

The Journey

GOD'S WORD FOR DAILY LIVING



MAY-AUGUST 2022



Bible Reading Fellowship

Eternal God,

**Your word is always a light for our way;
Open our eyes and enlighten our spirit that we
may understand your truth in all its power and
holiness.**

**Give us courage to allow it to transform our lives
and enable us to grow more and more into the im-
age of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.**

Amen

The Journey is a daily Bible reading program which covers the Bible every five years. Each month addresses a book of the Bible or a Scripture theme.

Each day's reading consists of a 10-15 verse Bible passage followed by clear, helpful commentary. A reflection and discussion question and applicable prayer are also included. The passage of Scripture should be read just before studying *The Journey* commentary.

The following features make *The Journey* unique:

1. Commentary on Scripture to aid in better understanding the passage (as distinguished from devotional material based upon Scripture)
2. Presented in a relational way (i.e., what does this say about how God wants me to live?)
3. Easily adapted to group study (the "Reflection and Discussion" questions at the end of each lesson can be used for group discussion)
4. Special readings for Advent and Lent

We sincerely hope that you will find this resource a valuable companion on your "journey" through productive Bible reading for many years to come.

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The Bible Reading Fellowship is committed to the Church's classic teaching that the Bible is the inspired word of God and contains all things necessary for salvation.

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Table of Contents

	Begins on
The Acts of the Apostles: Chapters 9-16	page 1
Judges	page 31
Letters to the Thessalonians	page 55
James: An Action Plan for Christians	page 83

The Bible Reading Fellowship is deeply grateful to all who have so generously contributed to this issue of *The Journey*, especially the writers: **Shirley R. MacNaughton** (Acts of the Apostles), **Robert Stevens** (Judges), **Gregory O. Brewer** (Thessalonians), and **Harry C. Griffith** (James: An Action Plan for Christians). We are also extremely grateful to J. Keith Miller who so generously allowed us to quote from his writings for Sabbath Times (unless otherwise noted).



The Acts of the Apostles

Chapters 9-16

Sunday, May 1

Sabbath Time

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. 2 Corinthians 4:1

One minister wrote the names of members of his congregation and the tragedies they had in their lives on 3x5 cards he kept in his pocket. When he went calling and discovered someone in trouble, or when a counselee came to him with an agonizing situation, he reached in his pocket and pulled out the card with the name and address of the person in his congregation who had had the same problem. He asked his counselee if he or she would like to talk to someone who had been through the same difficulty and survived. Then he made contact and got these people introduced. Time after time he found that the people who had been through alcoholism, sickness, failure, or divorce were much better able to tell those who were in the midst of these experiences that they would survive and to give them some hints as to how. This also made ministers out of his congregation.

Monday, May 2

Read: Acts 9:1-9

A Change of Plans

The way was long, 140 miles from Jerusalem over hot and thirsty roads, finally climbing Mount Hermon to see in the valley below the beautiful city of Damascus. The way was lonely, a week's journey on foot with no one but the temple guard for company, persons from which Saul normally kept aloof. But the journey was almost over.

There had been plenty of time to think and to make plans, to think about these Christians who were threatening the things which were the foundation of his life, the Jewish law, the temple worship and the traditions of his people. His ardent fervor for these

things found a corollary emotion in his blinding hatred for this Jesus, a cursed criminal, and hatred for his followers, common men of the people. His plans were to hunt down all followers of the Way, the name these people used for themselves. He marched under the banner of the Sanhedrin. He would bring them back to Jerusalem, bound, to stand trial and be punished for their blasphemies. But during this long journey he also could not resist reflecting on the strange love and loyalty which these people had for this foolish faith (1 Corinthians 1:22-25).

Saul had plans for himself. God also had plans for Saul. In a moment of blinding light, the “light of the world” (John 8:12) appeared to Paul and called him to fulfill God’s plan. “Who are you, Lord?” “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do” (vv.5-6).

Paul was used to doing what he thought best, to doing what he wanted to do, to following his own plan for his life. But in what has been called “perhaps the greatest event in Church history after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost” (Warren Wiersby), Paul discovered a better way. He discovered Jesus Christ was alive and had plans for him. In that moment of conversion, he began to do what Jesus Christ wanted him to do.

R&D An old prayer reads, “God grant me the wisdom and the courage to be what You created me to be.” How well are you fulfilling God’s plan for your life?

Prayer: Lord, You created me out of love; help me to reflect that love in my life.

Tuesday, May 3

Read: Acts 9:10-19

To Be Used

It is said that there is no greater satisfaction in life than to be used in and for the service of a cause or a person in whom you believe. If the root meaning of being a disciple of Jesus is to believe in and follow him, an integral part of discipleship is our willingness to be used by him in the service of other people. The Boy Scout banner proclaims service to God and to country. The disciple’s banner proclaims service to God and to others.

Someone has said that the call to ministry is a call to action. Ministry is not given to confer status or privilege or position on the minister, either clergy or lay, but it is to carry out a task for the Lord. It is a part of discipleship. It is service for Christ (Matthew 20:25-28; 25:31-46).

Ananias was a disciple. He believed in and followed Jesus. He knew who Jesus was! When Christ spoke to him in a vision, Ananias did not answer, “Who are you, Lord?” but “Here I am, Lord.” His relationship with Jesus was such that when the call to service came, Ananias could express his true feelings. Understandably, however, Ananias had a problem with Saul. He was afraid of him for he knew what Saul had been doing to other Christians and why he was coming to Damascus. Ananias was not eager to confront Saul and risk imprisonment and death. Yet, in spite of his fears and hesitation, he accepted the Lord’s reassurance and call to service.

How God used Ananias! Responding to God’s call, Ananias found Saul. His first action was to offer Saul Christian love and fellowship. “Brother Saul, no matter what you have been, you now belong, you are a part of us.” Then Ananias was used by the Lord as the minister of Saul’s healing and to be the vehicle for Saul’s personal Pentecost and baptism.

As disciples who know Christ, we, too, are called to be used. We may think that there is little that we can accomplish but all Christ needs is that we, like Ananias, be willing to serve.

R&D What does the story of Ananias tell you about God’s call to you today?

Prayer: Gracious God, make us ready, willing, and able to serve in whatever manner You call us to serve this day and all days ahead.

Wednesday, May 4

Read: Acts 9:19b-31

A New Creation

Being a sometimes horse-racing fan, I watch with fascination the hype and fanfare surrounding the Kentucky Derby. Each horse, owner, trainer, and jockey is photographed from all angles and their lives examined in depth. One year the jockey on one of the favored horses was particularly scrutinized. He was very young and

his career was described as troubled and later revealed to have been disturbed by cocaine problems. His message to the watching public was, “That’s all behind me now. I have a different life.” And, indeed, although some may have had doubts, it seems likely that he told the truth as he rode his horse to the winner’s circle.

“The old life is behind me. I have a new life. I have a new reason for living... Jesus,” was the message which Paul proclaimed. In brief verses which telescope a period of some three years in the life of Paul (see Galatians 1:15-24), Luke describes the reactions with which Saul’s dramatically changed life was received.

The change was received with disbelief (vv.21, 26). We tend to think that people cannot change overnight. At first, neither the Jews nor the Christians believed that Paul had really changed. Paul had a past that was well known and which other people saw as circumscribing all he was and could ever be. Suddenly he had broken out of the boundaries that other people had set around him and they didn’t quite believe it.

As people accepted the change in Saul, he experienced acceptance, care, and protection from the Christian community (vv.25, 27-30). The Jews who had sent him to Damascus saw Saul as a traitor. Betrayal provokes strong feelings, and the Jewish community reacted with outrage and with punitive measures and attempts to destroy him.

R&D How do you react to someone who has become a changed person through Christ? What causes you to react as you do?

Prayer: Lord, I don’t want to be the person I used to be; I want to be the person You want me to be.

Thursday, May 5

Read: Acts 9:31-43

Doing His Job

Two little vignettes of the Church, seldom read, never preached about and so strangely positioned in Scripture are before us. It is supposed by some scholars that these stories about Peter form the bridge between the conversions of Saul, the Jew who became the supreme apostle, and of Cornelius, the first Gentile con-

vert. For some, these stories merely place Peter in the position to be the catalyst at the Gentile Pentecost.

But what a truly marvelous picture of Peter they paint for us! They focus him more clearly than almost anything else in Acts, for they show him faithfully carrying out his ministry. Not huddled fearfully in the upper room nor converting thousands with his preaching power, Peter is pictured walking from village to village, visiting groups of Christians, simply and faithfully doing the work he had been given to do. As the larger-than-life, heroic figure in the old western movies shyly hangs his head and brushes aside thanks from grateful citizens with the soft words, “Shucks, I was just a doin’ my job,” so Peter is “just doing his job.” In this passage, he personifies the steady, faithful, and productive servant so commended by Jesus in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:23).

Luke presents Peter traveling about “here and there among them all,” visiting the dispersed Christian communities of Judea. Peter oversees a good and successful time in the Church (v.31). It is a time of peace now that the ravaging lion, Saul, has been tamed by Christ’s love. As he faithfully pursues his call, Peter’s ministry is not without the drama of God’s grace. His very constancy and faithfulness is the open door through which God’s grace can flow. For in these days, Peter walks with God’s power! Wherever Peter goes, the name of Jesus brings healing. The paralytic Aeneas, a believer, responds to Jesus’ name and is healed. When the good and generous Tabitha (Dorcas) dies, a call goes out for Peter. Expectations are great that even death can be conquered! And why not? Jesus is alive! Through the Holy Spirit he is present in Peter and, in Peter’s steady response to him, his risen power does miraculous things.

R&D How do you respond to this picture of Peter? What challenge does it offer you?

Prayer: Give us the inner confidence, Lord, that we can do as Peter did; that we can respond to the opportunities before us every day with Your loving action.

Read: Acts 10:1-8

Even Greater Gifts

Here's a thought: what would you like to have written on your tombstone? "Here lies Jane/John Doe. She/He was a good person, a success in work, an example to the family, a model of generosity, a true humanitarian, a person who believed in God, a spiritual person of prayer." Would such a eulogy satisfy you or is there some further exemplary phrase that you would want included? We all are concerned about success in profession and career. Cornelius had that. As a member of the elite Italian Cohort, he had respect and authority. We are concerned about status in our community. Cornelius had that. As a centurion he had status among the Gentiles; and, as a god-fearer of great generosity, he had status among the Jews (10:22). We are concerned about the love and respect of family and friends. Cornelius seems to have had even that as all his household followed his example of faith. At the deepest level of our being, whether we are consciously aware of it or not, we are concerned about spiritual things. Even here Cornelius was blessed. God communed with Cornelius through the prayers that he offered and the gifts that he gave others (10:4, 30-31).

Luke's portrait most probably would have satisfied Cornelius. It would satisfy most people... but it did not satisfy God. He wanted more for Cornelius. He wanted Cornelius to be more. He had a greater gift in store for Cornelius. Asking Cornelius for his willing obedience, God set in motion the events which would bring the gift of a new community to Cornelius. Old barriers were to crumble and cease to exist. As Cornelius eagerly waited, God prepared not only the gift of a larger, deeper spiritual community, but the power-filled and personal gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

R&D As you consider how Cornelius prepared himself to receive the gifts of God, where do you find parallels in your own life?

Prayer: Come, Lord Jesus, and so full my heart with your love, that others might come to know you better through me.

Read: Acts 10:9-28a

Dare to Be Different

“Dare to be different” was once a popular slogan that urged us to risk being different from other people. It raised the possibility of taking the risk of acting, thinking, being different from the person we had been in the past. Peter was different from the other apostles. Scripture portrays him as brash, bold, impulsive, unthinking, strong-headed, impetuous... different. He was also intensely loyal and deeply loving. Peter dared to be different from most other people of his day as he chose to follow Jesus.

Now God has come to Peter and challenged him to dare to think differently from the way he had in the past. God asks Peter to accept a bold new truth and to undertake a new course not only in his own ministry but in leading the whole Church into different waters of thinking and acting. The change was introduced to Peter in a vision. On the housetop, hungry, waiting for a meal, shaded by an awning and growing sleepy in the noon heat, Peter fell into a doze and began to dream. In his dream, a huge sheet was let down from heaven containing all kinds of animals forbidden as food to the Jews by Old Testament law (Leviticus 11). Peter heard God’s voice, “Kill and eat” (v.13). Peter, still the orthodox Jew, recoils from the forbidden foods. Twice more the dream is repeated. Twice more Peter rejects the forbidden food. Finally awake, the dream remains clear in memory but incomprehensible in meaning.

Immediately, in the midst of his puzzlement, three Gentile men arrive asking Peter to travel for two days to visit a Roman centurion. Urged by the Holy Spirit, Peter offers the visitors hospitality. It is the first step in Peter’s most dramatic call to be different.

This is the second of five scenes in the Cornelius saga. The length of the Peter-Cornelius story (10:1-11:18) indicates the importance of this incident. Howard Marshall comments, “It deals with the decisive issue in the history of the early Church, namely that the gospel is for the Gentiles as well as the Jews, and makes it clear that this was no mere human decision, but that it was a result of God’s clear guidance.”

R&D *How able are you to see God's guidance in new courses of action in your life as God dares you to be different?*

Prayer: *Sometimes, Lord, it is not easy for You to get through to me with what I am supposed to believe or do. May Your Holy Spirit continue to knock at the door of my heart until I hear Your messages clearly.*

Sunday, May 8

Sabbath Time

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." John 3:3

Regardless of the circumstances surrounding a person's surrender, and whatever the specific "content" of his experience, there almost always follows a strange awareness that he has entered a whole new segment of his life—as if he had turned a page and begun a new chapter. Jesus said this fresh vision of life is like being "born again".

Monday, May 9

Read: Acts 10:23b-34

Shaky Ground

Progress always involves risks. As someone once remarked, "You can't steal second base and keep your foot on first." It was one thing for Peter to offer hospitality to Gentiles but it was quite another thing for him to accept hospitality in a Gentile home. Peter steps out onto shaky ground and ventures into new and untried territory as he accepts Cornelius' invitation. Taking six Jewish companions (perhaps as witnesses) (11:12) with him, he makes the requested journey from Joppa to Caesarea. During the two-day journey, with his mind busy in thought and prayer, Peter is shown the meaning of his vision. With crystal clarity, Peter sees that it is not only foods that are acceptable but people! "God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean" (v.28).

It is hard for us to understand the giant leap of faith which Peter has taken. Ingrained in Peter was the notion of racial and spiritual superiority. He was part of a nation which saw itself as God's "exclusive and only" chosen people. He understood one God (Deuteronomy 5:6ff). He believed in one God who created all people (Genesis 5:1-2). But deep within himself, he resisted the thought that the blessings of God were for all people. Peter, along with al-

most the whole early church, saw the gift of the gospel of Christ as being offered to the Jews alone or to those who first became Jews before becoming Christians. Jesus for the Gentiles? Risky ground!

Is the message of this event something which happened long ago and never needs to be repeated? Or do we need to hear over and over again the central theme of this passage? God loves all people (v.34). Do we ever try to exclude from God's love those who are different from us? Are there those within the fellowship of the Church who insist that others become as they are before newcomers are allowed to enter? Or do we step out on risky ground by sharing God's love with anyone and everyone?

R&D What kind of risk are you willing to take to allow others to join the fellowship of the Church?

Prayer: Help me, Lord Jesus, to see you in others with whom I come into contact rather than noticing their differences and judging them because of those differences.

Tuesday, May 10

Read: Acts 10:34-43

Just the Facts

Cornelius was ready, open, eager for all of the facts which Peter has brought. "Now therefore we are all here present in the sight of God, to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord" (10:33). Never did a preacher have a more willing audience than Peter had in the home of Cornelius!

Unique among the sermons in Acts, Peter's message includes information about the earthly ministry of Jesus. Filled with his own recent revelation from God, Peter begins with the fact that Jesus Christ is the peacemaker and reconciler between God and all persons. Through Jesus, God has fulfilled His promise to bring peace to His people... peace with Himself and peace with each other (Romans 5:1; Ephesians 2:14-18). This peace is "not merely the absence of strife and enmity between man and God but also the positive blessings that develop in a state of reconciliation" (Howard Marshall). The ministry of Jesus was one of goodness, wholeness, and reconciliation. His entire ministry was an assurance of the blessings that come through peace with God.

Peter's message continues with the death of Jesus and the great good news of the resurrection. Jesus was rejected by the Jews and killed. But, God's message cannot be silenced. God's love and power cannot be defeated. The resurrection of Jesus testifies to that fact. The apostles are witnesses of that resurrection. Salvation comes to any one of any nation through the name of Jesus (v.43).

R&D *Where have you raised walls of hostility which divide you from others around you? from God?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for accepting me; help me to be accepting of others.*

Wednesday, May 11

Read: Acts 10:44-48

The Gentile Pentecost

Not only did God want more for Cornelius than the simple praise of the world (10:1-2), Cornelius himself wanted more. He craved words of forgiveness and salvation; he yearned to know deep down inside that he was acceptable to God (11:13-14). When Peter preached the wonderful words of life, Cornelius heard the answer for which he had prayed, the promise for which he had longed. He and all those with him believed and were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues.

There is no explicit mention of faith but it is implied. There is no question of circumcision before baptism. The outward manifestations of the Spirit were convincing evidence to Peter and the six other Jews present of the acceptability of the Gentiles. The door of faith was opened and the first Gentiles walked through into the Church. Peter used his keys of the kingdom for the third time. "The event was not so much a second Pentecost, standing alongside the first, as the participation of Gentile believers in the experience of the first Pentecost" (F. F. Bruce).

These first chapters of Acts tell us that we cannot "program" the work of the Holy Spirit. Groups of Christians have tried to codify their experience with God and insist that all other believers must experience the same avenue to God or be judged second-class. The disciples experienced the power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost changing them from simple believers to evangelists. Pentecost em-

powered them for mission. The Samaritans believed and were baptized and later received the Holy Spirit. The first Gentile believers believed and received the Holy Spirit and then were baptized.

These events say that we must not limit God to our experience or insist that every person be as we are. God speaks to each one of us where we are and uses every means to bring us to faith and into relationship with Himself. Praise God for His never-ending patience and ingenuity in seeking to reach us.

R&D How would you describe your own conversion experience to another person?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord God, for the unlimited ways in which You seek to find the lost. Thank You for finding me.

Thursday, May 12

Read: Acts 11:1-18

Closed Ranks

The early Church is not a society of Lone Rangers, each person doing his or her own thing. Even Peter is accountable to the whole Church! Peter's actions are closely scrutinized by the Church, put under a magnifying glass, "enlarged" to make certain that he is not departing from the apostolic faith. The conservative element within the Church, the circumcision party (the Jewish Christians who believed that before Gentiles became Christians they needed to be circumcised and pledge to keep the Jewish law), challenged Peter's bold action in proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles. Peter had taken a leap of faith in going to Cornelius and he asks the whole Church to take the same leap. His defense before the Jerusalem church recounts the actions of the Holy Spirit throughout the entire event. The Holy Spirit instigated his vision, led him to Cornelius (v.12) and filled the Gentiles so that they manifested outwardly the Spirit's gifts (v.15). The importance of this event for the early Church is evident since Luke here describes the event a second time.

The Jerusalem church accepted Peter's word. They trusted him. They knew that "what they saw was what they got." Peter was a person of integrity. How important it is that the Church has leaders who are trustworthy, leaders who are bold, leaders of integrity, leaders who will be accountable to the whole Church. Such a person

was Peter! In the face of his words, “Who was I that I could withstand God?” (v.17), the Church believed and moved forward, away from being a Jewish sect into the world-encompassing movement to which it had been called.

R&D *Can your actions stand being “enlarged” and made public (Luke 12:1-3)?*

Prayer: *Lord, if what we say is not how we live, who will care what we say?*

Friday, May 13

Read: Acts 11:19-30

Called Christians

It was in the great cosmopolitan and politically powerful “sin city” of Antioch that the followers of Jesus were first called Christians (v.26). The suffix “ian” means “to belong to” or “to be a part of” or “to be a partisan of.” Believers were seen as belonging to Christ. They were prominently visible in the community by the way they lived their lives. That distinct difference seen in them was traced to their faith in Jesus.

What made them stand out from the people around them? This panoramic picture of the early Church gives us some clues. (1) They were an inclusive fellowship composed of both Jews and Gentiles (v.20). (2) They were an evangelistic group who powerfully shared their faith with others (v.21). (3) They were not an isolated community but remained connected to the Jerusalem church and under its watchful oversight (v.22). (4) They were a community which had powerful, good, and encouraging leaders (vv.24-25). (5) They were a community which continued to learn and grow in their understanding of their faith (v.26). (6) They were a community which shared their material goods with other believers (vv.27-30).

The citizens of Antioch were noted for giving nicknames, usually derisive, to people and groups. The name Christian was a half-mocking, half-contemptuous name. But something happened as time went by. The name became not a name of contempt but a name of honor which stood for all the best, for love and courage and right and truth.

R&D *When you use the name “Christian” to describe yourself, what are you saying about who and what you are?*

Prayer: *Blessed Jesus, make us so bold in our faith that we are never hesitant to let others know we are Christians.*

Saturday, May 14

Read: Acts 12:1-24

A Tight Spot

There is a comforting childhood poem which describes the poet’s feeling of God’s protection: “Now I lay me down to sleep. Fourteen angels watch o’er me keep.” Peter must have had just such a sense of the protection of God in his life. Imprisoned by Herod Agrippa, Peter was in a very difficult spot. Security was airtight; sixteen soldiers were assigned to guard Peter throughout the day and night. He was chained by the right and left hands to two soldiers and two other soldiers guarded the door to his cell during each watch. Yet, secure in his faith in Jesus Christ, he slept soundly, so soundly that God’s messenger, an angel of deliverance, had to strike him before he awoke (v.7), literally shake him awake.

For some time the Jerusalem church had been blessed with peace and prosperity. Then Herod Agrippa, grandson of Herod the Great, became king in Palestine (A.D. 41). Part Jewish, raised in Rome, a practitioner of the Jewish faith himself, Herod both needed and desired the good will of the Jewish religious hierarchy. To gain their favor, he began a persecution of the church in Jerusalem. James, the apostle, was killed. Peter was imprisoned and headed for the same fate.

In such a “tight spot” the church did what it has done from the beginning, it prayed. The other believers prayed, surely, for Peter’s deliverance. Interestingly, when Peter was freed from prison, the believers had difficulty accepting the fact that God had answered their prayers. Full of fear and confusion, they had trouble hearing God’s answer (vv.15b-16).

How true is this incident to our own experience? Somehow today we have been indoctrinated not to expect much from prayer. We allow ourselves to be influenced by the world’s disbelief. We allow ourselves to be influenced by a certain cynicism within the

Church itself. We have been told that God may not change the circumstances but He will change you in order to accept the circumstances. And that is sometimes true. Yet we limit God! Are we afraid to say that, through prayer, God can change even the circumstances about which I pray? Or can we take our “tight spots,” our desperate situations, and give even those completely to God?

R&D Has there ever been a time in your life when you desperately needed God’s protection or power? Did you ask Him for it? Were you able to see an answer to your asking?

Prayer: Lord God, You work miracles in our lives every day if we just have the spiritual eyes to see them. To the world, seeing is believing; to the Christian, believing is seeing.

Sunday, May 15

Sabbath Time

Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.
Ephesians 6:18

For several years I had been reading the Bible and praying in the mornings. But now I began to concentrate on the people around me in the office in which I worked. Not knowing what to do, I began to pray for each of them as I walked to the drinking fountain, for instance. This decision made it necessary to get to know people personally, because I had to have something specific to pray about. So I asked questions during coffee breaks and learned about their lives—even though they didn’t know I was going to use that information to pray for them more specifically. People began to come into my office and sit down to talk about their personal problems, hopes, and dreams. And I hadn’t even invited them to or told them what I was doing.

Monday, May 16

Read: Acts 12:25—13:14a

The Right Man

In music there are certain clearly recognizable themes. A great symphony such as Beethoven’s Fifth will have a melodic line which is easily recognized and remembered and which is heard repeatedly as the work progresses. The Bible also has some clearly recognizable and dominant themes which echo and reecho throughout the entire

work. One of those themes is sounded again by Luke: God raises up the right persons at the right time to further His relationship with His people. Abraham was set apart to found a great nation. Moses was set apart to receive the Law. The Judges were set apart to lead the Hebrews during times of crises (Judges 2:16). The apostles are set apart as witnesses to Christ (Luke 24:48). And now, once again, Luke sounds the theme as Barnabas and Saul are set apart for mission (vv.2, 4). The work of the Church is still being directed by the Holy Spirit. The Church recognizes and confirms the direction of the Spirit.

Luke's great hero, Paul, begins to emerge as the missionary extraordinary. Whether the name change (v.9) is mentioned because of special information that Luke had or because of Luke's desire to indicate that Paul (a Gentile name) is now embarking upon his work as a missionary to the Gentiles (9:15), Paul clearly is the right man at the right time. With his Jewish background, his Roman citizenship, education, and acculturation, his Christian experience of enlightened zeal for God (Romans 10:1-4), he becomes God's chosen instrument (9:15).

Never wishy-washy, always clear in mind and speech, Paul meets the first obstacle on this first missionary journey head on. His opponent is a false prophet (Bar-Jesus or Elymas) who had a vested interest in his own teachings, who refused to hear the gospel himself and tried to persuade the proconsul Sergius Paulus of the foolishness of Christianity. Recognizing the evil in Elymas, Paul deals with him harshly in words and deed. The power of the Holy Spirit permeates the scene as evil is met and vanquished and the gospel is preached and believed (v.12).

R&D Where in your Christian experience have you sensed being the right person in the right place to be used by God? How did you respond to the opportunity?

Prayer: Thank you, Holy Spirit, for being in us to guide us, particularly when you have a special opportunity for us to fulfill.

Read: Acts 13:13-52

Forgiven/Freed

“Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, I am free at last.” There is hardly an American who could not identify those words as coming from the mouth of Martin Luther King during the struggle for civil rights. Paul understood very deeply every person’s great longing and desire for freedom which King’s words identify.

For Paul, our freedom is spiritual. Some of Paul’s most profound writings describe our freedom in Christ. “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death” (Romans 8:2).

For the first time in Acts, Luke records one of Paul’s missionary sermons, preached in Pisidian Antioch. The setting for this sermon was in the synagogue amidst the prayers and the readings of Old Testament Scripture. An outline for Paul’s sermon might simply be: (1) The promise of a Savior: a brief rehearsal of the history of Israel from Abraham to the promise of a Messiah from the line of David (vv.17-22). (2) The promise imminent: the announcement by John the Baptist of the Messiah’s imminent arrival (vv.24-25). (3) The fulfilled promise unrecognized: the Messiah came, the promise was fulfilled in the person of Jesus (vv.23, 26). The Jewish rulers, ignorant of the true meaning of the Scriptures, failed to recognize Jesus (v.27). (4) The promise rejected: an innocent Jesus was killed but was raised from the dead, all according to the prophecy of Scriptures (vv.28-37). (5) The promise given anew: the promise still stands, for God continues to offer forgiveness and freedom through Jesus (vv.38-39).

There is one essential difference in Paul’s sermon from those of Peter and Stephen which Luke has previously recorded. Paul strikes the opening note of one of the dominant themes of all of his preaching and writing, the theme of God’s gift of freedom in Christ. “By him everyone that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses” (v.39).

R&D The good news is not only that Jesus has come but that he offers forgiveness and freedom. How would you describe to another person the part that acceptance of these gifts plays in your life?

Prayer: *Thank You, God Almighty, that we are truly free at last!*

Wednesday, May 18

Read: Acts 14:1-21

People Divided

Set apart by the Holy Spirit (13:3), sent out (13:4) to do specific work, Paul and Barnabas might have anticipated easy journeys, open receptive audiences, many converts, and growing success. Was this not God's work? Was not this God's mission? Why, then, were there problems? Why were there threats? Why was there opposition? Why was the response to the gospel so uneven? In spite of powerful preaching and miracles, why were the people so divided (v.4)? The remembered words of Jesus must have been of great comfort to them. Jesus taught that there would be divided responses to him and that the response of each person would be affected by the circumstances of life. "Hear then the parable of the sower" (Matthew 13:18-23).

There were those Jews who heard and understood the message but in their closed minds rejected it and did all in their power to keep others from accepting the gospel (vv.2, 5). There were those Gentiles who heard but misunderstood and misinterpreted the message and tried to accept it only on their own terms (vv.11-13, 18-19). Yet, as both Jesus and Peter had found (Luke 5:18-26; Acts 3:1-10), there were those who heard and believed, who discovered the "living God" in the good news of Jesus and experienced miracles in their lives (vv.1, 3, 8-10, 20-21).

William Willimon reminds us that as we read Acts, "We are reading a theological work meant to say and do something to the Church of Theophilus' day and our day, not a travelogue of Paul's journeys." Can this passage then cause us to examine the response of our city, our church, ourselves to the gospel? Do we impede its progress? Do we use it for our own ends and purposes? Can we give ourselves to it and allow it to change our lives?

R&D As you continue to read about the panoramic spread of the gospel in Acts, how would you answer the above questions for yourself?

Prayer: *In this time of great need for a spiritual awakening in our nation, Lord God, help us to reach others for Christ by all means needful and proper.*

Thursday, May 19

Read: Acts 14:19-28

No Easy Way

There is the old refrain “accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative.” The positive is what we want to hear! The mass media sells by touting the positive advantages of their product, insisting that the goods or services they have are the best. We see few disclaimers, no negatives about the product. Weight loss plans and mental health hospitals and lawyers promise relief and release from chronic problems without any mention of the discipline or cost involved. Even today’s churches promise happy, fulfilled, prosperous lives if we will just join their fellowship, accept their interpretation of the Christian faith, and give of our money to support them. All is positive; there is no mention of the negatives.

Jesus never tried to “sell” relationship with himself by citing only the positive aspects of that relationship. He was painfully honest. Luke records some of the costs of discipleship. “Bear his own cross... count the cost... renounce all” are the sobering words (Luke 14:25-35).

Paul delivered the powerful, lifesaving message of the forgiveness of sins plus the news of the glorious freedom from the necessity to earn God’s love and acceptance (13:38-39). Yet the basic honesty of his preaching would not allow him to neglect the cost of discipleship. “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (v.22). Access to God is free! Faith in Jesus is a free gift! The power of the Holy Spirit is free! Yet there is the reality of cost. Based on Jesus’ experience and teachings and his own personal experience, Paul warns that the way in the kingdom of God is not an easy one. Phillips Brooks once said, “Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be strong persons. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks.”

R&D *Has your commitment to Christ cost you anything, any sacrifice, any discipline, any discomfort? What blessings have you discovered in your "tribulations"?*

Prayer: *Lord Christ, the cost of discipleship is small compared to all you have given for us.*

Friday, May 20

Read: Acts 15:1-5

The Problem-Controversy

From earliest times, the Church has had to make the decision as to what it is going to be. Some Jewish Christians came to Antioch teaching the Gentile Christians that in order to be saved not only was it necessary to have faith in Jesus as the Son of God but it was also necessary to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses (v.1).

The first Christians were Jews who were circumcised, knew the Jewish Scriptures, followed the law, and worshipped at the Temple and synagogues. After becoming Christians, they still participated in those things. There were also proselytes among these first Christians, Gentiles who had been circumcised and had, in fact, become Jews. Both these groups were seen as completely acceptable in the Church. But then another group called God-fearers, such as Cornelius, became Christians. God-fearers were those Gentiles who, while not accepting circumcision, knew the Scriptures and attached themselves to the synagogues. These persons were seen by some Jewish Christians as questionable. Some ten years after the dramatic conversion of the Gentile Cornelius the Church still regarded the Gentiles with suspicion. If a rank pagan, a Gentile previously unconnected with Judaism, comes into the Church, then, so they feared, Christianity would be irrevocably changed. It would no longer be a part of Judaism but would be a new religion. That change, in fact, was what God was making happen in the Church through the leadership of the church in Antioch and the work of Barnabas and Paul. The problem was not the admittance of the Gentiles to the Church but rather the conditions of that admittance.

The debate centered around salvation (v.1). Am I acceptable because I believe or am I acceptable because I believe and do certain things (v.5)?

Lest we condemn those legalistic believers, we do well to examine our own faith for remnants of legalism. Many Christians fall into the trap of trying to earn God's acceptance, of trying to enter relationship with Him on their own merits. How hard it is to accept the gift of the freely given grace of God of relationship with Him!

R&D *What place does "living a Christian life" have in your relationship with God?*

Prayer: *Within the Christian faith our spiritualities are different, Lord. Help us not to judge other Christians because they don't worship You in exactly the same way we do.*

Saturday, May 21

Read: Acts 15:6-12

Witness of Experience

The fascination of this watershed chapter is, in part, in its ordinary character. How does any organized group of people decide on its future course? All points of view are presented in free debate and a general consensus emerges with which the group as a whole will abide. Just such a debate is the setting for the decision regarding the terms for the inclusion of the Gentiles into the Church. As in all groups, there are some people whose words carry more weight than others. One of those persons was the apostle Peter.

Enter, Peter, center stage, for his last appearance in the book of the Acts. What an appearance it is! We may imagine Peter carrying on his missionary work to the Jews of the dispersion (Galatians 2:7-9) and being called to Jerusalem for this critically pivotal meeting of the apostles and elders. Peter's experience with Cornelius has convinced him that the inclusion of the Gentiles as a part of the people of God is the will of God. He saw God's will revealed in his vision. He saw God's will revealed as Cornelius and other Gentiles believed and received the Holy Spirit.

Peter's experience also has convinced him that the law cannot lead to salvation. A Gentile convert to Judaism who undertook to keep the law was said to have taken up the yoke of the kingdom

of heaven. The yoke of the law had proved a heavy burden to all of the Jews. Peter had found that he could not keep the law, and he understands that these new Gentile Christians will find it an impossible burden as well. Above all, the law did not bring salvation. Peter had found salvation in the same way that the Gentiles had found salvation. There was another yoke. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; ...and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:29-30). Peter’s question might have been, “Whose yoke must we take?” His answer proclaimed, “We shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus” (v.11).

Suggesting the relative importance of their words, Luke uses a single verse to include the testimony of Barnabas and Paul as confirmation to the witness of Peter. They, too, had experienced God’s will in choosing the Gentiles to be a part of His Church.

R&D How open am I to accepting other people’s experiences of God? How open am I to receiving new experiences of God for myself?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord God, for accepting me into Your Kingdom just as I am.

Sunday, May 22

Sabbath Time

Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this or that.” James 4:15

The most amazing thing the Lord showed me about my resources was that he was going to use my secular social training instead of only my religious training. After two years of trying to hammer out a life as a Christian in the oil business, I was convinced that most lay people don’t want to be “religious” in the pious sense, but they do want to find out about the living God and to discover a creative way to live with a strong sense of meaning and purpose.

Monday, May 23

Read: Acts 15:13-21

Witness of Scripture

James enters the debate. He is the leader and most influential person in the church in Jerusalem. It is thought by many that James was the blood brother of Jesus (I Corinthians 15:7; Matthew

13:55). He earned his place and prominence in the church, however, not by that relationship but by his personal character and record. James listened to the witness of experience and it rang true for him because it was in accord with the Scriptures. James found the prophecy for the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God foretold by Amos (Amos 9:11-12). He tested the revelation given to Peter and the experience of Peter and Barnabas and Paul by the record of God's dealing with His people in the past.

William Willimon writes, "New revelation along with confirmation by experience and with testing by Scripture are the proper measurements for the Church... these three criteria determine the boundaries for our debates. They are the ultimate court of appeal."

R&D What part does the Scripture play in how you accept or reject new understandings of God? In your personal life?

Prayer: We are grateful, Lord, to have Bible translations that speak clearly to us, and commentaries on the Bible, to guide us day by day.

Tuesday, May 24

Read: Acts 15:22-35

The Solution

Samuel Johnson said, "Life cannot subsist in society but by reciprocal concessions." Why compromise when the principle that salvation for all persons comes only by the grace of God and through faith in Jesus Christ was upheld? Why not just press onward for complete freedom? Within the body of the Church the second and great commandment, namely, of responsibility for one another (Mark 12:31; Romans 14:13ff) has always held sway. Here that principle is given practical force. Jewish Christians must change to include converted Gentiles into the Church and Gentile Christians must change as well for the good of the Christians fellowship. Jewish Christians will associate with and have table fellowship with Gentile Christians who have not been circumcised and placed under the burden of all of the Jewish rules and regulations. Gentile Christians will be sensitive not to eat those foods which would obstruct the important and essential table fellowship between themselves and Jewish Christians, avoiding foods sacrificed to pagan gods (Romans 8), meats from strangled animals (Genesis 9:4), and partaking of

blood (Leviticus 17:10 ff). They must also accept for themselves a different standard of sexual conduct. The Church saw these decisions as being inspired by the Holy Spirit (v.28). Thus a cataclysmic division within the Church was avoided.

Wisely the Jerusalem church sent not only a letter to the church in Antioch but also two respected leaders. The presence of Judas and Silas affirmed and strengthened the work of Paul and Barnabas in their work among the Gentiles.

A major danger to the Church has always been from dissension and disagreement within. Division destroys inevitably and irrevocably. Jesus said, "If a house is divided against itself, that house will be unable to stand" (Mark 3:24). Disagreements with fellow Christians about policy or practical matters of the Church must be resolved through love and compromise. Christians need to learn the art of loving compromise.

R&D When are you able to compromise with others in the Church? What things are so important to you that they are not matters for compromise?

Prayer: In an age of relativism help us always to see Your truth, Lord God.

Wednesday, May 25

Read: Acts 15:36-41

A Broken Relationship

Paul's thoughts stray constantly to the young churches in Galatia. Neither the infrequent reports of their progress nor his own letter to them could satisfy his hunger for them. His desire grows to visit them. He remembers the persecution that they face and he is still uneasy over the circumcision controversy that had so upset them (Galatians 1:6-9).

Barnabas agrees with Paul that a second journey is advisable. Suddenly there arises between them a sharp and bitter disagreement. Barnabas, ever the encourager, desires to take John Mark with them (13:12). Paul will not even consider the possibility. This is no friendly disagreement. In a severe confrontation, the two strong-willed friends part company to go in different directions.

It is thought by some that the memory of Barnabas' failure to stand up to the circumcision party in the question of table fellowship with the Gentile Christians in Antioch was behind Paul's unwillingness to accommodate Barnabas about taking Mark (Galatians 2:11-13). Paul may have felt unsure of Barnabas as he thought ahead to the tricky problem of the circumcision of Gentile converts in the Galatian churches. The art of loving compromise is absent from both Barnabas and Paul. Its absence brings about a breaking of love and friendship and the end of a partnership that had brought God's message to waiting and hungry hearts.

Who was right in this disagreement? Probably both. Mark certainly had failed. Paul needed people upon whom he could depend. He had risked his life before and needed someone to stand beside him. Mark needed seasoning and training. But a second chance was not unreasonable. Mark had the potential for greatness. Who was wrong? Probably both. Paul and Barnabas had a long and productive relationship upon which to build. They had the means to work out the problem in the relationship through prayer and dependence upon the Spirit. For some reason, however, they did not use that resource at this time.

There is one certainty, nevertheless. God's work had to go forward, and both Paul and Barnabas had a share in it. Instead of one missionary party, there were now two and even more people would hear the good news of Christ.

R&D As you consider broken relationships in your life, does there seem to be any common cause of the break? What lesson does the failure of past relationships teach you?

Prayer: Blessed Lord, we Christians need one another. Give us loving hearts when we find ourselves at odds with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Thursday, May 26

Read: Acts 1:1-11

Ascension Day

While physically on this earth, Jesus was limited by time and space. His departure, which we memorialize today, opened the door to the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-13), whereby Jesus

became present to his people unlimited by time and space. Yet, so often we miss the point.

At the beginning of his sermon, a priest held up a sign that read “GOD IS NOWHERE,” and asked the congregation what it said. Most responded, “GOD IS NOWHERE” rather than “GOD IS NOW HERE.” The same letters carry very different messages, depending on how we see them. It is a matter of attitude.

The presence or absence of God to the Christian is like a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we do not expect God to be with us, we will not be conscious of His presence in our lives; for us He will be “nowhere.” For those who live in hopeful expectation, however, God will be found in the common events of life as well as in prayer, worship, and Bible study.

An effective exercise for those in small prayer or Bible study groups is to ask at each meeting, “When, since we last met, was your moment closest to Christ?” This discipline helps those involved to see Christ in their lives.

R&D What helps your consciousness of God’s presence?

Prayer: Precious to us, Lord, is the fact that You are an accessible God.

Friday, May 27

Read: Acts 15:40—16:5

A New Team

William Willimon commented, “Nothing, including human limitations and the need for new young leaders, can stop the movement of the Spirit.” We may be sure that the bitter quarrel between Paul and Barnabas was not of the Spirit, but as God can bring good from any and all circumstances (Romans 8:28), so two outstanding men stand ready to join Paul’s missionary team. Paul had found a kindred spirit in Silas. Silas was a prophet (15:32), a strong leader in the Jerusalem church (15:22), and a Roman citizen who would share that singular advantage with Paul (16:37).

The second man for the new team appeared early in the second missionary journey from among Paul’s own converts. Timothy was a young man who had become a disciple. In the years following his conversion he had gained a good reputation among the churches in Lystra and Iconium (v.2). He bore one disadvantage in that as a

son of a mixed marriage, Timothy would be regarded as illegitimate by the Jews. Son of a Jewish mother, he was considered a Jew but he had not been circumcised. Paul does a surprising thing. Considering his stand on circumcision and the victory of his point of view at the council in Jerusalem, Paul asks Timothy to be circumcised. When it came to his missionary work, Paul was supremely single-minded and practical. Being circumcised, Timothy's ministry would be acceptable to the Jews. He would have the door opened to him to speak in the synagogues. Timothy could assume a full share in the work.

R&D To what extent do you encourage young people to work for the Lord?

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to be sensitive to the needs and thoughts of others as we try to minister Your love to them.

Saturday, May 28

Read: Acts 16:6-12

A New Direction

A daughter called one day with the surprising news that she was expecting a second child. My first question after expressing delight was, "Did you plan this?" "No, this came as a surprise," she replied. "This is really going to cause a change in the direction of our lives."

Decisions to chart a new course, change directions, enter a new area of life, change jobs, go back to school, or to have a new baby are usually carried out today after careful deliberation. We weigh the pros and cons of the decision and make our choice. As Christians we pray about our plans, ask blessing upon them, but they are still our plans. Occasionally, if we are fortunate, change just happens and we find ourselves suddenly in a whole new life, and we understand the change to be a part of God's plan for us. So it was with Paul and his new team.

Traveling due west across the southern edge of Galatian Asia Minor, Paul and Silas and Timothy are on mission. That mission included not only the founding of new churches but the nurturing of those already in existence as well (16:5). Paul's plan was either to continue on to the heavily populated cities of the Roman province

of Asia or to go directly northward into Bithynia. Suddenly those plans were altered. The route was changed and led them instead northwest to Troas and hence across the Aegean Sea to Philippi in Macedonia (Europe, modern Greece). Paul understood this new direction to be not his plan but the plan of the Holy Spirit. How did this change of direction come about? Luke does not tell us of the incidents which may have influenced Paul. The final push to understanding this new direction came through a dream or vision.

It is interesting to note the change in pronoun to first person plural and the inclusion of the first “we” passage (16:10-17). Scholars speculate that Luke (perhaps already a believer) joined Paul’s team at this juncture perhaps in his capacity as a physician and accompanied Paul during certain periods of the rest of his travels.

This passage also spotlights our own experience as we sense the Holy Spirit pointing to new directions for our lives. How does this come about? Through the words of other people, through circumstances in our lives, through new or heightened inner convictions, through prayer, through visions or dreams? Any and all ways are possible avenues for his use. The important thing is that we, like Paul, keep open to the possibilities of the Spirit.

R&D *When has the Holy Spirit indicated a new direction for your life?*

Prayer: *Holy Spirit, my plans are nothing compared to your plans for me; help me to see them clearly and to follow them faithfully.*

Sunday, May 29

Sabbath Time

Do not neglect the gift you have. 1 Timothy 4:14

We began helping people find the creative shapes of their own obedience and love and to examine their “natural” resources. It was very exciting. And the kinds of helping these people ultimately did was filled with energy and enthusiasm and seemed to ignite creativity and life in those being helped, because the resources being used were natural and charged with passion and energy. The helpers felt as if they were carriers of the gifts of the Holy Spirit rather than people dutifully putting band-aids on society’s sores.

Read: Acts 16:11-24, 40

Macedonian Woman

Paul and Luke (note the use of “we” in the text) now establish the church in Philippi to whom Paul would later write with such deep affection. Paul’s letter to the Philippians describes a community of people living in happy and close relationship, free of conflicts. This is the one church from whom later Paul will accept monetary gifts to aid him in his ministry. “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you... thankful for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now... I hold you in my heart... how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:3:ff).

There is no synagogue in Philippi so evidently there are few Jews there (10 men required to form a synagogue). The place used for community prayer is outside the city by the river. Paul’s team joins these people, mostly women, who gather for prayer on the Sabbath. Among the devout women is a wealthy Gentile businesswoman, Lydia, whose business is to sell cloth dyed with the expensive purple dye obtained from shellfish.

The conversion story of Lydia is centered on the woman herself. As Peter was merely God’s instrument in the conversion of Cornelius, so Paul is merely the instrument for Lydia. God has already opened her heart and she is ready to hear the message of salvation from Paul’s lips (16:31). Her response to the message is faith, baptism, and personal witness resulting in the conversion of her whole household. Her further response is to offer all her resources to Paul to assist in the spread of the gospel: “Come to my house to stay” (v.15). As the women who followed Jesus from Galilee provided a base of financial and emotional support for Jesus (Luke 8:1-3; 23:49, 55), Lydia offers that same support to Paul.

Willimon comments, “Perhaps Luke gives prominence to the role of women like Lydia to assure Theophilus’ church... a church which may have regressed to more conventional cultural mores regarding the status of women... that the leadership of women had apostolic precedent.”

R&D *What influence do you have on the character of your congregation?*

Prayer: *You have a special place for each of us in our local congregation, Lord; help us to see and fulfill Your plans for us in that role.*

Tuesday, May 31

Read: Acts 16:16-40

Adventure in Philippi

Being an intrepid mystery/adventure reader, I greet each new novel with eagerness in the knowledge that for a few hours I will be absorbed by exciting drama. The best writers have a way of presenting characters who are like real persons with whom we get involved. Their situations are believable and carry us through harrowing experiences which finally climax in a reader-pleasing solution. It is this kind of storytelling genius with which Luke describes this incident in Philippi.

Our heroes, likeable and dedicated Paul and Silas, follow their call to present Jesus Christ as “The Way” of life. Danger raises its deceptively innocent head in the person of a slave girl who was a source of great profit to her owners. “She was what was called a Pytho... a person who could give oracles to guide men about the future” (William Barclay). The girl perceives that Paul and Silas are holy men offering a spiritual message, and continuously declares that fact to the world. Finally, unable to ignore the girl’s annoying behavior any longer, Paul heals her “in the name of Jesus Christ” (v.18).

Faced with the loss of future financial gain, infuriated by the interference of strangers, the villainous slave owners react to the healing with punitive anger. They appeal to the racial and religious prejudices of the people around them as they vilify Paul and Silas as “these Jews.”

Violence erupts! Paul and Silas are badly beaten, and then thrown, injured and bleeding, into prison. Here they are further tormented by being placed in stocks which torturously force their legs apart.

Heroes we like become heroes we respect. Paul and Silas show courage and confidence as they sing and praise God and hold fast to that which they believe. Can they be delivered? Not by their own efforts, but rescue appears from the outside. Obedient to the Spirit

of Christ, they are rescued through the cataclysmic earthquakes of land (v.26), of witness (v.31), and of the birth of faith (vv.32-34). The reader-pleasing solution which closes the incident includes the apologies of the authorities to our heroes and sees Paul and his team moving on to conquer new worlds for Christ.

R&D *Where can you find yourself in this dramatic presentation of the gospel?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for good books; but thank You much more for the faithful witness of Paul and Silas.*



Judges

Wednesday, June 1

Read: Acts 13:16-20

Introduction to Judges

Welcome to the Book of Judges. This book of history, with its blend of irony and tragedy, victory and defeat, obedience and apostasy, helps us live into the time when Israel consolidated its settlements in the Promised Land. This loose configuration of tribes grapples with the tensions of incomplete projects, unfulfilled promises, spirits of renewal and retreats because of loss of nerve. The people of God dealt with the pressures of the surrounding cultures and other religions. They often found that the need for success and security attracted them to the “easy solution” religions of the people among whom they lived.

During this time of settlement (approximately 1220-1020 BC) Israel was surrounded on all sides by foreign people and religions. The constant fight was not only to resist the invasion of heathen belief and culture into the faith and practice, but also to protect themselves from annihilation.

The book is the stylized story of the twelve tribes, in a type of confederation that had them united by common worship and a common memory focused on their deliverance by God from Egypt and His call to the people to be bearers of His covenant promise, “to bless all the peoples of the world.” It is in this promise that the people have come out of Egypt across the wandering of the desert and now into a Promised Land. A commentary of Judges is entitled *At Risk in the Promised Land*—an appropriate title as we shall discover.

R&D Do you have preconceptions about the Book of Judges? You might list them and refer back to them in a month.

Prayer: *Guide us in tough times, Lord, when our path forward is not clear.*

Thursday, June 2

Read: Judges 1:1

After Joshua

One of the important features of the life into which God calls us is that it is going somewhere. We are a people who are part of a history—a history of deliverance, struggle, and final completion. God wants to go somewhere with His creation, with Israel at the time of Judges and with you and me.

The opening words of this book emphasize continuity. Joshua had died. Now what? In one sense there is a feeling that all of the high drama of the formative “mighty acts of God” were in the past and now here Israel remains, faced with living day by day in consistent faithfulness. How is this life sustained? How is the “old story” embraced so as to strengthen the life of Israel without fossilizing the community, and how can the promised future be lived into so as to enrich and empower the present moment?

The power of the God of history is that His work is historical and yet He is timeless. He has delivered, He does deliver, and He will deliver. All of these realities address and inform every moment. The glory of the future promise is as firm a foundation as the remembrance of past victory. Indeed, it is the reality we affirm when at the altar all of history is focused in on “remembrance events,” “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”

And so with that in mind we move into the history of Judges. “Now it came to pass...” (KJV). God has delivered us, and we are assured of a hope for the future by His promise. Now we must use these realities to inform and empower our present.

R&D Reflect on God’s work in your past and give thanks. Recount His promise for your future and consider the implication for you this day.

Prayer: *Lord God, how easily we forget to remember all You have done for us.*

Read: Judges 1:2-21

Judah in the South

Immediately we move into very specific activity the understanding of which demands some knowledge of names and places. The action involves conflict between the local inhabitants who still occupied the land and the tribe of Judah. It is action taken in response to promise: “I will give the land into his hand.” It is important to note that the promise did not preclude the need for obedient response by Israel.

The area in question was the region west of the Dead (Salt) Sea, a country east of the Mediterranean coastal plains. Bezek and its king (Adoni-Bezek) were located on the northern fringes of this area. A confederation of Israelites is formed, and Simeon’s family is absorbed into Judah’s control, and together they are victorious over the Canaanites and Perizzites at Bezek. Jerusalem is conquered (v.8), but notice the reference to the continued presence and status of the conquered who remain there (v.21). (The reference to the subsequent conquest of Jerusalem by the Benjaminites suggests that instability in that city is not just a recent phenomenon). The conquest solidifies the southern reaches of Judah, as the Negeb and Zephath (a large town) are subdued.

The one failure of this effort was the inability to secure the territory of the coastal plains occupied by the Philistines.

One anecdotal feature of this story is the tender picture of harmony in the life of these tribes: the brotherly harmony as Caleb generously gives the victory at Debir to his junior officer (v.13); the father/daughter harmony of Caleb and his daughter; the harmony of wife and husband as together they approached the father and sought his gift. It is important to note this because we will see in this a contrasting deterioration of this harmony throughout the Book of Judges.

R&D How do you balance the tension between grace and will—what God does and what you do?

Prayer: *Lord, help us to realize that, while we are doing the things we believe You are calling us to do, You are functioning at a level of which we cannot conceive to do things of much greater consequence.*

Saturday, June 4

Read: Judges 1:22—2:5

The Fragile North

One commentator has suggested that the purpose of the first chapter of Judges is to mark the beginning of a period of obedience which stands in contrast to the period which preceded it. The incident at Bethel is an illustration. The northern tribes now gather to conquer Bethel and their failure, in sharp contrast to Judah, seems to be the source of their future troubles. Apparently the forming of an alliance with a local inhabitant (v.24) was seen as compromising that which had been forbidden by God.

Worthy of note is the fact that the rest of these northern excursions result only in partial conquest, compromise, or outright failure. One after another the tribes north and west of Judah failed to follow through on tasks that were commanded. Notice the form of verses 27-33. There seems to be an almost rhythmic repetition of the failures. It might even be a bit of a lament, especially as we live out the history and the subsequent agony of the northern tribes. You might want to take a moment and compare today's lesson with Amos 4:6-11 and read 2 Kings 17:7-8, 15.

All of this gets us in touch with the issues that all Christians must face with risky cooperation. At what point does participation in the world cause us to become "of the world"? Hopefully our prayerful consideration of God's story unfolding in these pages will guide us parents, marriage partners, businesspeople, government officials, responsible citizens, and teachers, as we walk that line between faithful stewardship of all of God's creation and ruinous compromise with "the world."

R&D *How can we be in the world and not of the world?*

Prayer: *O Holy Spirit within us, help us to perceive your guidance as we seek to do God's will in the midst of confusing times.*

For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live. Romans 8:13

I think there are basically two things in coming to God at the center of one's life: (1) To tell God that we do not love Him most, and confess specifically what it is that we cannot give up to Him. (2) To ask God in the personality of Jesus Christ to come into our conscious lives through His Spirit and show us how to live our lives for Him and His purposes one day at a time.

Monday, June 6

Read: Judges 2:6-17

Picture not Pretty

By now you are seeing the story unfold. The picture of the tribes of Israel was not pretty and it stands in marked contrast to the story as related in Joshua. There we see the sudden and total victory of Israel over the Canaanites. In a way verse 6 seems a continuation of Joshua 24:28 where Joshua dismisses the people to go to the various areas of a subjugated Canaan which had been assigned to them. This context in Joshua is a picture of a land lying defeated and awaiting occupation.

The narrative in Judges presents quite a different picture. Here we experience the tribes living within a land that is shared by indigenous and powerful people. Their survival was at stake, and the completion of the conquest of the land was very much in question. Scholars disagree as to whether this is two versions of the same period of conquest or sequential events that describe first, second, and subsequent phases. Regardless, it is important to note that much remains to be done.

How often have we, while seeming to have some conquest in hand, found that there are huge pockets of resistance that still threaten the stability of the end result? How we love to see God work in His powerful strokes to bring in His kingdom! On occasion we are witnesses to such glorious denouements. Yet, without fail, in the moments following, we are reminded that it is in plodding faithfully day by day into those subdued dark areas of life that we are called to be consistently obedient. I think it would have been fun

and exciting to be in the army of Joshua, but I find my life normally lived on the outskirts of Luz.

R&D *Reflect on those areas of your life where the conquest is still incomplete. What is this passage saying to you?*

Prayer: *It's the future that is always daunting, Lord, because that is where uncertainty lies. Help us to rely more fully on You to guide us along the way.*

Tuesday, June 7

Read: Judges 2:18—3:6

Sin and Grace

Back in verse 11 there appears a phrase which will rear its head throughout Judges. “Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals.” Here we see the beginning of the writer’s view of the way God works in history. The people did evil and the anger of the Lord was kindled against them; He gave them over to plunderers (vv.14-15). Then God raised up Judges who saved them (v.16), and each time when the Judge died, they returned to their evil ways (vv.18-19).

These verses outline the unfortunate cycle of human response to God: sin... punishment... repentance... deliverance, and then usually back to sin again. The writer refers to this as “apostasy” or turning aside from God.

This fourfold pattern provides the basic pattern for the stories of Judges. Almost all of these narratives include obvious references to the four features of this theology.

This is a remarkable story, and when you place it in context, it is truly extraordinary. Here you have Yahweh, the creator of heaven and earth, taking the enormous risk of choosing “a people” to be agents of His mercy, and finding them to be consistently unfaithful. Then in an almost monotonous routine He watches as they stray, then brings them home, only to watch them stray again. It is a picture that forever puts to rest any suggestion that only in the New Testament can be found the covenant of grace; that the Old Testament is locked into a framework of obligation to performance under the law.

How embarrassed we feel before the Lord God as we approach Him again with the same old sins. But, thanks be to God, His mercies are new every morning.

R&D *To what extent is the consistency of your sin troubling to you? How does this passage uncover the love of God for you?*

Prayer: *Blessed Lord, You are more forgiving of me than I am of myself.*

Wednesday, June 8

Read: Judges 3:7-11

Othniel

In this account we see the first recitation of the litany of lament. The people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. What was that? They forgot Him. Sound familiar? Let us be sure that we understand what “forget” means. It does not mean that they had no recollection of Him. Nor does it mean that they abandoned ritual observances that had become the societal norm.

Rather, life had no “remembrance” of Yahweh. This is a term that comes alive for us in Holy Communion. To remember is to bring someone into the present in such a way that the present is transformed. To remember the Lord is to bring him into the very heart of every decision, to allow His living presence to transform each into a redemptive moment.

To forget the Lord is to exclude Him. Our culture is rife with examples of this type of distancing. We relegate religion to the province of pale preachers and pious old ladies and tip our hat to the Lord God whom we characterize as a heavenly handyman or cosmic cop. This disconnected, feel-good cultural religion is precisely what “forgetting God” is all about. We simply leave Him out of the areas of our lives where the critical issues are in play.

Take a moment to review this Othniel account. Notice the four-point cycle of sin, punishment, repentance, deliverance. It is the pattern we will see consistently throughout the book.

R&D *In what ways do you “remember” Christ?*

Prayer: *Faith in You, Lord God, is strengthened by our remembrance of all You have done for us in the past and are willing to do for us now.*

Thursday, June 9

Read: Judges 3:12-30

Ehud

This story begins with reference to the defeat of Israel by elements of Moabites and Ammonites and Amalekites. This represents a group of tribes that were from the east side of the Jordan River and from the south. Most commentators suggest that there was little likelihood that all of Israel was subjugated, rather that an excursion across the Jordan engulfed the area around Jericho (“the city of palms,” v.13). So the people cried out and Ehud was raised up. It is interesting to note that he never ruled anyone and is not referred to as “judge”.

Ehud is left-handed and this is important to the story because he hides his knife in a location that is unsuspected and convenient only for the lefthanded. The events are earthy to the point of crudity. The plunging of the knife into the fat, the dirt, and the smell (v.24) all typify a style of story that was characteristic of a less fastidious audience.

There are no modern-day heroes in this story. Central in the event is the trickery used. Ehud posed as a collaborator and brought a secret message “from God.” King Eglon, on the other hand, is pictured as a fat and gullible oaf. And in the closing verses, the troops of Moab apparently ran head-on into slaughter.

R&D *Why do you suppose this story has been preserved for us?*

Prayer: *As a prayer for this story, God, all I can come up with is “Lord, help us!”*

Friday, June 10

Read: Judges 3:31

Shamgar

Shamgar the foreigner is mentioned only in passing possibly as a prelude to his inclusion in the story of Deborah (5:6). Noteworthy here is the appearance of the Philistines. They were seafaring folks who had invaded the coastal area of the eastern Mediterranean. Many of the battles we will experience in this study

will deal with the attempts of the Philistines to move eastward into the hill country and Jordan River beyond.

A strange element of this story is that by best accounts, we understand Shamgar to be a foreigner of Hurrian descent, worshippers of Canaanite deities. Hurrians also are referred to in Scripture as Horites or Hivites. The reference to Shamgar as “son of Anath” bears some comment. Anath was a Canaanite goddess of battles. Could it be that this deliverer worshiped a pagan goddess? His involvement with the Israelites is tangential at best. Nevertheless, he is honored and celebrated because God used him to bring deliverance to Israel.

R&D *Can you recall modern instances where God used nonbelievers to accomplish His purposes?*

Prayer: *Lord God, You are all-powerful and all-knowing; there is no limit to Your ability to deal with the whatever needs to be done.*

Saturday, June 11

Read: Judges 4:1—5:3 (4-31)

Deborah

A new dimension of warfare is introduced in this account. No, I’m not referring to the leadership given by women, but the dramatic shift of military strategy reflected in the willingness to face the Canaanites in the valleys. Heretofore most battles have taken place in the rough terrain of the hill country. But now we see the Israelites willing to come to the open plain where the enemy could use its chariots. In the hymn (5:2-31) that emerged from this encounter we see the awe and reverence that is accorded the Lord God of heaven and earth.

Regarding the leadership of Deborah, we see that she is a Judge over Israel, and that a new dimension is added. She is a prophetess. Not only did she act as a deliverer, but she gave forth the word from God. She is inspired, not only to rule and lead into battle, but also to proclaim God’s message to His people. She commissions her general, Barak, in the “name of Yahweh.” This dual role of prophet and judge seems to be a preview of the history of Samuel.

Concerning the battle, the Israelites under Barak form on Mount Tabor, then sweep down on the plains and defeat the chariots of the Canaanites. Forced to flee on foot, the Canaanite general

Sisera stumbles into an Israelite loyalist, Jael, in the camp of the neutral Kenites. Here he befalls the ultimate military humiliation. He is killed by a woman.

R&D *As you read the lovely poem “Song of Deborah” notice how liturgy celebrates and teaches God’s truth. Have you ever written a song or a poem that captures an experience with the living God?*

Prayer: *My heart sings of Your majesty and glory, Gracious Lord.*

Sunday, June 12

Sabbath Time

“Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; if it is, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.” Matthew 9:17

Things began to change in my inner life. It wasn't that I got rid of all my problems. But I simply began getting a new set of problems. I came to realize that God wasn't going to take things out of my life. Instead, He brought in a great many positive new things. Since my life and my time were already filled to overflowing, some things had to go, but He made me choose what they would be. And it was a great day when I found my whole set of values and my honest secret inner desires were changing. I began to want to be Christ's person enough to pray that he would reveal to me those thoughts and habits that were standing between him and me and my doing his will. I prayed that he would then give me the desire and the power to change.

Monday, June 13

Read: Judges 6:1-10

Had God Failed?

As the story of Gideon begins, we see the familiar pattern emerge. Israel has forgotten God and the resulting weakness has left them vulnerable to an invasion by a new powerful group from the east, the Midianites. The reference to camels is informative. These newly domesticated animals with their range and speed added a new and threatening dimension to the arsenal of the Midianites. The Middle East arms race was accelerating even then.

This story has another added dimension. A prophetic word calls Israel back to its roots. Here is that recitation of the mighty

acts of God that we see so often in the later prophetic writings. They remind the people that Yahweh has delivered them from Egypt and that the allegiance He demands has been abandoned.

It is not just a coincidence that the reference to agricultural disaster is the chief symptom of the downfall. This is a symbolic illustration of the nature of the broken allegiance to Yahweh. When the Israelites began to move from being a nomadic people to a more settled culture they began to develop agriculture, a skill they learned from the Canaanites who preceded them. The tensions arose as they discovered that the Canaanites depended on a “new god,” Baal, to bless and multiply their crops.

The worship of Baal had deep agricultural ties; because it was linked to the season and focused on keeping nature appeased, it was tempting to change allegiances. After all, Yahweh didn't have a track record in this agricultural arena. He was regarded as the military leader, the deliverer, and founder. Now was the time for more “practical” deities. “We need to eat, don't we?” So this destruction of the agriculture by the grazing hoards of the Midianites is a fitting form of punishment by God.

R&D What are some of the more “practical gods” you find yourself trusting in?

Prayer: It is too easy to yield to the culture around us, Lord; thank You for faith to stand, instead, for the truth.

Tuesday, June 14

Read: Judges 6:11-24

The Call of Gideon

Notice the dialogue as an angel of God comes to Gideon. “Why should I listen to you; after all don't you represent the God who has let all this happen to us?” Gideon argues. “But, sir, if the Lord is with us why then has all this happened to us? Where are all the wonderful promises of which our ancestors tell?” The Lord, through His angel, feels no need to answer these questions line by line. The dialogue simply continues with the Lord directing Gideon, “Go, I commission you.”

Again Gideon questions, “Why me? I am the weakest in my family.” We see in this a favorite theme of Israelite story. The Lord chooses one of the weakest to lead His work of deliverance.

Two signs follow that allow Gideon to recognize that the angel is indeed of the Lord. The ritual sacrifice of the goat and unleavened bread are consumed by the fire of the angel, and the reality of this encounter brings Gideon to a point of crisis: “Help me.”

How often an encounter with the living God prompts this response from the encountered. He has a beauty that makes us initially feel inept; Moses, Isaiah, Peter and so many more had this experience. God’s response is always the same: “Don’t be afraid.” When confronted by the awesome presence of God, deeply rooted feelings well up from within us. We encounter our true heart’s desire... that longing, born in creation, to be in the presence of our creator. At the same time all of the distractions of lesser gods, all the doubts, all the questions are shown for what they are: the thrashing banalities of a people who have “forgotten” God. And we, like Gideon, are afraid. But the message is always the same: “Don’t be afraid.”

R&D You are called to be something special for God. How do you react when confronted with this reality?

Prayer: You never call us, Lord God, to tasks for which You are unwilling to equip us to succeed.

Wednesday, June 15

Read: Judges 6:25-40

Preparation

The Lord now instructs Gideon to destroy the objects of worship of the lesser god, Baal. So he pulled down the altar to Baal and cut down the sacred pole that was the Asherah, the symbol of the female counterpart to Baal. Still timid, he does this at night. When the neighbors discover his deed they rally to the support of Baal but are challenged by Gideon’s father to let Baal take care of himself. Thus Gideon was given the name Jerubbaal: “Let Baal contend against him.”

Up to this point Gideon has been less than heroic. He is resistant to God’s advances; he is afraid to obey in the light of dawn and his father needs to defend him from the ire of the neighbors.

Now a dramatic change occurs. The threat of the Midianites is intensified (v.33) and Gideon rises to the challenge and calls the people to follow him (vv.34-35). We see this change when the “Spirit of the Lord” took possession of Gideon (v.34).

The Hebrew sense of this event is not that of a violent intervention by God, but rather a reclothing of Gideon with the “personality” of God. This reclothing by the spirit of the Lord is similar to what happened to Joshua (Numbers 27:18). The point is that acting on this reclothing Gideon sounded the trumpet summoning the tribes and directed them into battle.

The curious story of the fleece seems to be a return of the doubting, tentative Gideon and so it may be. Isn't it typical for all of us to discover our own insufficiencies when faced with new challenges? The new and formidable presence of the Midianites and the imminence of a severe conflict found Gideon doubting. Who can blame him? The story of the fleece and the dew is familiar turf for those of us who have wrestled with the Lord who calls us to go where we don't feel equipped or confident.

R&D Recall how God has met you in the midst of doubt.

Prayer: Thank You, Gracious God, that You don't give up on us in our moments of doubt.

Thursday, June 16

Read: Judges 7:1-23 (7:24—8:21)

The Midianites

As preparation for the battle begins, the Lord made sure the strength of Gideon's fighting force is sufficiently reduced so that it might not claim credit for the victory. When the force had been reduced to three hundred warriors, the instructions were given for battle: strange weapons— earthenware jars, torches, trumpets. (The description of the non-battle that follows suggests that the message might be beneath the surface because torches, trumpets, and earthenware vessels—in the potter's hands—are all strong biblical ways of God remaking a society). In any event, the Midianites became their own worst enemies.

When the battle involves the Ephraimites and they are offered the opportunity of killing the princes of the Midianites, they

become indignant not to have been invited to come to the original battle. (This is not the only time the Ephraimites were excluded from the battle plans; see 12:1-6). Gideon's flattery appeases them and cooperation results.

The pursuit of the princes continues and the cities of Succoth and Penuel are promised punishment for their refusal to feed Gideon's army. Their reluctance to aid Gideon is understandable given the control the Midianites held over the region. Subsequently, the forces met and the Lord prevailed (8:10-12). With this defeat and the revenge that Gideon takes against Succoth and Penuel, we are faced with those ugly stories of brutality that we wish to attribute to a more primitive cultural development. The fact remains that our times are marked with the same violence.

R&D Describe times when God's power has been made known in powerlessness.

Prayer: When we look back on the violence in the Old Testament, Lord, we can be especially grateful that Your Son came to show us Your true nature—One who loves us and wants our peace.

Friday, June 17

Read: Judges 8:22-35

Seeds of Apostasy

In the final chapter of Gideon's rule we see two dramatic events that shape the near future and cast dark shadows of the long-range view. First is the issue of the unification of the tribes into a nation and an office of king. This is the beginning of the movement that would result in the tragedy of Saul. At this point Gideon refused kingship. However, we will see this issue reemerge in the story of Abimelech in chapter 9.

Gideon's virtue is eroded significantly when shortly thereafter he requests from his soldiers the booty they had gathered from the vanquished. This he makes into an "ephod," the exact nature of which is ambiguous. Scholars suggest that it was a covering or an image that conferred some priestly or divine status. Whatever it was, it was a factor in Gideon's family's eventual apostasy.

It is painfully ironic that this hero who, with the early enthusiasm of a tentative faith, tore down the images of Baal and prepared

his people for a mighty victory; now, in the flush of that victory, plants the seeds of the deterioration of Israel. In verse 27 it appears that the services of God are no longer needed and the people “prostituted themselves” before the image created by human hands.

R&D Do you find yourself frustrated at the lack of growth on the part of the Israelites? How about your own congregation?

Prayer: These stories remind us, Lord, how weak human nature is. It is why Your Son Jesus had to live and die on our behalf.

Saturday, June 18

Read: Judges 9:1-21 (22-57)

Abimelech

This chapter is filled with the plotting and intrigue of the people who have become disconnected from their centeredness in God and follow after their own selfish desires. Abimelech is the half-Canaanite, half-Israelite son of Gideon (Jerubbaal) and a concubine. He plots to be king, and his strategy includes convincing his kinsman of Shechem (a Canaanite city) that as a kinsman he would be superior to the other sons of Gideon. This alliance is furthered by the murder of the seventy other sons of Gideon (save one, Jotham), after which Abimelech is crowned king at the shrine oak of Shechem. Jotham cries his lament in a fabled verse decrying the submission of the tribes of Israel to the Canaanite throne. Jotham predicts that the failure of Abimelech and the rulers of Shechem to draw the confederation together in good faith will result in their being consumed by self-inflicted fire, which is the eventual outcome.

Verses 22-57 tell what happens, with plot and subplot. Out of their own fear of the curse that Jotham has placed upon them, and the action of Gaal (a newcomer in town whose “bark is worse than his bite”), the people of Shechem and Abimelech end up battling one another. This results in the defeat and destruction of Shechem and its tower by fire. Thus, the prediction of Jotham (vv.15-20) is fulfilled.

Abimelech then attempts the same strategy at the tower of Thebez and is thwarted by a woman who crushes his skull with a rock. To avoid the insult of defeat by a woman he commands an aide to kill him.

R&D *Reflect on the chaos that has grown from abandoning rootedness in God—in Abimelech's life and in ours.*

Prayer: *From a standpoint of faith in Christ, we too live in perilous times. We pray for a Great Awakening in our day, O Lord.*

Sunday, June 19

Sabbath Time

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." John 10:10

The newly converted Christian has a whole new cluster of motivating needs. He wants to become different from his past. And what this seems to mean in practical terms is that he is highly motivated to learn a whole new style of living. He feels that he is being liberated from many of the limitations of his past. His horizons have expanded, along with the possibilities of what he may become as a loving person. His old dominant values and the frantic sense of responsibility for his own success don't seem important as compared to learning about God and his will in ordinary life. And whether the convert's reaction of relief is expressed in booming laughter or silent tears, the inner feeling is one of joy and gratitude.

Monday, June 20

Read: Judges 10:1-5

Tola and Jair

The end of the Abimelech episode leaves us with a picture of chaos and terror. Into this abyss the writer inserts the story of two quiet administrators, Tola and Jair. The condition of the people called for a different type of deliverer. Their need was not for a military leader; the soul of Israel called out for order. This time the liberation was from an internal chaos, not some external oppressor.

Tola and Jair are pictured as quiet guides dedicated to an itinerant, pastoral, teaching ministry. The impression is that they traveled among the traumatized remnants of the people, restoring the memory of the covenant the Lord had made with them. The area ruled by Jair is the present-day Golan Heights. The reference to the number of sons who ruled indicates that there was a tightly knit administrative structure that brought about over twenty years of quiet and order.

Without our romanticizing this account, it would be worth noting the rhythm of the experience of God's people. How many times have we seen periods of discord and strife in a congregation followed by the gracious gift of a quiet administrator who brings a recollection of the promises of God and a framework for orderly day-by-day living?

R&D *To what extent are you a Tola/Jair gift to your parish?*

Prayer: *Lord, You provide Your people with gifts of the Spirit to allow them to minister effectively to one another and the world around them.*

Tuesday, June 21

Read: Judges 11:1-11 (12-28), 29-33 (34-40)

Jephthah

The action of this story occurs east of the Jordan River. The Ammonites are in power and the Israelites need a leader to execute the Lord's will. Jephthah, although an outcast, is a good candidate. He leads an itinerant band of guerrillas and has more military experience than any of the others. It is significant that even though the invitation comes from leaders, Jephthah demands some ratification from the Lord (v.10).

Negotiations for peace is his first tactic. This is characterized by a long history lesson of the relations between these peoples and then a simple religious lesson. The Lord has delivered the lands unto us, they are His gift—not a conquest. “What has your god, Chemosh, done for you?” (v.24).

The rapid-fire story of the battles is overshadowed by the tragic tale of the vow of Jephthah. His promise to God is that if victory is his, he will sacrifice “whoever comes forth from the doors of my house to meet me.” Tragically, his daughter rushes out and even though the vow might be hasty and shallow in intent, it is nevertheless a vow unto God and must be irrevocable.

The emphasis given to this incident underscores the importance given to a vow made to God. The daughter speaks the wisdom of the nation. “Father, if you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth” (v.36). A remarkable contrast to our modern application of vows.

R&D *What vows have you made? Do you think vows are an appropriate “modern” discipline?*

Prayer: *What is expected of us, Gracious God, is to love You and love one another.*

Wednesday, June 22

Read: Judges 13:1-7 (8-25)

Birth of Samson

A word about the Philistines. These are the coastal “sea people” who were not conquered by Joshua (Joshua 13:2). These people came to the land of Canaan as outsiders like the Israelites under Joshua. But unlike the Israelites, they did not come as liberators but as heirs of Egyptian imperial presence. It appears that they functioned as mercenaries to oversee the Egyptian interests in Canaan. With the decline of Egyptian power, probably concurrent with the Samson saga, the Philistines took the reins of power to themselves. To strengthen their commerce and defense, they sought alliances with the Ammonites to the east. This provides the context for the work of Jephthah.

The story of Samson begins in a way quite different from any other Judge. The time of the dominance of the Philistines was longer than that of any others, and there appears to have been a passive resignation on the part of the Israelites. There is no repentance, no amendment of life, no cry of anguish.

It appears that God takes the initiative quite apart from any human response. He selects a pious family located in a strategic invasion route through which the Philistines probably needed to pass. To this family is given an announcement (or annunciation) that their son would begin a long struggle that would deliver Israel from Philistine dominance. He is to be raised as a Nazarite with strict vows of adherence, most significantly that his hair should never be cut. Although these vows were usually taken as adults, here we see the parents accepting these instructions on behalf of their son and dedicating him to God.

R&D *What other children were dedicated to God in the Bible?*

Prayer: *Once we give our lives to Christ, we are dedicated to You, Lord God. May we always live into that commitment.*

Thursday, June 23

Read: Judges 14:1-20 (5:1-8)

Samson Provoked

The following stories are puzzling. They lack heroic faithfulness and piety and seem coarse and without moral rooting.

First is Samson's marriage to the Philistine woman. He is drawn to her beauty, but his parents resist the idea of marrying a foreigner. It is interesting to see the rationalization that God ordained this union and its unfortunate ending in order to provide an occasion to act against the Philistines.

As he travels to gain his wife, Samson is confronted by a lion. Here the spirit of the Lord comes mightily upon him and he tears the lion apart without any weapon. On a return trip he finds a hive of bees and honey in the carcass of the lion.

When he arrives for the wedding, he is given a group of thirty attendants. Apparently, the stakes were sufficiently high to cause the attendants to persuade his wife to cajole Samson into revealing the answer to his riddle. Thus exposed, Samson was foiled. His indignant rage leads to brutal revenge. When he later returns for his wife, he discovers that she has been given to another; again, he vents his rage upon the Philistines who, in an effort to stop these provocations, kill the wife's family. At this Samson concludes that the Philistines are indeed a people who deserve to be punished. The "justification" for the warfare that follows is established.

R&D *How do you respond to this perplexing series of events?*

Prayer: *Lord, too often in our own day we see foolish happenings leading to deadly action. Protect us from our own foolishness, Dear Lord, and from the violence of others.*

Friday, June 24

Read: Judges 16:4-5 (6-14) 15-31

Samson's Revenge

The narrative of Delilah's efforts to pry from Samson the secret of his great strength is well-known. The Philistines' continuous

plots to overwhelm him are the stuff of movie themes. By her persistent wiles, Delilah pries from him his secret and he is overcome.

Theologians over the years haven't given Samson very good press. It is interesting to note, however, that at the final, crucial hour Samson utters his first formal prayer. "O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, only this once."

Only after he has reached the depths of despair does Samson ask for help. He had not asked for the strength he possessed; it had been granted him because of his parents' vow. Now blinded and humiliated, he asks for help.

That help is always available to us from God. We do not need to be at the end of our rope to ask for and receive it. But we, like Samson, often wait too long.

R&D When have you waited too long to seek the help from God that was always available to you?

Prayer: Help us always to remember this timely advice: pray first.

Saturday, June 25

Read: Judges 17:1-13

Toward a King

It appears that the writer is beginning to build a case for the need for a king of Israel. He begins to point out the abominations that were rampant. This story is of a son who stole his mother's silver. She had previously pronounced a curse on the thief. When he returns the silver to her, she is forced to dispel the curse by casting the silver into religious images, ephods, and teraphim. Although it is entirely probable that these images were of the Lord, nevertheless they stood in direct violation of the Second Commandment. This defection from the will of God was seen as further evidence of cooperation with the pagan traditions. The writer seems to infer that since there was no king in Israel, all the people did what was right in their own sight.

The next idolatrous action is Micah's search for prosperity. We see in this story a strategy by Micah to guarantee his prosperity by employing a "major league" priest: a Levite. This behavior, designed to guarantee prosperity without any corresponding call for obedience is proudly affirmed by Micah as he boasts, "Now I know

that the Lord will prosper me because the Levite has become my priest.” To the recorder of these stories, this is seen as another abomination and further evidence to support the need for a king.

R&D *What parallels do you see between these stories and voices we hear today?*

Prayer: *It is so easy to rationalize when we want things our own way. Holy Spirit, guide our thinking away from our selfishness and toward God's will.*

Sunday, June 26

Sabbath Time

Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.” John 11:44

As Bruce Larson has pointed out so powerfully in *Ask Me to Dance*, when Jesus stood at the tomb of Lazarus and called his name, he walked out of the grave alive. This was miraculous. But all Lazarus could say, with gritted teeth, was “hallelujah.” He was alive but he was totally bound in graveclothes. And the surprising thing is that Jesus never got Lazarus out of the graveclothes, according to the Scriptures. What Jesus did, instead, was to turn to the people standing around Lazarus and say, “You unwrap him.”

Monday, June 27

Read: Judges 18:1-31

Idolatry of Dan

Again the writer sets the scene for another sad episode with the phrase, “In those days there was no king in Israel.” The Danites’ search for land was precipitated by pressure from the Philistines. Moving northward, an advance party encounters Micah and his household. Upon their return from the north, they lead the warriors of Dan northward. Stopping at the house of Micah, they encounter again the priest and the images of worship. The invitation to the priest to join them and his response is a vivid picture of the idolatrous nature of ambition. “Come join us. Is it better for you to be priest to the house of one person or to be priest to a tribe and clan of Israel” (v.19)?

Micah’s plaintive cry bespeaks the spiritual poverty of the time. “You take away my gods (that I have made) and my priest. What have I left” (v.24)?

The Danites continue northward and conquer Laish, which they rename Dan. After inflicting considerable damage, they rebuild the city into a shrine which becomes a principal shrine of the subsequent Northern Kingdom. This whole story is another chapter in the picture of tribal anarchy and clan-like conflict that characterized the land in the time before Samuel. The writer seems intent on making the point that this was because “there was no king in Israel.”

R&D Reflect upon the problem of relying upon symbols of faith rather than God.

Prayer: Keep us focused on You, Lord, and our Savior Jesus Christ, and not on anything that tries to be a substitute.

Tuesday, June 28

Read: Judges 19:(1-15) 16-80

Anarchy in Gibeah

This story may sound familiar to you. There is an obvious parallel with the story of the men who encountered Lot in Sodom—note Genesis 19. The writer again uses a disconnected incident of rampant immorality and lawlessness to underscore the need for a king.

It is important to note the central focus of this story. The story begins with the migration of a Levite from the hills of Ephraim to be reconciled with his concubine. Her father’s hospitality is conspicuous in the story and emphasizes the contrast with the failure of hospitality at Gibeah. While continuing on their journey, they bypass Jerusalem (Jebus) because it is controlled by Canaanites and thought to be unsafe. So, they travel on to Gibeah. Here the inhospitable state of the people of Israel comes into stark reality. Bear in mind this is an Israelite city of the tribe of Benjamin. The travelers are not welcomed; they are left to sleep in the town square and are finally welcomed in by one who was not a local. The abominations that follow are important issues to the writer. This is not some pagan incursion; rather it is the Israelites, fellow bearers of the covenant, who harass, exploit, and eventually kill the concubine.

The lurid details of this story are difficult to assimilate. Obviously, they do not fit into our current stereotypes. The behavior of the “good guy” seems as difficult to understand as that of the

attackers. However, the point which the writer made was very clear. Israel, without a king, had sunk to a new low. “Such a thing has never happened or been seen from the day that the people of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt until this day” (v.30).

R&D *What parallels do you see between what happened in this story and the seeds of rampant immorality evident in our day?*

Prayer: *As faith in Christ ebbs even in our own day, we see atrocities that we never imagined. Lord, again, we beg for revival.*

Wednesday, June 29

Read: Judges 20:1-11 (20:12—21:25)

Retribution Sought

The last two chapters of the book represent a continuing look at the societal chaos that had befallen Israel in the Promised Land: a war of revenge against the Benjaminites, a power struggle within the tribes at war (20:18), brutal struggle and catastrophic divisions in the confederation (21:5). It is fitting that these events seem to form a watershed in later Israel’s and Judah’s understanding of the decline of the people of the covenant. Hosea refers to the “days of Gibeah” (Hosea 9:9, 10:9) as uniquely evil; Isaiah refers back to the evil of Benjamin (Isaiah 30:9); Jeremiah cites them as without conscience (Jeremiah 6:28, 8:12). All these prophets suggest that the almost complete destruction of Benjamin was a warning of what would befall Israel.

This final chapter is editorially highlighted by its final verse: “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” The stage is set for the next act in God’s unfolding drama of creation: deliverance and completion. This venture had failed. People living in loose confederation in obedience to their heavenly King had been sabotaged by sin. The pattern of the people to “forget” God left the way open to chronic failure. The writer now leaves us with a broken dream—and yet a new hope emerges. Will a king be the solution? Is there value in some intermediate authority who will stand as a symbol of Yahweh to help remind them of their need for obedience and faithfulness? The writer of Judges thought so. The subsequent histories of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings tell the unfolding story.

R&D *In the midst of the Book of Judges, can you see God working His purposes out?*

Prayer: *Help us to see Your hand in the unfolding history of the Christian faith, Father God.*

Thursday, June 30

Read: Mark 1:14-15

Favorite Passage

I maintain that our Lord really had only one sermon. That message is expressed for us in this passage of Scripture. Everything else that Jesus said or did seems to be an illustration or elaboration of that message. His gospel is about the kingdom of God.

Another way of saying this is, “Our God rules!” This world is not out of control. Evil cannot and will not prevail. He is worthy of all trust. It is within His power to do anything and everything. He is always “at hand,” always present. He is present right now with you. He knows everything: our hopes, our fears, our joys, our sorrows, our desires, our needs, our strength, our weakness, our faith, our sin. And yet He loves us. He loves each person whom He has created, even our enemies. He loves each one of us, completely; He is eternal.

God’s call to us, as we struggle through our life trying to make everything work out right, is to repent. Turn from that path and follow Him. Believe the good news that “our God rules,” and then let Him rule our life moment by moment, day by day.

Alex D. Dickson

R&D *Where are you letting God rule your life at the present time? Where are you still trying to run the world yourself?*

Prayer: *I’m yours, Lord Christ.*



Letters to the Thessalonians

Friday, July 1

Read: Acts 17:1-10

Introduction

Thessalonica was the principal metropolis of Macedonia. It was situated at the junction of the main land route from Italy to the East with the main route from the Aegean to the Danube. Thus, her position under the Roman Empire was assured, and she has remained a major city to this day.

The story of Paul's stay in Thessalonica is in our reading for today. He preached in the synagogue for three Sabbaths, which indicates that his stay in the city was only for three weeks. He apparently had so much success that the Jews became enraged and created so much trouble that Paul had to be smuggled out of the city.

What might have seemed a somewhat failed mission appeared just the opposite to Paul. If, in just three weeks' time, so many could be won to Christ at this special crossroads of the world, what were the possibilities for bringing the entire Roman Empire to Christ? Thessalonica was an important "test case" and Paul was anxious to maintain contact with the new Christians there.

Therefore, the two letters to the Thessalonians were written soon after Paul's departure and there was only a short interval of time between the first and the second. So anxious was Paul to know what was happening in Thessalonica that he sent Timothy back to get information. Timothy returned with the good news that the new Christians were standing fast in the faith. But, there were questions to be answered, which Paul attempts to do in these letters.

R&D When have you felt a need to follow up a visit with a letter in order to clarify (or amplify) something important that had surfaced during the visit?

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord God, for the faithfulness of Paul through whom we are able to learn so much about the early days of Christianity and gain understanding of the faith for our day as well.*

Saturday, July 2

Read: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-3

Fruit of Right Priorities

In the opening paragraph of Paul's earliest letter, he praises the Thessalonians for their "work produced by faith" (v.3). Let's examine this characteristic of the Thessalonian church that Paul found so noteworthy.

Work produced by faith is work that arises out of faith. This is the kind of work that is the peaceable activity of those guided by God. This is the work that has its source in God's direction. By contrast, this is not the frenetic activity of a guilt-ridden "do-gooder" who is still trying to win the favor of God. Those whose work is produced by faith are already confident of God's acceptance; and thus, free to receive His guidance. The mind clouded by condemnation has little room for the still small voice of God's Holy Spirit.

Such confidence in God's acceptance is not arrogant presumption. It is merely (and blessedly!) the personal acceptance of God's all-consuming mercy.

He forgives us for all we have done. He loves us as we are! The grace of His love and forgiveness frees us to walk in His paths. Condemnation cripples; but love sets us free to serve Him without fear.

R&D *Where in my life do I still feel that God has not forgiven me? Where do I feel trapped and condemned? How can I move from condemnation to forgiveness?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, you died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins and reconciliation with Father God. Let us live into the acceptance of that reality and reflect your love to others.*

He called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority. Matthew 10:1

Jesus' method (and Paul's) was that of apprenticeship. That seems almost always to be God's method of creating community. Look at Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, Paul and Silas, and Barnabas and Mark in their little groups. This may sound terribly naive to a sophisticated and highly organized minister of a large, busy church. But history indicates that there is no shortcut to taking the time to be on a personal adventure with Christ and a few other committed people, if a genuine healing community is to be born.

Monday, July 4

Read: John 8:31-38

Independence Day

Emily Griffith, in leading Prayer in Practice Workshops some years ago, told a story to illustrate rebelliousness. A little girl was told to sit in the corner as punishment. She refused to sit down despite continued demands by her mother that she do so. When the mother finally forced the child to sit down by placing her hands on the girl's shoulders and pushing her down, the child said, "I may be sitting down on the outside, but I'm standing up on the inside."

As Philip Parham says in his book *Letting God*, "We can't help but admire a strong will and do applaud perseverance and courage. Even childish rebellion and stubbornness are better than fearful and slavish obedience. We are not created to be slaves and to grovel in the dust; we are created to be free. Liberty is our lot."

On this day when the United States celebrates its liberty, we can truly be grateful to God not only for our freedom but also for the beacon of hope that our nation is to the people of the world. Yet, two things should be noted, things that are surely interrelated. The first is that, despite all the good things that can be said about our freedom, there is serious moral sickness eating away at the foundation of our country. The second is that freedom in Christ is immeasurably more important than the political freedom we enjoy. The moral sickness that could destroy us can only be healed by surrender

to Christ; the anomaly that, by becoming servants of Christ, we are his ambassadors in the world and thereby “will be free indeed.”

R&D *What responsibilities do you have as a result of: (a) political freedom, (b) freedom in Christ?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for this country in which we are privileged to live despite its imperfections.*

Tuesday, July 5

Read: 1 Thessalonians 1:4-7

The Joy of a Good Example

When Paul and his fellow believers first came to Thessalonica, Paul’s proclamation of the gospel was not merely good sermons. Paul’s open preaching of the gospel threatened his very life (see Acts 17:1-9). This example of personal sacrifice was not lost on his early converts. Even though Paul was only in Thessalonica for less than one month, the impact of that visit was enough to start a church that became a beacon of light throughout Macedonia.

Think of it. One three-week visitation from a band of foreign Christians was enough to change the course of that city forever! The example that Paul and his companions set was so profound that the early Christians in that city set out to imitate him and the Lord that he served. The witness of his life was infectious. Even though following Jesus could cost them their lives, they chose to follow the Christ Paul presented with abandonment.

R&D *What Christian quality would you most like to develop in your life? How can others help you?*

Prayer: *Lord Christ, let the light of your love show forth from us to those around us.*

Wednesday, July 6

Read: 1 Thessalonians 1:8-10

Breaking Out of Idolatry

The impact of the example Paul and his companions set while in Thessalonica was not limited to his immediate converts. Since they set out to imitate Paul’s abandonment to Christ, others soon became Christians through the example set by the Thessalonians.

Such abandonment was earmarked by two things: (1) a resolute break with the idols of the past, and (2) an anticipation of the return of Christ that guided their choices in the present.

To resolutely break with idols of the past is to determine that nothing will stand in the way of following Jesus. The idolatrous pride of self-sufficiency must die and give way to the humility of crying out without shame for God's mercy. We must let go of the right to control our lives. Jesus said, "He who would save his life must lose it."

But to choose to lose one's life requires the grace of God. Resolutions without grace are worthless. I must believe that God wants me to succeed in dying and chooses to give me His grace out of sheer love.

R&D Take the time to thank God that He is for you and not against you. How can you see that God is helping you to become like Him?

Prayer: You are much better able to run my life, Lord, than I ever have been. I give my life to You.

Thursday, July 7

Read: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-6a

Seeking God's Approval

The account in the book of Acts of Paul's visit to Thessalonica is filled with conflict. While some came to Christ, others were ready to kill him. Paul was in constant personal danger. Preaching the gospel was a life-threatening profession. No one got rich being an apostle. In fact, in his first letter to the Corinthians (4:9) Paul described his social status as being at the tail end of the procession.

Paul's motivation was never approval by others. His chief desire was to please God. He knew that God had entrusted him with a message that was so precious that to sully it with personal ambition was treason. God had made him the steward of a treasure. That treasure was the gift and the message of eternal life.

You and I are entrusted with that same treasure. God gives us an example in Paul that challenges us to live only for the approval of God, even if it invokes the displeasure of others. After all, it is not our fellow humans that we will face on the day of judgment. It is the Son of God.

God desires that we live only for His pleasure. The grace that He gives us is the grace to say “no” to popularity and “yes” to Christ.

R&D *Where in my life is God asking me to say “no” to popularity and “yes” to Christ?*

Prayer: *Give us courage, Lord God, to stand with You no matter how unpopular that stand may be.*

Friday, July 8

Read: 1 Thessalonians 2:6b-12

God Is for You

In describing his relationship with the church at Thessalonica, Paul uses the analogies of mother and father. Through these analogies, we gain insight both into the way Paul dealt with his people and the way God deals with us.

Like a mother, Paul says that he shared with them “not only the gospel of God but our lives as well” (v.8). Paul was not aloof; nor was he dispassionate. He cared for these people dearly and was willing to share with them even his own personal history.

God is like that. He is not one who merely sits on His throne in heaven, observing the human race from afar. His passion for us extended itself into the depths of human history in Jesus of Nazareth. The comfort of His presence seeps down into the pores of our very being through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The very nature of the Godhead desires and, through grace, implements intimacy with His children.

Like a father, Paul states that he urged and encouraged these new believers. To encourage means to call people to their very best. This is the voice of one who says, “I believe in you. You can do it!” God is like this as well. God is for us and not against us. He is not some vengeful accountant waiting for us to slip up so He can mark it in the annals of eternity. He is the one who continues to give us His best gifts. He is the one who loves us enough never to give up on us. Even now, He is preparing a place in heaven for us because He knows that, through grace, we will succeed.

R&D *How has God shown you that He is for you and not against you?*

Prayer: *Your love for us, Blessed Lord, could not have been better demonstrated than through what You were willing to do for us in Your Son Jesus on the cross.*

Saturday, July 9

Read: 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

Faithful under Trial

Have you ever completed a project and asked: “Was all of this effort worth it?” Paul knew the frustration of seemingly empty efforts. Consequently, here he is openly rejoicing that his work in Thessalonica was not in vain. When he, and the other disciples, opened their mouths to preach, the Thessalonians knew they were hearing the word of God.

The Thessalonian believers received these words from God with joy. They knew that a God who loved them enough to communicate with them personally was also at work within them. They were not alone! And because these new believers knew that God was with them, they could face the severe persecution that befell them. The tragedy of their circumstances did not diminish the fervency of their love.

Paul had already warned them that persecution was coming. It was part of the package of becoming a Christian (see 3:4). They understood the fact that God loved them and would give them whatever grace was necessary to remain faithful.

It makes a difference knowing that difficult circumstances are no surprise to the God who is with us always. The faithfulness of His love towards us is not threatened when things get hard. He is the God of difficult places. The light of His love is never overshadowed by the powers of darkness. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me” (Psalm 23:4).

R&D *What reminds you that God is in control when times get hard?*

Prayer: *It is a blessing to know that you are with us, Lord, even in the toughest of times.*

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 2 Corinthians 5:17

I can't say this hard enough. For my whole lifetime, we have ignored the enormous disparity between what is said and what we do in our churches. Either I am insane, or there is some strange conspiracy of silence which will not let us face the fantastic, stereotyped charade we go through each Sunday in many churches. We do not come to grips with each other, with our real problems, with the brokenness and lostness all around us right in the room—much less in the world.

Monday, July 11

Read: 1 Thessalonians 2:17—3:5

Investing in the Kingdom

It has been said that the only thing that lasts throughout eternity is our investment in people. Everything else passes away. Jesus tells his disciples to “lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Matthew 6:20). How do we do that? Is it not through the sacrifice of time, money, and prayer we make that others may know Christ? Paul echoes this when he tells the Thessalonians that they are his “crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming” (v.19).

For Paul, his priority was seeing people converted and then growing in their relationship with Christ. When that process was cut short, Paul felt as if they had been orphaned (“bereft” in v.17). The extreme character of the phrase indicated how deeply Paul loved this small and persecuted band of Christians. He would make every effort to send Timothy to them to make sure they were all right and had not abandoned the faith. Paul states that this struggle to be with the Thessalonians was engineered by Satan (see 2:18). We do not know in what ways Satan tried to keep Paul and the other Christian leaders from being in Thessalonica, but there is no doubt about Paul's understanding of the nature of the battle.

The battle is true for us as well. When we want to reach out and help someone else, or seek the help we need only to find our efforts thwarted, we could be engaging in a similar spiritual battle. We would do well to pray and redouble our efforts, knowing that investing in people is the work of the kingdom.

R&D Where, in your giving to people, do you need to regroup and try again?

Prayer: Help us never tire of doing your work in the world, Lord Jesus.

Tuesday, July 12

Read: 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Strengthened with Prayer

Up until this point, Paul has been speaking of the past. Verse six brings us to the present with Timothy's visit. "But now," he says. Obviously, Paul is relieved, even overjoyed, that his fears concerning the Thessalonians were unfounded. They are "standing fast in the Lord" (v.8). It is almost as if the tables are turned; for now Paul says that in the midst of his distress and affliction (an allusion to his being persecuted), he gratefully declares that he has been comforted by the strength of their perseverance.

So, Paul stands with them in prayer. After asking to be reunited with them again, he prays two things: (1) that they would increase in their love for each other, and (2) that God would strengthen their hearts so that they would be blameless at Christ's return. Why? In times of darkness and distress there are two temptations: (1) to blame others for our distress, growing bitter and cynical, and (2) to lapse into self-indulgence as a way to escape the pressures of difficult circumstances.

In times of trial, Christians need each other more than ever. It is sin and the evil one who would try to divide us so that we face life's difficulties alone. True religion is "to visit orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (James 1:27). Reaching out in love to others shields us from self-pity and encourages those who are struggling.

In praying that their hearts would be strengthened, Paul touches upon the miracle of grace that is available to every Christian. God does not expect us to face temptations in our strength. He

promises to supply all of our needs according to His riches in glory (Philippians 4:19).

R&D *Which of Paul's prayer requests would you want prayed for you, right now? Why?*

Prayer: *When things aren't going our way, Lord God, we pray that they will go Your way whatever that may be.*

Wednesday, July 13

Read: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Pleasing God with Purity

Paul turns from his prayer to the practical implication of that prayer. What does he mean by “blameless” (3:13)? Blameless means living a life that pleases God (4:1). How do we please God? By living God-centered lives. The focus of much of contemporary culture is personal fulfillment. This is not the emphasis of the New Testament at all. The goal of the Christian's life, according to the New Testament, is to love God—completely (i.e., all our heart, soul, mind and strength). Christians do not live so as to obtain the maximum amount of pleasure for themselves. They are servants of God and servants of others. The goal of life is not for me to get my needs met. The goal of life is to please God “more and more” (4:1).

Paul then applies this principle to the area of sexual purity. Because I am to love God and love my fellow believers, sexual immorality is out. To violate one's marriage vows (“vessel” in v.4 can be understood as either “body” or “wife”) wrongs not only my spouse but the Christian community at large.

Paul warns that such will not go unpunished. There is no room in Paul's argument for any rationalization or justification for sexual activity outside of marriage. Living a “holy life” (4:7) means rejecting immorality and living to please God.

R&D *What would you say to a Christian who believes one can do anything he or she wants so long as it feels good and no one gets hurt?*

Prayer: *In an age of lax morals, Lord, help us to look only to You and not to the culture around us.*

Thursday, July 14

Read: 1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

Devotion

It almost seems a surprise that after praising the Thessalonians for their profound love for each other in the earlier part of the letter, Paul would urge them here to love each other “more and more.” But it is our love for each other that is the safety net every Christian needs if he or she is to battle temptation successfully, especially sexual temptation (which was his previous subject). It is so true that lust strikes hardest when we are feeling the most alone. Having strong and openly affectionate relationships can go a long way to alleviate the pressure of loneliness that drives even well-meaning Christians to sexual immorality.

Paul also calls the Thessalonians to be faithful in earning their living. One of the striking contrasts between Christianity and the pagan world of Thessalonica was in attitudes towards work. For the pagan, work (especially manual labor) was something to be avoided. The goal of life was leisure. But for the followers of the Carpenter, work was holy. All of life, including work, was to be lived for the glory of God.

Pleasing God involves the whole of life. For the Christians there is no such thing as “sacred” versus “secular.” “Whatever you do, do all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

R&D *How do you strive to please God in your work?*

Prayer: *Let the light of Your love flow through us, Lord, to the joy of those with whom we are in contact.*

Friday, July 15

Read: 1 Thessalonians 4:12-18

Facing the Future

Paul’s love for the Thessalonians moves him to address the subject of life beyond the grave. Commentators lead us to believe that Paul addresses this subject because some within the Thessalonian church were confused. They wondered if Christians who had died before the return of Christ would miss out on this

great event. Would those who had died before the return of Christ ever be raised?

Paul moves swiftly to set their minds at rest. They do not need to grieve as “those who have no hope.” Those who have died are not in eternal death; they are asleep in Christ. Those who are asleep in Christ will be awakened by him at his return. Those who are alive will be reunited with those who have died. Should we grieve for their loss? Certainly. Should we despair? Never.

The sequence of events that Paul gives us at the Lord’s return is sketchy at best. A host of questions are left unanswered. In fact, nowhere in the New Testament is there a detailed exposition of the return of Christ, just small bits of information given here and there to encourage. However, there are some things that can be said from this passage with certainty:

The return of Christ will be a global and public event. There is not a hint of a “secret” return that only the initiated will be able to see. Neither is there room to spiritualize the return of Christ to mean that Christ is only returning to our hearts.

The return of Christ will be surrounded by honor befitting a king. The “shout from heaven,” “the sound of the trumpet,” and the “archangel’s call” all allude to a commander returning in triumph.

The return of Christ will activate the resurrection from the dead in Christ. A great reunion with the departed will begin that will last forever (v.17).

Paul writes all of this to “comfort” those who still grieve. Paul was as certain of these events as he was of the resurrection of Jesus (v.14). The end of history poses many unanswered questions. But the Christian knows that the end of history is Christ.

R&D How does the return of Christ affect the way you look at the future?

Prayer: May we rejoice in the time ahead rather than concerning ourselves with details we cannot know until we are there.

Read: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Living with Purpose

It is as if Paul is anticipating the Thessalonians' question: When will these exciting events take place? Paul's answer is that "no one knows." But when it does happen, it will be suddenly. The analogy of the "thief in the night" means that it will come unexpectedly for those who are not prepared.

Paul sees the entire pagan world as unprepared. Speaking of "peace and safety" means they will completely fail to foresee the reality of what is about to take place. The reality is that the return of Christ will bring inevitable judgment (even "destruction," v.3) on those who have opposed him. Paul seems to leave no alternative: life with Christ or eternal loss.

Consequently, Paul warns the Christians to live as the children of light (v.5) that they are. That means living with watchfulness (v.6). The term "watchful" ("keep awake" in the RSV) means being determined not to fall asleep. It is as if the pagan culture of Paul's day was singing a seductive but fatal lullaby (like the sirens in Homer's *Odyssey*) leading unsuspecting travelers to their doom.

"But you," Paul says, "are not in darkness" (v.4). You do not have to give in or follow their path. The pagan road to destruction is not where you belong. God has appointed you to salvation and not to wrath (v.9). Christ died for you (v.10) so that you can live with him. God has given you a higher purpose. You are destined to be with Christ for all eternity.

R&D *What reminds you that you belong to Christ?*

Prayer: *For the Christian, eternity begins when we give our lives to Christ (Galatians 2:20). Thank You, Lord.*

Sunday, July 17

Sabbath Time

You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God. 1 Peter 1:23

When we make a serious commitment to Christ and his people, our use of time and money changes drastically, sometimes overnight, sometimes over a period of months or years. But the new

adventurer does not think he is living a grim life of renunciation at all. He is suddenly in a love relationship with a Lord he wants to get to know and live for and with some exciting new friends. He has come alive, and instead of giving only intellectual assent to a doctrine, he has become compassionate about God and the love of people.

Monday, July 18

Read: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15

Final Instructions

Paul ends this letter with a series of final instructions. The first set has to do with relationships within their local congregation. He begins by calling for respect for those in authority within the church. Paul defines “respect” in verse 13 where he tells them to “hold in high esteem in love” those in leadership.

Whom in leadership Paul is referring to is not clear. We only know them by their job description. These are those who “labor among you,” who are “over you in the Lord” and “admonish you” (v.12). “Labor” gives the connotation of hard work that costs something of those who give it. This is work that is sacrificial. For someone to be “over you in the Lord” obviously refers to those who are in pastoral authority over the rest of the congregation. To “admonish” means to guide, even correct, with tenderness and gentleness. In other words, the picture of church leadership that Paul presents is one where those in authority do not use church leadership to their personal advantage. Just the opposite; these are church leaders who are setting an example for the rest of their flock by their hard work, their conscientious faithfulness and their willingness tenderly to confront sin.

Paul ends this section by exhorting the rest of the church to do likewise (see vv.14-15). While church leaders bear more responsibility for the spiritual life of others than the rest of the congregation, there is no indication from the Scriptures that members of the congregation are to be less committed to Christ than their leadership. All, both clergy and lay, are called to take responsibility for each other to see that no one falls away from the gospel. We are our brothers’ keepers.

R&D *Who do I know that has dropped out of church? How can I reach out to them to see them restored?*

Prayer: *Help, Dear Lord, to be conscious of those around us in the body of Christ who are slipping away from the fellowship and in need of our love and encouragement.*

Tuesday, July 19

Read: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Always Rejoicing

Do I honestly believe that God is in charge of my life? Do I really know that since God has my life in His hands He is “working all things together for the good” (Romans 8:28)? Do I sincerely accept the fact that God honestly loves me, and that He always has my best intentions in mind? If I believe these things, then I can rejoice regardless of my circumstances. Why? Because even when things are going badly, I can still rejoice in the fact that God is good, He loves me, and He is working out His best for my life (even though I may not be able to see it). If need be, I can even say with Job, “Though He slay me, yet will I love Him!” (Job 13:15). To know in the depths of my heart that God loves me is a fundamental secret to successful Christian living.

But if I do not honestly believe that God loves me, I can say none of these things. When circumstances turn for the worst, I will always suspect that God is finally paying me back for all the wrongs I have done. I will worry that because I do not measure up to His standards, His concern for me is fleeting at best. “After all,” I will tell myself, “God has much bigger concerns than the petty circumstances of my life.”

But the entire testimony of the New Testament is that God loves each of us personally, deeply, and intimately. No circumstance is too small for His attention, so great is the intensity of His care (“even the very hairs of your head are numbered” Matthew 10:30). All that God has demonstrated in Jesus Christ is that He loves us.

His plan for our lives is to guide us through all of life, both good and evil so that, finally, we may be united with Him in the glories of heaven. While the circumstances of our lives may be irritating, painful, or even tragic, we know that nothing can separate us

from His love. Even if we don't feel like rejoicing, we can still express thanks to God for His love. And because we know that He loves us, we can rejoice.

R&D Resolve to rejoice today regardless of the circumstances.

Prayer: In the toughest of times, we know God is in control and we know how the Book ends. Rejoice!

Wednesday, July 20

Read: 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22

Staying on Fire for God

One of the clear symbols for the Holy Spirit in the Bible is fire. This is fire that cleanses, purifies, ignites with passion and zeal, and motivates into action. It is the fire of the Holy Spirit that warms the soul, enlightens the mind, and speaks to the emotions with enthusiasm and joy. It is the fire of the Holy Spirit that causes normal men and women to perform the abnormal, even the miraculous, through the power of God. It is the fire of the Holy Spirit that enables us to be finished vessels in the hands of God rather than formless lumps of clay.

Here Paul warns the Thessalonians not to “put out” this fire from the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, it is not difficult to quench or put out this fire. When we deny the warmth of the Holy Spirit in our own hearts, we are quenching the Spirit. When the warmth of that Spirit yearns to move us into action, but we refuse, we are quenching the Spirit. When someone speaks a word to us that we know to be a word from God (the true meaning of prophecy), but we refuse to accept or obey it, we are quenching the Spirit.

Instead of quenching the Spirit Paul calls the Thessalonians to “test” everything and “hold fast to that which is good.” To “test” everything implies living life with openness and anticipation, always looking for the guidance and affirmation of God. To live with this kind of anticipation means beginning each day with the declaration: “Today, O God, I want to do Your will. Lead me and guide me. Help me not to quench Your Spirit, but to be open and submit to Your leadership. Not my will but Yours be done.”

R&D *Where have I quenched the Holy Spirit? How can I be more available in his service?*

Prayer: *Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle in our hearts the fire of your love.*

Thursday, July 21

Read: 1 Thessalonians 5:23-28

He Will Keep You!

Have you ever found the ethical requirements of Christianity difficult, even impossible? Have you ever found yourself agreeing with Paul when he lamented that “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Romans 7:19)? Does the commandment of Jesus, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” bring you to the edge of despair?

“Yes!” you say? You are not alone. Such sentiments are as old as Christianity itself. All thinking, committed Christians struggle with the gap between what they aspire to and what they actually practice. It is only the unreflective who think that their Christian walk is all that it ought to be.

So, what are we to do? How can we become what God has intended us to be? Paul answers that question in the closing benediction of this passage: “May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly...” (v.23). If we cannot produce within ourselves the fruit of righteousness, then God Himself has to do it. If I cannot make myself different by my own efforts, then God has to change me.

In the letter to the Philippians, Paul says, “I am sure that He (meaning God) who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). God has taken upon Himself the responsibility of bringing us to Himself and will keep us in the palm of His hand even through our struggles. So, do not give up! Verse 24 says: “He who calls you is faithful, and He will do it.”

R&D *What struggle in your life do you need to release to God?*

Prayer: *What more could we ask, Lord God, but that it is Your will to shape us according to Your plan for us?*

Read: 2 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Tried in the Furnace

It always sounds so right when someone says, “Suffering is an opportunity for personal growth.” But when we actually find ourselves in a place of pain, such words can seem hollow. Suffering, by its very nature, is a lonely and harrowing experience. There are only two things which seem to make a difference in times of pain: (1) a community of friends who do not preach to us (like Job’s comforters) but who stand by us so we are not alone, and (2) the presence of God who is never afraid of our sufferings.

In the Thessalonians’ furnace of affliction, they had both a community of friends and the sense of the presence of God. And because they had these gifts, even in unjust suffering they grew in their love for each other and in their love for God.

But another kind of suffering is mentioned in this passage. Paul talks about the suffering of their enemies as the judgment of God. Paul says that when Christ returns all perpetrators of injustice will be punished and all inequities made right.

The Bible never runs from the fact that during this time before the return of Christ, injustice will abound. Jesus said, “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

This places a special responsibility on those of us who believe in a God who will one day remove all injustice. We who know Him are called to befriend those who suffer alone. We bear His presence in the world. The light of His love shining through our friendship, the warmth of His love felt in the touch of our hands can make a difference. Remember the awesome words of Jesus: “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14).

R&D In the business of your life, where can you make a difference?

Prayer: Help me to see you, Lord Jesus, in the people I meet day by day.

Read: 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12

Living with Resolve

In a society where we are constantly bombarded by news from around the world, most of us have developed the fine art of selective listening. We skim most of the publications that come our way and only take the time to read what is immediately relevant. We crave entertainment because it alleviates the stress. We like our news in manageable bits; and we feel guilty about all that we are not reading.

The pace of our lives and the demands of our schedules keep us constantly on the move. Someone once told me, “I feel as if all I do is go from event to event to event!” And yet, all of this busyness has not produced in us a greater sense of either satisfaction or accomplishment. In fact, most of our endeavors just make us feel tired.

In the midst of our frantic world, ruled by what one author called the “tyranny of the urgent,” we hear Paul’s words: “that God may... fulfill every resolve and work of faith by His power” (v.11). What? Does God want to bless me in my efforts for Him? The answer is “Yes.”

But to inherit this blessing takes a reordering of our lives. Instead of being captured by our schedules, God calls us to capture our schedules for Christ. Make the time to look at how you spend your time. Ask God to show you what He wants you to do. Aim for the highest and best, that “our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ” (v.12).

R&D *What are God’s priorities for your life?*

Prayer: *Christ is life; everything else is just details.*

Sunday, July 24

Sabbath Time

I love thee, O Lord, my strength. Psalm 18:1

The problem is often that we preach about the necessity of sacrificial giving and renunciation of selfish pursuits to people who may have joined a church but never consciously and specifi-

cally stepped into a committed love relationship with God which involved their whole lives. Imagine a parent demanding that his teenage boy give up basketball and use his money for a girl with whom he had not fallen in love—and hoping he would decide on his own to do this.

Monday, July 25

Read: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-8

He Is Still Coming

Paul begins this section of his letter by dealing with questions that had arisen over his preaching about the second coming of Christ. This is an extremely difficult passage to interpret because what we have in this letter is only supplemental material. The bulk of his teaching on the return of Christ had been given in person. So, what we have in this letter (and in the previous letter) are merely efforts to fill in the gaps and answer some lingering questions. Consequently, reading this section of the epistle is a little like walking into the middle of a conversation.

From what can be gathered, some within the Thessalonian church were frantic over the assumption that maybe Christ had already returned and they had missed it. What Paul tries to explain is that all of the events that should precede the coming of Christ had not yet taken place. He is still coming!

What the specifics of these events are, we have very little idea. But some points in Paul's teaching are echoes in other passages of Scripture. Jesus speaks of a global rebellion that would precede his return (see Matthew 24). The Revelation of John describes a powerful leader who would be the very embodiment of evil arising out of this time of rebellion (see "the beast" in Revelation 13-14). But when this rebellion is to take place and who this "man of lawlessness" is we do not know. All attempts to identify this man with specific historical figures (from Nero to Hitler) have so far failed because Christ has yet to return.

But the significance of this teaching is not in the specifics, but in the principle that underlies these events. This principle is that God is in control of history, even the worst parts of history. God is not distant and aloof. Rather, He is actively moving throughout

our daily events carrying out His own purposes. He is preparing the entire planet for the return of His Son.

R&D *Where do you see the movement of God in your life?*

Prayer: *Lord God, everything is in Your hands, and everything is under control even when what we see seems to be utter chaos.*

Tuesday, July 26

Read: 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12

Living by the Truth

Paul continues his teaching on the “man of lawlessness” (see v.3). This man of lawlessness will not only arise out of a time of great rebellion, he will be in league with the supernatural forces of Satan. Paul describes one who will capture the attention of the world through “all power” and “pretended signs and wonders” (v.9). This power will have its source in evil. The signs and wonders will be “pretended” because they will be attempts to mimic the signs and wonders surrounding the ministry of Christ. In fact, the reason this man is sometimes called the “antichrist” is because he will attempt to place himself in the position of Christ himself (see 2:4).

This man will gain a large following among those who had rejected the “truth” (presumably the truth about Jesus as the Christ). Because these will have already rejected the truth of Jesus, God will judge them by convincing them of the final lie: that ultimate pleasure is to be found in unrighteousness. To put this in modern language: there is no ultimate meaning in life, so pursue pleasure to your heart’s desire.

How many voices within our culture are trying to convince us that life has no ultimate meaning? How many people do we know who have justified their actions by saying that it “felt good”? This final lie is a powerful and popular deception, indeed. But it is to have no place in the life of a follower of Jesus. We are not here to do what feels good. We are here to serve and follow our Master, Jesus Christ.

R&D *Where are you lying to yourself about what you do? How can you keep yourself from being deceived?*

Prayer: *You have a path for us to follow, Blessed Lord; help us to keep on that path amid the many distractions and temptations of life.*

Read: 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

Encouraged by His Love

Paul turns from the harshness of judgment to words of comfort. Paul loves those who are “beloved by the Lord” so much that he cannot keep away from the subject of consolation too long. Again, he stresses how grateful to God he is for them and how firm the promises of God are on their behalf.

The whole thrust of this passage centers around the sovereignty of God. God is the one who chose us for salvation. He in His love for us called us to Himself and it is by His grace that we believe. God is the one who enabled us by the Holy Spirit to move from darkness to light and it is by His grace that we are being changed into the image of Christ. God is the one who has declared that we will live with Him forever and it is by His grace that we live in the hope of eternal life. God is our foundation. God is our source. God is our hope.

These are promises in which a Christian can rest. While we are always responsible for our choices, ultimately it is God who is the author and finisher of our salvation. It is the grace of God, not our human effort, that sets us free to live for Him. He loves us. He accepts us. We do not have to prove our worth in His sight. As His children, we belong to Him.

When we know that God holds our salvation in His hands we are free to move ahead, knowing that even if we fail, He will still stand by us. This is the hope that establishes our hearts for “every good work” (v.17). When we know our future is secure in Christ, we can serve him without fear, knowing any efforts we make in his service are broken, blessed, and multiplied.

R&D *Where do you need the most encouragement and strength right now?*

Prayer: *As Christians, there is always someone or some situation on our hearts, Lord Jesus, because you want us to be concerned about the people around us and their need for your healing love.*

Thursday, July 28

Read: 2 Thessalonians 3:1-5

Working Together

The words of benediction and comfort continue in this passage even as Paul asks the Thessalonians for their prayers. It is as if Paul is saying, “I see the marvelous work God is doing with you and among you. As you continue to stand strong in the midst of persecution, pray for us that we, also, may stand strong in the persecution we endure.”

In a real sense Paul is paying these Christians a high compliment. The commander is now asking his soldiers to stand with him in the battles he faces. So it is with Christians. Even the strongest of leaders cannot stand alone and succeed. Christians are always mutually dependent upon each other. It is not inappropriate to admit that we need each other. Rather, God has designed us that way. In fact, as Christians, we are at our best when we are working together rather than separately.

There is just no room in the church for the attitude that says: “If you want a job done right you have to do it yourself.” Such a perfectionist places jobs above people, and the performance of tasks above human relationships. God never delights in a job well done if it was accomplished at the cost of broken friendships, even if the job was done in His Name.

R&D Are there broken relationship in your life that need restoration? What will you do?

Prayer: Carrying broken relationships around is like keeping trash rather than placing it in a container and sending it away. Help us to live this truth, Lord Jesus.

Friday, July 29

Read: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

Apostolic Authority

In this lesson Paul turns his attention to a subject he had already treated in the previous letter. What about those who refuse to work? First Thessalonians shows us that there were some who did not work on the grounds that they were preparing for the return

of Christ and did not want the distraction of earning an income (see 1 Thessalonians 4:12 and 5:14). Apparently, his exhortations to this group did not have the desired effect, so he must return to this matter again.

Since his previous suggestions did not work, Paul must take a stronger position. Here he speaks “in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ” (3:6) as one holding apostolic authority. His command is to “keep away” from those who do not work. This directive echoes the words of Jesus who told his followers that if one follower of Christ had wronged another and they could not settle it between themselves they were to bring in another party; but if the three could not settle it they were to bring it before the church; but if it still could not be settled the offending brother or sister was to be asked to leave (see Matthew 18:15-19).

Finally, in a similar manner, Paul charges the Thessalonians to disassociate themselves from those who refuse to follow the directives of his letter. He does not call for their excommunication (“Do not look on him as an enemy,” v.15); but he does emphasize that they need to be warned.

The strength of these directives comes from Paul’s view of the Church. Paul sees the Church as a living organism that must work together as one unit. The Church is not a collection of bodies; it is one Body with Christ at the head. Consequently, to fight against each other, or even to work together uncooperatively, is not merely bad organization, it is sin against each other and sin against Christ. For Paul, such sin must be avoided at all costs.

R&D Where have you dishonored Christ by working uncooperatively with other Christians?

Prayer: Forgive me, Lord, when, in my frustration, I have undertaken an action on my own that should have involved consultation and help from my brothers and sisters in Christ.

Saturday, July 30

Read: 2 Thessalonians 3:16-18

Lord of Peace

Paul closes this volatile second letter to the Thessalonians with a benediction of peace. Certain sections of this letter remind

us of the words of Jesus when he said, “I have not come to bring peace but to bring a sword” (Matthew 10:34). However, Paul wishes to close this letter with words that remind us of Jesus when he said, “My peace I leave with you” (John 14:27).

Paul calls Jesus the “Lord of peace,” emphasizing that the controversies within the church should always be looked at as necessary tensions on the way to a deeper unity. Christ’s goal for the church is that “they may be one as you and I are one” (John 17:11). For stubborn, independent, and selfish human beings to be united takes nothing less than a miracle. Only Christ can bring about this miracle as his Church submits to his lordship. Only as the people of God follow Christ and say, “Not my will but Thine be done” (Luke 22:42) can the miracle of unity given to us in salvation be manifested.

So, Paul prays that the Lord of peace “give you peace at all times in all ways” (v.16). Before this unity between Christians is manifested and as we live in the tensions of the world, we need this peace “at all times in all ways.” Thankfully, God does not wait for there to be peace in our circumstances to give us peace within our hearts. In fact, the peace Christ brings transcends circumstances because it is a gift from the throne of heaven. This peace is the equipment we need to carry out our mission: peace (unity) between Christians and the evangelization of the world.

R&D Hear the words, “My peace I leave with you” spoken to your heart. Thank him for the peace that passes understanding. Where are you called to bring this peace today?

Prayer: It is overwhelmingly wonderful to experience Your peace, Lord God, in the midst of the most trying situations.

Sunday, July 31

Sabbath Time

“So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.” Revelation 3:16

Talk of “total commitment” or recommitment may sound terribly naive to the average church lay leader or even pastor who has tried to drum up enthusiasm for worthy programs. But we are almost never seriously asked to make that kind of commitment. It’s not that we are called to commit too much in the average church.

We aren't asked to commit enough. And consequently most of us are neither hot nor cold.

Monday, August 1

Read: Proverbs 14:15-24

Stupidity

Stupidity opens the door to evil. Stupidity isn't the same as evil; stupidity is like the rich, black soil of my home state. Anything will grow there unless you're careful, especially weeds.

What faces does stupidity wear? One: "A simple man believes every word he hears; a clever man understands the need for proof" (v.15). The aim of advertisers is to nurture uncritical acceptance of claims. It's done by diverting our attention: a sexy model draped across the car, for instance, or as the chief priests once tried against Jesus, overstated and irrelevant claims that obfuscate the relevant facts. Thus, "The stupid is heedless," that is, incautious, not enough savvy (v.16). A wise person ignores the smoke and looks for the truth.

Another face of stupidity: "The simple wear the trappings of folly; the clever are crowned with knowledge" (v.18). Evil dictators know the value of showy uniforms. Were any fools quite so lavishly plumed as Hitler's followers? At a more mundane but still dangerous level, look at the way destructive adolescent peer groups use costume to mock the wise and to give the naive a salve for loneliness or insecurity.

What counters stupidity? The wise farmer counters weeds by knowing the weeds' growing cycle, by checking his soil for signs and by attacking the weeds, both preventively and responsively. In other words, he takes the weeds seriously, before they kill good seed. We, too, must abandon childish naivete and, as Jesus suggested in his parable of the sower, tend to our soil and be savvy about what's growing there.

Thomas L. Ehrich

R&D *What smoke screens or outright lies are being beamed into your life?*

Prayer: *Lord, give us the vision and wisdom to discern the truth in this world.*



James: An Action Plan for Christians

Tuesday, August 2

Read: Acts 15:12-21

Introduction

The Letter of James is one of the most practical books in the Bible. It was written to the Church in general and, therefore, to us. It is truly an “action plan” for Christians.

James talks about an active faith that is expressed in Christian living. He tells us that if we do not express our faith in action, it is useless and dead. We are cautioned against showing favoritism to the wealthy to the detriment of the poor. Controlling our conversation is a prime subject of the letter. We are encouraged to be more trusting in God, submitting ourselves to His plans for our lives. And we are told to pray in faith, believing God for results. These are just a few of the many things we can learn from the Letter of James.

There is thought that James may have been the first New Testament book written. There is even speculation that it was a sermon preached by James, the brother of Jesus, and written down by someone else. It is certainly a sermon-like presentation of practical advice. Let us listen to James in these coming weeks as though he were giving us an action plan for living the Christian life.

R&D What do you know about James, the brother of Jesus?

Prayer: Lord God, show us ourselves in this study of James what we may more clearly see how You want us to live.

Wednesday, August 3

Read: James 1:1-8

Wisdom

The letter is written to the “twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (Diaspora). At first glance, this might appear to be addressed to the Jews who were scattered all over the world; and, indeed, it could

have been written for the benefit of Christian Jews who, in fact, were widely dispersed. However, it is more likely that the terminology is that which was common in the early Church of referring to other Christians as the new, true Israel.

The trials or testing that James is speaking of here are not in the nature of temptations to sin, but just the common encounters with life from which we can learn. “Experience is the best teacher.” Life does test us; and whether we succeed or fail, we can learn from the experience. Learning from experience leads to wisdom.

James’ main concern here, however, is not with worldly wisdom, but the wisdom that comes from God (v.5). We are to weigh our experiences prayerfully that we may discern what God would teach us through our testing.

“Ask God,” we are told, “but ask in faith, with no doubting.” This is our first encounter with James’ “have-faith” message. We are being asked to have confidence both in the power and in the desire of God to give us the things that clearly He would want us to have.

R&D What is a recent example of my learning something from God as a result of a testing or trial?

Prayer: Thank you, Holy Spirit, for reminding me that you are with me when I find myself being tested.

Thursday, August 4

Read: James 1:9-11

Change

Here James is considering the effect that Christianity has upon people who are rich or poor in material goods. Christianity has, or should have, a very leveling effect. The poor person learns self-respect, and the rich person humility.

Christianity should bring to the person of humble means a much greater sense of self-worth. In the early Church, there was no class distinction. We need only look at the original twelve apostles to see that leaders came from very meager circumstances. The early followers of Christ soon learned that they all counted equally in the eyes of God.

Christianity brought to the rich person a sense of reality, seen from a spiritual point of view. The danger of wealth is that it

gives a person a false sense of security. A person begins to believe that he can cope with anything; but wealth is only of temporal consequence whereas Christianity calls a person to focus primarily on things eternal. James illustrates his point in a way that would have been very familiar to the people of Israel: as the desert sun so easily destroys vegetation, so does earthly wealth pass away.

James is cautioning us to put aside the pursuit of things temporal so that we may concentrate on things eternal; he is calling us to a new humility which understands our total dependence on God.

R&D *What "things temporal" have an ungodly hold on you?*

Prayer: *Help us never to forget, Lord God, that all we have belongs to You and is ours to use for Your glory.*

Friday, August 5

Read: James 1:12-15

War within Us

Dr. William Barclay has said that every person is a walking civil war. Paul, in Romans 7:22-23, talks about the war between good and evil always going on within himself. It is a common experience of us all, and the tendency is to want to blame the predicament on God, on circumstances, or on someone else.

James wants to make it clear that we cannot put the blame on God. He is not the one who put that evil desire in our hearts, and He does not tempt us to sin. Our own evil desires are responsible for our sins; sin would be of no effect if there were not something within us to which it can appeal.

As was true in dealing with the common trials of life noted earlier, we can either learn and grow by the way we handle temptations, or we can sin and suffer the consequences. The more we resist temptation, the stronger we are and the better we can resist the next time. Conversely, the more we give in to or allow ourselves to entertain temptation, the weaker in resistance we become.

Two especially helpful things we can learn from this passage are to accept responsibility for our own sins, and to desire what is good rather than what is evil. James is saying that desire becomes action, and he wants our actions to be holy ones.

R&D *What recent temptation have you faced? How did you deal with it?*

Prayer: *Lead us, Lord, away from those ideas and incidents that tempt us; instead, help us to focus on godly matters.*

Saturday, August 6

Read: Luke 9:28-36

The Transfiguration

Today is a Feast Day when many denominations remember the Transfiguration of Jesus. We should not be surprised that Peter wanted to memorialize the event described in our passage today. It is important to remember the Transfiguration because it was a special revelation of the glory of Christ. It is also important to remember that Peter was not allowed to build a memorial (construct three booths).

Anthropological studies show the human need in all cultures for “divine beings.” There is something within all people that yearns for the divine. In pagan cultures, idols were constructed to represent the divine, and rituals and ceremonies were developed in order to worship the idols.

God’s chosen people were not beyond falling into the trap of idol worship (Exodus 32:1-6), nor are we in our day. The desire for power and prestige, the accumulation of material possessions, addictions to drugs, drinking, and smoking, even our family, can become our idols.

God calls us to worship Him alone (Exodus 20:1-6). There is to be no substitute. The Transfiguration is a powerful reminder of the awesomeness of God and the uniqueness of Christ as “my Son, my Chosen.” We need no idols.

R&D *What “idols” are separating you from total commitment to God?*

Prayer: *There is no substitute for You, Blessed Lord; why would we be so unwise to worship a substitute no matter what it might be?*

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Matthew 22:37

There is a sense in which Jesus Christ has always demanded an absolute allegiance to himself and to God’s will. It may be that no one can fulfill that allegiance, but as William Temple said, “Absoluteness of allegiance is the very life-breath of religion.” Of course, that doesn’t mean that no one can properly be called a Christian who doesn’t have this absolute allegiance, but it is essential to wholeness and the hope for new life in the church that we should all regard God as entitled to such total commitment and ourselves as under an obligation to give it.

Monday, August 8

Read: James 1:16-18

Gifts from Above

Having assured us that the evil within us did not come from God but is our own responsibility, James now tells us that all good things do come from God. And although there is great variety in the gifts given us, there is no variation in the giver. James is stressing the unchangeableness of God. He does not rule us by whim or caprice; He can be counted on.

Furthermore, God’s purpose is altogether gracious. “Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth.” The word of truth is the gospel. God’s purpose for us is that we be reborn into a new life in Christ.

We are to be a sort of “first fruits” of God’s creatures. In the ancient world, first fruits were sacred. We may have a hard time seeing ourselves as first fruits in view of the fact that we are now living in the third millennium. However, the fact remains that there are more people alive today than the total who have died in the history of the world.

Our mission is still before us. Will our fruit bear fruit?

R&D *What are some of God’s gifts to you?*

Prayer: *If we have ears to hear, Dear God, You are sending us messages all day long. There are unlimited ways in which we can plant fruit in the lives of others that can grow into the love of You.*

Tuesday, August 9

Read: James 1:19-25

Listening and Doing

James' first calling in this passage is to "be quick to hear," that is, to be a good listener. There is a great ministry of listening to which we are all, to some extent, called. In the world in which we live—so filled with distractions and yet, for many, so lonely—we need to be good and willing listeners. If we will really listen to the other person, particularly when in an adversarial situation, we will be much slower to speak and slower to anger because we will better understand where the other "is coming from."

"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only" (v.22) is one of the most quoted verses in Scripture. What good are Bible study, worship, and prayer if these spiritual exercises do not cause us to change, if they do not result in Christian action on our part? One charge that sometimes is levied against spiritual renewal is that it does not, often enough, result in servanthood on the part of those who have been renewed.

James ends by talking about the law. Martin Luther, who really did not like the Letter of James "because it drives us to law and works," would have had a problem with this reference. However, there is an ethical demand in Christianity which we cannot ignore; there is a law of life which the Christian is expected to put into practice. That law is found in the Ten Commandments and in the teachings of Jesus. It is in obeying this law that perfect freedom is found.

God did not give us law to bind us and make us miserable, but to protect us and to guide us in His ways.

R&D *To whom is God calling you to listen today?*

Prayer: *Help me today, Lord, to be sensitive to someone who needs to talk... including in my own family.*

Wednesday, August 10

Read: James 1:26-27

Right Perspective

Perhaps the Revised Standard Version of the Bible's use of "religious" in this passage is unfortunate. At too many times in the history of Christianity—and now may be one of those times—we have had too much "religion" and too little faith. Barclay renders the word "worship" and takes the position that James is saying that we can get too wrapped up in the liturgy and forget what our worship should be sending us out to do.

It is a fact that religious fervor can result in self-righteousness that judges everyone else but ourselves and finds them falling short. Such a condition can truly be described as "not bridling our tongue but deceiving our heart."

What James is talking about is one of the prime aspects of the Christian faith: maintaining balance. Faith "that is pure and undefiled before God" cares about and does something about the needs of others, on the one hand, and lives a holy life, on the other. Micah put it this way: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God (6:8).

R&D To what extent is your church community "balanced" in its ministry?

Prayer: Lord, our spirituality is so different, one from another. Help us to rejoice in this variety of worship and practice rather than using it as a basis for judging others.

Thursday, August 11

Read: James 2:1-13

Against Favoritism

Years ago, my family and I were visiting Washington, D.C. As we were about to step into an elevator in the Senate Office Building, a famous political personage stepped out of the elevator and our children almost squealed with excitement. This man had a most ungodly reputation; but he was a celebrity. This is just a small example of the ridiculous extremes to which we—Christians included—carry our infatuation with well-known people. And, we are not

exempt from similar actions within the household of faith. We seem to have an innate tendency to pay more attention to those people who are influential, who “can do something for us.” James is saying “loud and clear,” God loves us all equally; we are to love equally, without regard to position, prestige, or power.

The passage ends with references to law, judgment, and mercy. We are being told that Christians, unlike Old Testament Jews, are not governed by rigid rules and regulations imposed on us from the outside but by the inner compulsion of love. And it is the Christian who shows mercy who will find mercy.

R&D *When have you been guilty of favoritism?*

Prayer: *Help us, Gracious God, to be balanced in our care and concern for others.*

Friday, August 12

Read: James 2:14-19

Faith and Works

James 2:14-26 has been the subject of much theological discussion over the years. Paul had stated that a person is saved by faith alone, not by works (see Romans 3:21-28). Now, James seems to be contradicting Paul. The difference is that Paul was dealing with a question of law versus faith, noting that salvation does not come from observing the law but by faith in Jesus Christ; James is dealing with the person who is already a Christian and should demonstrate his faith by his deeds.

What James is standing against is the person who professes faith but does not put that faith into practice. In his illustration he questions what words of faith would mean to a person who is hungry. He is telling us that we need a faith that cares enough about others to reach out to them where they are. We show our faith by what we do.

James closes today’s passage by engaging in a theoretical argument with someone who opposes his view. It is Barclay’s contention that the other person is arguing that a person can have either faith or works, as alternate expressions of Christianity. James will not accept that proposition; a Christian must have both faith and works. He accuses his hypothetical opponent of having an understanding of

faith that is so meager that it goes no further than acknowledging that there is one God, and “even the demons” know that!

R&D *In what ways does your faith manifest itself in works?*

Prayer: *Lord, there seem to be so many people who think they can earn their way into heaven by doing good works. The works that James speaks of flow from our hearts, impelled by the love of Christ within us.*

Saturday, August 13

Read: James 2:20-26

Evidence of Faith

James supports his point of view by giving two illustrations of faith that would have been very familiar to his audience. Abraham is a wonderful example of faith in God. He proved his faith in many ways, but certainly by his willingness to sacrifice his only son just because he thought that that was what God was telling him to do. His faith was proved by his actions.

Rahab was also a familiar figure. As portrayed in Joshua 2:1-21, she had hidden the Israelite spies who had been sent by Joshua to scout out the Promised Land. This was a bold and risky act. It was her treatment of the spies that proved Rahab's faith.

In this passage faith and works come into clear focus. Without faith, Abraham and Rahab would never have taken the action that they did. Yet, without the works that issued forth from their faith, we would question whether they really had faith in God. Faith and works do not stand in opposition to one another; they are two sides of the same coin.

R&D *Give other examples of people who have demonstrated both faith and works in your life.*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord Jesus, for the joy we get in serving others as you showed us how to do.*

Sunday, August 14

Sabbath Time

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. Galatians 6:2

The corporate nature of the family of God means, among other things, that when one person's passion for God breaks out

anew, it starts an epidemic of new faith within the lives of the rest of us who have become lukewarm or discouraged. Also the manner in which we bear our burdens along the way often releases a power in the Christian family which helps other people become willing to carry on with courage in difficult situations. But our seeing these things depends on the open windows in our brothers' and sisters' lives—and our own.

Monday, August 15

Read: James 3:1-8

Taming the Tongue

James begins this passage by talking about the responsibilities of those who teach. In the early Church teachers were very highly regarded. Yet, there had been some who had sought, through ignorance or their own selfish motives, to subvert the faith. Thus, James stresses the importance of the burden of responsibility teachers carry: they must be sure that, to the best of their ability, they teach the truth, and they must live the truth they teach.

He then talks about the tongue. He uses two illustrations to demonstrate how a very small thing—a bit in a horse's mouth or the rudder of a ship—can have power greatly out of proportion to its size. The tongue is like that. Damaging words are far-reaching and uncontrollable. Like a forest fire, burning out of control in all directions, they can do immense harm.

It is said that the pen is mightier than the sword. James is saying that the tongue is deadlier than a poisonous snake.

R&D *When was the last time your tongue got you in trouble?*

Prayer: *Keep a bridle on my tongue, Lord; help me to think before I speak.*

Tuesday, August 16

Read: James 3:9-12

Double-Mindedness

We have earlier considered the war between good and evil that is constantly going on within us. James is saying that nowhere is this condition more obvious than in the tongue.

With the tongue, we praise God. What more noble use could any part of our body be put to than that? With the same tongue we malign or belittle our fellow human beings. What more detestable use could be made of any part of our body than that? It should not be this way, says James.

What we are dealing with here is the root cause of our misuse of the words we say. If we maintain a right relationship with God, how can hurtful words flow forth from our very being? It is no easy task, but we are called to live lives so filled with the love of God that our tongue does not contradict itself, but only speaks words we would want God to hear.

R&D What will you do to try to ensure that your words are words that God wants to hear?

Prayer: May we use our words to lift people up rather than tearing them down, Gracious God.

Wednesday, August 17

Read: James 3:13-18

Two Kinds of Wisdom

At this point, James seems to be going back to the start of this chapter where he was speaking about teachers. “Who is wise and understanding among you?” (v.13). The answer, of course, is the one who manifests the fruit of wisdom. But, there appear to be two kinds of wisdom, and therein lies the problem.

James is giving us some guidelines concerning godly and ungodly wisdom. The negative wisdom, the one that does not come down from above (v.15), is earthly, unspiritual and devilish. Earthly wisdom is based on worldly standards and worldly aims; unspiritual wisdom comes from our lower (animal) nature; devilish wisdom comes from Satan. Instead of producing good fruit, this type of wisdom causes disruption of our personal relationships reflected in “bitter jealousy and selfish ambition” (v.14).

Godly wisdom, on the other hand, is pure (able to bear the scrutiny of God), peaceable (bringing people closer together), gentle (doing unto others as we would have them do unto us), open to reason (willing to obey God), full of mercy and good fruits (not only showing sensitivity to others, but turning it into action), without

uncertainty or insincerity (based on a sure faith in Jesus Christ). The harvest of righteousness (v.18) is sown by those who make it their life's work to reconcile people to one another and to God.

R&D *When have you seen churches or church leaders using the right and the wrong kinds of wisdom?*

Prayer: *Make us wise in Your eyes, Lord God.*

Thursday, August 18

Read: James 4:1-3

Spiritual Checkup

Just as we need to have regular physical checkups for our health's sake, spiritual checkups are also needed regularly. People who are in "12-Step" programs are familiar with the expression, "I need a checkup from the neck up." From time to time, we need to back off and think about our motivations and our actions. In a sense, that is what James is calling us to do at this point.

He is asking us whether our goal in life is to submit ourselves to the will of God or to pursue the pleasures of this world. If personal pleasure is our goal, the consequences will be strife, hatred, and division. Scripture makes it clear to us that desire for the pleasures of this life is a danger to the spiritual life. We have to choose between pleasing ourselves and pleasing God.

The pleasure-motivated life has evil consequences. Because we can never have all that we want, we are set against one another (we "kill" by words and deeds) and we commit reprehensible acts (we "fight and wage war") (v.2). This all-consuming desire for pleasure even shuts the door of prayer (v.3).

We have a choice. We can choose God.

R&D *What pleasure-pursuits are endangering your relationship with God?*

Prayer: *Now might be a good time, Lord, to pause and take stock of ourselves; are we too focused on pleasuring ourselves rather than pleasing You?*

Friday, August 19

Read: James 4:4-10

Enemies of God

James tells us that “friendship with the world is enmity with God” (v.3). He is not calling us to detest God’s created order; we should love the world “as God so loved the world” (John 3:16). When the New Testament refers to the “world” in the sense used here, the meaning is the “world apart from God.” James is reminding us, “No man can have two masters” (Matthew 6:24). God loves us and indwells us by His Holy Spirit. “He yearns jealously over the spirit which he has made to dwell in us” (v.5b). He calls us to a humility that can be defined as being in a right relationship with God; we are humble not because we put ourselves down but because we know who He is. It is a humility that has access to God Himself and that can stand against Satan (“Resist the devil and he will flee”) (v.7b).

In the end of the passage for today, James is not demanding a joyless faith. He is talking about voluntary abstention from lavish living, repentance, and sensitivity to others. The Christian life begins with repentance from sin; it is no coincidence that John the Baptist, Jesus, and Peter all started their ministries with the call to repent (Matthew 3:2, 4:17, and Acts 2:38). The new life in Christ also brings with it a whole new value system, and leads to an increased sensitivity to the needs of others.

R&D To what extent is this study of the Letter of James helping you to form or to evaluate your “action plan” as a Christian?

Prayer: Blessed Lord, You have a plan for each of us; help us to follow that plan as You reveal it to us day by day.

Saturday, August 20

Read: James 4:11-12

Judging Others

Unfortunately, there seem to be few activities more enticing to people than gossip. Perhaps too many of us have low self-esteem and have to try to build ourselves up by putting others down.

The problem is serious enough that God dealt with it in the Ten Commandments. James is rather specific about it as well.

James condemns such talk on two primary grounds. It is a breach of law. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves. Few things are as unloving as speaking evil against another. If a person breaks the law, knowing he is doing it, he is setting himself above the law. He has made himself a judge of the law.

Still worse, says James, speaking evil against another is an infringement upon the prerogatives of God. To speak evil of our neighbor is to judge him, and no human being has the right to pass judgment on another; that right belongs to God alone.

Loose speech about others is probably regarded as one of the least harmful things people can do today. James is reminding us that it is one of the worst sins we can commit.

R&D What is the difference between judging another person and simply being discerning about that person?

Prayer: Make us conscious, Lord, of our own humanness; it will make us less likely to find fault in others.

Sunday, August 21

Sabbath Time

“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Matthew 5:44

I do not think God’s long-range purpose in Christ is the life of a victorious sheep singing praises and munching safely in the care of the good shepherd though I’m ashamed to say I’ve lived a good bit of my life as if I thought it were true. But we are also called to go out and love the wolves and the bears or at least those who have been captured by them. And though it will be hard it will have meaning. And meaning, not security, is what separates us from the sheep!

Monday, August 22

Read: James 4:13-17

Openness

James continues to give us practical guidelines for living. Here he deals with our tendency to make our own plans and then,

perhaps, to ask God's blessing on them. Instead, we are to be open to what God wants us to do.

James is saying that no person can make complete and confident plans for the future, for no one knows what the future holds. "Man proposes, God disposes;" the future is in God's hands.

We are not being called to a life of fear or of inaction, but one of openness to God. It is simply that, in recognizing the uncertainty of the future, we can become more conscious of our total dependence on God. In James' final warning (v.17), we are face to face with sins of commission and omission. If we know what the right thing to do is, from God's point of view, and do something else, we have sinned. Likewise, if we know what God wants us to do and do not do it, we have sinned just as grievously. We are to be open to God's plans for us, and obedient to the directions we receive.

R&D *How open are you to God's plans for your life?*

Prayer: *Rationalization can be a big problem for us Christians, Lord. We have a tendency to temper what You are saying to us to fit our own desires... and miss the target You have in mind for us. Lord, forgive.*

Tuesday, August 23

Read: James 5:1-6

Oppression

James is here trying to show the ultimate worthlessness of earthly wealth, and he is warning those who might be deceived into thinking that riches are an end in themselves. He uses strong language ("rotted," "moth-eaten," and "rust") to describe what happens to our possessions. As noted earlier, the acquisition of wealth is very seductive; it gives a false sense of security, it demands great portions of time to maintain, and it distracts a person from God.

These warnings of James are typical of much of the social passion found in the Bible. It is hard to understand how Christianity ever became regarded by anyone as an "other-worldly" religion; there is no book in literature that speaks more forcefully to issues of social injustice than the Bible. Scripture does not condemn wealth as such, but it constantly warns about its dangers on the one hand and its responsibilities on the other.

The passage ends with condemnation of those who are not fair in providing for those who perform services for them. The day laborer in James' time lived daily on the edge of starvation. Or, to take an example more apt to our time: as I heard someone say recently, "Those people who begrudge the waitress a decent tip in a restaurant are people who never worked for tips before." The Bible tells us that the laborer is worthy of his hire (Luke 10:7, 1 Timothy 5:18).

R&D Compared to the rest of the world, almost anyone reading these words is wealthy; what responsibilities does that place upon us?

Prayer: Lord, everything we have is Yours; make us generous in the sharing of it with others.

Wednesday, August 24

Read: James 5:7-11

Patience

If you know anything about farming, you know what patience and waiting on the Lord are all about! The farmer can do nothing to make it rain, and the crops are totally dependent on that rain. Likewise, we Christians experience the early rain and the late rain (v.7) in the sense that there may be a great gap of time between the freshness of our coming into a relationship with the Lord (the "early rain") and our taking a next major step of growth in our spiritual life (the "late rain"). Patience and persistence are required, but the Lord is faithful.

James then gives us a lesson in what patience is all about. He mentions the prophets who were certainly stellar examples of patience, and then he refers to Job. In a sense, Job was anything but patient! There are few people who have so thoroughly and passionately questioned God; but the point is that, in the midst of all of his pain and his questioning, Job never lost faith in God.

There is another aspect of this passage that needs to be mentioned. Underlying what James is saying is the message to encourage one another that all may be built up in the faith. Instead of grumbling against one another (v.9), we need to be witnessing to one another our faith in the Lord. Realizing the importance of evangelism, one of the greatest gifts we can give our brothers and sisters in Christ

is sharing with them what God is doing in our lives, that they might be encouraged to share with others.

R&D *What is God saying to you today about patience?*

Prayer: *Many of us have impatience with interruptions, but being interrupted by others because of their needs can be one of our greatest opportunities to show Your love to them, Lord God.*

Thursday, August 25

Read: James 5:12

Oaths

It may be surprising to us, in view of all of the essential advice that James has given us, that he begins this verse with, “But above all.” The question of oaths just doesn’t seem that important to us today. Yet James is repeating a teaching of Jesus himself in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:33-37). Two factors concerning oaths in Bible times are especially significant. The first is that, if an oath was in the name of God, it was strictly binding, the idea being that God was then a part of the transaction to which the oath was attached. If God’s name was not used, the oath was not binding. Thus, there occurred all manner of evasive swearing.

Secondly, there was an extraordinary amount of oath-taking in those days. And, as has been wisely said, the frequency of oaths simply shows the prevalence of deceit. In an honest society, no oaths are needed.

What James (and Jesus) is saying is that, for the Christian, it is as though every word spoken is spoken in the presence of God. We should live in such a way that our word is honored by others without necessity of an oath.

R&D *When, in your opinion, is an oath justified?*

Prayer: *There was a day, Lord, when it was said that a person’s word was his bond. It should be true with every Christian today.*

Friday, August 26

Read: James 5:13-18

Prayer of Faith

Years ago, my wife regularly participated in midweek services of Holy Communion with special intention for her cousin who was desperately ill, praying for the cousin's healing. One day, it was as though the Lord said to her, "Quit praying for her healing, and pray that she will come to me." My wife obeyed, and soon afterward the cousin became very interested in Christ and began to read her Bible. In the course of that she discovered James 5:14-15, went to the church to which she had been nominally affiliated, asked for prayers of healing and was healed!

The early Church was a healing Church, and the vital ministry of healing is maintained in churches to this day. There was also joy and singing in the churches, which distinguished it from the dark mood of paganism, and distinguishes the Christian faith from other religions today.

Perhaps most of all, the early Church was a praying Church; and we need to be, as much as ever before, a praying Church today. Repentance (confession, v.16) should be at the heart of our prayer. But, we should pray in faith, believing. "The prayer of the righteous has great power in its effects" (v.16b). James uses the amazing example of Elijah, a prophet through whom God worked spectacular miracles, and says, in effect, "He was a person just like you or me!" What power we have, in Christ's Church and in Christ's people, just waiting to be used to save a sin-sick world.

R&D Does your parish have a ministry of healing? If not, what are you going to do about it?

Prayer: Lord, why are we so reluctant to free the Holy Spirit within us for the benefit of those in need around us? Father, forgive.

Saturday, August 27

Read: James 5:19-20

Truth

We live in an age when most people consider that "everything is relative." A friend, trying to confront moral deception

among leaders in his church, stated that he was only appealing to reliance upon truth. The leader being confronted replied, “You tell me your truth, I’ll tell you mine, and somewhere in between we will find truth.” It is against this type of hazy, relativistic thinking that James speaks, because he knows that Christians can wander from truth.

Dr. William Barclay puts it this way: “Christian truth is not only an intellectual exercise; it is not only something which is the object of the search of the mind; it is not an academic affair; it is not a matter of knowledge and of opinion, of argument and of debate. Christian truth is always moral truth.” Truth is found in Christ, and the Christ we know is the Christ of Scripture. It is in the Bible that we find truth.

Finally, James speaks of “tough love.” Christianity does not call people to sentimental love, the kind that feeds a child candy until his teeth rot out. Christian love is confrontational love, that calls our sisters and brothers to repentance and new life. As Christians, we are responsible for one another. And, the reality is that, in confronting another Christian with his wanderings from the faith, we confront ourselves and our own sinfulness, “covering a multitude of sins” (v.20b).

R&D *What act of “tough love” is God calling you to today?*

Prayer: *Lord, help me to recognize when I wander from Your truth.*

Sunday, August 28

Sabbath Time

Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials. James 1:2

If we answer this call to commitment, what will the cost be? Where will it lead and what will happen to us? Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “To answer this question we will have to go to Him, for only He knows the answer. Only Jesus Christ who bids us follow Him, knows the journey’s end. But we do know that it will be a road of boundless mercy. Discipleship means joy.”

Monday, August 29

Read: 1 Thessalonians 5:11

Conclusion

We began this study by putting it in the context of giving us an “action plan.” Certainly, James has called us to action in a multitude of ways.

In the Introduction, several primary themes were mentioned: (1) unless we express our faith in action, it is useless and dead; (2) we are not to show favoritism to the wealthy to the detriment of the poor; (3) we are to control our tongues; (4) we are to be more trusting of God, submitting ourselves to His plans for our lives; and (5) we are to pray in faith, believing God for the results. These are just a few of the issues we should have dealt with in this study over the last month.

What you are encouraged to do today, or as soon as you can provide sufficient time, is to reflect back on what James has told us, to see what changes are indicated in your life that your life might be more responsive to God’s will for you. In other words, how can you be a better doer of the word and not a hearer only (1:22)?

R&D *What is God’s “action plan” for you?*

Prayer: *And, Dear Lord, help us remember to encourage others to live by their “action plans”.*

Tuesday, August 30

Read: Proverbs 24:1-9

Favorite Passage

The wicked cannot be trusted. Thus, “Do not emulate wicked men or long to make friends with them,” says Proverbs (v.1). This counsel, like much of Proverbs, seems to have a particular audience in mind: the man or woman who has a life course to chart and day-to-day choices to make. Wickedness, it seems, lies in wait for the naive. It looks trustworthy, but life’s painful discovery is that “violence is all (the wicked) think of, and all they say means mischief” (v.2).

It sounds like counsel to the young man or woman just starting out in life. (See the refrain “my son,” as in 24:21: “My son, fear the Lord and grow rich.”) As the parent of two preadolescents, I’m

attuned to the need for such startup counsel. But Proverbs seems to see people as always being on the brink of fresh starts. Thus: “A wise man’s teaching is a fountain of life for one who would escape the snares of death” (13:14). Or again: “An evil messenger causes trouble, but a trusty envoy makes all go well again” (13:17). Any time we are ready, it seems, we can “try again,” as the teacher says to a balky twoyear-old in the “time-out chair.”

Jesus carried this fresh-start theme even farther. To the elderly leader Nicodemus, Jesus offered the chance to be “born anew” (John 3:3). He sought out the veteran sinner Zacchaeus and affirmed God’s desire, not just to avert disaster, but to “seek and save what is lost” (Luke 19:1-10).

Proverbs’ counsel, then, catches each of us at the moment of potential, when fresh choices lie ahead and the wisdom of accumulated experience clears a path.

Thomas L. Ehrich

R&D Read the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1—7:27) with a lens focused by Proverbs, that is, as counsel to one just starting a new journey. Sound different?

Prayer: *Thank You, Gracious God, for the “second chance” You give us when we go astray.*

Wednesday, August 31

Read: 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

Aidan of Lindisfarne

We have just finished studying “An Action Plan for Christians.” Perhaps it is appropriate, as we close out this issue of *The Journey*, that August 31 is the day we commemorate Aidan of Lindisfarne on the Church calendar. He was definitely “a man with a plan” and an exemplary missionary of the Christian faith.

Our lesson for today is about evangelism. Paul was compelled to preach the gospel. The love of Christ in his heart gave him, really, no other choice. He was willing to go to any lengths to reach others with the claims of Christ.

So it was with Aidan. The gospel had come to the northern English through King Edwin of Northumbria in 627. But, following Edwin’s death in 632, there was a reversion to paganism.

Edwin's nephew Oswald had, in the meantime, been converted to Christianity. Edwin called upon the gentle monk Aidan to head the missionary effort that was now needed, and Aidan established his base at Lindisfarne, an island off the northeast coast of England.

The historian Bede says this of Aidan: "Wherever in his way he saw any, either rich or poor, he invited them, if pagans, to embrace the mystery of the faith; or if they were believers, to strengthen them in their faith and stir them up by words and actions to alms and good works." What an action plan for us all!

R&D Name one of your heroes or heroines of the faith, and state how you would like to follow that person's example.

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for holy men and women who have shined the path of Your love before us and thereby guided our way.

Reflections