20:26-27). In other words, greatness in the Kingdom of God looks a lot different than what is considered greatness in our culture. For those of us who follow Jesus, greatness is not about fame, or power, or affluence – it is about humility that seeks to glorify Jesus and let others go first.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood

First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**WEDNESDAY**

**March 18, 2026**

**Day 25 – Freedom Through Confession**

*God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:5-10)*

Confession is one of the most powerful gifts God has given those of us who follow Jesus. Still, we tend to resist it. Maybe its pride, maybe its embarrassment, maybe it's just that we do not want others to know we're not perfect. When we refuse to confess, we open ourselves up to dire consequences. John wrote, "*God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.*" (1 John 1:5-10)

Confession is one of the most freeing things we can experience in this life because it brings about relief, which is the greatest feeling in the world. Think about it – you are driving along in your car and unintentionally cut someone off. Fortunately, they manage to get stopped and ...phew! That is relief. Or you

stumble and start to fall, but you manage to catch yourself and ...phew! That is relief. Relief is that feeling of something bad could have happened, but it doesn't. It is the same feeling we experience when we confess our sins to God because, "*...the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Romans 6:23). Phew!

The Bible says, "*Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy*" (Proverbs 28:13). When we confess our sin to God, he always forgives us – mercy comes, healing comes, relief comes. God welcomes the humble and restores the repentant. So, confession is not a doorway to shame, but a pathway to freedom – a pathway to relief and relief is the greatest feeling in the world.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood

First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**THURSDAY**

**March 19, 2026**

**Day 26 – God’s Grace Is Sufficient**

*Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)*

We live in a culture that seems to excel at “canceling” one another. We love to criticize, attack, and tear down those who have achieved a level of success. It is one thing for our culture to destroy those who are famous, affluent, or successful, but the Body of Christ tends to do the same thing (yep, I have Facebook, too). I think part of this disturbing trend is related to our own insecurities. We tend to focus on our shortcomings and failures in such a way that we convince ourselves we are insufficient so we look around for someone else to take down so we can feel better.

Here’s the good news – you and I are not good enough, but we do not have to be because God is. The Bible gently but obviously and firmly points out a life-changing truth – God is sufficient. His grace, His power, and His presence are enough and in Christ he makes us enough, too. God told the Apostle Paul, “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*” (2 Corinthians 12:9). This revelation came to Paul after he pleaded with God to remove a *thorn in my flesh* – some kind of physical, emotional, or mental weakness that plagued Paul. Whatever it was Paul did not like it and probably felt it hindered

his ability to spread the Gospel. However, God did not remove Paul's issue. Instead, He offered something far greater – his sustaining grace.

In our humanness we often make the mistake of measuring our worth by how well we behave, how much we have, how much we are in charge of. This is a trap because we end of thinking if we just had more – more stuff, more money, more affirmation, more confidence, then we would finally feel secure in who we are. Our sufficiency in Christ is rooted in him, his faithfulness, and his love. Our value depends infinitely more on his faithfulness than ours. Maybe that is why King David wrote, “*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want*” (Psalm 23:1). God is sufficient. He will never leave you. He always loves you perfectly. He will supply you with wisdom even when you are confused (James 1:5), peace when you feel anxious (Philippians 4:6–7), and strength when we are weary (Isaiah 40:29–31).

God is sufficient.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood

First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**FRIDAY**

**March 20, 2026**

**Day 27 – Abiding in Christ**

*“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” (John 15:1-8)*

Few invitations in Scripture are as tender and transformative as Jesus’ call to abide. Jesus painted a vivid picture in our text today when he said, *“I am the vine; you are the branches”* (John 15:5). We all know a branch has no life in itself. It does not produce fruit on its own. The life of the vine flows naturally into the branch, producing fruit in its season. In the same way, our spiritual health depends entirely on our connection to the *vine* – Jesus.

To *abide* means to stay, to dwell, to be connected. It is not a hurried visit but a settled, continual relationship. Abiding in Christ is the foundation of the Christian life. It is not about working harder but about staying connected. In this, we must be careful because it is easy to substitute activity for intimacy. We can mistake serving, studying, or working for being connected with Jesus while neglecting actually being with him. When we rush ahead without him, we will eventually find

ourselves weary and dry. But, when we linger and rest in his presence, our souls are renewed and refreshed.

Jesus said, “*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you...*” (John 15:7). So, we *abide* in Christ by spending focused time studying the Bible. Obviously, abiding also involves prayer. Prayer is not just telling God what we want, it is a sacred conversation where we speak and God listens, or God speaks and we listen, or we simply enjoy spending time with him. Jesus also said, “*If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love*” (John 15:10). So, obedience is another way to *abide*. When we follow Jesus’ teachings and example, we experience the joy of getting closer to him.

Abiding is both a daily choice and a continual posture. It is turning our hearts toward Jesus even in the ordinary moments. It is remembering that He is always with us. So, slow down and *abide* in Jesus today.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood

First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**SATURDAY**

**March 21, 2026**

**Day 28 – Bearing Good Fruit**

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. (Galatians 5:22-26)*

The Bible is full of examples of fruitfulness. It is woven into God's design. In creation, God commanded the earth to bring forth vegetation and trees bearing fruit (Genesis 1:11). Later, He told humanity to "*be fruitful and multiply*" (Genesis 1:28). Fruitfulness reflects life, growth, and the blessings of God. Spiritually, the same principle applies to us. In yesterday's text Jesus told us, "*I am the vine; you are the branches... If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing*" (John 15:5). Followers of Jesus who abide in him will produce good fruit.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "*...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*" (Galatians 5:22-23). Do not interpret this as a comprehensive checklist of everything possible fruit we produce in Christ. We do not produce good fruit by striving or self-effort. A branch does not strain to produce grapes; it simply remains attached to the vine. Likewise, we abide in Christ, rooted in his teachings and example, dependent on him in prayer, and responsive to the Holy Spirit.

Jesus taught, "*Every good tree bears good fruit*" (John 15). When our hearts are aligned with Christ, our actions follow. Words become gracious. Choices become wise. Relationships reflect love rather than selfishness. Remember, fruit

grows gradually. We may not see dramatic change overnight, but faithfulness in small, daily choices leads to lasting transformation.

The Psalmist wrote about those who abide in Jesus, *“That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither...”* (Psalm 1:3). So, stay planted, abide, stick close to Jesus. When we abide in Jesus, fruit is not forced, it is inevitable. And through our good fruit, God is glorified.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood  
First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**MONDAY**

**March**

**23, 2026**

**Day 29 – Faith Expressed in Action**

*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ...Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder... As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. (James 2:14-26)*

The Apostle Paul wrote, “...it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8). Then James came along with today’s text and declared, “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead” (James 2:26). While these two statements from two church fathers might seem contradictory they actual complement one another to form a vital piece of Christian doctrine – faith in Christ must show in action, or it is not faith at all ...at least not the kind of faith one would want to step off into eternity with. In fact, James asked a rhetorical question, “Can such faith save them?” (James 2:14) and challenged his readers with a bit of sarcastic irony, “Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds” (James 2:18). In other words, it is impossible to show faith without a recognizable life-change and *deeds* done for the glory of Jesus. Good deeds do not bring about salvation or earn extra credit from God because we are saved by his grace alone. However, faith in Jesus must show or it is not faith.

James also had something to say to those who claim believing in God is enough for salvation and eternal life. He wrote, “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder” (James 2:19). So, belief is the essential beginning as John wrote, “For God so loved the world that he gave his

*one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16). However, belief must be more than assent to the idea that there is a God of some kind or acceptance of the historical fact that there is a Jesus Christ. In the same way that love must be expressed through words and actions before the object of our affection will have any clue of our feelings, belief or faith must be shown or it will not bring about salvation. Faith and deeds are inextricably linked in that faith brings about our salvation and deeds are evidence that salvation has taken place.

Jesus put it best, *“If you love me, keep my commands... Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me... Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching”* (John 14:15, 21). So, do you believe in Jesus? Do you love him? Does it show?

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood

First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**TUESDAY**

**March 24, 2026**

**Day 30 – The Cost of Following Jesus**

Jesus said, “*Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me*” (Matthew 10:38) “*...whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple... Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out.*” (Luke 14:27-35)

It is not a popular theme, but sacrifice is woven throughout the narrative of the Bible. From the earliest offerings in Genesis to the ultimate sacrifice of Christ on the cross, sacrifice is about love, devotion, obedience, and worship. The Old Testament, sacrifices were tangible expressions of worship, devotion, and repentance. Innocent animals were offered as atonement for sin, to remind God’s people that sin carried a cost. As Paul wrote, “*Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness*” (Hebrews 9:22). Of course, these early sacrifices pointed to the greatest and final sacrifice – the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.

The sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross stands in the middle of Christianity as the ultimate and final fulfillment of, “*...the wages of sin is death*” (Romans 6:23). Jesus paid that price with his sacrifice. However, sacrifice for those who follow Jesus did not end with the cross. Therefore, Paul wrote, “*...I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship*” (Romans 12:1) as a commentary on Jesus’ challenge, “*...take up [your] cross and follow me*” (Matthew 10:38). For those of us who follow Jesus the *sacrifice* or *cross* involves placing God at the center of everything. For some it will involve giving generously when it feels costly, serving when it is inconvenient, forgiving

when it is painful, or choosing obedience over comfort. Sacrifice always costs something.

Sacrifice is a major theme of the Lenten Season. Many of us lay aside something for Lent as a form of sacrifice. Others focus on acts of service, specific times of personal worship, or some kind of life change. Sacrifice has a way of reshaping us as we release our grip on temporal things and our hearts become more aligned with eternity. So, if you have not already done so, prayerfully consider your Lenten sacrifice. Sacrifice is a pathway to deeper fellowship, greater freedom, and lasting reward in Christ.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood

First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**WEDNESDAY**

**March 25, 2026**

**Day 31 – Hope in Suffering**

*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. (Romans 5:1-5)*

I know of no one who enjoys suffering. In fact, human nature is such that when we suffer, we want it to be over as quickly as possible. Suffering can feel as though the darkness will never lift and the weight will never ease. However, the Bible consistently points us to a hope that is not dependent on circumstances, faith in Christ even when we suffer. This is not wishful thinking. It is confident expectation that is rooted by faith in the unchanging character of God.

The Apostle Peter wrote, *“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials”* (1 Peter 1:3-6). He spoke to followers of Jesus who were suffering terrible hardship and reminded them that our hope is anchored in Jesus' resurrection. Resurrection is not just a past event that we celebrate on Easter Sunday! It is a present reality that gives us the hope to believe that no amount of suffering is permanent.

That is why James could write, “*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything*” (James 1:2-4). James did not minimize pain, but saw it as something that refines us, strengthens us, and makes us more like Jesus. That is why we can consider suffering *pure joy*.

Paul wrote, “*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us*” (Romans 8:18). Suffering is real but remember Jesus knows what it is like and when we fix our eyes on him our suffering is placed alongside him – his glory, his resurrection, his promises, his victory. If you are suffering today remember Jesus is with you and he is sufficient. You can do this.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood

First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**THURSDAY**

**March 26, 2026**

**Day 32 – Preparing Our Hearts**

*The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters. Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god.*  
(Psalm 24:1-4)

It seems like we live in a culture that is obsessed with outward appearance – the pretty people, the talented people, the famous people. But the Bible constantly turned our attention inward to the heart – the seat of our affections. Jesus taught, “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*” (Matthew 5:8) and Proverbs said, “*Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it*” (Proverbs 4:23). Purity of heart is not just moral or ethical behavior, or religious performance. It is sincerity, authenticity, and humility before God. It is a devotion that is not divided.

When King David repented for his adulterous affair with Bathsheba he cried, “*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me*” (Psalm 51:10). David recognized his sin and it broke his heart because he knew he was not pure before God. He wanted transformation and restoration. He wanted a pure heart.

You and I do not get a pure heart on our own. That is the work of God's redeeming grace. God said, “*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you... I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws*” (Ezekiel 36:25-27). A pure heart flows from our relationship with Jesus, but it requires our

undivided loyalty to him. James wrote, *“Submit yourselves, then, to God... Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail... Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up”* (James 4:7-10). So, humble repentance is a major step toward a pure heart. From there, Paul reminded us, *“...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”* (Philippians 4:8).

As we surrender our hearts to God, he refines us and makes us pure. A pure heart is not perfect yet – it is devoted and transparent before God. A pure heart is made pure by God and focused on remaining pure by abiding in Christ.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood

First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**FRIDAY**

**March 27, 2026**

**Day 33 – The Servant King**

*The evening meal was in progress... Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him... When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."*  
(John 13:2-17)

There are few events in the Bible that represent the heart of Jesus more vividly than the night he washed his disciples' feet. Foot washing in the first century was the task of a servant, usually the lowest servant in the household. You see, roads were dusty around Jerusalem, sandals were open, and feet were dirty... and stinky. No respectable rabbi would ever wash the feet of his followers. It was too humbling, too demeaning, it was beneath them. Yet here was Jesus, rising from the table, laying aside his outer garments, wrapping a towel around his waist, and washing the feet of those who followed Him. Peter objected, struggling with obvious role-reversal, but Jesus insisted. He washed Peter's feet and he washed the feet of all the other disciples... including Judas.

How could the King of kings do such a thing? Because he knew who he was. *“Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God”* (John 13:3). Jesus’ humility did not come from insecurity. It flowed from absolute security in who he was. Because he knew who he was he could not be threatened or challenged. Therefore, he was free to serve. Then he told his disciples to do the same thing (John 13:12-17).

Could it be that you and I struggle with serving others because we are insecure in ourselves? Is it possible that we somehow think that by humbling ourselves and elevating someone else we will lose our place in line? Your place and position are in Christ and in him you can be absolutely secure in who you are. Therefore, you are free to serve, and forgive, and encourage others with no worries that you will somehow be diminished in the Kingdom of God.

Followers of Jesus reflect His humility. Jesus stooped. So must we.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood

First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**SATURDAY**

**March 28, 2026**

**Day 34 – Watching and Praying**

*Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Matthew 26:36-41)*

On the night before His crucifixion, Jesus entered the Garden of Gethsemane with Peter, James, and John. He asked them to stay with him and keep watch as he struggled with what was coming, *“My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here and watch with me”* (Matthew 26:38). However, when he returned from praying three separate times, he found them sleeping. Jesus challenged them with words that are still important and relevant for us, *“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak”* (Matthew 26:41).

Jesus’ challenge to *watch and pray* is much deeper than staying awake – it is being vigilant, spiritually alert. Think of a military guard standing watch at his post, or a cowboy taking the first watch in one of those old western movies. Peter seems to have learned the lesson because he wrote, *“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour”* (1 Peter 5:8). Jesus warned us that we are weak, so we might

as well just admit that. Because of our weakness we must be vigilant in prayer so that we can avoid spiritual complacency which leaves us vulnerable.

One of the more valuable aspects of the Lenten Season is a heightened focus on prayer. Prayer is our lifeline, our strength, our access to God. We acknowledge our need for his strength. We invite the Holy Spirit to shield us against temptation. We invite the power of Christ to move in us and around us. Life can be noisy, distracting, and stressful, so stay awake, stay connected. Keep your eyes on Jesus and your knees bent in prayer.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood

First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**MONDAY**

**March 30, 2026**

**Day 35 – Not My Will**

*Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. On reaching the place, he said to them, “Pray that you will not fall into temptation.” He withdrew about a stone’s throw beyond them, knelt down, and prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. (Luke 22:39-44)*

Surrender is another one of those English words a lot of folks do not like. For many it conjures up images of losing, giving up, or failing. Since our culture tends to value winning, trash-talking, and dominating an opponent, surrender is often seen as weakness... and we do not like weakness. Still, the Bible calls us again and again to surrender to God.

Our text today is one of the most moving examples of surrender in the Bible. On the night before His crucifixion, Jesus entered the Garden of Gethsemane with Peter, James, and John. He knew his torture and crucifixion were mere hours away. He was in agony, even admitting to his disciples, *“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death”* (Matthew 26:36). He was facing a decision he did not want to make – the agony of the cross. In that moment, Jesus – God Incarnate, the King of kings, prayed *“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done”* (Luke 22:42). Never forget that while Jesus is fully God, he is also fully human. In his humanity he did not want to suffer and die on the cross. He expressed his feelings openly and honestly, made his desire know ...and then submitted to the greater and purpose of God.

Despite Jesus' stellar example, surrender never comes easy to any of us. Even though the wisdom of Proverbs teaches, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths" (Proverbs 3:5-6) we resist surrendering. We want guarantees. We want certainty. We want clarity. But God calls us to trust Him even beyond what we understand.

The apostle Paul understood the nature of surrender. He wrote, "*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me*" (Galatians 2:20). He placed his attitudes, decisions, relationships, opinions, and future into God's hands – he surrendered his very life. He gave up control.

Surrender is a huge part of Lent. As we focus more on Jesus, we will come to a number of decision points where surrender is required. In surrender we grow. In surrender we get closer to Jesus.

Are you surrendered?

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood

First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**TUESDAY**

**March 31, 2026**

**Day 36 - The Beating**

*Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they slapped him in the face. (John 19:1-3)*

Before the cross, before the nails, before the crown of thorns, there was the scourging. Our text does not even come close to what Jesus endured when John wrote, *Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged*" (John 19:1). Roman scourging was brutal. It was designed to punish, weaken, torture, and humiliate. The victim, in this case Jesus, was stripped naked and beaten with a multi-strand whip. Each strand was embedded with sharp fragments of stone, pottery, or bone all sharpened to do maximum damage. With each last, the victim's back was torn and bloodied as flesh, muscle, and even bone was broken and shredded. Some scholars think the damage done by the scourging might have been enough to end Jesus' life, but that was not the way Romans did things. Crucifixion was still coming.

As amazing as it might seem, the scourging was prophesied centuries before Jesus walked the earth. The Prophet Isaiah wrote, *"He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely, he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed."* (Isaiah 53:3-5).

Do not turn away from the scourging in your mind. Look at it. In fact, consider watching the film, "The Passion of the Christ" (2004) for one of the more

accurate depictions of what Jesus suffered. Then remember why he suffered. The scourging was ugly, brutal, degrading, and lethal perhaps to remind us that our sin is ugly, brutal, degrading, and lethal. When we consider Jesus' scourging, we are confronted with the cost of our sin. It separates us from God and brings death. The beating Jesus took was ours. He did not have to take it, he allowed it. The Prophet Isaiah wrote, "*He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth*" (Isaiah 53:7). He did not retaliate. He did not defend himself. He did not summon the angels or declare judgment on humanity. He took it in silence. Therefore, "*...by his wounds we are healed*" (Isaiah 53:5).

How much he must love us!

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood  
First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**WEDNESDAY**

**April 1, 2026**

**Day 37 – Waiting in Hope**

*Out of the depths I cry to you, LORD; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, LORD, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you. I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in his word, I put my hope. I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. (Psalm 130:1-6)*

I confess that I am not good at waiting. I excel at impatience – I have stood in front of a microwave irritated because my popcorn is taking too long. I have turned away from breakfast at McDonald's because the drive-thru line was too long. I have grown frustrated with a computer that was taking too long to boot up. Waiting is one of the hardest disciplines in the Christian life. Am I alone in my impatience? I suspect not.

When the Psalmist wrote, “*I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits...*” (Psalm 130:5) he (or she) captured a significant component in the Christian life – we wait for prayers to be answered, we wait for figurative doors to open, we wait for healing to come, we wait for clarity or direction. But do we wait, well? Do we wait in an attitude of trust? Often in our waiting we wrestle with doubt, impatience, and discouragement. Still, the Bible says, “*Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord*” (Psalm 27:14) and “*...those who [wait] 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*” (Isaiah 40:31).

We do not like waiting, but it is so good for us! Waiting relates to strength and courage. It is not passive resignation, but it is active trust. To wait on the Lord means to trust in him over ourselves, our schedules, and our priorities. It is

admitting he knows what he is doing and letting him do it. In fact, waiting renews us. It shifts our focus away from self to God.

The Bible is filled with stories of waiting. Abraham waited years for the promised son. Joseph waited in prison before stepping into leadership. David was anointed king but waited through years of danger and obscurity before wearing the crown. All the while God was working, character was being forged, and trust in God was growing. King Solomon wrote, “*There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens...*” (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

So, wait. Trust God. Keep the faith. Pray. Watch him work.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood  
First Congregational Church, Durand MI

## MAUNDY THURSDAY

April 2, 2026

### Day 38 - The Upper Room

*While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. (Matthew 26:26-30)*

It is Maundy Thursday and we commemorate the night Jesus instituted The Lord's Supper or Communion. The word "maundy" comes from the Latin word *mandatum*, which means, "command." So, it points us not only to his instructions to, "...do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19), but also to the other instructions he gave that night in the upper room. Jesus said, "*The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the [least], and the one who rules like the one who serves*" (Luke 22:25-26) and "*Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you*" (John 13:14-15). After supper while they were on their way to Gethsemane, Jesus said "*Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am... I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*" (John 14:1-6), "*If you love me, keep my*

*commands*” (John 14:15) and “*This is my command: Love each other*” (John 15:17).

Remember Jesus. Be an authentic servant of others. Live like you are on your way to heaven. Jesus is the only way to Salvation. If you love Jesus follow his teachings and example. Love one another. On Maundy Thursday we commemorate The Lord’s Supper and so much more. We remember Jesus and the last instructions he gave before he was crucified. We remember Jesus and we honor him. We honor him and we worship him by following his instructions.

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood

First Congregational Church, Durand MI

**GOOD FRIDAY**

**April 3, 2026**

**Day 39 – It Is Finished**

*Finally, Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.*

*So, the soldiers took charge of Jesus. Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). There they crucified him, and with him two others—one on each side and Jesus in the middle.*

*Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews. Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, “Do not write ‘The King of the Jews,’ but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews.”*

*Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written.”*

*When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, dividing them into four shares, one for each of them, with the undergarment remaining. This garment was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom.*

*“Let’s not tear it,” they said to one another. “Let’s decide by lot who will get it.” This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled that said, “They divided my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.” So, this is what the soldiers did.*

*Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, “Woman, here is your son,” and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.*

*Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty.” A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted*

*it to Jesus' lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:16-30)*

It is Good Friday, a day of grief, mourning, and reverent reflection – a day that must not be overlooked. We remember Jesus' crucifixion today. Take time to remember. Remember Paul's words, "*God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*" (Romans 5:8) Remember God's love and Christ's sacrifice. Remember his death on your behalf. Remember he said, "*It is finished*" (John 19:30).

*It is finished.*

# JARS OF CLAY

Devotions for Lent, 2026

By Dr. Steven Wood

First Congregational Church, Durand MI

## HOLY SATURDAY

April 4, 2026

### Day 40 – Jesus in the Tomb

*Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. (John 19:38-42)*

It is Holy Saturday, a day often overlooked in the Christian calendar, probably because it exists between the sorry of Good Friday and the celebration of Easter Sunday. Holy Saturday is supposed to be a day of quiet reflection in which we remember Jesus' dead body lying in the tomb, wrapped and sealed, while His disciples hid in mourning, confusion, and fear.

Holy Saturday is a day that many are tempted to move past too quickly because of the excitement and celebration of Easter Sunday. Often, it is a day of yard work, errands, and perhaps an Easter Egg Hunt for the kids. Because we never want to be dogmatic or legalistic in the observance of our faith, and because we live in this end of history where we know Jesus lives, I have no quarrel with any of those things.

However, please be sure not to blow past Holy Saturday carelessly. Do not fail to consider Jesus in the tomb. It matters because he was really dead. It matters

because his death occurred for us. It matters because it teaches us to wait just a little longer for God to do something amazing. Yes, Easter is coming... but not yet.

As we come to the end of the Lenten Season let us finish it well. Take some time to reflect on Jesus in the tomb. Embrace some silence and contemplation sometime today. Mediate on the cost of your salvation, the reality of Jesus' death, and his amazing love for you. Sit in silence for a little while. Think about the lessons this Lenten Season has taught you. I pray it is more than an experience, but a meaningful journey of devotion and faith that has brought you closer to Jesus.

Remember to wait just a little longer.