

The *Journey*

GOD'S WORD FOR DAILY LIVING



MAY-AUGUST 2023



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
image 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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The Journey

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The Holy Spirit

(Continued)

Monday, May 1

Read: Acts 2:1-8

Pentecost

Picture the scene in your mind. Hear a sound like the rush of a mighty wind. See tongues of fire resting on each person. The wind sounds like thunder and the tongues of fire appear like lightning. Luke tells us it was like a mighty thunderstorm as the power of God came down from heaven upon the Church. What an exciting moment! Divine energy empowers every member for the work of Christ in the world.

Notice that they all were filled with the Holy Spirit. Not just the twelve apostles, but all one hundred twenty members of the church in Jerusalem. The Spirit equipped every member to share in the common ministry of the Church.

They all began to speak in other tongues, other languages. They were extolling God and telling of His mighty works. Pilgrims to Jerusalem heard the “good news” spoken in their native languages. Obviously, these Galileans had been given supernatural ability to speak other languages in a prophetic demonstration of their destiny to preach the gospel in all the world.

On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came in a powerful, dramatic way to energize the members of the Church. Ever since, everyone who has been baptized into Christ has received the same gift of the Holy Spirit. But not all seem to realize the power bestowed upon them. What would happen if every member of the Church would accept the gift of the Holy Spirit, and begin to bear witness to Christ?

R&D How has the Spirit enabled you and your church in ministry?

Prayer: *Lord Christ, we have been empowered to do your work in the world today. May we avail ourselves of that power for your glory.*

Tuesday, May 2

Read: Acts 2:5-12

What Does This Mean?

Exuberantly, joyfully praising God, the church drew a crowd of curious onlookers. Wondering about all the excitement, they asked, “What does this mean?”

Peter explained, “This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel.” Joel had predicted that one day God would pour out the Holy Spirit on everyone. Previously, only certain selected persons were gifted by the Spirit—prophets, priests, and kings. But in the “last days,” young and old, male and female, slave and free, all would receive the Spirit. Christ inaugurated the “last days,” the era prior to the judgment, and he has poured out the Spirit on all flesh.

The Church rejoices because God fulfilled His promise and has given the Spirit to everyone. His intention, from the very beginning, was that every single member of the Church would be empowered to share in the common ministry. Each person would be gifted to contribute to the work of the whole, to give, in love, to one another. With everyone cooperating together, the Church would rapidly and effectively extend its ministry to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the world.

Exuberance marks some parts of Christ’s Church today, as a renewal of awareness of the anointing of the Holy Spirit spreads throughout the denominations. Reemergence of every-member ministry enlivens the Church and enables more effective outreach to a waiting world. Isn’t that God’s intention for us?

R&D *What should we learn from churches where spiritual renewal is happening?*

Prayer: *Lord, we need a great movement of the Holy Spirit to sweep across the world.*

Wednesday, May 3

Read: Acts 2:14-21

This Is That

So joyful were the Spirit-filled disciples that the crowd thought them “filled with new wine.” Little did they know the spiritual meaning of those words. The new wine was the new life Jesus bestows upon those who believe in him. Rising to explain, Peter said, “These are not drunk as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day” (Acts 2:15). A book written by a pioneer in charismatic renewal, Dennis Bennett, was entitled, *Nine O’Clock in the Morning*, for that is the third hour of the day. No, they were not drunk with wine. It was much too early for that. They were inspired not by spirits of alcohol, but by the Spirit of God.

Perhaps you can understand the enthusiasm and joy experienced by people in the current renewal of the Holy Spirit. Prayer and praise meetings provide opportunities for expressions of worship, adoration and thanksgiving. Paul recommended such spontaneous meetings: “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father” (Ephesians 5:18-20).

Our worship services, inspired by the Holy Spirit, can draw the uninvolved to experience the presence of God in our midst, and to encourage them to faith in Jesus Christ.

R&D *How might our worship be used to draw people to Christ?*

Prayer: *Joy in worship is enticing, Lord.*

Thursday, May 4

Read: Acts 2:22-36

He Has Poured Out This

The descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Church is confirmation of the ascension and exaltation of Jesus as Lord and Savior. That is the declaration of Peter in his sermon: “Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God he has poured out this which

you see and hear” (v.33). The exuberance of the disciples, their joy in praising God, and their ability to proclaim the “good news” in other languages is evidence of the beginning of the new era, the last days, during which the authority and power of Jesus will be evident in his Spirit-filled servants.

Jesus is king, and his kingly power comes into the lives of the faithful via the Holy Spirit. They “receive power from on high” (Acts 1:8). Once frightened, huddling together for fear of the Jews, the disciples boldly proclaim Jesus to the same people who were responsible for his crucifixion. The effectiveness of this new power shows in the response to Peter’s sermon. The Holy Spirit not only enables him to preach, but convicts the hearts of the listeners.

When you receive the Holy Spirit, when you open your heart to his influence in your life, then you, too, will begin to experience the kingly power of Jesus. His rule becomes effective in you, and you discover that you are becoming more and more obedient to his commandments, and increasingly wanting to serve him by serving those whom he loves. Yes, Jesus has ascended and now reigns from heaven, ruling in us by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

R&D How have you experienced the power of Jesus’ kingdom?

Prayer: Father God, You equip us in every way to follow the path You have chosen for each of us, and we are grateful.

Friday, May 5

Read: Acts 2:37-42

What Shall We Do?

As Jesus had promised (John 16:8), the Holy Spirit convicted the hearts of the listeners as Peter proclaimed the gospel. Like a living, two-edged sword, the Word cut them to the heart. Aware of their guilt in rejecting God’s Christ, they said, “Brethren, what shall we do?” Peter’s response applies to everyone in the future who, like the people in Jerusalem, hear the Word of God and are convicted of its truth.

“Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (v.38). Repentance is a change of heart

and mind resulting in a change in behavior. Repentance involves confession and sorrow for past behavior, and a resolve to live righteously in the future. Baptism is public confession of faith in Jesus Christ, and incorporation into him, sharing his death to sin, and his resurrection to new life. Then, the penitent shall receive not only forgiveness, but the same gift of the Holy Spirit as did the apostles, empowering them to live the new life and to be of service to Christ.

Everyone who hears the Word, and who is convicted of its truth, and repents and is baptized, shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is given to every believer; none is excepted. It is not a second experience, but an integral part of the initiatory experience of baptism.

R&D Have you realized and accepted the gift of the Holy Spirit given at your baptism?

Prayer: Awaken us, Lord, to this precious Spirit who can guide us, inspire us, comfort us, and show us Your way.

Saturday, May 6

Read: Acts 8:4-17

They Laid Their Hands On

Scattered by persecution, the Church began to fulfill its divine commission to go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth. Philip preached Christ in Samaria, and the response was overwhelming. Could it be that Jesus' own ministry with the Samaritan woman at the well planted seeds now reaped by Philip?

The apostles, hearing of the conversions, sent Peter and John to oversee the beginning of the Samaritan church. When they arrived, they discovered something very important was missing. The Holy Spirit had not yet "fallen on any of them." Apparently, Philip had not fully instructed the converts, and did not pray with them to receive the Spirit.

Completing the initiation of the new believers, the apostles laid their hands on them and prayed for them to receive the Holy Spirit. This Scripture is often cited as the basis for the separation of

baptism and confirmation in the liturgical churches. Baptism was delegated to priests, but bishops, as successors to the apostles, retained for themselves the confirmation rite of bestowing the Holy Spirit. One thing, however, is clear: initiation into the Christian faith is not complete until one has received the Holy Spirit.

In some instances, the Holy Spirit falls upon believers prior to baptism in water. In others, the Spirit comes after baptism. In all cases, everyone is baptized in both water and the Spirit.

R&D *How is the Holy Spirit evident in your life?*

Prayer: *Lord Christ, we can't follow you successfully without help. We are grateful that the Holy Spirit is with us to lead the way.*

Sunday, May 7

Sabbath Time

Therefore keep sane and sober for your prayers. 1 Peter 4:7b

Often I have heard people say that they could pray to God while they were walking about and doing their chores, but that as soon as they knelt down they were plagued with distracting thoughts. The truth about that is that they prayed best when they were least conscious of themselves.

Monday, May 8

Read: Acts 9:10-19

Saul Is Filled

In the calling of Saul (Paul), after the Lord had appeared to him on the Damascus Road, a disciple named Ananias was sent to pray for the blinded persecutor of the Church. The obedience of Ananias is remarkable. He listened to the voice of God, undoubtedly spending time in prayer and meditation in order to hear the Lord. In his prayers, Ananias argued with God a bit, aware of the evil Saul had wrought among the saints. Directed by the Lord to a specific house in Damascus, he found Saul, and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road, has sent me to you."

As Ananias laid hands on Saul and prayed, the Holy Spirit filled the new apostle with his divine presence. What a dramatic conversion! And how surprising that an ordinary disciple should

be the one to pray for him who was to become the Apostle to the Gentiles!

If the Lord could use Ananias, He can also use us, ordinary Christians, to be the vehicles through whom others may receive the blessings of Christ and the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Each member of the Church has the capacity to share the “good news” of Jesus Christ with others, and to pray with and for them to accept the Savior and receive the Holy Spirit. God did not limit the ministry to the ordained. Every baptized Christian shares the work of serving Christ by serving others in his name.

R&D What would it be like if all the members of the Church were willing to share Christ and the Spirit with others?

Prayer: Embolden us, Lord Christ, to be your disciples in this needy world.

Tuesday, May 9

Read: Acts 10:34-48

Gentile Pentecost

Our lesson for today has been called “The Gentile Pentecost.” Up to this point in the history of the early Church, only Jews had responded to the gospel and received the Holy Spirit. The Samaritans were related to the Jewish people, having intermarried with the people who were settled there by Assyria and Babylonia. But the events in the house of Cornelius mark the first time fully Gentile persons, and Roman soldiers at that, accepted Christ and were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Notice that while Peter preached, the Holy Spirit fell upon them. The descent of the Spirit was a sovereign act of God showered out upon Cornelius and the people in his house. No doubt they had faith and believed in Jesus as Peter proclaimed the gospel. But, Peter did not pray for them, God simply sent the Spirit upon them.

The Gentile experience is similar to that of the first disciples on the feast of Pentecost. They spoke in tongues (foreign languages) and extolled God. Peter recognized that they had received the Spirit in the same way he and the others in the upper room had

received. He had no question about including the Gentiles in the Church. No, if they had been blessed by the Lord with the Holy Spirit, who could deny water that they should be baptized?

God intends every believer in Jesus to receive the Holy Spirit whether the person is a Jew, Samaritan or Gentile.

R&D *Who are the modern Gentiles whom God wants in His Church?*

Prayer: *May we be disciples who make disciples, as you called us to do, Lord Jesus, in your Great Commission (Matthew 28:19, 20).*

Wednesday, May 10

Read: Acts 19:1-7

Did You Receive?

When Paul met some disciples in Ephesus, he sensed something was missing in their spiritual lives. We're not told why he asked the question, only that he asked, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" (v.2).

We can speculate, however, that there was a lack of joy and enthusiasm in them. Their practice of the faith might have been grim and determined, not spontaneous and free. There might have been a lack of certainty about their salvation. They might not have begun to evangelize and share the "good news" with others. We can speculate, because having tried to live the Christian life without the grace of the Holy Spirit, we know the difference.

When believers are filled with the Spirit, they seem to come alive with enthusiasm. They love to sing and praise the Lord. They want to study the Scriptures and learn about Jesus and his teachings. They desire to reform their lives and become disciplined in all their affairs. They want to share their knowledge of Christ with those who have yet to believe.

Like those disciples in Ephesus, some modern church members are unaware of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. They may not have been taught about the gift of the Spirit bestowed in their Christian baptism. Let's share the news of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the difference he makes in our lives today, so others may receive their full inheritance in Christ.

R&D *What difference does the Holy Spirit make in my life?*

Prayer: *Awaken a sleepy church to the wonders of Your grace, Lord God, by manifesting the Holy Spirit to all believers.*

Thursday, May 11

Read: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Varieties of Gifts

Gracious gifts of God to build up the Christian community flow through the members to one another. The Holy Spirit distributes the gifts as he chooses, but every member may be given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. A gift, or charism, reveals the grace of the giver, freely bestowing a blessing on the recipient.

Every member of the Church in whom the Spirit dwells may be used to administer gifts to others. The gifts are meant to build up the Church and benefit the recipient. There are varieties of gifts and differences in ministering them, but they all proceed from the one God.

Spiritual renewal movements remind us of the continuing presence of the Spirit within the Church, and the blessings of the Lord we can share with one another. In these verses, Paul speaks about a meeting of the local church, a small house meeting. As those gathered pray together and sing the praises of God, the Holy Spirit can enable a member to share a gift with the others. It may be wisdom or knowledge, faith, healing, a miracle, prophecy, tongues, or interpretation.

Here is every-member ministry in its original form. The members share God's love with one another by ministering His gifts of grace. The Holy Spirit inspires every one and apportions to each one individually a gift to share. In this way, we both give and receive God's love through one another.

R&D *How have you experienced the gifts of the Spirit?*

Prayer: *Blessed Lord, may these experiences of shared gifting take place in our churches today and be spread to the benefit of those around us in need of experiencing Your love.*

Read: 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

One Body

As our physical bodies have many parts yet function as a whole, so does the Body of Christ, the Church. When we were baptized, the Holy Spirit plunged us into the Body of Christ. Whatever our previous identity—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—the Spirit incorporated us into a new reality.

Our distinctiveness remains. “For the body does not consist of one member but of many” (v.14). There’s no need to lose your own uniqueness and try to be like someone else. You, specifically you, are needed in the Church with your own special talents and abilities. “If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body” (v.15). Nor should we think ourselves inferior simply because the gift or gifts we are given are not the same as others. The Body of Christ needs you.

You, on the other hand, need the Body of Christ. None of us is self-sufficient. God has wisely made us interdependent. He did not give any one of us all the gifts and talents, for if He had, we might be tempted to get along without one another. Instead, God shared the gifts and talents with everyone, so that we would, of necessity, have to share with each other. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’” (v.21).

Each person is needed and each person needs others. We care for one another, sharing both the joys and sorrows of life.

R&D Share how you have been blessed by giving and receiving in the Body of Christ.

Prayer: Help us to always remember, Lord, that the gifts of the Spirit are the Holy Spirit working within us and not something we accomplish on our own.

Saturday, May 13

Read: 1 Corinthians 12:27-31

God Has Appointed

In addition to the gifts of the Spirit shared by all in the Body of Christ, God appoints certain persons to fulfill specific ministries. They are anointed by the Holy Spirit and enabled to serve the Church by serving all its members.

In the modern Church, we recognize these persons as those who are ordained and called to ministry, and those lay persons who serve full or part time to build up the Body of Christ.

The ministry of an apostle was a one-time gift to the Church in the original twelve, plus Paul. Since that time, the Church has continued the apostolic ministry through the office of bishop. Prophets are inspired by the Holy Spirit to exhort, teach and admonish the people of God. Today, those who preach the Word of God fulfill that office. Teachers, whether in the seminary, the pulpit, or the Sunday school classroom, continue to pass on the teaching of the apostles.

In addition, Paul lists a number of other ministries. The list is illustrative, not exhaustive. From time to time, the Church recognizes gifted persons and authorizes them to serve the people of God. These persons are not only those who demonstrate the presence and power of God in miracles or healing, but also as helpers and administrators. Do we recognize those who are always willing to help as God's gifts to us? Do we understand that a good administrator is sent by the Lord for the good of his Church? They are the gifts of God through the Holy Spirit to serve us all.

R&D Reflect on how you've been blessed by these ministries.

Prayer: Thank You for our spiritual leaders, Lord God; may we support them as their ministry supports us.

Sunday, May 14

Sabbath Time

"Come, let us return to the Lord." Hosea 6:1

When Mary and Joseph lost the Holy Child, they had to go back to where they had lost Him, and we have to do that over and over again in life.

Monday, May 15

Read: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

More Excellent Way

The love described in this chapter is not a substitute for the ministries of the Spirit, but the way the ministries are to be shared. It's possible our speaking in tongues could amount simply to a lot of noise or our prophecies, wisdom, knowledge, and faith could add up to nothing. Even martyrdom might profit nothing if love is absent.

Love is the motive for service, both the love of God and the love of others. This is no romantic love, no sentimental feeling. Paul describes the very special quality of love shown us in Jesus Christ. Using the Greek word *agape*, we learn of the divine love that gives of self to the other out of compassion and concern.

Positively, love is patient and kind, rejoices in the right, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Negatively, love is not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude, not insisting on its own way, not irritable or resentful, nor rejoicing in the wrong. Clearly the former portrays the love of Jesus, and the latter our own human failings.

In our relationships within the Church, and in the exercise of our ministries, love is the more excellent way. In the use of spiritual gifts, we must aim at love. Our purpose, then, is to promote love within the fellowship. Whether we speak in tongues or pray for healing, our motive is love and the gift we seek to share is a manifestation of God's love for His people.

R&D Think of the ways God's love has been shown to you through others.

Prayer: You show us, Lord, that gifts are of little value unless wrapped in love.

Tuesday, May 16

Read: 1 Corinthians 14:1-19

Speaking in Tongues

Speaking in tongues can be a controversial issue in a church, especially when the clear teaching of Paul is not followed. Speaking in tongues is a genuine manifestation of the Holy Spirit, a gift of speaking in a language unknown to the speaker. Inspired by the Spirit, one may speak the praises, the worship of God, or may communicate to others the words of the Lord.

In this gift of the Spirit, one speaks not to other people, but to God. No one else can understand what is being said. Tongues, therefore, function as an aid to personal spirituality. “He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself” (v.4). Prophecy, on the other hand, is given in the language understood by the hearers, for it is inspired preaching to the community of Christ.

The purpose of the use of spiritual gifts in a public meeting of the church is to build up the church, to strengthen the faith of its members. Concentrating on helping others grow in faith and devotion, we ought to seek to minister the manifestations of the Spirit that others can understand and accept. Although he spoke in tongues privately more than most, Paul would rather speak in the vernacular when in a church gathering so others could understand and not be offended.

Don't neglect the spiritual help praying in tongues provides for your personal devotions. But in church, pray to share a gift of the Spirit others may benefit from as well.

R&D Discuss how spiritual gifts have helped you grow in faith.

Prayer: Lord, You are showing us in these teachings that spiritual gifts are for the common good and not to be used in a manner that separates us.

Wednesday, May 17

Read: 1 Corinthians 14:20-33

Each One Has a Gift

In the intimacy of small house churches, each person shares in the common ministry. In the early church, when they gath-

ered, each one would be prepared by previous prayer and study to contribute a gift. “Each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation” (v.26). In smaller gatherings, we can experience the warmth and love of the Christian community, and many churches have developed house church, or home Bible study groups.

Every contribution should be made for “edification,” to build up the faith of the individuals and the whole church. Here one may gain experience in serving others in love, in learning how to be a minister of Christ’s grace. Supported by one another, apprehension may be set aside, and Christians can try out their gifts and abilities without fear of criticism.

Notice the emphasis placed on orderliness. There’s to be no confusion, no babble of people all speaking at once. No, they are to minister one by one, so all may learn and be encouraged. And, the meetings are not to be interminable, but limited to two or three speakers at most. Love demands courtesy, order, and peace so all may be blessed.

The Holy Spirit makes us members one of another in the Body of Christ, and enables us to minister his grace to one another. There’s no better way to experience the Body of Christ than in a small group where all may share Christ’s love.

R&D How might small groups assist your local church’s ministry?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for small prayer and Bible study groups where we can learn from one another.

Thursday, May 18

Read: Ephesians 1:15-23

Ascension Day

This assigned reading from the Lectionary for Ascension deals with the fact that God the Father raised Christ from the dead and “made him sit at His right hand in the heavenly places... and has put all things under his feet and made him the head over all things....” There are at least three aspects of this fact that are of great importance to us.

The first is that once Jesus had ascended to be with the Father, the Holy Spirit was sent to be with us here on earth. When Jesus was on earth he could do wonderful things, but he was limited by time and space. If we had lived in those days, only a few of us could have been with Jesus. Now, through the Holy Spirit, he is present to us at all times and in all places.

Secondly, Jesus is present in heaven to be our intercessor. In Hebrews, the writer speaks of Christ as the one who holds his priesthood permanently “because he continues forever.” “Consequently, he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (7:25). The Ephesians and Hebrews passages, taken together, give us a picture of Jesus sitting at the right hand of God the Father, praying for us.

Thirdly, the First Epistle of John (2:1) tells us that if we sin, “we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” Jesus is not only praying for us, but “he speaks in our defense” (the NIV wording for “advocate”). What more could we ask?

R&D In what other ways are we blessed by the fact that Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of the Father?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you did it all for us, and we are grateful. Praise you, Lord Christ.

Friday, May 19

Read: Galatians 5:16-26

Walk by the Spirit

We conclude our study of the Holy Spirit with an exhortation from the apostle to “walk by the Spirit.” He means we are to be guided by the Spirit in all our lives, our thought, our talk, our relationships, and in all we do. You may remember one of the prophecies with which we began this study in which Ezekiel promised God would give us His Spirit to “cause us to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe all my commandments.”

The transforming power of the Holy Spirit will change us from the inside out, giving us a new mind and a new attitude. As we continue to listen to the Spirit’s prompting, study the Scriptures

with his help, and share in the holy community of the Church, we find ourselves increasingly able to follow the teachings of Christ and to obey the commandments of the Lord.

The fruit of the Spirit is a harvest reaped after a season of spiritual growth in our journey of faith. The Spirit will produce those beautiful character traits we have seen in Jesus, and we will share his love, his joy, his peace. Like Christ, we will be more and more patient, kind, good, faithful, and gentle. As we mature in the Spirit and develop a Christ-like character, we shall be more and more able to be self-controlled. We will manage our impulses, control our emotions, and gain stability in our lives.

To your writer, the greatest miracle of all is the transformation Christ causes in those who love him, and in whom his Spirit dwells. May he be glorified in his people, now and always.

R&D How can we produce the fruit of the Spirit in our lives?

Prayer: What a blessing it is, Lord Christ, to be able to measure our growth in you by discerning how the fruit of the Spirit are growing in our lives.



Luke

Chapters 12-18

Saturday, May 20

Read: Luke 12:1-12

Warning and Promise

Jesus was concerned that his disciples not be contaminated by the influence of the Pharisees which he says will spread like leaven. At its base, the problem with the Pharisees is hypocrisy, concentration upon appearances while failing to show love and concern. Deception of ourselves and others in the end is useless; we cannot deceive God.

It was clear that Jesus' opposition to the Pharisees was creating a serious problem for him. There was no denying the power that the Pharisees wielded, but the one to think more soberly about is God, who holds eternal destiny in His hands and who holds His servants in very high regard (vv.4-7).

The time was coming when association with Jesus would be dangerous; following the resurrection, the opposition would be even greater. Those who followed Jesus would be tempted to deny Jesus or at least to falter in trying to state their position or explain their faith. Jesus promises that they will be given the words to say in such situations.

In the midst of all of this is that troubling comment about the unforgivable sin (v.10). One thing we know about God is that He is all-forgiving. Why then this comment about denying the Holy Spirit? Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is seeing good and calling it evil, denying the very work of the Spirit. Such a sin cannot be forgiven, not because God wouldn't want to forgive it, but because a person of this mind-set would find an evil motive even in the offer of forgiveness. It is a reprobate state of mind.

R&D When have you experienced God giving you the right words to say in a tight situation?

Prayer: *In tight situations we need all the help we can get, Lord. Thank You!*

Sunday, May 21

Sabbath Time

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men. 1 Timothy 2:1

Intercessory prayer, prayer “in the Name of Jesus,” is this. It is not suggesting to God ways of helping, it is not reminding God of things. It is our faith that God is helping, it is our remembrance that God is remembering. It is putting ourselves at the disposal of God that He may use our will power and heart power as waves of spiritual love and energy given to Him and made free for Him to use in blessing those whom we are allowed to cooperate with Him in helping, and whom He can only help humanly if we put our humanity at His disposal.

Monday, May 22

Read: Luke 12:13-21

Treasure

“Divide the inheritance.” Nothing causes more difficulty in families than who gets the possessions. Richard Rohr has made the point that Jesus’ main contention was against power, prestige, and possessions because they are the things that take us away from a recognition of our total dependence upon God. They provide us with earthly alternatives that detract us from God. Jesus’ parable is a wonderful illustration of the point.

The man in the parable’s vision was limited to himself and his possessions. He could not see beyond work and pleasure. He undoubtedly worked very hard and enjoyed his leisure to the fullest. He couldn’t wait to retire so that he could enjoy his accumulated wealth even more. Suddenly he is faced with death, however. His possessions are no longer of any value to him; death confronts him with his poverty.

The man’s basic fault was not his wealth but his selfishness. He wanted all that he had for himself, without regard to the needs of the less fortunate. The relief of poverty depended upon the generosity of the wealthy. If he had experienced the joy of help-

ing others, he would have found in it more pleasure than in his self-indulgence. He also would have learned something about the generosity of God, and would have experienced God's generosity toward him. It is not money that is the root of all evil, but the love of money (1 Timothy 6:10). One of the greatest gifts we can have is to be able to share our abundance with others.

R&D What opportunities does God give you to share your treasure with others?

Prayer: Help us to be content with what we have, Lord, and grateful for what we can share with others.

Tuesday, May 23

Read: Luke 12:22-34

Anxiety

Anxiety is a real problem. It can sap our energies and prevent us from being effective in what we do. Some people are almost paralyzed with worry. Jesus is hitting the matter of anxiety head-on. He is not encouraging thoughtlessness or failure to provide for our legitimate needs and the needs of family and those for whom we are responsible. Insurance and savings are proper means of Christian stewardship. What Jesus is trying to get us away from is the constant worry which makes material possessions our dominant concern, revealing lack of faith in God.

It is a matter of priorities. Our top priority should be the kingdom of God. If bringing ourselves and others into a living relationship with the living God is our major concern, then our focus will be upon Him. If we truly seek to do the will of God, He will provide for our physical needs.

It may be verse 33 that gets our attention in this passage. Jesus often puts things in terms that will shake our complacency and bring us up short. He is not saying to us to sell all that we have unless we, like the "rich young ruler" (18:23), are possessed by our possessions. But he is clearly telling us that we do have a responsibility to share generously what we have with our church and with those in need.

R&D What anxiety is God asking you to turn over to Him today?

Prayer: *Worry is a waste of time, Lord. May our focus, instead, be on You and what You want us doing.*

Wednesday, May 24

Read: Luke 12:25-59

Prepared

“Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes” (v.37). We should, of course, live each day as though it were going to be the day of the Lord’s return (“Christ will come again”), not only for our own sake but for the sake of others. If we lived in that expectation, we would be more concerned about bringing others into relationship with the Christ and we would be more faithful in our own relationship with him.

Teachings about “end times” are among the most difficult in the Bible to comprehend fully. Jesus is talking about approaching crises and being prepared for them. Christ can come to us through many crises, and his coming will always show the extent to which we have accepted our responsibilities to be prepared. Death will certainly call the matter to account and show us where we stand; illness can do the same. And the point is made that the person to whom much has been given, much more will be expected (v.48); the greater our resources (of education, wealth, opportunity, spiritual growth), the more will be asked of us. For those in leadership positions—or who should be in leadership positions except for their unwillingness to accept responsibility—this is an especially important warning.

Jesus continues to talk about crises. In extremely strong language he hints of things to come. Jesus did come to bring peace (2:14), but not just superficial peace. Commitment to him is more important even than family relationships. To maintain unity in the family at the cost of following Christ is to forfeit genuine peace. Christians are called to discern the signs of the times and to make their own value judgments as enlightened by our relationship with the Lord.

R&D *What are the “signs of the times” that should be guiding our thinking and action today?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, we seem to be at a time when, in many parts of the world, faith in you is waning. Help us, Lord, to find new and more effective ways to reach people for you in our rapidly changing world.*

Thursday, May 25

Read: Luke 13:1-17

Repentance

As the theme of imminent crisis continues, Jesus is calling the people to repentance. He is using illustrations of tragedies that were current topics of conversation in his day; we can think of parallel ones in our own day. Sin didn't cause these tragedies, but they are evidence that disasters do occur that take away human life, and we had best be prepared. Worse things could happen to us if we do not repent.

Jesus then uses the parable of the unproductive fig tree to illustrate that we are being given one more chance. Unless the fruit of repentance and obedience come forth (v.9), nothing can save us. We shouldn't miss the reference to cultivation and fertilization of the tree, however. As Christians, we need nurture if we are to grow in the faith, and we need to see that such care is provided to others so that they may know Jesus and the blessings of being his followers.

The overall theme of today's reading, however, has to do with the Jews and the extent to which they were in danger of missing the kingdom. They were the unproductive fig tree, and the error of their way was clearly illustrated by the episode of Jesus' healing of the woman on the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a day to devote to honoring God. What could more honor Him than to bring relief in His name to this woman? Yet the Jews were so bound into legalism that they could not see this.

R&D Reflect upon a parable of unproductiveness within the Christian Church that Jesus might use if he were doing this teaching today.

Prayer: *We have blind spots, Lord, that keep us from seeing the obvious. O Holy Spirit, touch our minds and our hearts that we may see things as Christ would see them, and act accordingly.*

Friday, May 26

Read: Luke 13:18-35

Kingdom Within

Jesus was using illustrations of what the kingdom of God is like. He wanted the people to perceive this most important point: If the kingdom of God is within us, our potential is as unlimited as that of the mustard seed. As glorious as that potential is, many will not be willing to enter into it by the narrow gate.

Teaching about how the kingdom spreads naturally leads to the question of how many will enter into it. Jesus, once again, uses an indirect approach in answering in order to force his listeners to think for themselves.

Entry into the kingdom is simple but not easy. Jesus refuses to deceive people by letting them think that they can follow him without it being a very costly commitment. He was on his way to Jerusalem; whoever went with him took their lives in their own hands. Jesus was calling them as he calls us today to total commitment of our lives to him; a casual acquaintance will not work.

The movement toward Jerusalem proceeds relentlessly. God's purpose decrees that Jerusalem alone can provide the stage for the final act of the world's most important drama. God (the speaker in vv.34-35) had continually made His appeal. His face would not be seen until the people were ready to utter the cry of welcome to the Messiah (Psalm 118:26). The Messiah came, and the cry of welcome was given by some (19:38). The face of God would be seen, as never before or since, on a cross!

R&D *What might the kingdom of God be compared with in our day?*

Prayer: *The glories of living in Your kingdom, Holy God, are well worth the sacrifices required to enter.*

Saturday, May 27

Read: Luke 14:1-14

Advantage

How often do we take advantage of who we are or what we have? Jesus tells us to do just the opposite. Take the lowest seat; care for the unfortunates rather than those who are on our own

social level; don't be bound by non-loving rules and regulations that get life out of perspective (this last point illustrated by another healing on the Sabbath).

Jesus' teachings draw heavily on the events of everyday life. In our passage for today, his host's choice of guests and their actions at the party give him material for two such teachings: one involving humility, the other generosity.

The advice Jesus gives would be helpful just on the basis of human decency, but more is involved here. The party is a symbol of the kingdom of God. The humility which is encouraged is humility before God. It is, by the grace of God, when we practice such humility in our everyday affairs, however, that we come into greater understanding of the kingdom and of our life (and humility) before God.

In encouraging people to be generous with their invitations, Jesus was asking them (us) to behave as God behaves. God invites into His kingdom those who have no hope of being able to repay the generosity. Again, we can experience some understanding of this principle (and thereby become more like Jesus wants us to be) by caring more about feeding the homeless than about impressing the boss by inviting him to a sumptuous meal.

R&D *What kind of "invitations" would the Lord have you send?*

Prayer: *Lord Christ, in these teachings you are showing us how to change our focus from the way we normally look at life to how you would view the same situations. May we pay attention!*

Sunday, May 28

Sabbath Time

"If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." 2 Chronicles 7:14

The first thing that we have to determine when we come to prayer is that we will really come to God with our wills and our minds and not just our mouths and our knees.

Monday, May 29

Read: Luke 14:15-24

Banquet

The illustration of the party allows Jesus to go a step further by his parable of the banquet. In doing so, he tells us something about receiving, priorities and evangelism.

“A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many.” God invites us all to His banquet. He even sends His servants out to bring everyone in. God has a gift for us, but we have to receive it. The kingdom of God is offered to each of us, but we must enter.

“But they all alike began to make excuses.” God wants us to get our priorities right. Do we really have time to bother with God? There are so many other interesting things to do. And, of course, we must guard our possessions (v.18), make a living (v.19) and care for our families (v.20). All very important matters, but how do we balance them against our primary commitment to God? Do we have our priorities in order?

“Go out to the highways and hedges.” This is our call to evangelism, that we might be the servants of the Lord who bring others to the Lord. We are to bring in those who are spiritually poor, maimed, blind and lame “of the city” (v.21); these are our neighbors. But we are to go further still (v.23); God offers His kingdom to the whole world, but who will know if we do not tell them?

R&D *Which of the elements of this study—receiving, priorities, or evangelism—speaks most directly to where you are today? Why?*

Prayer: *It is so easy to rationalize and to make excuses when you seek to lead us the right way, O Holy Spirit. Break down the barriers of resistance within us.*

Tuesday, May 30

Read: Luke 14:25-35

Count the Cost

Jesus was still very popular with many (v.25). They liked his teaching and were astounded by his miraculous powers. Perhaps they thought that this journey to Jerusalem would end in triumph

for Jesus and they would have liked to share in his glory. But, count the cost, Jesus tells them.

In our day, we may be startled by verse 26, and think it must be some sort of a misprint. No, it was just a manner of speaking among the Jews (see, for instance, Genesis 29:30-31). In Matthew 10:37, the point is more understandably made. Jesus is, again, talking about priorities. We must put God first, even as against our own family and loved ones.

There is little wonder that Jesus told his followers to count the cost of discipleship. It would be better for a person not to have begun at all than to begin and then turn back. A halfhearted disciple is like tasteless salt. Salt had many uses in Jesus' day, but if it had lost its saltiness, it was no good for anything.

Jesus is not demanding that all disciples be good, brave and clever. He knows we are not perfect. He knows that we will fail. What he does ask is loyalty and obedience. He wants us to think through what our commitment to him will mean, and to make that commitment in the clear knowledge that there is a rocky road ahead but that we are willing to go on anyway. He will be with us.

R&D What has discipleship cost you in the last 24 hours?

Prayer: There is nothing more important, Lord Jesus, than to know you are with us in times of trial.

Wednesday, May 31

Read: Luke 15:1-10

Lost and Found

Do you ever think about the joy that Jesus would have experienced if the Pharisees had begun to repent? Our passage today is, in many respects, about evangelism: seeking the lost and bringing them into the kingdom. But the focus is repentance.

Jesus uses the two parables to answer the charge that he was always associating with the people who, in the eyes of the scribes and Pharisees, were worthless. Jesus seizes upon this occasion to demonstrate God's attitude toward sinful people.

First of all, we see how God values all people. Sheep were of vital importance to the shepherd, just as a coin would be to the

average woman of Jesus' day. To use the illustrations in the manner he did, Jesus is saying that there is great value in the sinful person, the one who has "gone astray." Secondly, he is saying that we must take initiative to "find the lost" and restore them to fellowship. Thirdly, he is expressing the joy in heaven that results from these successful efforts.

God values us highly, goes after us when we are lost, and rejoices at our return. That is good news indeed! He calls us as His servants to value others, seek them, and rejoice when they are found. There remains, however, the focus on repentance. Jesus does not want the scribes and Pharisees to miss the point; both parables, in talking about rejoicing, refer to sinners who repent. Jesus is finding acceptance among "sinners"—people who know they need to repent—and rejection from the self-righteous whose deep-seated sinfulness is covered with a veneer of piety.

R&D *Who are the "scribes and Pharisees" of our day?*

Prayer: *It is easy to judge harshly those people who are different from us, and we are living in a time when differences are being accentuated. Lord, on the other hand, you call us to love, and demonstrated how to do it. May we follow your path and not the ways of the world.*

Thursday, June 1

Read: Luke 15:11-32

Loving Father

The theme of joy is continued from the two previous parables. Sinful people, completely out of touch with religion as it was practiced in their day, were finding in Jesus an avenue to genuine faith and repentance. Unfortunately, the religious people of the day were reacting in just the opposite manner. They, who were supposed to know the mind and heart of God, were hostile. They were, in fact, just like the elder brother.

When he heard the rejoicing at the younger brother's return, he would not join in. He sulked instead. When begged by the loving father to participate, he expressed his indignation that so much should be done for this worthless brother when nothing had been done to reward his own loyalty and hard work.

This parable has a lot to say about how we feel about the kingdom of God. The elder brother was meanspirited about it. Being present with the father (in this case, God) was no big deal to him; it was just hard work and no joy. If that is what our faith is all about—grudgingly living by a bunch of dos and don'ts in exchange for a promise of eternal life—we're probably much like the elder brother ourselves.

Christians can be stuffy and unwelcoming. Why? It is something that is vitally important for us to recognize and deal with in our own day, especially if we are the ones who are guilty!

R&D *How are newcomers to your parish received?*

Prayer: *We are all, in a sense, doorkeepers in the house of the Lord. Help us to be gracious, welcoming hosts rather than primarily guardians of our community of faith.*

Friday, June 2

Read: Luke 16:1-15

Worldly Wisdom

In the movie “O God” George Burns (as God) says that he has made some mistakes and gives the avocado seed as an example. The story of the unjust steward seems like another one. Verse 9 in the Revised Standard Version just doesn't sound like something Jesus would say. William Barclay contended that verse 9 means that “material possessions should be used to cement friendships wherein the real and permanent value of life lies.” In other words, those who are wealthy have an opportunity to help the poor in this life, something of eternal value to the giver.

Something else needs to be said, however. It is a fact that even seriously committed Christians seem to be better at exercising worldly wisdom than in using their minds to do the work of God. Anyone who has been on a church board or other Christian committee will probably agree with this. Jesus may well be pointing out that if we would spend as much time thinking of ways to serve Him as we do in our own selfish pursuits, the kingdom of God would be much more of a reality for us and for those around us.

Perhaps the first part of the passage is clarified by the second. “He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest in much” (v.10), and “No servant can serve two masters” (v.13). God wants us to be honest and faithful and to serve Him. What otherwise seems rather complicated in this passage may be as simple as that.

R&D To what extent can you realistically apply wisdom to the things of God in comparison to the wisdom you apply to your own job?

Prayer: Holy Spirit, guide me to new and effective ways to serve Christ by serving those in need around me.

Saturday, June 3

Read: Luke 16:16-31

Separation

There is some hard teaching here. On the surface, there seems to be a contradiction between verses 16 and 17. The former seems to say that from the time of John the Baptist the new way of the kingdom has taken over for the law. In fact, the most unlikely people were accepting the good news of Jesus Christ and storming their way into the kingdom of God. No barriers erected by the religiously elite are keeping them out.

Verse 17 then seems to say that the tiniest part of the law cannot be nullified. This is then affirmed by Jesus’ general teaching on divorce (v.18). Jesus’ teachings in the early part of the Sermon on the Mount (see, for instance, Matthew 5:17-48) show that the law remains valid but that it is to be interpreted more by the spirit than the letter. (This, of course, made the law even more demanding than it had been in the past, as Jesus’ illustrations make clear.) Suffice it to say that simplistic interpretations that had been placed on the law by the scribes and Pharisees were no longer binding, but the great moral enactments of the law remain unalterable because their standards are divine.

The parable then shows the great divergence between truth and the commonly accepted ideas about virtue and reward. The rich man did not expect judgment after death. He undoubtedly took his prosperity as a sign of God’s favor. In fact, however, he is

an excellent illustration of missing the spirit of the law. He knew the needs of Lazarus and did nothing about them. And, just to bring the point home as clearly as possible, it is noted that there is no need to send special word to the rich man's brothers; the Old Testament Scriptures contain that word and it simply needs to be taken seriously.

R&D *In what ways does the spirit of the law still evade us in our day?*

Prayer: *Being guided by love rather than by judgment certainly makes it easier to understand the spirit of the law, Dear Lord.*

Sunday, June 4

Sabbath Time

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

The Holy Spirit is pledged to help us to see things from the point of view of Jesus. If we yield ourselves in prayer to the Holy Spirit, things will begin to look quite different. As we see things from the supernatural point of view, we shall begin to meet them by supernatural methods.

Monday, June 5

Read: Luke 17:1-10

Guidelines

In these sayings, Jesus is giving some helpful guidelines for living. The "little ones" in verse 2 may be either children or people who are young in the faith. To harm either by our actions, inactions, attitudes, and so forth, is particularly reprehensible. A good question for ourselves is: In what ways do I tempt others to sin? It may not be by enticing others into sinful activities, but by mistreating them generally (exhibiting my own bad attitudes, for instance). I may get them out of sorts and cause them to mistreat someone else.

We next are told that we Christians should exercise "tough love" toward one another. Loving confrontation is something that was apparently very common in the early days of the faith, but is almost unheard of today. In the "open society" in which we live, our culture cautions us against "rebuking our brother." Yet, here

Jesus tells us that we have a responsibility, on the one hand, to confront our brother or sister in Christ, and, on the other, to be quick to forgive if there is repentance.

We are also told to stretch our faith by exercising it.

Finally, Jesus makes it clear that what we do in the name of God is not something for which we can expect Brownie points in heaven. What we do in the name of God is by the grace of God; it shows no merit on our part, just obedience.

R&D In what ways is the Bible, for you, a set of guidelines for living the Christian life?

Prayer: *Lord God, You wrote a Book.... (2 Timothy 3:16)*

Tuesday, June 6

Read: Luke 17:11-19

Thanksgiving

In this incident, Jesus is showing again the extension of the kingdom of God beyond the boundaries of Israel. The leper who gave thanks was a Samaritan. The Jews despised the Samaritans for their differences concerning orthodox Judaism. The Samaritans had been infiltrated and influenced by foreigners and foreign gods. But the leper, by his action, showed that he understood more about the kingdom of God than the others.

Teachers on the subject of prayer down through the years have often pointed out that people spend a great deal more prayer time asking than thanking. We Christians, above all others, should have an attitude of gratitude. The Samaritan in our story praises God and thanks Jesus. In adoration we praise God for who He is; in thanksgiving, we thank God for what He does. The leper had things in the right order and in the right perspective.

A suggested prayer of thanksgiving: I thank You, Lord God, for all You have done for me. You care more for me than I do for myself. I am precious in Your sight, and You do for me much more than I deserve or can comprehend. I have nothing to give in return but my gratitude and that I give You, Lord, with my whole heart. Amen.

R&D Do you give God thanks for one-tenth of what He does for you?

Prayer: *There is no way, Lord, that we can give You enough thanks for Your love and care, but we should at least try.*

Wednesday, June 7

Read: Luke 17:20-37

End Times

The Pharisees were looking for the coming of the kingdom of God at some point in the future. They could not seem to comprehend that in Jesus and his ministry the kingdom was already at work. Verse 21 can be translated “the kingdom of God is within you.” It is not something to run after but live into. The kingdom is present to us who are Christians; the question may be whether we are present to the kingdom (i.e., conscious of the Holy Spirit within us and the joy of living in Christ).

Yet, the kingdom has not come in its fullness. That will not happen as long as evil still holds people in its grip. Jesus taught that God would establish His authority fully on the day of the Son of Man. No one could predict when that time would come. Jesus therefore warns of the suddenness of its coming as well as the fact that there will be those who will misread the signs and try to lead others astray. People who are living life at the expense of eternal values (as they were in Noah’s time), will face a rude awakening.

Today’s lesson is a mixture of historical and eschatological terminology. “Eschatological” has to do with end times. When God’s last word about human life is spoken, people will be confronted with the things that really matter. But, this is already happening; and, in that sense, eschatology and history mingle. In Christ, God’s last word about human life has already been spoken. Jesus has appropriately been called the hinge of history. This passage of Scripture calls us to face two realities—the reality of the kingdom and the reality of judgment.

R&D *What do you believe about “end times”?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord God, that we can be a part of Your kingdom in our day.*

Read: Luke 18:1-8

Perseverance

Although most parables work by comparison, this one works by contrast. God is not like the judge. The judge will not give the woman the justice she deserves because she is not in a position to bribe him, nor does she have friends in high places to put pressure on him. In the end, he gives in to her demands only because she has made a nuisance of herself by her continual pestering. If such perseverance will wear down an unjust judge, how much more will it be rewarded by God, whose whole desire is to grant mercy to His people.

And so we see that this passage of Scripture, through the parable, tells us something about persistence in prayer. But we should not overlook the opening statement by Jesus that leads to the telling of the parable. “Always pray and do not lose heart.” This tells us, first of all, that we should *always* pray about the situations we face in life. Often, we approach prayer as a last resort when it should be our first consideration.

“Do not lose heart” tells us not only to persevere, but to persevere in hope. We know that God loves us and wants the best for us. The best may not be what we are praying for, because we cannot always see things as God sees them. We should persist in prayer in the full confidence that God will answer, and that the answer will be His best for us.

R&D *The passage ends with the haunting question, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” Will he?*

Prayer: *Help us, Lord, when we are persistent in prayers that seem not to be answered, to put our hope, faith and heart into them and not our frustration.*

Friday, June 9

Read: Luke 18:9-17

True Prayer

Jesus continues to teach about prayer. The Pharisee in the parable was concerned only with himself. He had committed no

major sins and he was covered with superficial virtue. He is very much in the first person singular. He took no notice of the awesomeness of God; he seemed to have no consciousness of the presence of God at all. His prayer never went beyond the circle of this own self-centeredness.

The tax collector, on the other hand, had an awareness of the holiness of God that the Pharisee, despite all of his religious practices, totally lacked. This is shown by the tax collector's reluctance to draw close and his body language of downcast eyes and beating his chest. With his awareness of God's holiness went his consciousness of his own failure. If it were not for God and his trust in Him, the tax collector would have been in despair. But, by the grace of God, he knew how to come in an attitude of true prayer. He also knew that God is merciful to those who ask for forgiveness.

The episode with the children reflects the attitude of hope-filled openness that is as characteristic of children as it was of the tax collector. We are to receive the kingdom of God like a little child. We are to approach prayer in the same way, simply but not simplistically.

R&D How can we maintain balance between being conscious of God's presence in our lives yet not taking Him for granted?

Prayer: Lord God, we each love our earthly father, but we remember that he is our father and should always be respectful of him. Perhaps this should be an example to us of our relationship with You, our Heavenly Father.

Saturday, June 10

Read: Luke 18:18-30

Rich Young Ruler

Jesus treats each person individually. He did not tell every wealthy person to sell his possessions and give to the poor. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were wealthy, but Jesus did not require of them what he asked of this young man. Jesus was able to see that, in this case, the individual was possessed by his possessions; his wealth was standing in the way of his life of faith.

The command for one person may not be the same as the command for another. “Follow me” is universal, but, “Sell what you have and give to the poor,” is not.

Combining wealth with obedience to God is never an easy task, however. God alone is able to save us from the dangers that affluence brings. First of all, possessions tend to focus our attention on the world; to keep what we have, and to have more, requires a serious commitment of time and effort. Furthermore, when a person is comfortable by virtue of what he has, he tends to be less conscious of his dependence on God. Humility and wealth are a rare combination.

In the meantime, those who hear this teaching by Jesus are puzzled: “Then who can be saved?” (v.26). From their point of view, it would be the wealthy person who would have the time to observe the intricacies of the law and the resources to tithe who would have the best chance of earning salvation. Jesus indicates that it is God alone through whom salvation comes. Peter then wants some reassurance that the disciples are following the right path by leaving all behind to follow Jesus. Although Jesus seems to give that assurance, it is a mistake to dwell too much on what we have given up for Christ’s sake; the rich young ruler was possessed by his possessions, but we can become possessed by our self-righteousness.

R&D Comparatively speaking, most people of the Western world are wealthy. What does that say to you concerning how you can most effectively follow Jesus?

Prayer: We need balance, Lord, in looking at what we have versus the needs around us. May Your Holy Spirit guide us in this crucial situation.

Sunday, June 11

Sabbath Time

But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Galatians 6:14

Get back to the Cross of Jesus again and again and again. When you are in a temper get down on your knees and do not

get up until the temper is gone; if you doubt the love of God get down on your knees and look at the cross and let the presence of Jesus have power over you until the doubt of God's love has gone; if you are going to do something wrong get down on your knees and look at the cross and think of God's pain and do not rise from your knees until your will is right and you can make the sacrifice that God demands.

Monday, June 12

Read: Luke 18:31-43

Blindness

We have in this passage the contrast between spiritual blindness and physical blindness. "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written of the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished." This is far from the first time that Jesus had mentioned what was about to happen to him, and yet his disciples still did not understand. In this sense, they were spiritually blind.

Lest we become a little smug about how thickheaded Jesus' followers seem to be, it is important to recognize that Jesus usually spoke profoundly but obscurely. Again, he wanted people to think for themselves, and he spoke in a manner that forced them to do so. It would be hard enough to accept that someone of his stature was going to be killed, but the references to his resurrection would be even more difficult for them to fathom. There was nothing in their past experience that could prepare them for such.

Having indicated the failure of the Twelve to understand, Luke then gives us the story of the healing of the blind man. There are things to be learned from the incident itself (that the man could sense that Jesus had the power to heal him, his perseverance despite being severely rebuked by the crowd, his cry for mercy), but its position here is to show the contrast between a blind stranger's understanding of who Jesus was while his closest friends still failed to understand fully what lay ahead and why.

R&D In what ways does Jesus force us to think for ourselves concerning spiritual matters today?

Prayer: *Lord Christ, we have the knowledge of what happened to you and why because we have the Bible; yet we remain blind to so much that you would show us if we opened our eyes, our minds and you hearts to all you have to offer us.*



The Shaping of the Kingdom

(Samuel, Saul, and David)

Tuesday, June 13

Introduction

The books of Samuel immediately follow Judges in the Hebrew canon. The closing sentence of Judges is a repeated lament throughout that book: “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” The political anarchy of the times was more than matched by a deep moral and spiritual chaos. The story that now unfolds in 1 Samuel takes place against a backdrop of priestly corruption (2:12 ff.), spiritual poverty (3:1b), and shallow superstition (4:1-10). The people of God have wandered far from their first commitment to love and serve God and God alone.

In these days of darkness God raises up Samuel, a towering figure of the Old Testament worthy to be mentioned in the same breath with Moses (Jeremiah 15:1). Samuel becomes the first great figure of restoration and revival in Israel’s history—a combination of prophet, priest, and judge—who leads the people back into a right honoring of the true God and guides them through a transition that leads to the establishment of the monarchy.

The crisis through which God’s people are led is one which requires them to sort out how their allegiance to their new king is to be fitted in with their primary loyalty and dependence upon the God of their fathers. The new king, for his part, must struggle to understand that to be a king in Israel is an altogether different matter from being king in the nations around. Israel’s king must always be a subject of the one true King.

Such crises are not alien to God’s people in any age. We should not have to strain in order to hear ourselves being addressed by a word from God.

R&D *What is the appeal of a society where each is free to do “that which is right in his own eyes”?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Holy Father, for Samuel and for all the faithful leaders You have provided us down through the centuries.*

Wednesday, June 14

Read: 1 Samuel 1:1-20

Faith Honored

In days of moral and spiritual bankruptcy a new beginning is about to be made. We hear of a single family, consistent in faithful worship and a godly manner of life—and a conspicuous exception to a society where the rule was “every man for himself.”

The central human actor in the opening of this drama is Hannah, a woman of prayer who carries the grief of her barrenness into God’s presence and lays it down there. Particularly striking is the contrast between the Hannah who enters the temple weeping and refusing to eat, and the Hannah who returns joyous, serene, and resolute in the assurance that her prayer and vow will be heard and honored (v.18b). The history of God’s people is full of stories of renewal and spiritual revolution that begin in just this way—with the prayer of a single individual of faith (e.g. Nehemiah 1).

The other principal in this drama is the Lord Himself, who alone has the power to give life. The text makes it clear that what had heretofore been of no avail (“Elkanah knew Hannah his wife”), now produces the longed-for result. (“The Lord remembered...and in due time Hannah conceived.”) In Scripture when God is said to remember that is not to indicate that He is preparing to do something that has slipped his mind, but rather that He is now about to work His unfolding purpose (Exodus 2:24). The prayer of this woman of faith releases the power and purpose of God.

R&D *Why do you suppose God limits His action in the world in accordance with our prayers and faith?*

Prayer: *Lord God, You work Your purposes out in ways that are far beyond our understanding, but we can count on You to hear our prayers and have faith in Your best for us.*

Thursday, June 15

Read: 1 Samuel 2:1-11

God of Great Reversals

Hannah's song is a joyous celebration of God's power to reverse the fortunes of the despised, the downtrodden, and the powerless ones of this world. She sings out of her personal experience; but the emphasis then falls on God's providential reordering and redemption of His whole world. The world is in good hands; all injustice and wrong will be overturned.

It seems likely that this was an adaptation of an already existing psalm known to Hannah. In creating their own prayers the people of God have always made use of phraseology familiar from common worship. Those familiar with Mary's song of thanksgiving (Luke 1:36-55) will not fail to notice its strong similarity to Hannah's. Both exult in the mercy and goodness of a God who overrules all circumstances of life, and turns the tables on normal human expectations in order to lift up those who put their hope in Him. The outworking of this purpose to finally put all things right is in no way dependent upon human power (v.9c). The powerless ones of this world have a special ability to recognize and appreciate this good news.

R&D Can you tell about an experience of God's power that inspired a "song" from you?

Prayer: May our voices ring out with joy in You, Lord God, for Your loving-kindness and mercy.

Friday, June 16

Read: 1 Samuel 2:12-18, 22-35

Judgment and Hope

We are now introduced in some detail to the religious corruption of the day. The sons of Eli are dismissed as a thoroughly bad lot who "had no regard for ('did not know') the Lord." Their exercise of the priestly office is characterized by greed, lust, and intimidation of the people they are called to serve. Their "contempt" for the Lord's offering was surely at bottom a contempt for the Lord Himself.

Sandwiched between these descriptions of the scandalous behavior of Eli's sons we have references to the boy Samuel growing up in the temple and reflecting a spirit and demeanor in complete contrast with the arrogance and apostasy that surrounded him (v.26). We sense that God is at work and that the days of Hophni and Phinehas are numbered.

Indeed, when it becomes clear that a deaf ear will be turned to all warnings, doom on the house of Eli is accordingly pronounced. But alongside the announcement of judgment comes the promise and hope of a purified priesthood, embodied in a "faithful priest" who will reflect in word and deed God's heart and mind.

The prophecy goes on to speak of a priesthood that will have no end (v.35), thereby inviting us to conclude that the fulfillment of this promise experienced in Samuel's own day and time was not to be the final fulfillment of this prophecy. For that, as with all God's promises (2 Corinthians 1:20) we look to Jesus Christ. It can hardly be accidental that Luke's description of the boy, Jesus (Luke 2:52) is all but identical with 1 Samuel 2:26. Ultimately Jesus Christ alone embodies the promise of the "faithful priest" who brings us to God, and whose priesthood never ends.

R&D What keeps your faith and hope alive when even some "spiritual leaders" of the day seem to be turning their back on God?

Prayer: Thank you, Lord Jesus, for faithful clergy who follow you in equipping us laypeople for discipleship.

Saturday, June 17

Read: 1 Samuel 3:1-21

A Prophet's Call

A "faithful priest," who will discern and do all that is in the heart and mind of God, has been promised. Such a priest must also fulfill the office of a prophet—one who stands in the presence of God's voice and faithfully bears His message to others. The sorry state of God's people is summed up in a single sentence: "The word of the Lord was rare in those days." But now this faith of Hannah is about to bear fruit for the renewing and blessing of the whole people of God.

Throughout the Old Testament the true prophet of the Lord is always characterized by this simple response to God's call: "Speak, Lord, for your servant hears." The Lord speaks, His servant hears and obeys.

As a true model for prophets still to come, Samuel does not temper his message to suit his audience. One can well imagine that he must have wished for some *other* message to bear to Eli, who was after all both friend and mentor.

For His part, God honors the obedience of such a faithful mouthpiece. The famine of God's word is over at last, as Samuel is now established as the Lord's prophet. Even a child who will listen and obey can be the instrument through which renewal begins.

R&D Who were the spiritual guides in your own life who taught you to recognize and respond to God's call?

Prayer: We are grateful for all who have gone before us, Lord God, in faithful obedience to You and thereby have shown us the way.

Sunday, June 18

Sabbath Time

And in the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed. Mark 1:35

The real burning of the candle at both ends is exercising body and mind without exercising the soul. Times of spiritual refreshment, however we come by them, are much more important than times of physical rest.

Monday, June 19

Read: 1 Samuel 4:1-22

God's Glory Departed

The threat of domination by the neighboring Philistines is an ever-present reality throughout the time of Samuel and Saul. The shock of defeat at Aphek prompts the suggestion that further defeat may be warded off by carrying the ark of the covenant into battle. The ark, the supreme symbol of God's presence in the midst of His people, was now to be used as a talisman to ward off evil. The tragic irony of this story emerges with special force when it is remembered that the ark contained the tables of God's

law, to which Israel had committed herself at the beginning of her existence. The spiritual poverty of the time is such that she now imagines that the presence of the ark alone, notwithstanding her utter disregard for the law it contained, will suffice to guarantee God's favor.

The enormity of the disaster that ensues is driven home by the thrice repeated solemn refrain, "The ark of God (was) captured." In the Old Testament this is equaled and surpassed only by the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. "The ark captured" could mean nothing less, it seemed, than that Israel was abandoned, an orphan. What now would become of God's people?

The fear and sense of doom that this event created is capsulized in the story of the birth of Ichabod. A helpless infant enters the world as an orphan and is given a name that means "departed glory," a living picture of the disaster that seems to have befallen God's people.

R&D Can you think of some ways God's people today fall into the trap of substituting the trappings of true religion for the genuine article?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord God, that You cannot be lost to us unless we ourselves turn away from You.

Tuesday, June 20

Read: 1 Samuel 5:1-12

Israel's God

The ark is taken as a trophy of war to the Philistine city of Ashdod. There it is set up in the local shrine beside the image of the god Dagon. In the easygoing polytheism of the Philistines there was plenty of room to add Israel's God to their pantheon of deities.

However, much to the shock of the local population, Israel's God refuses to be treated as one among many, and indeed will permit no rivals. On successive mornings Dagon's image is found prostrate before the ark, and then dismembered with head and hands lying on the threshold of the shrine. Thus, the impotence of other gods, so called, is proclaimed loud and clear. Israel may have

lost its battle with the Philistines, but any contest between Israel's God and the "gods" of their oppressors is no contest.

As the ark is carted about from city to city on what might normally have been a kind of victory tour, there is a growing sense of parody. In each location the celebrating "victors" are struck down with a terrifying plague which they are forced to recognize as the hand of Israel's God turning their victory into ruin. In the end they find themselves seeking mercy from a God they are forced to recognize as overwhelmingly greater than their own gods. This story strongly recalls the Exodus account in which the plagues on Egypt are declared to be an expression of Yahweh's purpose to "execute judgment on all the gods of Egypt." A defeat for Israel is not a defeat for Israel's God.

R&D *What is the appeal of other gods to the likes of you and me— notwithstanding their ultimate powerlessness?*

Prayer: *There is no substitute for You, Lord God, and no life like life in Christ Your Son*

Wednesday, June 21

Read: 1 Samuel 7:1-14

Repentance and Renewal

Here Samuel emerges in one of his most characteristic roles, that of *intercessor*—one who (like Moses) stands between a wayward and unfaithful people and the God whose covenant with them they have persistently broken. Twenty years of two-timing Yahweh by playing around with the gods of the Canaanites has brought a great weariness and the sense that not all is well: "All the house of Israel lamented after the Lord." Samuel seizes this moment to gather the people at Mizpah for a national act of repentance and recommitment to God.

Once again, their Philistine overlords threaten battle. This is a testing moment. The memory of their humiliating defeat in the previous encounter is still very much alive. However, this time the outcome will be quite different *because* their relationship to God is now quite different. We no longer sense any of the arrogant presumption that God is in duty bound to be their protector—

that evil can be warded off simply by a wave of some symbol of their special status with the Almighty. Now there is simply the recognition that God's decision to be their defender is their only hope. "Do not cease to cry to the Lord our God for us."

The deliverance experienced here is memorialized with a monument intended not to recall the names of the dead, but the *living* God who had shown Himself to be the helper of His people. This visible reminder of past answered prayer was to be a source of encouragement in future times of need.

R&D What events in your own life stand out as "landmarks" that hold you steady in the assurance that God is still "a very present help in time of trouble" (Psalm 46)?

Prayer: One of our biggest shortcomings, Lord, is when we forget to remember all You have done for us.

Thursday, June 22

Read: 1 Samuel 8:1-22

Give Us a King

The request for a king is prompted by motives less than ideal. The Israelites want to be like all the nations; they hanker after influence and status. They want a champion who will knock their enemies on the head; they want to be top dog in their neighborhood.

Obviously, this falls far short of God's ideal for His people, which is that they should entrust themselves wholly and completely to His rule. We are given to understand that what Samuel experiences as a personal rejection is ultimately much more than that. It is rejection of the rule of God. The people simply cannot believe it would be safe to choose God as their only king.

But this failure of faith, tragic on the human plane, is not fatal to the purpose and plan of God. What particularly stands out in this passage is the portrait of a God who works in and through and around human weakness to accomplish His purpose. While He waits and longs for us to trust Him more fully, He will sometimes acquiesce to our weakness and even incorporate that into His unfolding plan. In this case kingship very quickly becomes

one of the major themes of the Old Testament, with the image of the ideal king who rules in righteousness, embodying much of the hope and promise of God given to His people.

R&D *Can you tell of some ways God has acquiesced to you, working for your good even in your rebellion?*

Prayer: *Please give us godly leaders, Lord.*

Friday, June 23

Read: 1 Samuel 9:1-2, 10:17-25

A King Selected

We have now been introduced to Saul, the prospective king, who is described as a man well endowed in his physical appearance so as to appeal as a leader. In a private and secret ceremony, he has been anointed by Samuel to be the first king of the new monarchy. Now the representatives of the people are summoned to a public ceremony where the new era they have demanded will be inaugurated.

When Saul is, by a process of elimination, finally identified as God's choice, he has to be dragged out of a hiding place among the baggage to be presented to his subjects. This apparent reluctance to be king seems if anything to make him even more appealing as a leader.

The setting in which this new beginning is launched is one of covenant making. The monarchy Israel is granted is circumscribed by "rights and duties" that are publicly proclaimed and written down to be laid up "*before the Lord*" (v.25). Saul is not called to be an absolute monarch after the fashion of the surrounding nations. All, including the new king, are still accountable to the God who called them into covenant with Himself.

Saul is acclaimed with a great shout (v.24) that invites us to recall the shout with which the people had greeted the arrival of the ark in their military encampment (4:5). But of course the mere existence of a king will not guarantee the end of all their problems, any more than did the presence of the ark. That true security lies only in faithfulness to God still appears to be a lesson not fully learned.

R&D *How does the temptation to look for human “saviors” who will “solve all our problems” show itself among God’s people today?*

Prayer: *Lord Christ, you are our Savior; there is no substitute for you.*

Saturday, June 24

Read: 1 Samuel 11:1-15

Kingship Confirmed

At the close of chapter 10 we are given to understand that initially Saul’s leadership received something less than universal approval and acceptance. The incident now recorded shows how this opposition was won over, as Saul deals decisively with the first major crisis of his reign.

The political fragmentation and chaos of Israel in the era of the judges made her vulnerable to the kind of aggression and extortion we read about here. Nahash’s complete confidence in his command of the situation is firmly based on the record. There is little or no precedent to suggest that in this case help for Jabesh-gilead will be forthcoming.

But a king submissive to and empowered by God’s Spirit, accompanied and guided by the Lord’s prophet (v.7), is a reality Nahash has not taken into his reckoning. A completely new situation now prevails in Israel.

The biblical storyteller is at pains to make it clear that Saul’s understanding of the deliverance that is wrought under his leadership is one that recognizes God as the true source of all deliverance: “Today the Lord has wrought deliverance in Israel.”

Saul is now firmly established as a king “*before the Lord*” (v.15), one who recognizes and honors Yahweh as the only God and Savior of His people. The new king has begun well.

R&D *How can the people of God today nurture and encourage leaders to keep the perspective that their leadership is always “before the Lord”—subject to His correction and overruling?*

Prayer: *Lord, we pray that we and our leaders would recognize that You alone deserve all glory.*

For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. John 3:17

The judgment of God is not the judgment of one who wants to find out where we are wrong in order to condemn us, but the judgment of one who knows we are wrong and wants to help us.

Monday, June 26

Read: 1 Samuel 12:1-25

A Farewell Address

With Saul firmly established as king, Samuel can now withdraw as a political leader—though he will continue to function in the important roles of prophet and intercessor. In this moving farewell he exhorts, encourages, and warns the people concerning what lies ahead.

The style of leadership he has exhibited, with its strict avoidance of any self-serving, is set forth as a model for the new king. Israel's king is to represent and embody God's justice to His people.

The history of God's saving activity and faithfulness to His promise to Israel is reviewed and set in contrast with Israel's history of unfaithfulness (vv.6-11). The summarizing words for this story are: "They forgot the Lord their God" (v.9). But notwithstanding this chronic forgetfulness, the Lord has not abandoned His commitment to them. Rather He has prodded their memory with the oppression of enemies so that once again they are driven to dependence on Him.

The people are reminded that their request for a king represents a failure of faith (sin); but simultaneously the strong assurance is given that the Lord's purpose cannot be thwarted by this failure. What He has set out to accomplish will be brought to fulfillment: "The Lord will not cast away his people for his great name's sake. Fear not!" Even human weakness and sin can be transformed into a means toward God's glory.

R&D *What are the best means for keeping fresh our memory of God's saving activity in our lives?*

Prayer: *Lord God, may we stay close to You in prayer so that we are always conscious of Your saving activity in our lives.*

Tuesday, June 27

Read: 1 Samuel 13:1-15

Dynasty Disqualified

The story now takes a tragic turn. The new king who has begun so well, with complete awareness that his strength must lie in total dependence upon God and obedience to His word, now begins to lose that focus. Saul's new guiding principle for action is perhaps well expressed in the familiar (non-biblical) saying, "The Lord helps those who help themselves." What follows is a story of moral and spiritual decline that will finally end in ruin for both Saul and his people (chapter 31).

The situation is a testing one. It appears to Saul that his whole army may desert in the face of the overwhelmingly superior force of the Philistines. The temptation to take matters into his own hands proves too great a strain. The restrictions imposed by the Lord's prophet will have to be sacrificed in order to adapt to the practical realities of the moment.

The judgment pronounced by Samuel may appear overly harsh at first; but it is worth recalling that Saul was hardly without evidence that God could be relied upon to be the protector and defender of His people (chapter 11). Furthermore, it was essential to establish from the outset the fundamental difference between Israel's king and the rulers of the surrounding nations. In Israel the Lord must remain King, and the human king an agent of His will, a man "after God's heart." One who would lead God's people must be servant of God and thereby servant of all.

R&D *How well do God's criteria for leadership match up with our society's ideas of what makes for good leadership?*

Prayer: *Too often, Lord, we decide to "take matters into our own hands" to our later regret. Help us to remember that You are King.*

Wednesday, June 28

Read: 1 Samuel 15:10-35

Obedience Not Sacrifice

Once again Saul has chosen to “re-interpret” and “adapt” the Lord’s commandment to suit his own convenience. This final confrontation with Samuel (but one) is decisive for his entire reign. His habit of refusing to be bound by anything beyond himself leads now to a lasting breach with Samuel, and indeed with the Lord. He will continue to be king, but he is now on his own. The result is ever more disastrous until the story ends in suicide (chapter 31).

Verses 22 and 23 enunciate a principle that is picked up and hammered home by the prophets (Hosea 6:6), and reiterated by our Lord himself as he rebukes the foolishness and futility of imagining that form and ritual can substitute for simple obedience to God’s word and command (Matthew 12:7). When the forms and rituals of worship spring not from an obedient and grateful heart, but rather are used as a means of control—a way to keep the upper hand and impose our will—the result can be nothing short of spiritual disaster. The tragedy of Saul’s life can perhaps be summed up by simply observing that he never could quite bring himself to believe that it would be safe to entrust himself and his plans completely to God’s guidance.

R&D Can you think of any ways you are tempted to keep God pacified by offering Him ritual observance rather than simple obedience?

Prayer: Have mercy on us, Lord. We too often think we know a better way.

Thursday, June 29

Read: 1 Samuel 28:3-25

A Final Encounter

To the very end Saul is still striving to seize control of events by his own initiative—to bend the will of God to fit with his own. This scene from the final act of this tragic story demonstrates powerfully that Saul’s fate rested upon the issue of his willingness to let it be the other way around. He wants the word of the Lord and of

the Lord's prophet, but only as a hedge against disaster, a means to his own end.

Cut off from God by his choices, and from his old counselor (and adversary), Samuel, he is willing to seek aid through whatever "powers" there are that will make themselves available to him—even powers expressly banned by God's word. He claims to be seeking guidance, but what he really wants is a "second opinion" on the outcome of his impending battle, more favorable to himself. After all, is that not what prophets and religious counselors are for, to give a reassuring message?

The biblical writer does not here address the issue of the truth of claims, by mediums, to be able to consult with the dead. However, his manner of telling the story appears to indicate that the woman was taken by surprise, hence her crying out with alarm at the appearance of Samuel.

In any case, it is the Lord's prophet who speaks; and the message is simply that the word of God stands unaltered. If a different message is expected, Saul will have to seek out a different messenger.

R&D Can you tell about a time in your life when you struggled to manipulate God into seeing things more your way?

Prayer: Holy God, may the destructing of Saul's kingship be a living illustration of what can happen to us when we turn from You.

Friday, June 30

Read: 2 Samuel 1:1-16

Introduction - King David

2 Samuel presents, in loosely chronological order, events of David's reign as God's anointed king of Israel. 1 Samuel showed God's audacity in choosing an uneducated shepherd boy for Israel's second king, and God's unique method of schooling that boy for the awesome responsibility of the job. David was called and trained to be a theocratic king, acting always under divine wisdom and the direct order of God.

How different are the ways of God from our ways. If educating a future king, wouldn't we choose the most reputable

school, with emphasis on political science and foreign languages? And a prestigious seminary for religious training? David's school became two years at the court of autocratic Saul, who soon became madly jealous of him, and a dozen years living in desert caves and fleeing for his life.

When God gives a man (or woman) a job, then God not only trains, gifts and prepares him, but also arranges all the circumstances so he, like Jesus, may learn "obedience by what he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8).

In the wilderness, God gave David 600 "brave warriors, ready for battle" (1 Chronicles 12:8) who were fiercely loyal, a priest with the means of learning God's will, and great favor among the elders of his own tribe of Judah. These provisions furnished the base needed when the time came to establish David as king.

We also have the assurance that God will use all things to our good when we are walking in the will of God; even an ungodly king like Saul, and all his armies, can never thwart that will.

R&D What was the last "wilderness" time in your life? What did God teach you from it?

Prayer: Discipleship involves discipline, and Your discipline is often not easy, but necessary, Lord God.

Saturday, July 1

Read: 2 Samuel 1:17-27

Love Your Enemies

David had learned of the Israelite army's defeat by the Philistines. King Saul and three of his four sons were slain, and David's reaction was a very revealing insight into his character.

There are many possible reactions to the news that the man who had been trying to kill you for ten years, who took away your wife and forced you and your family into exile, and who had hunted you through the desert like a wild animal, has finally been removed. And in disgrace, at that. What would your reaction have been?

Here is an example of why the prophet Samuel said of David, "The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart" (1

Samuel 13:14). Far from rejoicing, David and his men mourned for Saul, for his son Jonathan, and for the army of Israel “because they had fallen by the sword” (v.12). Then David composed one of the most beautiful examples of Hebrew poetry in the Old Testament, and commanded that the eulogy be taught to all his men.

In spite of Saul’s failures, David maintained his respect for Saul as king, as mighty warrior and as father of his friend. In our modern age, we often criticize our leaders, including our Christian leaders, without mercy simply because they disagree with us! William Frey once said that if Christians cannot show the world an alternative lifestyle, then the unsaved will never see the reality of Jesus. If our lives manifest caring and forgiveness, then our Church becomes the kingdom of God on earth.

R&D In what ways do you need to change for your church to share the love of Jesus with the world?

Prayer: Make us, Lord God, people after Your own heart.

Sunday, July 2

Sabbath Time

Therefore confess your sins to one another. James 5:16a

The highest privilege there is, is the privilege of being allowed to share another’s pain. You talk about your pleasures to your acquaintances; you talk about your troubles to your friends. It is only to the person you know and trust most that you can tell your greatest sorrows.

Monday, July 3

Read: 2 Samuel 2:1-11

Obedience

After the death of King Saul, David faced some new dilemmas. As long as he was running from Saul and living in desert caves, his choices were quite limited. But now a multitude of choices appeared, and David really knew only one fact: Samuel had anointed him as Israel’s next king. But the fulfillment of that call was still far from fruition.

No doubt David considered a number of possibilities, as we all would. He had many relatives living in Bethlehem who would welcome him and his family back to his father's land; a number of the border towns would be happy to have the protection of his warriors...but only God had the perfect choice. And the primary lesson the "wilderness" teaches us is to follow God's will and not our own logic.

When Abiathar had fled from King Saul, he had brought with him the high priest's breastplate containing "the Urim and the Thummin." Although we are not sure exactly what these were, the NIV Study Bible notes: "They were sacred lots and were often used in times of crisis to determine the will of God." So David used the means God had provided to determine that he should go to Hebron.

Now we have received Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit. Each of us has a personal relationship with the Lord, not just the king and the high priest. By Jesus' shed blood on the cross he made us "a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9) and gave us instant access into the "holy of holies," the very heart of God our Father. God has also given us His word, the Bible. We thus have the means to ascertain God's will, and always to be blessed by His perfect purposes for our lives.

R&D *How do you ascertain the will of God for your life?*

Prayer: *It is not always easy, Lord, to know Your will, but it becomes easier as we grow in the knowledge and love of Your Son Jesus.*

Tuesday, July 4

Read: Psalm 145

Independence Day

Psalm 145 is a traditional reading for this special day, and for good reason. It is a song of praise to our God for all He does for us and for all of His creatures. Although we may sometimes despair concerning the things happening in our country with which we disagree, we know that we are blessed to live in a bountiful land, a land of infinite beauty and an abundance of opportunity.

God has blessed us in this place with more than any society in the world has ever known. Praise Him.

Today might be a good day to reflect on the birth of our nation, to think about our Founding Fathers who pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to support the Declaration of Independence that we commemorate on this day. We are a young nation. This fact was recently brought to my attention: when Barack Obama was born, Hebert Hoover was still alive; when Hoover was born, Andrew Johnson was still alive; when Johnson was born, John Adams was still alive. Through the lives of four Presidents, we are back to the days of the Founding Fathers!

It is also a time to thank the Lord for all He has done for us in this nation and for us personally, including thanksgiving for those who have sacrificed their lives that we might be, and remain, free.

And we might pray this prayer especially written for this day: “Lord God Almighty, in whose Name the founders of this country won liberty for themselves and for us, and lit the torch of freedom for nations unborn: Grant that we and all the people of this land may have grace to maintain our liberties in righteousness and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen” (*Book of Common Prayer*).

R&D *For what one thing are you most thankful today?*

Prayer: *What could be better than the one above written for today?*

Wednesday, July 5

Read: 2 Samuel 3:12-21

Types of Jesus

Although the Old Testament presents real people to us with all their faults and foibles, the Scripture also tells us that “everything that was written in the past was written to teach us” (Romans 15:4). We can accept the Bible as truth because we know that no whitewash job has been done on the people portrayed in it. However, the people who were seeking to serve and follow God are also types or examples of New Testament truths.

Abraham, Isaac, Joshua, and David are some of the types of Jesus who appear in the Old Testament. In today's chapter David demonstrated some of his godly attributes in his dealings with Abner, a man who had been the power behind the rival king, Ish-bosheth, and the primary block to David's accession as king of all Israel.

Although Abner's motives seemed pretty dubious, David treated him as a forgiven enemy, held no grudges, and honored him. David's acceptance of Abner foreshadows Jesus' acceptance and forgiveness of us when we repent of our demands to be the king/power in our own lives and come in submission to him.

Jesus often taught on forgiveness, the most familiar example being the story of the prodigal son, which fits in the same category as David and Abner. By following Jesus and choosing to forgive those who have wronged us, we open the door for God to move in our situation to bring about the blessing He wants to give us. David forgave Abner, thereby establishing a bond of trust that later enabled the northern tribes of Israel to accept him as their king.

R&D How does it block God when we fail to forgive our enemies?

Prayer: Lord, forgiveness frees us from having to carry a lot of unhappy stuff around with us that can be better forgotten.

Thursday, July 6

Read: 2 Samuel 2:4, 5:1-12, 16:1-13

The Call of God

David became king of Israel in three easy stages. The times between them were very difficult, but the timing and the choice were the sovereign acts of God.

When God sent the prophet Samuel to anoint David king, he was a shepherd boy, the least of seven brothers, so unimportant in the eyes of his own family that they did not think to include him in the sacrificial feast. David did nothing from a worldly standpoint to bring about the event; he had no ambitions beyond protecting his sheep, loving God, and using his songs and music to glorify that God.

After Saul's death, the Lord again sent His emissaries to David. The elders of his own tribe recognized his leadership and "came to Hebron, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah" (2:4). Finally, "all the elders of Israel came and made a compact...before the Lord" with King David. Again, the initiative was the Lord's, and this time the promise was fulfilled: "They anointed David king over Israel" (5:3).

In the same way, God has a time and plan for each of us. The world would teach us to "do our own thing" as the way to fulfillment and happiness, but we can never be content or fulfilled until we see the call God has uniquely for us and come into the obedience that allows Him to bring that call to fruition.

When we submit our lives to him, Jesus promised never to leave or forsake us, and to use the "wilderness" times to draw us ever closer to God's perfect plan for us.

R&D *Why do we feel we need to "help God" bring about His plan for our lives?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord God, for the plan You have for me.*

Friday, July 7

Read: 2 Samuel 5:6-16, 6:12-23

Establishing

When David became king of all Israel, his work was by no means over. His first move was to capture Jerusalem and to make it the capital city of his kingdom. "The king and his men" (5:6) indicates that David used his private army to carry out the takeover, thus establishing the fortress as truly "the city of David" (5:7). Jerusalem thus became the royal city, a federal city belonging to the nation as a whole and not favoring any one tribe.

Then he set out to rescue the ark of God from the relative unimportance it had suffered during the reign of Saul. The NIV notes state, "As a true theocratic king, he wished to acknowledge the Lord's kingship over both himself and the people by restoring the ark to a place of prominence in the nation." The effect of these two events was a restoration of the identity of the people as one

unit, the special chosen of God, with one of their own “brothers” as their recognized leader.

My husband and I were nearing forty when we accepted Jesus as our Savior and our Lord. God used and blessed us mightily while we wandered from one ministry to another for nearly twenty years while He freed us from the worldly bondages and “all the diseases of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 28:60). It took that long for us, like David, to be ready to establish His kingdom and not our own. We are always in a process of growing into God’s purposes for us, but we also need to rest in His timing, knowing that He will establish us.

R&D *In what areas are you impatient with God’s timing in your life?*

Prayer: *Your timing is amazing, Lord; but it is always Your timing.*

Saturday, July 8

Read: 2 Samuel 6:1-11

The Ark of God

When most of us come to know Jesus as our Savior, we try to do so on our own terms. We desire the Lord’s presence in our lives and His blessing on our activities, but we have not yet made Him Lord and chosen to do all things His way and in obedience to Him. After all, we are serving Him and doing His work, aren’t we? So we expect Him to be pleased with us.

This was David’s mistake when he decided to honor God by bringing His presence in the form of the ark of the covenant to the capital city of Jerusalem. God had made it very clear in Numbers 4:15 that the Kohathites, of the Levite clan, were to carry the ark. When the Philistines had returned the ark some years earlier, they had transported it on a new cart, and David carelessly followed the same routine. In spite of all the celebration and the dancing, “The Lord’s anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act” (v.7), and the man died.

God is not inclined to excuse our sin because our intentions are good. As with David, the problem begins with our failure to be obedient at the beginning, and not at the point where we reach out to save the situation. Only when we totally commit our-

selves to Him and accept the “ark of His presence” in our lives are we in the place of Obed-edom where “the Lord blessed him and his entire household” (v.11).

R&D Have you completely surrendered your life to Jesus? Are you seeking in all things to serve him in his way? In what areas of your life are you still trying to have your own way?

Prayer: We have blind-spots, Lord, that hide from us not only our sinful tendencies but our unwillingness to submit fully to You. Heal us completely that we may serve You fully.

Sunday, July 9

Sabbath Time

And the angel said to him, “Dress yourself and put on your sandals.” And he did so, and he said to him, “Wrap your mantle around you and follow me.” Acts 12:8

When Saint Peter was brought out of prison, the iron gate opened of its own accord. That he could not open. But when he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, the door there did not open. He had to knock. Again, the chains fell from Peter, but he was told to put on his sandals: they did not put themselves on. God does not do for us what we can do for ourselves.

Monday, July 10

Read: 2 Samuel 7

Prophecy

David became uncomfortable because he resided in a beautiful palace and God, the true king of Israel, in a tent! That the ark of God needed an elegant house reflected the thinking of the time. The NIV notes state: “In the ideology of the ancient Near East the king’s possession of a palace was the chief symbolic indication of his status.” According to the pagan concept, the deity’s demands that followers provide his temple and follow cultic rituals were primary.

When David shared his discomfort with Nathan, the prophet returned with a surprising message from God. God hadn’t called David to build him a “house,” but to shepherd His people and fulfill His promise to establish them in His Promised Land. Then

to keep Israel in peace in “a home of their own,” God promised to establish an everlasting “house” for David. When the dynasty was firmly established with David’s son Solomon on the throne, then would be time to build God’s temple.

As the psalms show, David understood that this “everlasting covenant” was a prophecy that the Messiah would come from David’s royal line. Many prophets repeated this theme, and the fulfillment was Jesus, born 900 years later. God is faithful!

When we accept Jesus as Lord, we also become part of God’s prophetic word given three thousand years ago: “Your kingdom will endure forever before me” (v.16). How exciting that our obedience in serving Jesus makes us as much a fulfillment of God’s purposes on earth as David and all the “saints” of old.

R&D How much struggle would you have if God called you to stop building “your church” or “your work” and serve Him in some different way in His kingdom?

Prayer: Your plan for our lives always call for adjustments, Lord God, but Your plan is the only one that brings ultimate fulfillment.

Tuesday, July 11

Read: 2 Samuel 9:1-12

Covenant Keeping

Covenants have been a part of man’s relationships since before the beginning of history. God’s covenant with Noah following the flood was recorded in the ninth chapter of Genesis. In the fifteenth chapter the covenant with Moses was carried out according to what seems to have been an established ritual.

The covenant was usually instituted by the more powerful party, or at least by a peer. In the one between Jonathan and David, it appears that Jonathan, the crown prince, offered everything and David, a mere servant of the king, had nothing to give. Such an agreement meant that the men were now brothers, and all that one had belonged to the other. Indeed, in his lament, David called his friend “Jonathan, my brother” (2 Samuel 1:26).

Twenty years later, David fulfilled his promise when he sought out Jonathan’s crippled son, Mephibosheth, and restored

to him all his grandfather's estates. Since the common treatment of the offspring of former kings was to kill them to prevent any attempts to seize the throne, David's honoring of Mephibosheth by including him at his own table was another mark of his commitment to Jonathan.

In the covenant God gave the world through Jesus and his atonement, God indeed did give everything. All that is required of us to receive the kingdom for eternity is to give back to Him that which He has given us—ourselves—fallen and sinful though we are. We are covenant people, and it is only by His grace and love that we feed daily at the King's table.

R&D *What does it mean to you "to feed daily at the King's table?"*

Prayer: *You give us everything, Holy God, and all we have to give in return is our love and obedience.*

Wednesday, July 12

Read: 2 Samuel 11:1-5

Sinners All

David was a great biblical hero, but he was also a fallible human being just like us. The stories of God's mercy on David are a great encouragement and comfort to all His children when we really mess up our lives.

David's most remembered temptation seems ludicrous to us, since he already had seven wives and "more wives and concubines" (2 Samuel 5:13) after he came to Jerusalem, and the right to marry any unattached woman he chose. But he was smitten with Bathsheba, a married woman.

Recently, I was standing in line at the grocery, reading the headlines on the *National Enquirer* and *People* magazine. Each featured the picture of a well-known woman. Each had been having a public affair, and they were now divorcing their famous husbands. The comment quoted for both was, "But I'm in love."

David fell in the same way. He has sexual relations with Bathsheba, and she became pregnant. Both knew the Ten Commandments and flaunted the sixth one. Under the law, the

punishment was death. It was not always used, but certainly divorce and social ostracism could come upon Bathsheba.

In an attempt to cover his first sin, David began to commit others. Politicians and their ways have not changed in three thousand years; but to our joy, neither have the ways of God. When we insist on “doing our own thing,” He allows us the gift of free will and to suffer the consequences. Psalm 81 says: “So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices” (v.12).

R&D Is there present sin in your life that you need to redeem by confessing instead of trying to cover up?

Prayer: We are fallen creatures, Lord. Where would we be without the Cross?

Thursday, July 13

Read: 2 Samuel 11:6-24

Concealment

Matthew Henry says: “Much more attention is required to conceal sin than would have sufficed to prevent it... Adulteries have often occasioned murders, and one wickedness must be covered and secured with another.”

David called Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah the Hittite, back from the war, ostensibly to inquire about the battle. David was sure that Uriah would go home to have sexual relations with his wife, and all would be safe. But Uriah was a devoted soldier, one of “David’s mighty men,” one of “the thirty,” the bravest and strongest of all. The soldiers were under a vow to abstain from women during wartime, and Uriah’s loyalty to his God, the ark, and his comrades would not allow him to enjoy himself while they were fighting.

Uriah’s behavior was in great contrast to David’s disloyalty to his faithful servant and to his God. David then compounded his sin by instructing Joab, the army commander, to arrange to have Uriah killed in the battle.

We always have a choice. Many loving parents and young women have faced a similar choice when pregnancy occurred out of wedlock. Do we stop, confess our sins to God, and allow Him

to redeem the consequences? Or do we compound the sin by deception, denial, and even abortion? These are the hard places where God most blesses us if we submit to His mercy and trust His love and forgiveness in everything.

R&D Think about the last difficult decision you made. Would you choose differently if you could do it over again?

Prayer: You are gracious to forgive, Blessed Lord, but there are often consequences to our sins nonetheless.

Friday, July 14

Read: 2 Samuel 11:26-27, 12:1-14

Word of Truth

David was doubtless uneasy in his conscience; even the young child feels uncomfortable when he has done wrong and relieved when punished and forgiven. But any sin begins with self-deception, and we need others to tell us the truth.

My husband asked me to tell him when he is angry. I was amazed that this man who exhibits all the classic symptoms couldn't recognize his own anger. "No," he said, "I really do not realize I'm angry. Please tell me." We see another's sin more clearly than our own. Do we love them enough to tell them, and seek their insights for ourselves?

God sent Nathan the prophet, who related a parable to the king. David's heart was touched, and he judged that the rich man deserved death. Nathan said to David, "You are the man," and delivered God's message. David did deserve death for both adultery and murder, but he immediately confessed his sin and the Lord commuted his sentence. However, the consequences continued "because by doing this you have made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt" (v.14).

As Christians, what we do reflects not only on ourselves but causes others to judge God by our actions. Let us pray for the grace to be always faithful to the love and truth of Jesus.

R&D Do you have people who love you enough to be honest with you? Have you asked them to do so?

Prayer: *It is a privilege, Lord, to have a friend who loves us enough to help us become better.*

Saturday, July 15

Read: Psalm 51

An Honest Man

David was an honest man. He was able to look honestly at himself, and to admit both to himself and to God who he really was. There were no excuses, no justifying himself because he led such a good life otherwise (better than anyone he knew, probably), no attempts to cover his sin in all the ways we fallible humans try to hide from our true selves. He admitted: “Surely I was sinful at birth” (v.5).

We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners. In this greatest of the “penitential” psalms, David threw himself on the mercy of God in recognition that no matter what he has done to others, sin is always against God. It is only God who truly loves us and can “wash away all my iniquity” (v.2).

Because of my advanced age, I can look back on my formative years as a time very different from the time in which I now live. It is difficult to remember how different our attitudes were then. “Nice people” had only “nice” emotions; anger, hate, lust simply did not exist in my mother’s world. As a result, we were all fakes, and we rapidly learned never to admit our feelings to anybody, especially ourselves. Today, sin is unfortunately more public, but we are freed to be the people God Himself created us to be, even if the sin shows too. God knows us “in the inner parts;” who are we trying to fool?

R&D *What are the places in your life that you want to hide? Why?*

Prayer: *There is no way to hide from You, Lord; help us not to hide our failings from ourselves.*

But now that you have been set free from sin and you have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life. Romans 6:22

There is such a thing as clock-time, and there is spiritual value, which is above time and belongs to eternity. Life is to be estimated not according to its clock-time length, but according to its eternal value. One rich moment is better than many languid years.

Monday, July 17

Read: 2 Samuel 13:1-21

Greed

Absalom's story is one that has puzzled us through the centuries. The son of loving parents, he was given every advantage, but nothing was ever enough. His half-brother Amnon, the crown prince, was also one who took whatever he wanted, and that included raping Absalom's sister, the Princess Tamar.

King David's love for his children was genuine, but he failed to discipline them as he should. Out of David's weakness the consequences of his sin began to manifest themselves through his offspring. Because David ignored Amnon's crime, Absalom took personal revenge by having his brother killed. Judging by later actions, we assume that becoming crown prince himself was also in Absalom's mind.

Under Old Testament law, there was no provision for forgiving willful sin. But the shed blood of Jesus on the cross changed that. When we come to God in true repentance, our sins, of whatever nature, are completely washed away and our loving Father forgets them.

However, the natural consequences of sin still occur. The unwed mother still has her baby. Although God forgave David, the consequences remained a curse on his family.

Because of Jesus and God's provision of the New Testament, in our lives the consequences can also be redeemed. A curse can become the blessing which God uses to teach us many things which we could not learn otherwise. Many fruit of the Spirit, such as

patience and self-control, are forged in our character by such experiences.

R&D *What fruit has come in your life as a consequence of your mistakes?*

Prayer: *We are disciples who need to be disciplined, Lord, and You do not neglect to show us how!*

Tuesday, July 18

Read: 2 Samuel 13:23-39

Hospitality

As so often happens, when we choose one sin, we then fall into others as a result. Absalom deceived his father into allowing the crown prince to attend the sheepshearing, the first example of lack of honor for his father. Then the murder, which also broke an equally serious law in the Middle East culture: the law of hospitality.

Because the desert peoples lived in a place where no government existed to establish or enforce the law, their traditions acquired the binding force necessary for civilization to function. These traditions were considered inviolate, and the most sacred is still hospitality. Jamie Buckingham wrote: “Welcoming travelers is at the core of desert culture and is performed even if it means sharing the last piece of bread.... The host, once he has accepted a guest, feels obligated to protect him at all costs—even at his own peril.” This tradition dates back to Abraham and is demonstrated many times in the Old Testament. Absalom not only broke it but used the violation to arrange the murder of his brother.

The New Testament also stresses hospitality. Our daughter entertained eight foreign exchange students from our state university for Easter this year. They had been in the States four months, but this was their first time in an American home. They were thrilled to discover our traditions, and we shared Jesus with them in a natural way. Our loving Father certainly blesses us when we bless others by sharing His love through Christian hospitality.

R&D *What are some ways you can show hospitality to those who cannot repay you?*

Prayer: *Lord God, You welcome us with open arms; surely we can be guided accordingly.*

Wednesday, July 19

Read: 2 Samuel 14

Sowing and Reaping

Absalom fled to his grandfather Talmai, king of the city-state of Geshur. David's marriage to Talmai's daughter Maacah had been designed to secure an ally on the northern border of Israel. The family were Arameans, the same stock as Abraham but heathens who worshiped the Baals and Ashtoreth (fertility gods). Three years in this atmosphere solidified the sins of Absalom's heart.

With one dead and the other in exile, King David had lost both his oldest sons. When the wily Joab tricked him with a fictitious widow's plea, David allowed his son to return to Jerusalem, but did not accept him into the king's presence. This thwarted Absalom's plans and instead of being grateful, he became bitter and vindictive.

After two years, the king reinstated his son without justice and without repentance from Absalom. In so doing, he unwittingly set the stage for the further fulfillment of Nathan's prophecies.

Forgiveness is always required of us by the Lord; restoration is quite another matter. When a man (or woman) is returned to a position of power and responsibility without a period of deep repentance, healing and proving his change of heart, the results will be the same as they were for David: worse disaster the second time. God looks upon the heart. His concern is for our eternal souls, and He loves us enough to let the consequences continue to fall in around us until His work is accomplished and our hearts are changed.

R&D *What have been some of the consequences of "ignored sin" in your life? Did the sin recur with worse effect later?*

Prayer: *When you give us a "second chance," Lord, may we be grateful and act accordingly.*

Thursday, July 20

Read: 2 Samuel 15:1-12

Rebellion

Absalom lost no time assuming the role of heir apparent. He became the first Israelite leader to provide himself with a chariot and runners, a mark of worldly authority learned during his stay in Geshur. Prior to that, all the king's sons rode mules; poorer folks walked or rode a donkey if they were old or weak.

The guidelines for Israel's king had been given by Moses "that he may learn to revere the Lord his God...and not consider himself better than his brothers" (Deuteronomy 17:19-20). Absalom portrayed himself as "one of the boys" yet a strong man for justice and enforcement of the law, the lack of which he considered his father's great weakness.

Absalom then gave another party, this time at Hebron, the patriarchal city where David was crowned. There he had himself proclaimed king in open revolt against his father, in unwitting fulfillment of Nathan's prophecy to David: "Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you" (2 Samuel 12:11).

We live in an age where rebellion in teenagers is seen as a necessary stage in growing up. But God never views it as anything other than a curse with sinful causes and dire consequences.

Let us seek to keep such repentant hearts before the Lord that He may bless and protect our children. The greatest gift any child can have is the love of God manifested through praying parents who are themselves in obedience to their Father in heaven.

R&D What problems do you see in your own life which may cause problems for your children?

Prayer: Our greatest gift to the future, Lord, is the time we spend with our children.

Friday, July 21

Read: 2 Samuel 15:13-24

The True Servant

David's decision to flee Jerusalem typifies the spirit of the man. God had given the welfare of His people Israel into the hand

of the king, and David was greatly concerned that no harm should come to the people. A picture of the true servant, and a forerunner of the great Son of David's high priestly prayer as he was facing arrest and death: "Those whom you gave me out of the world...I protected them and kept them safe...none has been lost" (John 17:6, 12).

The king knew that Absalom's rebellion was a fulfillment of the word given earlier by the prophet Nathan: "Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own" (2 Samuel 12:10). As a result, David was not sure that God had not rejected him as king and was using Absalom's treachery to remove him from the throne.

David had always steadfastly refused to follow the evil ways of Saul's kingship by using his power to protect himself. "Though I constantly take my life in my hands, I will not forget your law" (Psalm 119:109). In this time of great temptation, David continued to adhere to God's way, and to submit himself to His will for David's life and for Israel.

R&D How would you react if you discovered one of your children had betrayed you in some way?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for faithful children who love You and follow the path You have for them.

Saturday, July 22

Read: Psalm 3

God as Shield

Psalm 3 has the notation that it was written "when he fled from his son Absalom," so we are privileged to look into David's heart under circumstances that might destroy most of us. He sets his problems before God, confident that He will be "a shield around me" (v.3), a metaphor used in the Old Testament to describe God as the covenant king who always defends us from our enemies.

David's childlike statement in verse 5 that he will sleep and wake again because the Lord protects him shows the beautiful peace that comes when we let Him who cares for the sparrow take

care of our worries. The same trust is expressed in verse 8 of the next psalm, and the two make a very comforting bedtime prayer.

David then cries, “Arise, O Lord!” This echoes the cry Moses used in the wilderness to inform the Israelite tribes when the cloud had moved and it was time to break camp: “May God arise, may his enemies be scattered: may his foes flee before him” (Psalm 68:1). Since the nations did “flee” because God traveled with Israel and protected them, David is voicing his faith that he and his family and troops will have the same covering. In these days of crisis, that cry of faith is the prayer we can use to claim God’s intervention when destructive forces of our world come against us and the Church.

R&D In what problem of your life have you been able to completely trust God?

Prayer: Trust in You is built, Lord God, on the basis of what You have done for us in the past. Thank You that we have reason for this trust.

Sunday, July 23

Sabbath Time

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.
John 3:19

If we are confronted with a beautiful picture or are allowed to hear noble music or come to the knowledge of some heroic act, our reaction to these things is really a blessing or a judgment. If we see nothing in them, we take nothing from their beauty, but they are our judgment. The light has come to us; we have preferred darkness, and the light condemns us.

Monday, July 24

Read: 2 Samuel 16:5-14, 19:18-23

Blessing and Cursing

David’s procession crossed the Kidron valley, as Jesus would also going to his passion. David was barefoot, a true mark of penance as anyone knows who has walked the sharp rocks of Israel’s foot paths. The people wept to see their beloved king in such distress, but one man vented his jealous anger over David’s succes-

sion to Saul's throne. Shimei, a Benjaminite of Saul's clan of Gera, screamed curses at the king. In our Christian community, we have a wise saying: "Vindictive people do foolish things." Shimei finally repented and confessed his guilt in cursing David. David had mercy and spared his life (19:19-20).

God promised Abraham and his descendants: "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse" (Genesis 12:3a). The ancient people took curses seriously, as an invective calling God to visit judgment on evil and to protect the helpless. From David's psalms we realize how often he called the wrath of God on his enemies the same way. "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord" (Romans 12:17). Jesus instead called us to forgive; we are always safe when we commit the outcome to God.

R&D Think of a stupid thing you have done because you had not forgiven a wrong.

Prayer: Help us to have compassion, Lord, on those who speak reckless and harmful words, even when it is we who do so.

Tuesday, July 25

Read: 2 Samuel 17:1-5, 23

Betrayal

Six-year-old Philip is having open-heart surgery. His parents are our longtime friends. We, our church, and many prayer groups are praying. Local church friends are caring for the other children, bringing in meals, and driving carpool. This is the normal pattern; we all expect to be a strong support in times of trauma.

Ahithophel was David's trusted friend and counselor. David and his court highly respected his wisdom. Ahithophel was also Bathsheba's grandfather, and probably felt David had betrayed and dishonored his family by committing adultery with her. That was no excuse, of course; friends forgive one another's weaknesses.

Robert P. Gordon says: "The news of Ahithophel's defection was a body blow: there was no one in the kingdom who could match his sagacity. Psalm 41:9 has traditionally been interpreted as referring to him and his treachery; in the New Testament it is

applied to the arch-traitor Judas.” In predicting his own betrayal, Jesus quoted: “He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me” (John 13:18).

Sharing of bread refers to the ancient covenant meal. These men were pledged to one another. Jesus spoke of Judas’ sharing the “new covenant in my blood” at the Last Supper, then going to betray him (Luke 20:20-21). When both men realized the consequences of their action, they took their own lives, the final betrayal of the trust God had given them.

R&D Are there times in your life when you have been betrayed? How did you feel? Did you get even?

Prayer: Lord, if there is anyone who believes I have betrayed them in any way, may they forgive me as I forgive anyone who may have done likewise to me.

Wednesday, July 26

Read: 2 Samuel 17:27-29

Royalty

David fled across the Jordan, then north to Mahanaim in the tribal lands of Gilead. This city had maintained loyalty to the house of Saul when Ish-bosheth made it his capital after his father’s defeat by the Philistines. It now served David in his flight from Absalom.

In David’s time armies traveled in extreme simplicity. Every man carried his weapons and little else; food was obtained from the surrounding countryside. David’s people were indeed dependent on the kindness of others.

The loyalty of David’s subjects in Trans-jordan shows God returning kindness to us by kindness done to others. Ammon was a vassal state to the south, and Shobi a member of that royal family loyal to the king. Makir had befriended Mephibosheth and must have admired David’s honoring his covenant with Jonathan’s son. Barzillai supported his king and received David’s lifelong gratitude in return.

God requires the same loyalty of us to His “anointed ones,” the chosen authorities He has given us. The Church is greatly

weakened if we do not support those who “keep watch over you as men who must give an account” (Hebrews 13:17). Our call is to provide from our blessings for those who “become hungry and tired and thirsty in the desert” (v.29).

R&D *What does loyalty mean to you in your family and relationships? Why do you feel it is important?*

Prayer: *In times of need, what do we have other than You, Lord, and one another?*

Thursday, July 27

Read: 2 Samuel 18:1-6

A Father's Love

When David realized that Absalom's forces had crossed the Jordan to pursue him to the death, his old battle cunning reasserted itself. He planned to lead the troops himself, but his men saw the fallacy in that, and he submitted to their advice. It is a great man who can hear wisdom through his subordinates. If Absalom had not been so headstrong and proud, the outcome might have been very different.

Here is a fine example of Samuel's description of David, “The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14). Absalom's purpose was not just to usurp the throne, but his primary reason for coming into Gilead was to kill his father. David's primary concern was to spare his son's life, and his parting instructions to his men were: “Be gentle with the young man Absalom for my sake” (v.5).

What a picture of the father-heart of God, who is always gentle with us even when He must allow us to suffer for our own choices. And the amazing love of Jesus on the cross, when in agony his concern was not for himself but in petitioning his Father to spare those who did not understand the sin they committed. In this age of dysfunctional families, we of the Church need to pray that our heavenly Father will restore true fatherhood to the men of our generation.

R&D *How does David's example of “true fatherhood” apply in the life of the Church?*

Prayer: *There is no characteristic of fatherhood that matches Yours, Lord God, like true love of our children.*

Friday, July 28

Read: 2 Samuel 18:6-16

Fighting God

When the battle ensued, David's men were outnumbered at least two to one, and probably the percentage was much higher. But the "army of Israel" discovered that no advantage counts when God is against you. "The forest claimed more lives that day than the sword" (v.8), including the oak which caught Absalom and held him helpless. "Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Deuteronomy 21:23); thus ended the ambitions of the man who sought to usurp the place God had anointed to another.

When we were new Christians, my husband and I helped found a New Testament-type church. We had more zeal than wisdom, but we worked very hard to bring our vision to pass. After a few years, some of us were led into a closer-knit commitment to one another, while our pastor felt strongly about continuing the status quo. We realized that to stay and continue our commitment would split the small church, so we quietly left.

But we had been very hurt in the process, and our feelings would have caused us to speak critically of the church. However, a wise friend cautioned us. "If you talk to outsiders about that ministry, you are wounding the Body of Christ himself, and that is extremely hurtful to God." By His pure grace, we said nothing, and the Lord blessed that obedience over and over in all our lives.

R&D *Can you name a time when a difference of opinion made a breach in your church? How could the matter have been better handled?*

Prayer: *Help us always to look past our personal hurts, Lord, if voicing them would reflect badly on Your Church.*

Saturday, July 29

Read: 2 Samuel 24:1-24

Centering

God was angry at Israel. David decided to take a census. We don't know why this displeased God, but against Joab's advice, he was sent "from Dan to Beersheba" to count the fighting men. When Joab returned, David realized his mistake.

When David began to repent, Gad the prophet came with a choice from God: famine, war, or plague. David chose "the hands of the Lord" rather than "the hands of men" (v.14). God sent a plague "from Dan to Beersheba," and 70,000 died.

David displayed the heart of a true shepherd-king, begging God to let His hand fall on David and his family, and to spare "the sheep." This was a foreshadowing of Jesus, taking our sins on the cross and dying for us, and it touched the heart of God. David was sent to the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite to make a sacrifice, and the plague stopped.

When you visit Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, you'll find that threshing floor under the Muslim "Dome of the Rock." On top of Mount Moriah, it's also the place where God stayed the hand of Abraham as he prepared to sacrifice Isaac. Above it hangs a forged chain marking "the Center of the World."

But when we give our lives to Jesus, then he becomes the center of our world. As we center in him, we have his peace and no need to run take a census to make ourselves feel important.

R&D What is a "true shepherd's heart"? What needs to change in your church to manifest the "good shepherd" image of Jesus?

Prayer: Lord, we are but sheep so easily led astray. Thank You that You love us nonetheless and always want us back in the Your fold.

Sunday, July 30

Sabbath Time

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 1 Peter 2:21

Never judge God by suffering, but judge suffering by the Cross.



Job

Monday, July 31

Read: Job 1:1-12

Introduction

Studying Job, as we will these next 12 lessons, means entering into a strange debate waged through questions and insults. That debate isn't about the problem of evil, as many suppose, but about the problem of faith. In a world where some have wealth and many don't, where some have troubles all the time and others only occasionally, how does faith come to be? What is faith's true grounding?

God held up Job as a model for all people of faith. But knowing that Job was a wealthy man, Satan asks the Lord, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his family and all that he has, on every side?" Is faith easy for Job because he is rich and safe? If Job lost his prosperity, would he still be "blameless and upright"?

That's a critical question for all people, but especially for us who live in this prosperous land. If we were starving like Somalians, would we still believe? To what extent does our faith depend on clean, attractive church buildings, leisure time to attend church and do volunteer work, sufficient wealth to hire competent church staff, positive self-esteem and supportive comrades, and hospitals to do our dying in?

Look at how church members are undone by relatively trivial matters like adding a third service or repainting a church wall. People walk away from the Body of Christ because a hospital call didn't get made promptly. Could the faith of many modern Christians survive if the "fence" of comfort and privilege were removed?

Satan, you see, asked the right question. For the test of faith, like the test of a marriage, is not how faith handles prosperity, health, and “better,” but how it handles adversity, sickness, and “worse.”

R&D Could my faith survive if the “fence” of comfort and privilege—to the extent I have such a fence—were removed? Explain.

Prayer: We learn from times of testing, Lord; help us to understand them as such, to learn from them, and to let our faith shine through them.

Tuesday, August 1

Read: Job 3:11-26

Why?

God tests Job’s faith in a horrible way. He allows Satan to destroy Job’s livestock, his servants, his children, even the skin on Job’s body. His wife begins to mock him for clinging to God.

As he sits in the ashes, Job begins to ask, “Why?” Why has he been born? Why has he not been granted respite in the grave, where “prisoners are at ease” and “slaves are free from their masters”? Why does God give light to the miserable and life to the bitter? Why not just let them die?

Job’s “why?” isn’t the “why?” that I often hear people ask from within the fence of comfort, privilege, and good health, namely, why have troubles come? Job doesn’t seem to consider his troubles a betrayal. “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” he asks his wife (2:10). Job’s “why?” is more like that of someone contemplating suicide. It’s despair that goes beyond surprise over bad fortune; it’s despair over life’s worth.

I think of the hospital room where a friend lies dying. People visit that room, see the tubes and the morphine, experience the semi-stupor, and ask, “Why?” What’s the point of life when troubles reach this stage? Sometimes we leave the room admiring life’s tenacity. Other times we wish he’d just let go. We’re confused, as Job was confused, about the purpose of living once “trouble comes.”

Many respond to this despair by remembering better times. On their death beds, they pursue visions of youth, vitality, adventures—in other words, they answer despair by recalling the days when they were “fenced in” and safe. Hence the genius of Satan’s challenge: Is a faith grounded in prosperity and safety worth anything? What happens to the person who never knew good times? Or the person whose troubles are so great that they overwhelm the memory of good times? Is there nothing for their despair?

Should my friend rejoice over his 57 years of marriage to a good wife, or see God in her today as she spoons pureed beans into his mouth?

R&D *How do I explain tragedy to my non-Christian friends?*

Prayer: *Lord God, You bless us and You test us; it is all part of life in Christ. It is a glorious life.*

Wednesday, August 2

Read: Job 4:1-11

“Friends”

As Job wrestles with his suffering, three friends appear. At first, they seem sympathetic, but soon their words turn sharp, as they ask the questions that people often feel but don’t always voice.

“Think now,” says Eliphaz the Temanite, “who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off?” That is to say, if you’re suffering, you must be a sinner. For suffering is a sign of sin. The fool is killed by his own “vexation” and the simple by his own “jealousy” (5:2). Misery, says Eliphaz, is not a condition that springs from “earth” or “ground,” but from the sinful nature of humankind. “Human beings are born to trouble just as sparks fly upward” (5:7).

The answer to suffering, says Job’s friend, is to “seek God” and to find in suffering a pathway to God’s “discipline” (5:8-17). Or as similar friends say in many a funeral parlor, “You’ll grow from this pain.”

Eliphaz’ words are confusing. On the one hand, they seem cold comfort. On the other hand, they sound like common wisdom. When a tragic accident hits, among the first questions is,

“What did I do wrong that I should deserve this?” Outcomes in life, people seem to believe, follow strict laws of cause-and-effect. We are more comfortable interpreting suffering as proof of sin than we are acknowledging that we live on the brink of chaos. Thus, we prefer to see some plan, maybe even a divine plan, in the car that suddenly hits a child, rather than accept a tragedy without cause.

That, I think, explains the emptiness of Eliphaz’ callous assurance that Job’s suffering will draw him closer to God. His assurances sound glib, designed to put Job’s pain at a distance, rather than express true sympathy.

R&D *Why do we seek to find a reason for another person’s suffering?*

Prayer: *Some things are better left unsaid; Lord, help me remember not to say them.*

Thursday, August 3

Read: Job 7:17-21

Relief Sought

His “vexation” mounting (6:2), Job rails against God. Must God visit every morning, test every moment? “Will you not look away from me for a while?” (7:18-19). Then he asks the question many ask when they blame God for their troubles: “Why have you made me your target? Why have I become a burden to you? Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity?” In his agony, Job evidently accepts Eliphaz’ argument that suffering is punishment for sin. He then wonders why God doesn’t just forgive his sins. Isn’t it God’s nature to forgive sins? Why continue to punish Job?

As in any good drama, the reader knows something the main character doesn’t know. In this case, we know that God’s forgiving nature isn’t the issue here. Job’s faith is under scrutiny, not God’s grace. We recognize, therefore, that challenging God to fulfill His revealed identity is a stage in the testing of faith. Can Job believe in God only if God behaves consistently? Does Job’s faith require God to follow the script that Job knows? Is there room for God to do a new thing?

This, of course, would become the issue for the Pharisees when Jesus appeared. They were invested in God's behaving a certain way—a way, as it happened, that they had not only adapted to but prospered under. When Jesus revealed a different dimension of God's nature, the Pharisees felt threatened.

In our day, God's otherness continues to baffle us. We think we have God figured out—that is, under control—but then God does something surprising. We're forced to accept that our call isn't to judge God, but to listen to God and to follow His lead.

R&D *What "new thing" has God surprised you with recently?*

Prayer: *The older we get the less we like change. Lord, please make us more adaptable. You know what's going on; we don't. Help us to accept that and to love You in all situations.*

Friday, August 4

Read: Job 9:1-20

Blame

Job's "friends" continue to assault him. Bildad accuses Job's sons of sinning. Why else would they have suffered? "Does God pervert justice?" asks Bildad. "If your children sinned against him, he delivered them into the power of their transgression" (8:3-4).

Job responds by noting the imbalance of power between God and humankind. With God so large—able to remove mountains, trample the waves, and place the stars—"how can a mortal be just before God?" God, says Job, "is not a mortal as I am, that I might answer him, that we should come to trial together. There is no umpire between us." Like a small child before a bully, humans are left to fend for themselves. Thus, if Job's sufferings are "a contest of strength," then God will inevitably win. If his sufferings are "a matter of justice," then courtroom odds are stacked.

Talk of justice, therefore, is pointless. Job's innocence counts for little. What matters is God's size. Overwhelmed by God, Job turns against himself. "I loathe my life," he says. If God "destroys both the blameless and the wicked," what's the point?

The problem of faith becomes more complex. God's otherness, God's majesty and glory, God's largeness can inspire awe or

they can just as easily inspire feelings of smallness, worthlessness and despair. In peaceful times, a large father-like God can seem reassuring. But in suffering, that same father-like God can seem oppressive. In happy times, the omnipotence commonly assigned to God can seem comforting, a sign of God's inherent justness, perhaps. But when night comes, that same omnipotence becomes horrifying. If Dad can turn out the light, he can also take away life. If God causes all things, then I must deserve this pain.

Faith, then, must not only believe in God, but wade through the shifting sands of life and find new reason to believe when yesterday's reasons lose their power. Hence, the many moods displayed by Jesus. A gentle shepherd one moment, a vengeful prophet the next; patient with Peter, then impatient; violent against some sinners, loving with others—Jesus revealed a fullness of God's nature that disciples must know in order to live fully themselves.

R&D When have "yesterday's reasons" for believing in God become inadequate for my situation today?

Prayer: Faith is built on trust; and, despite personal setbacks, You, Lord God, continually demonstrate why we should trust in You, if we have the "eyes to see."

Saturday, August 5

Read: Job 10:1-22

Job's Attack

In his "loathing" of life, Job attacks God's role as creator. Does God find some perverse "good" in despising a creature He made? Surely God sees Job's innocence. Why, then, does He search for sin in Job? Why does He turn to dust the one He fashioned? Having breathed life into Job, why does God hunt him down? Finally, in an outburst of despair, Job cries, "Why did you bring me forth from the womb? Would that I had died before any eye had seen me." If this is the best his creator can do, then Job would rather go quickly "to the land of gloom and deep darkness, the land of gloom and chaos, where light is like darkness."

Job's cry of despair—"I loathe my life"—signals a crisis of faith. When one's life turns sour, life itself can seem loathsome

and God a threat. Look at how many teenagers confront their first grown-up angst and turn immediately to suicide. Look at the self-destruction of alcoholics or food addicts, who are literally trying to kill themselves. Look at the suicidal rage of oppressed peoples, who willfully turn their homelands into “gloom and chaos.” In the absence of faith, love of life may be a luxury that only the contented and well-fed can afford.

The issue, of course, is faith. Job’s cry isn’t for a return to wealth and health. His cry is for a God he can believe in. Who needs a God who hunts down an innocent man? If that’s all God is, Job would rather be left alone “to find a little comfort” on his own.

Yes, there’s self-pity in this cry. But there’s also a cry for help that speaks to us as church leaders and as Christians in a troubled world. Our ministry to the dying, for example, isn’t to hold out an illusion of health’s return, but to strengthen their faith so that, in death, they feel treasured by God, not abandoned. Our ministry to the angst-ridden teenager or the despairing alcoholic is to help them find God, who alone can bring order out of chaos and make life worth living.

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

Prayer: *Lord, may we be more sensitive to the needs of those around us. And, if what is missing in their lives is that they do not know you, Lord Jesus, may we lead them to you.*

Sunday, August 6

Sabbath Time

When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe and said, “Truly this was the Son of God!” Matthew 27:54

It was not just in spite of his distresses and difficulties that the Divine Master learned obedience and offered the perfect Sacrifice for us all, but through them. Hate brought him thorns and he turned them into the Crown of Life, and the worst day in his life’s experience, the Friday that brought him murder and a death in the dark, he changed into the best day in his love’s expression, so that we call it Good Friday.

Read: Psalm 99

The Transfiguration

As we reflect on the glory of Christ's Transfiguration (a Feast Day celebrated yesterday by many denominations), our reading is one of the lessons assigned for that occasion. It has to do with the holiness, the "otherness" of God.

It is difficult to come to a clear understanding of what true holiness means. We look at ourselves and see unholiness. Yet, in a sense that is the best way we can understand holiness, for God is just what we are not! That is why the psalmist, in thinking of the mystery of God's holiness, uses terms like "tremble," "quake" and "thy great and terrible name." Peter, James and John must have had feelings of this sort as they experienced the mystery of Christ's Transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36).

The psalmist, having spoken of God in fearful terms, now (v.4) mentions His justice and righteousness. Charles Colson, in his book *The Body*, deals specifically with this subject. He says that "the biblical theme is consistent from Genesis to Revelation." What the Old Testament anticipated as justice, called forth by the Law and the Prophets, is fulfilled in the New Testament through Jesus Christ. The nature of the justice and righteousness of God is such that, although we could never attain to its demands by our own effort, we can through faith in Jesus. This was Martin Luther's great discovery that changed the world: "Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith."

In retrospect, we can see that perhaps that was the message of the Transfiguration, in which the Law (Moses), the Prophets (Elijah), and grace, mercy, and faith (Jesus) meet together.

R&D *What does the Transfiguration mean to you?*

Prayer: *It is by grace we are saved, Lord God, and for that we can be eternally grateful.*

Read: Job 13:1-28

Justice Demanded

When another “friend” urges Job to direct his heart rightly, to lift up an unblemished face to God and to forget his misery, Job responds angrily. Ask any living creature, he says, “Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?” If God has caused his suffering, why should Job raise his face to God? If suffering came despite Job’s innocence, why cleanse his face? And how can Job forget his misery when his friends’ mockery keeps his pain ever keen?

Job then moves from anger to confrontation. Yes, he will lift his face to God, but not in beseeching. Rather than beg forgiveness for sins never committed, Job wants to argue his case before God. Even though God has all power and likely will “kill” him for challenging, “I will defend my ways to his face,” says Job. “This will be my salvation, that the godless shall not come before him.” If Job can show his innocence, surely God will be just enough to grant him fair hearing. Job will demand that God enumerate his iniquities. “Make me know my transgression and my sin. Why do you hide your face, and count me as your enemy?”

Hear the tension: Zophar the Naamathite urges passivity and resignation in the face of God. Forget justice, is his counsel, and just do what it takes to earn God’s favor. Job says, “No, I want to argue with God, I want justice, I want to see God’s face and force him to reply, even if that reply is further punishment.”

At first, it sounds as if Zophar is more respectful of God, with his bowing before God’s “many-sided” wisdom (11:6). But put alongside Job’s demand that God be just, Zophar’s passivity sounds like fear. It sounds like the pastel phrases that “friends” murmur in funeral homes: “Now dear, this will pass, don’t be upset.” It is Job who gives voice to the rage of a grieving widow. It is Job who takes God seriously enough to *question* God and to demand that *God be God*, not some fickle monster. It is Job who takes his life and his innocence seriously enough to want a hearing before God. In the end, it is Job who shows the gutsy faith in God

that marked Abraham and Moses when they argued and bargained with God.

R&D *Reflect upon the last argument you had with God.*

Prayer: *Lord, You do want honesty in our prayers.*

Wednesday, August 9

Read: Job 19:13-27

Statement of Faith

Eliphaz continues to insist on Job's guilt (chapter 15). Job's weariness and despair mount. "Surely now God has worn me out," says Job. "My spirit is broken, my days are extinct."

With his world turned upside down, shall Job look to Sheol as his home? Will eternal torment be his parent? "Where then is my hope?" he cries. "Who will see my hope?"

Forget about hope, replies Bildad (chapter 18). In death, "surely the light of the wicked is put out." Having sinned his way into death, Job faces nothing but "calamity." His body will decay and his memory perish from the earth. "Such are the dwellings of the ungodly, such is the place of those who do not know God."

After protesting their refusal to consider his innocence, Job makes the statement of faith that anchors our Christian response to death: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another" (19:25-27).

A recent illness in my church touched me deeply. A friend literally wasted away with cancer. His family and friends stood by helplessly. At some point, we stopped hoping for recovery and began anticipating death. Our faith shifted from medicine to God.

At some points in life, you see, logic fails, and chasing reasons for suffering is pointless. We stop begging reluctant doctors for medical details. We stop looking for connections between a man's manner of living and the fact of his dying. What comfort comes from figuring it out? Death still looms. All we hope for is a calm acceptance of dying. We hope that, through the fog of pain-killers, our loved one arrives at Job's faith: I know my Redeemer

lives, even though I die. I know I will see him, even though I pass from earthly sight. I know he will greet me whole, even though my body decay.

My friend reached this stage in the quiet of early morning and allowed himself to die. When I led his body down the aisle, I read Job's words and found them comforting.

R&D *What comfort is there in death?*

Prayer: *In spite of the pain of death, Lord God, those who have given their lives to Christ have no reason to fear the results. We will be with You forever.*

Thursday, August 10

Read: Job 21:1-16

Milestones

“Why,” asks Job, “do the wicked live on, reach old age, and grow mighty in power?” Their homes seem “safe from fear,” their livestock productive, their children happy, their days prosperous. They reject God and believe “their prosperity (is) indeed their own achievement.” Why is their lamp never put out? If God is angry about something, why does He not “distribute” pain to the wicked, as well as to a righteous man like Job? Saying that “God stores up their iniquity for their children” means nothing. Their own eyes should see their destruction, if God's justice means anything.

It's the problem of fairness. Deep down, Job believes that virtue will be rewarded and iniquity punished, all in a way that he will see. But the evidence is contrary. What gives?

As always in Job's journey, his questions reveal critical milestones on the path to faith. First, long life, happy children, and prosperity might not prove anything except good luck. Take, for example, the good fortune of being born in America, rather than in Somalia. Can anyone take credit for that luck or prove God by it?

Second, our need to see proof of God's justice might not be a need that God fulfills. A decision for God can't arise from amassing evidence. Faith isn't a matter of proofs, especially proofs

by earthly measures such as prosperity. Faith is a decision *despite* the evidence, not because of it.

Third, God's fairness isn't subject to our standards. God's use of the Babylonians to teach Israel a lesson proceeded on a course quite disconcerting to the pious. Jesus' decision to accept defeat was appalling to his friends.

Finally, God's time is quite different from ours. The rich man of Jesus' parable (Luke 16:19-31) probably measured his days the way we do: by pleasures of the moment. But in the fullness of God's time, he came to his just reward, as did the beggar Lazarus. In the end, Job would have been pleased.

R&D *A Christian was wearing a T-shirt that said, "Nothing is fair." Explain.*

Prayer: *In expressing ourselves about any unhappiness we may feel, Lord God, may our focus be on Your love of us and not our immediate pains or desires.*

Friday, August 11

Read: Job 28:12-28

In Search of Wisdom

"Where shall wisdom be found?" asks Job. "And where is the place of understanding?" With skill and experience, humans can search for precious metals and find them. They know how to dig shafts, push through the "flinty rock," conquer mountains and bring the "hidden things...to light." But finding wisdom seems beyond reach. We cannot dig mines for it or buy it for gold. Wisdom is "hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air."

The connection between this complaint and Job's previous discourses is unclear. Up to now, Job hasn't exactly been looking for wisdom, but for the reasons behind his suffering. But both searches lead to the same place: God alone "understands the way." In his search for wisdom, Job must accept that only God "knows its place. For he looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens." When He created all things, "then he saw (wisdom) and declared it; he established it, and searched it out." That

will be God's answer to Job's persistent quest for the reason behind his suffering. "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" God will ask Job (38:4). In other words, our desire to know the whys of life won't lead us to wisdom or to faith.

What will? "God said to humankind, 'Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.'" Having suggested a wisdom that transcends the human realm and cannot be found except by God, Job ends up pointing to human experience and saying that here, in the way we approach God, in the way we pour out our lives, in our choices between good and evil—here is where we will find wisdom.

Jesus offered this same resolution. He acknowledged a God who was before time, but then said the way to reach this God was to follow His Son—the way that leads, through obedience and self-discipline, to suffering and servanthood. Truth isn't a speculative exercise, but a discovery gained through Christ-like servanthood. For both Job and Jesus, the call is to action.

R&D *How do we gain wisdom?*

Prayer: *Grant us the wisdom, Holy God, to do the work You have given us to do.*

Saturday, August 12

Read: Job 38:1-18

God Answers

When God finally answers Job's torrent of words—from his righteous indignation to his whining—God shatters Job's self-obsession. Rather than offer Job the explanation he seeks, rather than justify divine behavior, God says to put aside "words without knowledge...gird up your loins like a man," and let's talk.

"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" God asks. If your wisdom demands a world that meets your standards of order and justice, then "surely you know" how creation in its entirety works. But did you "shut in the sea," or "command the morning," or give birth to rain, or provide food for the hungry raven, or impel the wild ox? "Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes its nest on high?"

Look beyond your own wisdom, God is saying, and search deeper mysteries than this momentary suffering whose unfairness appalls you. “Will you even put me in the wrong?” asks God. “Will you condemn me that you may be justified?” (40:8). Is your search for order and control so great that you will demean the very God whose justice you supposedly trumpet? Are you that strong? “Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?” No, only God can master primal forces like Behemoth or Leviathan.

God’s answer goes beyond the parental voice crying, “How dare you question me!” God is saying that creation proceeds in ways that God laid out, and while we might wish for different forms or outcomes, we aren’t God. If God chooses “to bring rain on a land where no one lives” and to grow flowers in the desert (38:26), so be it. That’s God’s business.

In a world where Job’s suffering is now shared by whole nations and races and even the most comfortable life cannot escape cancer’s ravages, we, too, demand reasons—as if having reasons would make pain go away. That is playing God. When we confront the essential chaos of life and demand, whether in rage or in cowering, to know why, when we protest the apparent injustice befalling us, we are putting ourselves in God’s place. There must be a better response to suffering than to challenge pain’s right to exist.

R&D How does the picture of God revealed in the book of Job fit with the God of your understanding?

Prayer: In reflecting on this study of Job, Lord God, help us to stay focused on its purpose—faith in God regardless of what is going on in our lives—and not get lost in the details.

Sunday, August 13

Sabbath Time

“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.” Matthew 6:33

Faith in God will be shown by claiming the whole of life, science, labor, art, sex, everything, as God’s kingdom. The Church must claim the world, for the kingdom of God will only come when the Church and the world are one.

Read: Job 42:1-17

Drama Ends

The drama ends swiftly. Under the weight of God's questioning, Job puts aside his indignation and whining and accepts that God's purposes cannot be "thwarted." "I have uttered what I did not understand," says Job, "things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."

"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear," says Job, "but now my eye sees you." Thus is Job's problem of faith resolved. Not by more words, more reports about God, but by experiencing or "seeing" God. What did Job see? All truth, all wisdom? No, what Job saw was God caring enough for him to argue with him. Job's path to faith, it turns out, was the very act of questioning—and of listening. Job demanded of God, argued with God, accepted chastisement from God, bore God's questions. At first he blustered, but in the end he also listened. That entire experience, it seems to me, took Job from a faith based on ancient *words about* God to a faith founded on a living *encounter with* God.

The key wasn't passive resignation. Faith isn't that easy; we can't just fall flat before God and consider our faith-work done. Job did the harder work of probing and protesting, demanding, in effect, that God take him seriously and invite Job into the mysteries.

That was the faith that God then rewarded. First, God chastised Job's three "friends" for their empty and self-serving words. God required them to make an offering to Job and ask him to be their intercessor. Then, God restored Job's fortunes twofold and enabled him to live a prosperous and serene life. Job's message to us? In an age of abiding passivity—passive entertainment, passive politics, consumer religion, a prevailing feeling of powerlessness—Job's experience says to talk back, to argue with God, to engage God, to demand that God lead us beyond our ignorance. And, by extension, to engage the world, engage others, break out of passivity. Job never once gave in and confessed unworthiness just to

make peace. He took himself and God more seriously than that. So should we all.

R&D *In what ways have you confronted God, and what were the results?*

Prayer: *You are an accessible God, for which we can be eternally grateful.*



The Epistles of Peter

Tuesday, August 15

Introduction

Concerning the First Epistle of Peter, the traditional view that the author was the apostle Peter is still widely held among scholars today, though some have questioned it. The letter reveals Peter, the fisherman, as a practical adviser of humble followers of Jesus rather than as a learned theologian. He was writing to Christians who had encountered hostility and persecution for their faith. He reminds them that Christ was also rejected, but that the ultimate result of his suffering was glory and victory. He brings them the simple message that, by courageously following Christ's example, they will share in the blessings of his glorious victory.

The Second Epistle is a very short letter, with some passages quite similar to 1 Peter and others significantly different from it. The style is different from the First Epistle, leading to the speculation that, if Peter was the author, he had a different interpreter or secretary. The document is somewhat awkwardly composed, with uncommon words being used in places where common ones would have served better. For these and other reasons, there is dispute whether the apostle Peter was the author of 2 Peter.

The Second Epistle was apparently written during a time of threatening heresies, and urges Christians to hold onto the truth that they know. The letter begins and ends with the exhortation to grow in grace and knowledge.

R&D From what you know of Peter from the Gospel accounts, what kind of letter would you expect him to write?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for choosing Peter; he so often reminds us of ourselves!

Read: 1 Peter 1:1-12

Trials

In this wonderful opening of First Peter there is much to reflect upon. Perhaps we can do no better for a start than to consider the writer himself. The Gospels present Peter as forthright and impetuous. There was this thing about his foot: he'd stride forward with it, and then somehow manage to put it in his mouth, so to speak. Jesus must have felt frustrated by Peter's lack of understanding at times, yet saw in him the foundation of the future apostolic Church.

Verses 6-7 speak of "trials of many kinds." Certainly, Peter had experienced these. Probably the most painful one was in the high priest's courtyard the night Jesus was arrested, when Peter's heroic resolve was shattered, and he denied Jesus three times. We can hardly imagine how dark that first Good Friday was for Peter, when his own shame and guilt were added to his grief over Jesus' crucifixion and death. The severest trials are those which come from the heart and soul.

Earlier, in verse 3, the epistle speaks of "new birth into a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." The Church rightly celebrates her greatest feast on Easter Day, and every Sunday week by week is a reminder of that "living hope." Yet the time of that resurrection within each of us cannot be exactly defined by the calendar. Even after Jesus had been raised from the dead Peter walked in darkness until he knew that he had been forgiven and restored to the favor of his Lord. Only then was he able to fulfill his apostolic vocation.

R&D Consider a particular trial in your life and how God has brought you through it.

Prayer: Thank You, Father, that we have a "living hope" within us by the presence of Your Holy Spirit.

Read: 1 Peter 1:13-25

Self-Control

How far should one go in self-control? There are two extremes to avoid. One is perfectionism. The author Taylor Caldwell gives this an amusing twist: On a certain day when she was seven years old she determined to be perfect. By the end of the day her family was begging her to stop being perfect and just be herself. She was fortunate to have realized early in life the failure of that kind of experiment. Some people have grown up, reached old age, and died with a standard of behavior that doesn't allow for human frailty or recreation or laughter.

The other is permissiveness. In the musical *West Side Story* some youthful gang members explain as if to a police officer how social pressures and such have made them what they are. It's an amusing number, but death by violence soon takes center stage. Without a sense of personal accountability and morality, individuals and societies can only come to grief.

Peter had learned the value of self-control. He had had to struggle with his impetuosity, his tendency to speak and act without thinking, and the struggle was still going on. But he also knew now that the business of making Peter truly Peter was finally in the hands of God who had revealed Himself in Jesus. The price of Peter's liberation and ours "was paid in precious blood, as it were of a lamb without mark or blemish—the blood of Christ." Because Jesus had accepted death for him, Peter was able to grow in his ministry, empowered by the Holy Spirit. He didn't have to try to do it by himself; he knew that Jesus was with and within him on the way. And it was true for those to whom he originally wrote this letter, and it is true for us today.

R&D What is an area of your life which you have found difficult to master? In what area do you feel a need for discipline or self-control?

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to have self-control, but to keep it in balance.

Read: 1 Peter 2:4-10

The Laity

In verse 10 “the people of God” are, in the original Greek of the New Testament, the *laos theou*. From this comes our word “laity” with its adjective “lay.” Unfortunately, these words have suffered decline over the centuries. As the clergy assumed more power in the Church’s structure, the laity receded into the background and, for the most part, had no voice in important Church matters. This has carried over into the secular world: for example, a legal layman has some knowledge of law, but doesn’t have professional expertise in it, and so any advice he gives is suspect.

The Church has been paying a price for this neglect of the whole people of God. It has been a struggle to involve the laity in the broader ministrations of the congregation. The pastor is assumed to have the sole charge of spiritual and pastoral concerns. The situation is starting to improve, especially where clergy are willing to recognize the pastoral gifts of others in their congregations. But for a long time, the laity were passive recipients of the ministrations of the clergy.

Without denying the importance of holy orders and of the clergy as “stewards of the mysteries of Christ,” we need to affirm baptism, not ordination, as the primary sacrament of ministry. And it would help to see the clergy as having a role *within* and not apart from the order of the laity.

This passage shows that Peter had a very high regard for the *laos theou*. So should we.

R&D *What is your vocation as a lay member of the Church?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, if we are to be your people in the world today we need to understand that we are equipped with gifts of the Holy Spirit to do what you did when you were on earth. Because too many don't realize this, we fail truly to be the laos theou.*

Saturday, August 19

Read: 1 Peter 2:13-17

Law and Politics

“Let reverence for the laws...become the political religion of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, of all sexes and tongues, colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.”

Some might object to that religious imagery in connection with civil laws. The speaker was 28 years old; perhaps he had gotten a bit carried away with eloquent idealism? But the point of his address was this: without reverence for the law American society would disintegrate. He cited recent examples of mob “justice.” However strong the provocation, he said, no mob has the right to take justice into its own hands.

Twenty centuries earlier, Jesus has been cruelly executed under Roman law. The Church was in a dangerous position because she would not offer worship to the emperor. Before long Peter himself would be nailed to a cross. Yet he taught an attitude of reverential submission to the Roman sovereign and system of government. He had learned that Christ’s kingdom would not be achieved by political violence. And is it not significant that within a few centuries Rome became largely Christian?

Another lesson we may learn from this is that politics is a Christian vocation. We pray in our churches for government leaders and magistrates. We need to teach our children that to govern others Christianly is a very high calling, no matter how far some of our representatives and officials have fallen short of this.

R&D *How do you see your duty as a citizen and a Christian?*

Prayer: *Help us to be good citizens, Lord Christ, as examples of our faith in you.*

Sunday, August 20

Sabbath Time

“Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” Mark 10:15

“The kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field.”
What a lot of things the kingdom of heaven is like—a grain of

mustard seed, a net cast into the sea, leaven in a loaf, treasure in a field—all very simple and close at hand.

Monday, August 21

Read: 1 Peter 2:18—3:7

Obedience

This passage considers obedience relating to servants and to Christian marriage.

Servants included slaves. The Bible does not support slavery. The Exodus is the best known and most dramatic account of slave liberation in history, and struck a responsive chord with the slaves in our country. True, the Church did not condemn slavery, but neither did the Church uphold it. What Peter and Paul (see also 1 Corinthians 7:20-24) were concerned about was a grudging subservience contrary to the liberating spirit and example of Christ—a smoldering anger which could flame into violence, and make us slaves of sin.

We have rightly rejected the institution of slavery. However, in our preoccupation with personal freedom we may forget the value of loyal and loving service. That is what it means to follow *in his steps* (v.21).

The “submission principle” in marriage has come under heavy criticism. Here again we can refer to Paul’s teaching: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for it” (Ephesians 5:15). A similar understanding lies behind Peter’s doctrine in 3:1-7. When husbands treat their wives with less than love and respect, they are wounding Christ. At the same time, every wife in a Christian home is truly a bride of Christ, an image of the Church for whom he died, and a gospel-bearer (v.1), and that should be the guide of her conduct.

Stephen Bayne in *Christian Living* said that the ultimate freedom of every person is to choose whom or what he or she will serve. We cannot finally escape obedience.

R&D *Whom or what do you serve?*

Prayer: *It is a privilege to serve, Lord Jesus, when we are serving in your name.*

Tuesday, August 22

Read: 1 Peter 4:1-11

Now

In a story by the American novelist Henry James, a man becomes obsessed with the idea that a mysterious beast is waiting to ambush him. When he receives a farewell letter from the woman who loved him, he realizes that the beast has in fact struck, killing his relationship with the one person who meant the most to him.

“The end of all things is at hand” (v.7). Peter and the other leaders of the Church soon after the time of Jesus believed that he would soon return and bring the present world to an end. It didn’t happen. Today we still hear predictions about an imminent end of the world.

But there is a deeper sense here. The beast in Henry James’ story wasn’t something that would suddenly appear in the man’s future; it was there *now*, something he could plainly see with his mind’s eye, namely, his present fear. There is a New Testament word, *kairos*, meaning high time, a time for decision. Jesus in the gospels often confronted his disciples with it: “Follow me” ... “Who do you say I am?” ... “Arise, let us go hence.” Isn’t that what Peter is doing here? His exhortation to have the temperament of Christ, to put away the old life of sin and welcome the virtues of orderliness, sobriety and attention to prayer, is not a defense against some future devastation. It is *kairos*, “now.” It is overcoming the darkness within us so that we are able to be united to Jesus Christ, “to whom belong glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.”

R&D *What is God calling you to do now?*

Prayer: *Help us to be attentive and every ready to hear and obey your call upon us, Lord Christ.*

Wednesday, August 23

Read: 1 Peter 5:8-11

The Evil One

Near the end of his first epistle Peter gives us the devil.

C. S. Lewis observed that the devil is pleased when we take him either too seriously or not seriously enough. Some may pic-

ture him as a mischievous and rather entertaining fellow, perhaps in a red suit and tail; or as that villain Old Nick. Once a cartoon even went so far as to present the Lord of Heck, otherwise known as Phil, Prince of Insufficient Light.

All this in itself is silly, even funny, but it becomes very dangerous when, for instance, people dabble with Ouija boards and other paraphernalia of the occult. Peter's ravenous lion is much closer to the true picture of the evil one, though even that can't convey his malice and subtlety. The movie *The Exorcist* was about a demon-possessed child. For all its terrifying sensationalism, it taught an important lesson: demons are not to be trafficked with; the devil mustn't be taken lightly.

On the other hand, he can be taken too seriously. The beast in the previous meditation, you recall, was fear. The devil wants us to live in fear before him. But God, speaking through Peter, has the last word: "Stand up to him, firm in faith.... And the God of all grace, who called you into his eternal glory in Christ, will himself, after your brief suffering, restore, establish and strengthen you on a firm foundation."

R&D *To what extent have you been aware of the devil in your life?*

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the fact that we can daily put on the Whole Armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-18).*

Thursday, August 24

Read: 2 Peter 1:16-19

The Promise

This beautiful little passage recalls an event which Peter never forgot through all the intervening years. It was probably on a chilly slope of Mount Hermon that he, along with James and John, saw Jesus transfigured in glory.

It was a foretaste and promise of Easter, of the victorious and reigning Christ. But Peter and his companions were not allowed to linger on the mountain; they had to come down to the world below and begin the journey to Jerusalem and Calvary. On a dark Friday the promise of the Transfiguration seemed to have

been broken. Only after the resurrection and the flaming tongues of Pentecost did they begin to know how well it had been kept.

Peter expresses this in the image of a lamp shining in a murky place—the promise as articulated by God’s prophets in a world of shadow and half-light, and its fulfillment in the rising of the morning star, Jesus Christ, the light of the world.

And yet, Peter was still on the way to his own transfiguration in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. And so are we.

R&D Consider a time in your life when you have seen someone or something in a new light.

Prayer: Holy Father, thank You for revealing Yourself to us in so many ways, if we have the eyes to see.

Friday, August 25

Read: 2 Peter 2:1-11

Judgment

Judgment has never been popular, and never less so than today. No television evangelist, if he wants to be successful in his media ministry, can emphasize biblical judgment—it is God’s mercy which must be stressed. We hear about the crippling psychological effects of guilt and the wonderful sense of release when we can stop blaming ourselves.

Certainly, there is truth in this. God is merciful. To carry around burdens of guilt and self-loathing, or to dwell in continual fear of a sentence of doom, is not His way with us.

But we can go too far in the other direction. After all, there is no mercy without judgment. Mercy can only be understood in the context of judgment: This is the sentence—this is what we deserve. Without judgment there would be no lasting good in Good Friday; Jesus would be a religious idealist, admirable yet foolish, meeting the end of one who dared to oppose the currents of the time. He would never be the world’s Redeemer.

There are many today whose lives have been scarred by child abuse. There are many others who have been hurt by what the world would not consider abusive: a *laissez-faire* “do-what-you-want” childhood. Real love always entails judgment of right and

wrong conduct, in order that the one who is loved will become a good person and make a positive contribution to society. Every choice and every action has its consequences. Peter makes that plain here. And hell is not the creation of God nor of the imagination of fire-and-brimstone preachers. It is to a large extent what we choose for ourselves.

R&D Think about a time in your life when you have had to make a hard or crucial judgment.

Prayer: You forgive us our sins, Lord God; but we have to confess and seek Your forgiveness.

Saturday, August 26

Read: 2 Peter 8:10-18

Peace with God

In verse 14 Peter tells his readers, “do your utmost to be found at peace with him.”

What is this peace? It is resting in God, letting go of our anxieties. For many of us this is not easy. Little children come close to it in their trusting natures, and joy at discovery. Growing up, we learn about independence and self-reliance, and become familiar with things which earlier were new to us. All this is necessary for living as adults in the world, yet there is something within us which reaches out beyond ourselves. We are closed in, limited, finite, yet made for something, or Someone, more. To discover, and keep on discovering, a greater reality in the midst of the reality of life in the world is surely one understanding of the peace which Peter urges here.

Much more can be said about this peace. One aspect of it which needs to be stressed is the role of the Church. Peace with God isn't something we can achieve by ourselves, even by prayer. We need to be alone with God, but we also need one another.

Undoubtedly Peter went on making mistakes, occasionally putting his foot in his mouth. Being the “rock” didn't make him a flawless gem by any means. But the Jesus who had faith in Peter was with and in the Church, and that Church, through many trials and temptations, continued to uphold him.

To be in communion with God and with one another in the Spirit of God is to find peace.

R&D *Have you known this peace as a church member? Have you been able to help others discover it?*

Prayer: *We rejoice, Lord, that even in times of trial, we are able to have the peace that passes understanding.*

Sunday, August 27

Sabbath Time

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Matthew 16:24

The way of pain is the way of sympathy. I should find it very hard indeed to pray to a God if I thought that I could suffer something which He had never suffered. I should find it very hard to worship a God if I felt that I could plumb a deeper depth of suffering than He could know. But I know I cannot. Whatever I may suffer, I can never suffer a tenth of what He suffered. And I know very well that I can only understand the temptations of tempted men because I myself am tempted. I can only have true sympathy with suffering people if I myself can feel pain. So this inexplicable mystery of suffering may be to us the way of sincerity, may give us the chance of proving to others that we are true, of proving to ourselves and God that we are worthy of the name of the children of God.



God at Work in the World

Monday, August 28

Read: Matthew 7:13-14

Keep Your Hands Up

When Russia became open to the outside world, stories emerged from the underground church that existed during the years when it was the Soviet Union. This is one of those stories.

A house church received one copy of the Gospel of Luke, the only Scripture most of those Christians had ever seen. They tore it into small sections and distributed them among the body of believers. Their plan was to memorize the portion they had been given. Then at their next worship service, they would meet and redistribute the scriptural sections.

On Sunday these believers arrived inconspicuously in small groups throughout the day so as not to arouse the suspicion of KGB informers. They began singing a hymn quietly but with deep emotion. Suddenly, the door was pushed open and two soldiers walked in with loaded automatic weapons. One shouted, "All right, everyone line up against the wall. If you wish to renounce your commitment to Jesus Christ leave now!" Several people left. After a few more seconds passed, several more left.

"This is your last chance. Either turn against your faith in Christ," the soldier ordered, "or stay and suffer the consequences." Another person left. Finally, two more in the embarrassed silence with their faces covered slipped into the night. No one else moved. Parents with small children trembling beside them looked down reassuringly. They fully expected to be gunned down or, at best, imprisoned

After a few moments of complete silence, the other soldier closed the door, looked back at those who stood against the wall and said, "Keep your hands up, but this time in praise to our Lord

Jesus Christ, brothers and sisters. We, too, are Christians. We were sent to another house church several weeks ago to arrest a group of believers.” The other soldier interrupted, “But, instead, we were converted to Christianity! We learned that unless people are willing to die for their faith, we cannot fully trust them.”

R&D *What price are you willing to pay for your faith?*

Prayer: *There is, after all, no reasonable alternative to faith in you, Lord Jesus.*

Tuesday, August 29

Read: Acts 2:1-13

The Language of Heaven

The Maasai believe that their language is the language of heaven. It was therefore a time for special rejoicing when the complete Bible in Maasai was launched.

The little town of Namanga, set on a low hill straddling the Tanzania-Kenya border, was especially quiet on the Sunday morning: even the tourist shops had closed until after the celebration. But the hushed atmosphere in the large Roman Catholic church where the launch was to take place rose to a crescendo when choirs arrived singing, buses unloaded visitors, and trucks came jam-packed with people.

Then the Maasai converged on the church from all directions, mostly on foot, distinctive in their loose ochre-red togas, carrying their staffs and knobkerries, symbols of warriorhood and eldership. Some of the young men wore the traditional red ochre earth in their hair. Maasai women were resplendent in flowing robes of royal blue, red and white. The large church was soon packed to capacity. Outside the church Maasai children and men crowded around the windows, eager not to miss any of the proceedings, for this was their day, a day some had waited more than twenty years to see, when the red Bible of the Maasai would be officially launched.

“This is a great day for the Maasai people, who now have their own Bible; the whole Christian world rejoices with them,” said Million Belete, the United Bible Societies Regional Secretary

for Africa. “Now God speaks to us in Maasai,” was the comment one Maasai church leader.

R&D *What is your congregation doing to make the Bible or Bible studies available to others?*

Prayer: *We thank You, Lord God, that we may all find a Bible from which we can clearly read Your words for us each day.*

Wednesday, August 30

Read: Acts 7:59—8:8

Spiritual Awakening

According to an old article in *Timelines*, a publication of the North American Renewal Service Committee, “An unexpected result of the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 was a turning to Christianity by Chinese intellectuals and university students. Many observers believe that communism will collapse in China just as in the former USSR because the intelligentsia are more and more disillusioned by Marxism.”

The newsletter said estimates are that some 600 Christians were martyred in the Tiananmen Square crackdown, and that the resulting pressure forced many Christians to return to the underground “house churches” which have been the primary source of ministry in China for many decades. And, a large number of the conversions that are occurring are among university students and other intellectuals.

The *AD2000 Global Monitor* reported that one-fourth of the members of the “Three Self” churches in Beijing are composed of university students. “This ‘spiritual awakening’ among Chinese intellectuals has no parallel in Chinese history,” according to missionaries in Hong Kong.

Furthermore, a recent (2021) article in the Washington Times stated that the Christian community in China has been growing at a steady 7%-to-8% rate each year since 1980, and if trends continue, then there will be 300 million in the country by 2030.

R&D *Why would intellectuals in China be turning to Christ?*

Prayer: *Lord, we hear that Christianity continues to grow rapidly in China despite persecution; may that message resonate with those of us who live in countries where Christians are not under such persecution.*

Thursday, August 31

Read: Luke 4:14-21

Prison Ministry

Arrangements had already been made for a local church group to hold a worship service and share the Scriptures at a Kiev prison, when officials of the prison suddenly asked them to reconsider. It seemed they feared some trouble with the inmates. But Jacob Dukhonchenko and the other members of the group knew the great potential of God's word to touch the forgotten lives behind those walls, and so they went anyway.

"When we first entered the room where 700 of the prisoners had gathered, we could feel the tension," Jacob recalled. "But we continued the service for two hours and when I finally asked those who wanted to join us in prayer to stand up, everybody did!"

Such a positive response upon hearing the Good News of Jesus Christ is common among men and women in prisons. For many of them God's promise of hope and salvation is the key to breaking free of the despair that can be so much a part of prison life.

And the gratitude expressed by these men and women after receiving the Scriptures is equally moving. After the worship service in the Kiev prison, for example, a young man approached Jacob Dukhonchenko and gave him some flowers as a token of his thanks. Where he was able to obtain the flowers in prison no one knew. But more significant were the words that followed: "We in this prison had lost faith in everything," the young man told Jacob. "We have never met anyone who really cared for us. But after today, we will never be the same again!"

R&D *To what extent is your congregation involved in ministry to prisoners?*

Prayer: *There is a sense, Lord God, that all of those around us who have not found new life in Christ Jesus are prisoners. Help us to reach them for You.*