



# A Place to Stand

## Lenten Study

### Day 1

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**Read: Psalm 139:1-18**

**Back to Basics**

#### God Created Us

Today we begin a 40-day study for Lent. It will be divided into four sections: Back to Basics, The Ten Safeguards (the Ten Commandments for today), Practicing the Presence of God, and The Authority of Scripture. Hopefully, this Lenten journey will give us new assurance concerning “A Place to Stand” as Christians in an increasingly challenging world today.

For our first series we will draw upon an outline in the back of the *Life Application Bible*. It is a ten-step outline of how to become a Christian. Thus, it provides both a reminder of the foundation on which we stand as Christians as well as an outline to use in helping others give their lives to Christ.

Our reading for today is a powerful description of who we are in relationship to our Creator God. We are truly “fearfully and wonderfully made” (v.14). God knew us while we were still in our mother’s womb. He knew our parents and knows all about our life. He knows what we are thinking and why we are doing the things we do, whether they be good things or bad. We can hide things from other people, but not from God.

God knows what purpose He has for us and His Spirit is within us to guide us (v.7). What a blessing it is to realize that, regardless of what we do or how far we stray from the path the Lord has for us, He is still with us. He created us in His own image; the very character of God is woven into every human being. We should value our own lives as fully as Almighty God, our Creator, values each of us.

*R&D Reflect on the intricacy of the human body. Thank God that we are fearfully and wonderfully made.*

*Prayer: “How precious to me are Your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them” (v.17).*

### Day 2

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**Read: John 17:1-5**

#### A Personal Relationship with God

Chapter 17 of the John’s Gospel is sometimes referred to as Jesus’ “high priestly prayer.” It is about the fact that the world is a spiritual battleground between the forces of evil (Satan’s influence in the world) and the forces of good (those under the authority of God). In his prayer, Jesus prays for his disciples, including those of us who are his disciples today. He prays that God will keep us safe from the power of Satan, that we may be set apart as pure and holy, united in His truth.

Our focus is on the first five verses of the chapter. In Old Testament times, the average Jewish believer seems to have been present to God only through the Levitical priest as an intermediary between mankind and God. With Christ, however, we have an opportunity to be in

direct relationship with God through him, and we come into the Kingdom of God and experience eternal life (see Hebrews 7-9). Eternal life is conditioned upon being in a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. As it is stated in our Bible passage, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (v.3). Eternal life is not something we hope for in the future. In Christ we are in eternity in the here and now.

As he prays, Jesus states that he has brought glory to the Father because he has done what the Father gave him to do (v.4). Then he makes reference to the glory he had with the Father before the world began (v.5). “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God from the beginning” (John 1:1). Jesus, in his prayer, is asking the Father to restore him to the place of authority, at God’s right hand. We know this prayer was answered through Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, and by the testimony of Stephen (Acts 7:56).

It is a glorious thought to realize that we were created to be in relationship with God through Jesus Christ, who sits on His right hand eternally.

*R&D How would you describe the manner in which you are in relationship with God?*

*Prayer: It is awesome to reflect, Dear Lord, on what You have done to be in relationship with us.*

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### Day 3

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**Read: John 3:1-21**

#### How Much God Loves Us

Our reading for today is one of the most well known sections of Scripture. John 3:16 is so familiar to most of us that we can say it without really thinking about what it means. From that verse, we can be so sure that God loves us that we fail to think about the “shall not perish” portion of it. Those three words are a sure indication that those who not believe in Christ *will* perish. That is why it is vital that we not complacently rejoice in our own belief while others perish around us because we have not shown them Jesus.

Admittedly, it is not always easy to reach non-believers with a spiritual message. The difficulties Jesus encountered with Nicodemus make that clear. The fact that Nicodemus came to Jesus with his questions shows that he was open to what Jesus would tell him. Yet he continued to think on a physical plane while Jesus spoke on a spiritual one. Therefore, the whole idea of being born again was too difficult for him, although it is a necessary experience in coming fully into relationship with Jesus.

Jesus speaks of being “born of water and the Spirit” (v.5), signifying baptism and the coming of the Holy Spirit into the life of the Christian. There continues to be a lack of understanding among Christians in our day about the Holy Spirit. As a friend said recently, “Christians all talk of God as Trinity but seem to think He only has two parts, Father and Son.” The Holy Spirit is God’s great gift to Christians; he is God living within us to guide and direct our lives. Jesus was present on the earth to only a few people for a few years. The Holy Spirit is present to all Christians everywhere all the time.

Think of God’s love for us. He created us in His own image. He sent His Son to die for us that, by believing in him, we could have eternal life with Him. And, He sent His Holy Spirit to live in us to show us the way. What more could we ask?

*R&D In what ways does God show His love for you?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord.*

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## Day 4

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**Read: James 4:13-17**

### Sin Creeps in

We have, over the last three studies, looked at the fact that God created us, wants to be in relationship with us, and loves us. These are foundational building stones as we get back to basics. Over the next three studies we will consider what eats away at that foundation.

In our culture, it is too easy to overlook sin. We are living in a time when people are affirmed in their right to believe whatever they want. People can decide for themselves what truth is, and what is right or wrong. Standards are scoffed at. The media too often give us a picture of superficially happy people living openly sinful lives. God, however, has some standards about right and wrong. There is such a thing as truth. And there is such a thing as sin.

The passage in James has to do with boasting about tomorrow. There is nothing wrong with having goals and plans. We would be foolish not to think ahead. But when we make our plans without God in mind, we are more foolish still. God wants us to be in His will in all we do. Scripture exists to show us the way, and the Holy Spirit is within Christians to help us discern God's will. Life is short. We can be called "home" at any time. It is essential to be doing the good we ought to do and avoiding those things we ought not do.

James "lays it on the line" in verse 17. "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins." Doing wrong is sin and not doing right is sin. The first is a sin of commission, the second a sin of omission. One can be just as bad as the other. A snake has entered the garden. Its name is sin and it is deadly poisonous. How will we deal with it?

R&D *What areas of your life raise the greatest sin problems? Explain.*

Prayer: *Lord, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.*

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## Day 5

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**Read: Romans 3:21-30**

### All Have Sinned

Our reading for today is a classic "good news, bad news" teaching from Paul. The bad news first: "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (v.23). The good news is what Jesus did for us that can free us from sin. Let's look in depth at the good news before getting back to the bad news, even though the latter is the real focus of our study for today.

There are three words that are particularly important in this passage: justified, redemption, and atonement. Despite our sinful ways, we are *justified* freely by God's grace because we have placed our faith in Christ (v.24). We are declared "not guilty" as though before a judge in a court of law because God forgives our sins and our record is wiped clean.

Likewise, *redemption* comes by Jesus Christ (v.24). What this means is that God has set us free from slavery to sin. In Jesus' time, a person's debts could result in his being sold as a slave; but his next of kin could redeem him by paying his debt and freeing him from slavery. That is what Christ has done for us. By his death and resurrection, he paid our sin debt and redeemed us.

Christ died in our place for our sins by his sacrifice of *atonement* (v.25). Despite our sinfulness, through the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf, we have been restored (made at one) with

God. His death penalty completely satisfied God's demands, and we are justified, redeemed, and restored.

Nonetheless, we need to face up to the consequences of sin. It is too easy to compare ourselves with others and decide we are doing better works (and less bad things) than they are. Or when we do things that others might "misunderstand" as sinful, we are simply the victims of circumstances. Or we rationalize ourselves in other ways out of our disobedience to God. Such avoidance of our sinful nature is extremely dangerous. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Let's admit it, confess it, and be free.

*R&D What tendencies toward ignoring the sin within are a problem for you? What will you do about these tendencies?*

*Prayer: Father, forgive.*

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## Day 6

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**Read: Romans 6:15-23**

### Whose Slave Are You?

Paul tells us that we have a choice: we can be slaves to sin or slaves to God. Once again we have a "bad news, good news" illustration. "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v.23). We cannot be neutral. We can either have Christ as our master, or sin. Although all Christians will continue to sin, we need no longer be slaves of sin. The comparison is like slipping up and disappointing God from time to time versus living a depraved life.

As we increasingly live in a manner in which Christ is truly master of our lives, we begin to clean things up. Our priorities change. We enjoy doing those things we think God wants us to do and we are ashamed of ourselves when we do otherwise. As we "wholeheartedly obey the form of teaching to which we have been entrusted" (v.17), we are set free from sin and become slaves to righteousness (v.18). The "form of teaching" Paul refers to is about Christ's life, death, and resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:1-11).

Again, the choice is ours. We can choose which master we want to serve, but we can't choose the wrong one and then hope that we won't have to suffer the consequences. Each of the two masters pays with his own kind of currency. Christ's currency is eternal life. The wages of sin is eternal death.

God loves us and wants to be in relationship with us through His Blessed Son. He cares just as much for us whichever master we choose. But He cannot have a personal relationship with those who choose the way of sin over life in Christ. It is the most important decision we can make in this life.

*R&D Can you see how this "back to basics" message could be useful to you in approaching those you know who are following the wrong master?*

*Prayer: Lord, help me to become increasingly a slave to righteousness and show me how to help others see the crucial choice they should make.*

## Day 7

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**Read: John 14:1-14**

### The Way to God

As we have been reminded in our last study, God cannot be in relationship with us if our choice is to sin. From the first, God had a plan to deal with our sin. He made it clear through Old Testament times that sin leads to death. In those days animals were sacrificed to God as a way of showing that the people regretted their sins and wanted to be forgiven. That plan, however, was only temporary. God's ultimate plan was to send His Son, Jesus, as the final sacrifice for the sins of the world, opening the door to eternal life.

Although we have noted earlier that eternal life in Christ begins here on earth, our time here is only a moment compared to eternity. Therefore, our passage for today takes a glimpse at the afterlife. Jesus tells us that he has prepared a place for us. He will come back and take us there. Scripture tells us little about what it will be like; but we can know that if Jesus has prepared it for us and will be there with us, it will be more glorious than anything we could possibly imagine.

Despite the questioning of Thomas and Philip, Jesus wants to make one thing very clear how we get there. The pathway to eternity is through Jesus alone: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (v.6). By uniting ourselves with Jesus, we are united to God.

Non-believers (and even some people who call themselves Christians) rebel against John 14:6. Surely, they argue, there are other ways to God; this verse is too exclusive. Yet, nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus died to make it possible for *everyone in the world* to come to the Father through him. That is why, in the parable, Jesus tells of leaving the 99 in order to find the one lamb that has gone astray (Matthew 18:12-14). Instead of complaining about there being only one way to eternity with God, we should be praising God that He has provided us this way.

*R&D How do you deal with those who think John 14:6 is too narrow, and question what is to happen to those who are devoted to other faiths or who have never heard of Jesus?*

*Prayer: O Lord Jesus, you have said that you are the way, the truth, and the life. Suffer us not to stray from you, who are the way, nor to distrust you, who are the truth, nor to rest in anything other than you, who are the life. (Erasmus)*

## Day 8

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**Read: 1 Peter 3:13-18a**

### Why?

When he was little, our grandson asked my wife why Jesus had to die. She then gave him what might be called her version of Jesus' answer to that question on the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:25-27). It took some time. Our grandson listened attentively but still seemed puzzled. At that moment his sister, our granddaughter, entered the room and he asked her why Jesus had to die. "Because he loves us so much," she replied. "Why, Nana," he asked, "did it take so long for you to try to tell me that?"

Peter put it this way: "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (v.18). Jesus loves us so much that he accepted the penalty that our sins deserve. He took the punishment so we wouldn't have to. Because he did that, he cleared our passage to eternal life. His sacrifice for our sins has made it possible for us to be in relationship with God.

Note also in our reading for today our call to carry this message to others. “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...” (v.15b). As we get “back to basics” in this study ourselves, we should remember that there are others who don’t know the reason for the hope that is in us. If we are growing daily in our relationship with Christ, it should be possible for us to share that hope in a helpful, gentle, and inoffensive way.

In verses 13-14, Peter questions: Who is to harm us if we are eager to do good? But even if we suffer for doing what is right, we are blessed. Stand up for Jesus as God gives you the opportunity. Whatever the results, you’ll be blessed.

*R&D When was the last time you had an opportunity to share with another the hope that is in you in Christ? What happened?*

*Prayer: Christ has no voice in the world today but ours.*

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## Day 9

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**Read: Romans 10:8-15**

### The Rescue Plan

God has no grandchildren. We cannot be in relationship with God through Jesus Christ simply because our parents are Christians or because we have always attended worship services in a Christian church. Our relationship with Christ must be direct, something we do, not something done on our behalf by someone else. Yet, on the other hand, no matter how bad my life has been in the past, God is always ready to accept me “just as I am.”

How does a person become a Christian? Our passage for today contains that answer. If we believe in our heart and confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord, that is all we need to do. Salvation is right before us. Jesus will come to us wherever we are and just as we are. Our part is to accept what is offered to us, the gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ. It is not a complicated process. If we believe in our heart and confess with our mouth that Jesus is the risen Lord of our lives, we are accepted into the Kingdom of God.

To us, these facts are undoubtedly basic, although it is helpful to be reminded of them from time to time. They are not basic to non-believers. That is why being effective in “giving reason for the hope that is in us” means more than simply being a good example. Ultimately, the other person needs to understand the steps we have been going through in this “back to basics” study. “How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?” (v.14).

“How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (v.15). For God to use our feet to bring the good news of Jesus Christ, there are two key challenges. The first is living the kind of life that is attractive to the non-believer so they may see in us love, peace, and joy that they would like to have in their own lives. The second is being able to tell them about Jesus and lead them into relationship with him.

*R&D How might you use this “back to basics” study to reach the non-believers and the unchurched around you?*

*Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor or your name. (Book of Common Prayer)*

## Day 10

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**Read: John 1:1-14**

### Children of God

Over the last nine studies we have gotten “back to the basics” of the Christian faith as a way of reminding us of what it means to become a Christian and, at the same time, to help equip us in reaching out to others. What we consider today is sort of the final step in that process. We have talked about what needs to be believed; today we look at what must be done.

We begin by thinking about the opening of John’s Gospel, our reading for today. In a sense, it restates what we have been considering over the course of this short study. It tells us about creation and how much God loves us. It recognizes, nonetheless, the darkness (sin) in the world and the rejection of God that results. And it shows us God’s plan to overcome that rejection, that people might be in relationship with Him through His Son and become children of God.

Once we (and others with whom we would share the good news) “believe in our heart and confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord,” we can be children of God. But, how is that done? Normally by a spoken prayer. That prayer best begins by confessing that we have not been the person God wants us to be and are now repenting of our sins (making a complete turnaround in our lives), seeking His forgiveness and acknowledging that we accept Jesus as the Lord and Savior of our lives, and intend to live a new life in him.

A sample prayer from the *Life Application Bible* is: “Dear God, I know that my sin has separated me from You. Thank You that Jesus Christ died in my place. I ask Jesus to forgive my sin and come into my life. Please begin to direct my life. Thank You for giving me eternal life. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

R&D *Have you ever prayed a prayer like this? If not, why not now?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, thank you for all you are in my life. Help me to reach others for you.*

## Day 11

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**Read: Matthew 4:1-11**

**The Ten Safeguards**

### No One Before God

As we continue our Lenten study, “A Place to Stand,” we shift to the Ten Commandments, another foundation stone on which our Christian faith is based. Over these next ten days we will be looking at how these commandments were seen by Jesus and the writers of the New Testament.

“You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3) is the first of what we will call “The Ten Safeguards.” Too many people view the commandments as impediments against living our lives as fully and freely as we would like; while, in fact, they are really safeguards, showing us what sin is. It is in adhering to these godly standards that we can avoid sin and have the really full and free lives God wants for us.

God gave the commandments to Moses and the Israelites just after they had attained their freedom. He reminded them: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt” (Exodus 20:2), and then He tells them to have no other gods before Him. In Egypt the Israelites had seen that many gods were worshiped. The more gods one worshiped, the more blessings might seem to result. Why not add one more? Because God was getting ready to re-shape these people into the family from which salvation would come, it was essential that they understand Him to be the one true God or they could not be His people.

Our reading for today is Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Satan was throwing at him every temptation he could conceive. Jesus fends him off, relying on Scripture. When he had had enough, Jesus ends the dialog with "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only'" (v.10). Jesus knew this safeguard well because he had the closest of relationships with his heavenly Father. Today it is essential that we know the one true God in the midst of the gods of pluralistic religions and those of secular appeal (money, sex, power) that surround us. We need, with the authority of Jesus, to say: "Away from me!"

R&D *How do you stay focused on the one true God in our world of competing gods today?*

Prayer: *Lord, help us never to waiver in our loyalty to You.*

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## Day 12

**Read: Matthew 6:19-24**

### No Idols

"You shall not make for yourself an idol..." (Exodus 20:4) is our second safeguard. In a sense, this commandment is a spelling out in detail of what the first one meant. One of the ways people worshiped other gods was by building an idol to represent a god, and then worshiping it. That was what the Israelites did by way of the golden calf while Moses was on the mountain receiving the commandments! Jumping ahead many centuries, when Paul visited Athens "he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16).

God is not limited to an image created by people. He is so far above that that there is no comparison. Yet He knew that people wanted something they could see. More than that, they wanted something they could control. An idol provided that to them. Therefore, He had to make it crystal clear that idols profaned Him and were strictly forbidden.

Making physical idols to represent a god is not something we see much of in our day. The idols of our time are much more subtle. Jesus was dealing with one of them in our reading: money. "No one can serve two masters," he says. "You cannot serve both God and money." Unfortunately, for many people, money is the idol of our day. They dedicate their lives to amassing it. The more they have, the more they seem to need. Doing the things that increase the amount of money a person has, and then "taking care of it" so it won't be lost, are all-consuming tasks. When there is love of money (see 1 Timothy 6:10), there is no room for God.

Jesus gives us the alternative. We are to store up for ourselves treasures in heaven (v.20). Treasures in heaven are the doing of those things God wants us to do, especially for the benefit of others. When our focus is in that direction, there is no room for idols.

R&D *What, for you, are "treasures in heaven"?*

Prayer: *Lord, help us to look directly to You and not to any phony substitutes the world may place before us.*

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## Day 13

**Read: Matthew 5:33-37**

### Honoring God's Name

A footnote in the *English Standard Version Study Bible* can help us understand the third safeguard: "You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain..." (Exodus 20:7 ESV). The footnote



reads, “Taking the Lord’s name in vain refers primarily to someone taking a deceptive oath in God’s name or invoking God’s name to sanction an act in which the person is being dishonest.” I’m making this distinction because people in our day think of this command more in terms of using God’s name in cursing; although, doing so would certainly also violate this command.

This third safeguard is a further explanation point about who God is. It expresses the essentiality of recognizing how vital it is to honor Him, and not to dishonor Him by misusing His holy name. In our reading for today, Jesus is dealing with oaths. The Bible condemns making vows or taking oaths irresponsibly, such as promising to do something you don’t intend to do, or swearing falsely in God’s name. As Christians, we are the people of God; thus, any swearing or oath taking that is not honest takes the Lord’s name in vain whether we have specifically invoked His name in the course of it or not.

James 5:12 repeats Jesus’ “let your yes be yes and your no be no.” A person who fails to tell the truth cannot be trusted. Christians should never be so regarded. We dishonor God with our half-truths and our shady dealings.

The third commandment stands as a safeguard against straying from the honesty and truth God has a right to expect of us because He is our one true God and we have the obligation to be true to Him.

*R&D In view of what has been said above, in what way would using God’s name in cursing be a violation of the second commandment?*

*Prayer: Lord, let my yes always be yes and my no always no.*

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## Day 14

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**Read: Mark 2:23-28**

### **Remember the Sabbath**

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” (Exodus 20:8) is our fourth safeguard. It is the first of two transition or bridge steps from focus on God to focus on the people of God as we see in our reading for today. While the Sabbath was to be spent with the worship of God as the priority, it was also set aside as a time for rest by the people. God had given them an example by calling the seventh day of creation a time when He rested (Genesis 2:2-3). But, as you will notice from the Genesis passage, God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.

So, as we look at the Sabbath day, we see its two-fold purpose. Because worshiping God is the prime way in which we can show our love for Him, Christians are expected to worship God on the Sabbath (for most Christians, Sunday). That can best be done within a community of faith where our brothers and sisters in Christ are sharing that worship experience.

But, as we see from our Scripture passage for today, Jesus says that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath (v.27). God created the Sabbath for our benefit. We need a time each week for restoration of body and spirit. The Sabbath gives us the opportunity to rest and to focus on God. It is a safeguard of our health, both spiritually and physically. For the Pharisees, it was simply another obligation to impose on themselves and others—something that was burdensome rather than restful—and Jesus had to get the situation in perspective.

In our day with its many distractions, it is important to remember to keep the Sabbath holy. It should be a day in which we arise rejoicing in the opportunity to worship our glorious God. In being grateful for the rest we can also enjoy on the Sabbath, we thank the One who makes it possible.

R&D *What is the Sabbath to you, and how do you honor God on that day?*

Prayer: *Father in Heaven, when the thought of You wakes in our hearts, let it not be like a frightened bird that flies about in dismay, but like a child waking from its sleep with a heavenly smile.* (Soren Kierkegaard)

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## Day 15

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**Read: Matthew 15:1-9**

### Honor Your Parents

Our fifth safeguard is “Honor your father and mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12). This command is also transitional, a bridge between honoring our forebears in a manner, though secondary, to honoring God before we move to the more specific actions and attitudes we need safeguards against that are spelled out in the remaining commands.

The fifth command is the only one that has a promise attached. In order to live in peace in the Promised Land, the Israelites would need to accept authority and build strong family ties. Thus, again, we see the “safeguarding” nature of these commands. They were not given by God to shackle the people but to build foundations upon which to construct fruitful and joyful lives.

In our reading for today, Jesus’ problem is, once again, the Pharisees. They were trying to impose the letter of the law on Jesus and his disciples, complaining that the disciples did not always wash their hands before they ate. As he often did, Jesus simply turns the tables on them. Whereas the rule the Pharisees were calling into question was not one of the Ten Commandments, to honor our parents clearly is. Yet the Pharisees, for their own convenience, had found ways to skirt that command. He exposes them for the hypocrites they are.

Today’s subject cannot be dealt with short of mentioning passages in which Jesus seems to be saying that we are to hate our parents. “If anyone comes to me who does not hate his father and mother... he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). *Hating* was a Semitic term for loving less. Jesus makes it clear in many places that we are to love one another, not hate in the sense we think of it today. What he was saying is what we have been considering in the first four commandments: we are to love God first and foremost; all other love springs from that.

R&D *In what ways do you honor your father and mother, whether they are still living or not?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for parents, and especially for mine.*

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## Day 16

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**Read: Matthew 5:21-26**

### No Murder

“You shall not commit murder” (Exodus 20:13) bluntly states our sixth safeguard. As we reflect on that wording in our day, we might wonder why such a command might have been necessary. Of course, those were more primitive times, but the taking of human life (a life created in the image of God) was the worst sin that a person could commit against another person. God apparently believed that that needed to be said by way of one of the Ten Commandments.

Move forward, now, to Jesus’ day. Jesus, in our passage from the Sermon on the Mount, takes the commandment to a new level. “Anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to

judgment” (v.22). As the *Life Application Bible* says, “When Jesus said, ‘But I tell you,’ he was not doing away with the law or adding his own beliefs. Rather, he was giving a fuller understanding of why God made that law in the first place.”

This is a safeguard against our getting so angry that we might want to murder. Committing murder in our hearts is just a first step toward committing the act of murder, and many murders are rooted in anger. But, more to the point, anger of this nature is sin. We need to recognize that. Many people (including Christians) think we are justified in our anger and are unwilling to be reconciled with our brother who had angered us. That attitude is sin.

It is appropriate for Christians to be angry with Satan and with sin. Anger is also justified when it is aimed at injustice to others. Some of the great acts in history have been the result of Christian anger over such injustices as slavery. But, when we are angry about supposed injustices to ourselves, we are on dangerous ground, and that is what Jesus is warning us about.

*R&D What makes you angry in our world today? How are you dealing with it?*

*Prayer: Dear Lord, may we not let the sun go down on our anger.*

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## Day 17

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**Read: Matthew 5:27-30**

### No Adultery

As we noted earlier concerning the fifth commandment, it was essential for the Israelites, if they were truly to be the people of God in a hostile environment, to have strong family ties. Nothing is more destructive of family stability than adultery. Thus, the seventh safeguard was: “You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14).

Jesus, in our reading for today, again moves the command to a higher level. Jesus makes the point that if the act is sin, so is the desire to commit it. Thus, once more we see the safeguarding nature of the command. God wants us to see the thought for what it is before it leads to disaster. Jesus is fulfilling the Law, not abolishing it (5:17).

Marriage and family are under attack in our day. The percentage of marriages that end in divorce is astounding, and many children are being raised without the stability of a father and mother who live with them and nurture them in a peaceful and loving family atmosphere. There are many reasons for this, but one of them is certainly adultery. To be physically unfaithful to one’s spouse is the sin of adultery. To be emotionally and mentally unfaithful is lust; and that is not only a sin but also a step toward adultery itself.

Jesus is not telling us that we can’t have a natural interest in people of the opposite sex or healthy sexual desires. He is warning us against the fantasies of the mind that can lead down a dangerous path. He is safeguarding us concerning a matter that has the potential of shattering our lives and the lives of those we love.

*R&D How can we do a better job of protecting ourselves and our family from lustful desires?*

*Prayer: Lord, we live in a world that seems to have sex on its mind; protect us and show us a better way.*

## Day 18

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**Read: Matthew 5:38-42**

### No Stealing

Our eighth safeguard is, “You shall not steal” (Exodus 20:15). Jesus deals with this command within the framework of his teaching on revenge, as we see from our reading for today. On the surface, there seems to be a disconnect between not stealing and not seeking revenge. Let’s look at the whole of Jesus’ teaching.

Our reading begins with Jesus quoting Exodus 21:25. Moses needed to give the people more detailed laws for living than what had been spelled out in the Ten Commandments, and this “eye for an eye” rule was a part that. It was meant to guide judges in meting out punishment on a basis of the penalty equaling the crime. It was never meant to allow people to take the law into their own hands and to use it as a justification for revenge. That is the first thing Jesus wants to make clear because undoubtedly people were using this rule to excuse their sinful actions.

But, again, Jesus takes things to a higher level in order to show a new and godly way of dealing with situations that might tempt a person toward revenge. The best way to deal with an enemy is to make him a friend. It is natural that our first reaction to being wronged may be to get even. But that wouldn’t be God’s way. He loves us all, the bad and the good equally; and we, therefore, are to love others. Furthermore, Jesus would have us go “the second mile” with those who challenge us in court or otherwise force themselves upon us.

How does this apply to the eighth commandment? Simply this: Jesus says that not only are we not to take (steal), we are to give. Our focus is not to be on what we can get from others, rightfully or wrongfully, but how we can serve God here on earth by showing our love and concern for others. If we are trying to follow the will of God, the last thing on our minds would be taking something that belongs to someone else.

*R&D What are some of the more subtle ways of stealing that people engage in today that we need to avoid?*

*Prayer: O Giver of Life, help us to be givers in all the opportunities to do so that face us day by day.*

## Day 19

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**Read: Matthew 12:36-37**

### No False Testimony

The ninth safeguard is, “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16). This is another command that relates to the nature of the people God was forming as His own. It was essential for the people to stand together without fear of betrayal from within. As the Body of Christ in our day, it is equally essential that Christians stand up for one another and for our God, with no room for false testimony.

Jesus emphasizes the importance of the spoken word in our brief reading for today. We will have to give account for all careless words we have spoken. It would seem that that would be especially true concerning falsehoods spoken to the damage of others. Jesus himself faced false witnesses at his trial. The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were hoping for false evidence that would justify putting Jesus to death; and, although many false witnesses appeared, none had sufficient evidence until two came forward who said they had heard Jesus say he would destroy

the Temple in three days (see 26:59-61). Stephen's martyrdom also resulted from false testimony of ones who said he spoke against Moses and God (Acts 6:11, 13).

James 3:1-12 is the classic dissertation in the Bible on the danger of using the tongue to condemn rather than to encourage. "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness" (v.9).

When these Scriptures are looked at in combination, we can clearly see the danger of false testimony against which God has given us this safeguard. A false word can ruin the life of another. We hold our words in sacred trust.

*R&D Think of an instance in which a false charge injured you or someone you love. What was done about it?*

*Prayer: Lord, keep a watch on my mouth that I may not slander another person by a wayward tongue.*

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## Day 20

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**Read: Luke 12:13-21**

### No Coveting

"You shall not covet" (Exodus 20:17) is our tenth and final safeguard. Coveting is wanting to have things that belong to someone else. It is more than simply admiring the possessions of another; it's wanting to have them for ourselves. Coveting includes envy; we resent the fact that someone has something we don't, and it can have dire consequences. If we covet our neighbor's wife, it could lead to adultery. If we covet his possessions, it could lead to theft. If our coveting of what he has, and the envy it breeds, leads to intense jealousy, it could lead to hate and even violence. Thus, God wants to safeguard us against all of these.

In our reading for today, Jesus deals with the issue from a standpoint of greed. Greed and coveting go hand in hand. Greed is wanting more than we have or need, and that leads us to covet what others have that we don't. The man who issued the complaint in our passage of Scripture wanted his brother to divide his inheritance with him; he coveted the possessions his brother had. To make the point that life does not consist of how many possessions we have, Jesus gave the Parable of the Rich Fool. As we saw in an earlier study, the Christian life is for storing up treasures in heaven, not here on earth.

God, through the tenth command and Jesus' teaching, seeks to show us what the abundant life (John 10:10) is all about and how to safeguard against those things that would lead us astray. There is never an end to coveting and greed. Satisfaction is never reached by acquiring more things; it leads only to an insatiable appetite for even more.

Over the last ten studies, we have looked at how God wants us to live, and the safeguards He had in mind by way of the Ten Commandments. If we live by the spirit of those safeguards, we will grow in our knowledge and love of God and be increasingly in His will. It is a place to stand that pleases God.

*R&D How have you dealt with the temptation to want what others have?*

*Prayer: Lord, regardless of our place in life, our physical needs, and all of the rest of the challenges we may face, Your Providence is greater still. Help us to rejoice in what others have.*

## Day 21

**Read: Psalm 37:3-11**

**Practicing the Presence of God**

### Beginning the Day

Today we begin the third section of our Lenten study “A Place to Stand.” Over the next 12 days we will be considering ways in which we can grow in our relationship with God by intentionally keeping ourselves connected at various points throughout the day.

A “starting point” in maintaining a personal relationship with God is, of course, to commit our lives into His care first thing each day. A simple prayer such as “Lord, I commit myself into Your hands this day—body, mind, and spirit,” prayed soon after awaking each morning can accomplish this. What is better than to make this connection as early in the day as possible? It certainly gets things off to the right start.

David, credited with writing the Psalm that is our reading for today, is encouraging us to delight in the Lord and to commit everything into His care. To delight in someone involves taking great pleasure in their company and joy in their presence. This type of relationship is one that grows as our contact with, and knowledge of, the other grows. In the relationship with God, this growth process leads to our better understanding His love of us, and that is reason for delight.

Committing ourselves (v.5) implies putting complete trust in the one to whom we make the commitment. In the case of commitment to the Lord it means entrusting all we have to God: our family and loved ones, possessions, vocation, and the circumstances of our life. We give these to Him for His protection and His guidance in how we are to live. God can take a lot better care of us than we can ourselves. He just wants us to wait patiently (v.7) for Him to work out the details.

*R&D How do you begin your day with the Lord?*

*Prayer: Lord, there are no better hands into which I can commit my life than Yours.*

## Day 22

**Read: Ephesians 6:10-17**

### The Whole Armor of God

As we face the day in the presence of the Lord, another good starting point is protecting ourselves spiritually. There are Christians who seem not to believe in Satan, about whom Paul is speaking in our reading for today. Yes, they would say, there is evil in the world, but they really think it is just people sinning. They surely believe in supernatural good; otherwise, how could they believe in Jesus? But they disbelieve supernatural evil. This isn't the place to argue the point; except to say that your writer certainly agrees with Paul on the matter.

The important thing is that all Christians do well to put on the whole armor of God each morning. Our overall Lenten study is “A Place to Stand,” and Paul is telling us to stand firm (v.14). He first mentions the belt of truth. Jesus is the truth (John 14:6). As Christians, we are to go forth into the day encircled by this truth. Next, we put on the breastplate of righteousness. Here we are not talking about self-righteousness, but being in a right relationship with God; nor something of our own doing, but wholly because of His love for us. Then we have our feet fitted with the gospel of peace. In the midst of the most trying times, Christians can be “well shod” with the peace that passes all understanding and ready to share the gospel of grace with all with whom they come into contact.

The shield of faith is what we need to stand against the challenges of the day, whether it is the “flaming arrows of the evil one” (v.16), being verbally attacked by someone who disagrees

with us, or just the disappointments that may come our way. By putting our faith in Jesus as our shield, we can cope with whatever is sent against us. The helmet of salvation protects our minds from doubting Jesus' saving work in our lives. Finally, we have the only offensive weapon mentioned by Paul, the sword of the Spirit, God's word written. When we are tempted, we have Scripture to rely on and can use it just as Jesus did when he was tempted (Luke 4:1-12).

Thus, by putting on the "whole armor of God," we can take with us God's protection of us toward the day ahead. It can be our second step in practicing God's presence.

*R&D Do you regularly, or have you occasionally, put on the whole armor of God? What have been the results?*

*Prayer: Lord, this day I put on the whole armor of God: the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of righteousness, the belt of truth, the shoes of the gospel of peace, the sword of the Spirit, and the shield of faith.*

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### Day 23

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**Read: Philippians 4:4-7**

#### **Morning Prayers**

Our brief reading for today is filled with the joy of prayer. "The Lord is near," verse 5 reminds us. In everything, Paul encourages us to present our requests to God by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving. By doing so, he says we need not be anxious about anything. This is how we find the peace that passes understanding and guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

What Paul has given us is a perfect prescription for morning prayers. There is no better way to start the day than by coming near to God with our prayers. We have committed the day into the Lord's hands and we have put on the whole armor of God. Now is the time to get down to the specifics of our petitions, our intercessions, and our listening to God for His guidance, His answers to our prayers. What better time to seek God's will concerning the day ahead of us than at the break of dawn or as soon as we can?

We can fight anxiety and find peace in our morning prayers. There is something special about making our concerns and needs known to God early in the day. Of course, God knows what is on our hearts, but He longs to hear us express those needs in a way that shows that we are relying on Him for guidance and direction. As I have faced trials and tribulations in my own life and have laid them before God in prayer, I have seen Him speak to those situations in a multitude of ways. Sometimes it has been to show me that what seemed so serious was not worth worrying about. Other times He has inspired me with solutions to my problems. At still other times it was a matter of getting my priorities in place. And, of course, there has been the caution to simply wait on Him.

God gives us the opportunity to place our day in His hands by coming to Him with our morning prayers. It is the best way to start the day.

*R&D In what ways has God helped and guided you through your morning prayers?*

*Prayer: "It is good to give thanks to the Lord and to declare Thy loving kindness in the morning." (Psalm 92)*

## Day 24

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**Read: Colossians 3:12-17**

### Dressing with the Lord

Our next step in being in the presence of the Lord involves our getting dressed in the morning. Paul tells us, in our reading for today, to clothe ourselves with various fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). Karen Egerton, writing the Colossians study in *The Journey* in 2008, saw this passage as a means of getting dressed for work each morning by putting on these characteristics of the Holy Spirit so that God can be with us in this special way all day long.

As we put on our shirt or blouse, we can pray, “Lord, remind me to be compassionate today.” While we put on our pants or skirt, it can be: “Help me to take the time to be kind.” Putting on our belt can remind us, “Lord, wrap me in humility.” As we put on our shoes, we can pray to be patient with ourselves and forgiving of others. Our coat or jacket can be a mantle of gentleness.

For some of us, perhaps this is too structured a way to think and pray as we get dressed each morning. Nonetheless, the act of dressing can be a reminder that we are preparing to go out into the world as Christ’s person. Just as we would dress our bodies, we can clothe ourselves in Christ. Whether or not we are stylishly dressed will pale in comparison to being God’s ambassador, prepared to be His messenger and reconciler in a needful world.

Thus, we have one more way to practice the presence of God. A footnote in the *Life Application Bible* puts it this way: “Paul offers a strategy to help us live for God day by day: (1) imitate Christ’s compassionate, loving attitude (vv.12-13); (2) let love guide your life (v.14); (3) let the peace of God rule in your heart (v.15); (4) always be thankful (v.15); (5) keep God’s Word in you at all times (v.16); and (6) live as Jesus Christ’s representative (v.17).”

R&D *How might “getting dressed for Christ” work for you each day?*

Prayer: *Clothe me in Yourself, Lord, that I may be in You.*

## Day 25

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**Read: Ephesians 2:1-10**

### The Workday

Today’s reading reminds us of the wonderful new life God has provided for us through Jesus Christ. We, like the Ephesians to whom Paul wrote, were dead in our sins. We, too, followed the ways of the world and were disobedient to God. We followed the devices and desires of our lower nature. There was no hope for us short of an earth-shaking change. But God provided for us, and by grace we were saved.

Paul talks about being alive in Christ. Sin no longer has control of us. Christ’s sacrifice on the cross has destroyed the penalty of sin and its power over us. We have a place to stand, acquitted and not guilty before God (Romans 3:21-22). It is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us (Galatians 2:20). This is the truth we carry with us into our workplace each day.

“For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (v.10). As we continue to think in terms of the presence of God with us all through the day, perhaps our first real challenge comes as we arrive at our place of work. (Of course, while driving to work we may have had even more of a challenge, but we’ll get to that in a later study). On the one hand, we could face the extreme of a crisis (our workplace seeming to be like an emergency room at the hospital and we alone to deal with it). On the other hand, we may be looking at the other extreme of complete boredom. Hopefully, our work is



somewhere in between. But, regardless, we are not coming into it unprepared. Our prayers have gone before us, and we are alive in Christ.

What a wonderful difference we can make in our workplace if we are conscious of God's presence with us. We can see ourselves as much more than a person there to do a job. We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works. What does God have for us to do today?

*R&D How do you currently view your daily work? How can you make it more vibrant and joyful by being God's person in that special place?*

*Prayer: Ours are the only hands God has to accomplish His work here on earth. Use us, Lord.*

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## Day 26

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**Read: Mark 10:13-16**

### Interruptions

"Do not hinder them," Jesus tells his disciples who have rebuked the parents for trying to bring little children to him for a blessing. Jesus goes on to use this occasion to talk about the Kingdom of God and how we are to receive it like a little child. He wants us to be child-like in our openness to him, not childish. He took the children in his arms and blessed them.

This story is like a parable of what our day may be like. If we have "dressed ourselves" in the fruit of the Spirit as we talked about doing a couple of studies ago, people and situations will be coming to us each day in need of a blessing from Jesus. People who work with us may try to protect us from these interruptions, just as the disciples sought to protect Jesus. They will be doing it for the right reason, but that may cause the wrong result.

What Jesus would teach us is that the interruptions may well be opportunities for ministry in his name. The fact is that most of us probably get focused on what we need to do and how much time we have for doing it. When something unexpected happens or someone unexpected comes along, our first reaction may well be a negative one. Something has stepped into our private space and we don't want to have to deal with it. Jesus, on the other hand, may be calling us to sacrificial love. If we can accept these interruptions as God-incidents, we may be used to do a good work in the life of someone in great need.

We do, of course, need to consider that God does not call us to be doormats for everyone to walk over. It is appropriate to have boundaries to protect ourselves from continually being taken advantage of. It's a matter of openness on the one hand and balance on the other. If we are maintaining a consciousness of God's presence with us through His Holy Spirit, we can usually make the right decision in each situation.

*R&D What kinds of interruptions do you often face during the course of a day? How do you tend to handle them?*

*Prayer: Help me, Lord, to deal with my selfishness so that I may be there for You.*

## Day 27

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**Read: Luke 24:44-49**

### Witnessing to Our Faith

In our last study we considered interruptions that are really opportunities to be Jesus in other people's lives. They can also be occasions for specifically sharing our faith in Christ with others.

Jesus tells his disciples that they are his witnesses to the world. He does caution them to wait until they have been empowered by the Holy Spirit for their mission, but he certainly expects them to carry the message once they are "clothed with power from on high." Where would we be if they had not done so? Thank God, the flame of His love has been passed from person to person down through the generations so that we, too, may be alive in Christ.

There are few things that can keep us as conscious of God's presence in our lives as the anticipation of telling others about Jesus and what he means to us. We become more closely attuned to the Holy Spirit within us. We notice with gratitude the good things that happen through the grace of God during the day. We see Christ in others to a greater extent than we would otherwise. We become better able to hear what others are saying to us with their hearts as well as their voices.

All of this equips us to witness our faith to others. We can be most effective if we have the sensitivity to perceive where others are in their own spiritual journey. Then, in a natural way, we can tell them what Christ has meant to us as we faced what they are facing. The Holy Spirit can guide us in what to say and not say. Often, sensitive listening is the most important prelude to sharing God's love.

*R&D In what ways have you been able to share with others the story of Christ's love for you?*

*Prayer: Help me, Lord Jesus, to have the courage to share with others what you mean to me.*

## Day 28

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**Read: Colossians 2:6-7**

### Thankfulness

In these two verses, Paul is giving us assurance concerning the topic of this overall study ("A Place to Stand") and our sub-topic "Practicing the Presence of God." Receiving Christ as our Lord and Savior is the beginning of our life in Christ, but growth in the knowledge and love of Christ is a life-long process. He is present with us through the Holy Spirit. Our challenge is to be conscious of that presence in ways we are considering in this study. We can live for Christ by total surrender to him (Romans 12:1-2) and then learning from him through Scripture and the lessons of life.

Paul's use of the term "rooted and built up" in Christ is significant. Just as a tree or plant must seek its nourishment from the soil through its roots, so we must draw our spiritual nourishment and strength from Christ. The more we avail ourselves of this life-giving support, the stronger we grow in our faith. The more we grow in our faith, the more conscious we are of all that God does for us, and that leads to thankfulness.

Our focus today is on practicing God's presence through thankfulness. Paul says we should be overflowing with it. I like to use the term "providential disposition." This means not only living in the consciousness of God's presence but also His providence, His divine guidance and care. Thus, whatever happens during the day, we can look for God's hand in it. When those things are

reflective of divine guidance or care, we can see in them the grace of God in action. That gives us reason to be thankful. Expressing our thankfulness to God builds our sense of His presence.

One thing that has been helpful on this matter in my life has been keeping a “Thank Box.” When something happens in the course of the day for which I have special reason to be thankful to God, I drop some money in the Thank Box. How thankful I am is reflected in how much I put in the box. When it becomes full, I count the money and send a check for it to mission work.

R&D *What helps you stay conscious of what you have to be thankful for?*

Prayer: *“O Lord, Thou art my God; I will exalt Thee, I will praise Thy name; for Thou hast done wonderful things.”* (Isaiah 25:1)

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## Day 29

**Read: Matthew 26:26-30**

### Family Prayer

Our reading for today is from what we call “The Last Supper.” Jesus is breaking bread with his disciples as he faces crucifixion and death. The words he speaks and the actions he takes have become the basis of what we celebrate in our churches as Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper or the Eucharist. It is the ultimate family prayer, but it is also an example to us of the importance of prayer whenever we share a meal.

Another way of carrying the presence of the Lord in our lives through the day is to ask the blessing at our meals. The picture in my mind is one of Norman Rockwell’s classics. A boy and his grandmother bow in prayer at a table in a small restaurant, with two young men respectfully watching them. When we are out as a family we always ask God’s blessing on the food without trying to look “holier than thou.” Any number of times people have thanked us for doing so. But the point is not to do it as a witness to others, but because we are truly grateful for the ways in which God provides for us, and praying at meals is just one more way of being consciously in His presence and His provision.

Mealtimes is just one instance of when we can have family prayers. The best family prayer is the husband and wife praying together each day. It may be a formal time of shared prayer or simply a blessing of each other and of the children as we head off our separate ways to work or school each morning. When the children are small, praying with them at night can be a very special time. We can talk about prayer with our loved ones, but letting them see us doing it, and—better still—doing it with them, is much more effective. Family prayer encourages those who come after us to also practice the presence of God.

R&D *What do you do by way of family prayer? What could you do better?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for those who are our family; help us to grow closer to You in prayer.*

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## Day 30

**Read: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-24**

### During the Day

When Paul wrote these “final instructions” at the end of his first letter to the Thessalonians, he combined many of the thoughts we should have in our minds as we seek to be in the presence of God all day long. He wants us to be conscious of those working around us. We are to love them

and be at peace with them. We are to encourage, help, and be patient with others. And, we are to reflect the joy that is in us because of Christ.

In all of this, we are to pray continually (v.16). You may recall that I mentioned earlier in this study that going to and from work, especially if driving, can be a challenge. This is a time for prayer. Also, we find ourselves waiting... waiting for an appointment, waiting in line, waiting to pick up our children from school, waiting (may I add?) for our wives while they are shopping. These are often tests of our patience, and a time for prayer. Circumstances come along during the day, some that bring joy and others that pose problems. We are to pray about these as well. In verse 18, Paul is not saying that we give thanks *for* all circumstances, but *in* them; that is, we are thankful for God's presence and for what can be accomplished even in bad situations.

In calling us to pray continually, Paul does not have in mind our dropping to our knees in reverence for everything going on around us during the day. We can pray continually while we are doing many other things. The important thing is having a prayerful attitude, what I earlier called a providential disposition. Such an attitude is built on our acknowledging our complete dependence on God, being conscious of His presence with us, and doing His will to the best of our ability. Then we will find it natural to lift up brief prayers of petition, praise, confession, intercession, and thanksgiving all day long.

*R&D To what extent do you find yourself in prayer during the course of the day?*

*Prayer: Lord, I want to be conscious of Your presence with me all day. Help me to remember my full dependence on You.*

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## Day 31

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**Read: 2 Corinthians 9:6-15**

### At the Close of Day

Our reading for today may, on the surface, seem a strange one for dealing with how we maintain our relationship with God at the close of the day. But evening prayers would seem best to be a time for reflecting on the past day and in what ways we have sowed generously the love of God, or been sparing in doing so. It is a time for self-examination.

As we look at today's passage, our focus will not be on the giving of our money or possessions, although that could be a part of our looking into ourselves and our motivations. Let us, instead, think in terms of the giving our time and attention to others during the day just passed. Paul talks about sowing seeds. Have we sown seeds of God's love or seeds of discord and unrighteousness? Have we been God's person in the situations and circumstances of the day, or have we failed Him? This is a time for prayers of thanksgiving concerning our successes and confession for our failures. Most of all, it is a time to reflect on the day that we may learn from our experiences.

As Paul points out, the service we perform on behalf of others not only meets their needs, but is an overflowing of our thanks to God. There is nothing more satisfying than the feeling that God has used us to His glory. And, when we have made Christ known to others by our words and deeds, they may pray for us. That sustaining prayer can help us in recognizing God at work in our lives as we seek to continue to grow in the love and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Whether we conclude the day with formal prayers or informal ones, the important thing is to reflect on the day and what part God has had in it.

R&D *What do you presently do by way of evening prayers?*

Prayer: *O Lord, the shadows have lengthened and evening has come; our busy day is over. Give us peace and a holy rest.*

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## Day 32

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**Read: Psalm 63:1-8**

### **Committing Our Souls into the Lord's Hands**

The final step in completing the day in the presence of the Lord is to commit ourselves into His hands before we go to sleep. This can be by a simple prayer such as: "Lord, I commit myself into Your hands, body, mind, and spirit. Give me a peaceful rest, I pray You, that I may awake refreshed and prepared for the day ahead." It's a great way to end the day, dependent on God.

Our psalm also deals with prayer at night, but in a somewhat different sense. David, to whom this psalm is attributed, speaks of the watches of the night. The night was divided into three watches, but was generally the time for sleeping. Unfortunately, we do not always sleep soundly all night long. If we agonize over our sleeplessness, it only aggravates the situation. The remedy is to remember our desire for the Lord's presence, and this leads to prayer. If there is a problem that is keeping us awake, this is a wonderful time to pray for the Lord's guidance in connection with it. It is also a time to lift in prayer to the Lord our friends and loved ones and those in need of God's healing. We shouldn't waste our sleeplessness.

Over the last 12 studies, we have considered various ways to practice the presence of God from our time or awakening in the morning to, and through, our rest time at night. Overall this Lent, we are establishing or re-establishing the basis for our faith a place to stand. The purpose is to remind ourselves of the foundations on which our faith rests and to consider how to live each day on those foundation stones. Practicing God's presence not only builds our personal faith by learning to trust God in the activities of our daily lives, but it also gives us the opportunity to show forth the love of Christ into the lives of the people with whom we come into contact.

R&D *How good a "sleeper" are you? What could help you sleep better?*

Prayer: *Lord, help me not to waste my sleeplessness.*

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## Day 33

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**Read: Luke 1:1-4**

**The Authority of Scripture**

### **Luke's Purpose**

We have now reached the final stage of our Lenten Study, "A Place to Stand." In a sense, we Christians have no place to stand without the Bible. It is God's story and the fountain of our knowledge about Him and His Son Jesus Christ. Thus, over the remaining days of Lent, we will look at the authority of Scripture.

Luke the Physician was the first historian of the Christian Church. He was not an eyewitness to the events of Jesus' life and ministry, but he was concerned that the eyewitness accounts be accurately preserved. He wanted to be sure that the information would be clearly understood in the generations to come.

In a time when many challenge the accuracy of Scripture, it is important to be reminded of the conscientiousness with which Luke undertook his task. My standard response to those who question the accuracy and authority of Scripture is one I got from a friend some years ago: Why

would God do all He has done for us, including His Son dying for us to set us free, and then give us a record of it that we cannot rely on to guide all aspects of our life? For confirmation of that thought, over these next days we will be looking at specific passages of Scripture that substantiate its authority.

Luke was a medical doctor. He therefore knew how essential it was to be thorough and accurate. His skills of observation and natural inquisitiveness would have led him to investigate the stories about Jesus. We can be sure that Luke was neither gullible nor fanciful. He would have reached proper conclusions about what should be included in his account and what should be left out. We can have confidence in Luke's account of the life of Jesus.

*R&D How do you deal with people who question the accuracy or authority of the Bible?*

*Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for giving us a record of Your story that we can rely upon to guide our lives.*

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### Day 34

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**Read: Luke 24:13-35**

#### Jesus' Bible Study

Today's reading is the familiar Road to Emmaus story near the end of Luke's Gospel. The two with whom Jesus had been walking and talking did not understand why Jesus had died on the cross. Our focus is on verse 27 that tells us: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." That is the Bible study in which we all wish we could have participated.

The situation might remind us of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:29-35. The Ethiopian had gone to Jerusalem to worship. On his way home he was reading from the book of Isaiah, but did not understand what he was reading. The particular passage (53:7-8) was a prophecy concerning the Messiah, and Philip was able to interpret it for the man, leading him to commit his life to Jesus and be baptized. Jesus was undoubtedly doing something very similar with these travelers to Emmaus.

The problem with the Jews (as these two travelers were) was that they had been led to think of the coming Messiah as someone who would be a conqueror/king who would overthrow their Roman oppressors. Jesus had to show that this was a mistaken belief. By taking them through what we call the Old Testament, he could demonstrate the true nature of the Messiah and the death he had to suffer on their behalf. Later, they were able to say that their hearts were strangely warmed as Jesus opened the Scripture to them.

The experience of the Emmaus travelers and the Ethiopian eunuch is one we may have had ourselves when someone "opened the Scriptures" to us, or when we had the privilege of doing it for someone else. The Bible is God's word written. When we understand it, it can change our lives.

*R&D Recall an experience in which the Bible was opened to your understanding in a special way.*

*Prayer: Lord, help us to grow in our knowledge of Scripture day by day, and to share what we learn with others.*

## Day 35

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**Read: John 21:24-25**

### John's Testimony

In considering Luke's Gospel, we noted that Luke had not been an eyewitness to Jesus' life but was a historian we could believe in. Today we look at the concluding verses of John's Gospel. John was not only an eyewitness, but was one of the closest disciples to Jesus. He, along with Peter and James, were with Jesus at some of the most important events in Jesus' life. So, once again, we have a writer we can believe in.

There is another aspect of the Gospel of John that makes it special. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are synoptic gospels. That is, they contain common material and tell the story of Jesus in a logical progression. John's Gospel, on the other hand, looks at the story from a more spiritual point of view. There is a depth, a beauty, and a more profound way of looking at truth than in the other gospels. As a result, it gives us a fuller picture of the significance of Jesus' life and the effect it should have on us.

John "testifies to these things" and "wrote them down" that we may know that his testimony is true. John's purpose in writing the gospel was to prove conclusively that Jesus is the Son of God and that all who believe in him will have eternal life. He "makes the case" that all may believe. He presents his testimony just as a witness would do before a judge. Those who read the story can see the evidence and can make their choice. It is a choice that has eternal consequences.

John ends by mentioning that there was no way to write down everything that Jesus did. The fact is, however, that we have enough. For those who say that, in our day, we face situations the gospel writers could never have imagined, the answer is that people really haven't changed over all these centuries, and God knew what we would need to know in order to do His will.

*R&D What is special to you about John's Gospel? Explain.*

*Prayer: Lord, thank You for the unique perspective from which John wrote his gospel, and for the wisdom and beauty it conveys.*

## Day 36

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**Read: 2 Peter 1:12-21**

### Authentication

In our reading for today Peter authenticates Scripture in a clear and direct way. Peter knows his time here on earth is coming to an end and he wants to leave Christians with an understanding of the importance of Scripture. His reference in verses 16-18 is to the transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:1-8) to which he was a witness. He wants there to be no doubt about what happened on the mountain. He, James, and John had even heard the voice of God saying of Jesus, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Peter also wants to make it clear that all Scripture is God-inspired. He affirms the Old Testament prophets. They were not speaking for themselves but were saying what God wanted them to say. In making this statement he was bridging the gap between the writings of old and what he, Paul, and the gospel writers were writing in his day. The word of the prophets was being "made more certain" (v.19) by having been lived out in the Messiah Jesus and now being recorded for posterity. All Scripture writers were responding to the inspiration of God.

In affirmation of this point, see 2 Peter 3:14-16 in which Peter makes reference to Paul's letters. He speaks of Paul writing to other Christians (v.15) with "the wisdom that God gave him."

“He [Paul] writes the same way in all his letters” (v.16). “His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do *other Scriptures*, to their own destruction.” Already the early church understood Paul’s letters to be inspired by God.

Going back to our original passage, in verse 19 Peter is emphasizing the fact that one day “the morning star will rise in our hearts” (our being present with Jesus in eternity). In the meantime, we have the Holy Spirit to illuminate Scripture for us. It is to be our light “shining in dark places” and guiding us into truth.

R&D *How does the Holy Spirit illuminate Scripture for you?*

Prayer: *Dear Lord, may the Bible shine into the dark places of my life and guide me into truth.*

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### Day 37

**Read: 2 Timothy 3:14-17**

#### Affirmation

In our reading for today Paul is both affirming Timothy and affirming the Word of God written. Timothy was being challenged by false teachers and by the pressures of leading a young church while he was still a very young man. Paul saw a need to encourage him. He makes three especially important points.

Paul notes that Timothy had known the Scriptures from infancy. His grandmother and mother (Eunice and Lois) were early converts (1:5) and godly women who taught Scripture. Knowing Scripture from childhood gives us a solid start on life. Even if we later go through a period of doubt, that background knowledge is there for us when we yield ourselves to it. This is a reminder to each of us concerning our responsibility to teach our children and grandchildren the Bible from an early age.

Paul also knew that Timothy had been convinced of the authenticity of Scripture because of the persons from whom he had learned it. The living out of the Christian life is much more impressive than just speaking the words. Timothy had seen the quality of life exhibited by Eunice and Lois. What was real to them was real to him. The message for us is to be sure our lives reflect obedience to Scripture.

The main point is Paul’s “definition” of Scripture: it is “God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (v.16). The whole Bible is the inspired word of God. It is trustworthy to be applied to our lives. It does all the things Paul says it does and more. As the guidebook of our lives, we should be regular in the reading of Scripture and in applying it to the way we live.

R&D *From whom did you first learn Scripture? How has that affected your life?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for caring so much for us that You have given us the Bible to guide our everyday lives.*

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### Day 38

**Read: Romans 15:1-13**

#### Encouragement

Today we are looking at a message of hope and encouragement from Paul to the Romans. The church in Rome was divergent in make-up. It was composed of Jews and Gentiles, free people



and slaves, the wealthy and the poor, people of strong character and those who were not. Unity was a problem. It was difficult for the members of the church to fully accept one another. Paul wants these people to serve one another, sharing what they have and avoiding conflict. He calls on them to please one another and build each other up.

Our focus is verse 4: “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” So, in addition to what has already been said about Scripture and its benefits, we add encouragement. The more we know about what God has done in the past, the better we are able to cope with the present and the future. The better we know God through the Bible, the more assurance we have of His presence with us and love for us.

The Bible is filled with encouragement. If we are depressed, we can go to Psalm 25:15-18. If we have low self-esteem, Psalm 8:4-8 can help. When lonely, reading Joshua 1:9 is a remedy. When fearful, Romans 8:31-39 can lift us up. If we are feeling inadequate in any way, Psalm 23 can be a great comfort. If we are in doubt about our life in Christ, reading John 14:1-14 gives great assurance. And just for sheer inspiration, there is always 1 Corinthians 13.

The Bible can be an encourager to us and can strengthen us to encourage others, as Paul asks be done in today’s passage. It is, in fact, our authority for doing so.

*R&D Do you come to Scripture in times of need? Explain.*

*Prayer: Help us to remember, Lord, that the Bible is not just for our benefit but so that we may be encouraged to encourage others.*

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## Day 39

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**Read: Hebrews 4:12-13**

### **The Nature of the Word**

In the midst of his dissertation on Sabbath-rest, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews inserted these verses that are our reading for today. He is making the point that faithless disobedience will not go unnoticed. Few verses of Scripture are packed with as much significance as these two. As we reflect today on the day Jesus died on the cross, these verses of Scripture may speak to us in a special way.

The word of God is living. William Barclay calls it a living word for all mankind for all time. Other things may pass away, but the word of God must be accepted or rejected, to our eternal glory or eternal peril.

God’s word is active. When people have followed the word of God, things have happened. When the Bible became available to the common people, the Reformation occurred. When leaders stood on the word, slavery ended.

The word of God is penetrating. It divides soul and spirit. It tests our earthly life and our spiritual experiences.

God’s word judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. It scrutinizes our desires and our intentions.

Finally (v.13), the writer is telling us that all is laid bare before God. Visualize that, as Jesus hung naked upon the cross, we are naked before God. The word of God searches us. Our disguises are stripped away and God sees us as we really are. Scripture can have that power in our lives. Today is the day to decide if we will stand up for our belief in Jesus Christ who died for our sins.

R&D *In what ways would you say that Scripture has “exposed” you?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace. Thank you, Lord Jesus.*

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## Day 40

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**Read: James 1:19-27**

### Doing the Word

We come to the end of our Lenten study and our look at the authority of Scripture. Our focus is on a place to stand. Today’s reading seems to sum it up and give us our “marching orders” for the days ahead. James says, “Do not merely listen to the word of God, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (v.22).

James is giving us some practical advice. He first points out the importance of listening, saying that we should be quick to listen and slow to speak. He cautions against anger and immorality, calling us to humility and reminding us to rely on the promise of salvation (“the word planted in you”). He touches on the danger of the tongue, a theme he develops in full at 3:1-12. He ends the passage by telling us to look after the widows and orphans (ones who had little economic support) and to keep ourselves from being polluted by the world around us.

Our primary message today, however, is in verses 22-25. It is essential to Christian growth that we “hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest” Scripture. We cannot know how God wants us to live if we are not becoming increasingly knowledgeable concerning God’s word written. But James’ point is that knowing Scripture is of little value if we are not putting into practice what it teaches us. “Don’t just think about it or discuss it, do it!” is what James is saying to us.

Thus we close our Lenten study on “A Place to Stand.” We have gone “Back to Basics” for a refresher course on how we became disciples of Jesus Christ and how to help others do so. We then looked at “The Ten Safeguards,” how the Ten Commandments were designed by God not to limit us, but to free us. Next we considered “Practicing the Presence of God” all through the day. And we have concluded with “The Authority of Scripture.” These studies were designed to give us assurance about the place we stand as Christians in a challenging world. Hopefully, we feel refreshed and prepared to “do the word” in a needy world.

R&D *How do you intend to put into practice what you have learned through this Lenten study or through Lent itself?*

Prayer: *O God, from whom to be turned is to fall, to whom to be turned is to rise, and with whom to stand is to abide forever; grant us in all our duties Your help, in all our perplexities Your guidance, in all our dangers Your protection, and all our sorrows Your peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Augustine of Hippo)*

*by Harry C. Griffith*

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